

Clearing the Way for Constructive Storytelling

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Stephen Collis, for a lower-division English course, *ENGL 112W*. The assignment asked students to comment on the topic of dehumanization, using evidence from *Refugee Tales, Volumes I and II*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

The discussion surrounding sympathy versus empathy is becoming increasingly relevant as we examine an attitude of apathy towards a global refugee crisis. Philosopher, Martin Buber, framed these contrasting concepts using two statements: “I and it” versus “I and thou.” The former represents sympathy, which engages with others using objectification, marking dehumanization, while the latter represents empathy, defined by human connection, relationship and acknowledgment of humanity (Riess 75). Authors of *Refugee Tales*, Chris Cleave and Jackie Kay, note the vulnerability of human connection and the potential power of sharing traumatic and dehumanizing stories within an empathetic context in their stories “The Lorry Driver’s Tale” and “The Smuggled Person’s Tale.” These tales reveal that storytelling, although a vulnerable act, can humanize and heal when a safe space is established, a recognition of humanity takes place and a burden is shared. One of these tales reveals this process through a lorry driver who risks his reputation by sharing his humanizing story, while the other through a refugee who risks the loss of his humanity by withholding his dehumanizing story. These two individuals, however, reveal the necessity of storytelling for healing.

Sharing a traumatic or dehumanizing story can often be accompanied by a feeling of shame if the nature of the environment in which the storyteller shares is unsafe. Palmer compares the soul to a “wild animal,” which only reveals itself when it feels safe (Moschella 112). Both tales under examination suggest that an unsafe environment can cause a storyteller to recoil in fear. “The Lorry Driver’s Tale” provides an example of an unsafe environment when a journalist suppresses a story through unfair questioning, while “The Smuggled Person’s Tale” presents a safe and open space for the refugee to share. Cleave portrays a seemingly typical lorry driver, who initially admits his prejudiced view of refugees, referring to them as “illegals” (Cleave 29). After passing a large group of refugees travelling along a

street, the journalist poses an exposing question: “Do you feel sympathy?” (Cleave 29). The driver, feeling pressured, identifies himself with the group of lorry drivers, stating: “We can’t, can we? It’s us who get punished when one of them stows away” (29). He uses “we” as a mask to cover up his true feelings towards the refugees. It is not until the camera is turned off and the questions cease that the lorry driver becomes situated with a safe environment to share his true story, in which he explains his own transportation of a refugees in his vehicle. On the other hand, the power of creating a safe space is portrayed by J in “The Smuggled Person’s Tale” when she ushers her two visitors into the living room: “Make yourself at home, please, come in come in, she said...” (Kay 106). Although her hospitality may seem customary, it releases the refugee, who has likely been in many unsafe situations, from suspicion of his environment. When G arrives at her doorstep, he states that he first searches for “kindness” upon entering any new place (Kay 105). He cannot assume that a home in Manchester is a safe space to let down his guard. Arguably, establishing a safe environment is an important step for any kind of storytelling. Furthermore, when storytelling does take place, it is equally important to remain cognizant that the story being told belongs to a real human being.

Through the motif of looking into someone else’s eyes, these two tales emphasize the power of empathy, suggesting that it is most effective when a mutual recognition of humanity is made. The lorry driver elaborates upon this concept after he is able to share his story with the journalist, admitting that “it’s different once you’ve seen their eyes” (Cleave 34). He recognizes that taking a moment to look into the eyes of the refugee makes a connection that disrupts, at least momentarily, social labels such as “citizen” and “illegal.” The driver experiences a perspective shift: from seeing the refugees as dehumanized subjects, to seeing them as real people in a moment of complete vulnerability. “The Smuggled Person’s Tale” uniquely displays G’s personal journey towards human connection through symbolization. By looking “into the eyes of a beautiful brown bird,” he is confronting and engaging with his own dehumanizing story (Kay 111). He forms a relationship with the bird, symbolizing the formation of relationship with his own story. This connection seems to allow G to finally recite the trauma he has experienced to J and allows him to form a trusting relationship with her. His vulnerability in this moment suggests that engaging with his past pain is necessary for his own healing and is at the expense of his ability to connect with others. After a little while, G can actually feel himself “lighten” as he shares more of his story, gently coaxing it from within himself (Kay 110). This “lightness” indicates that a mutual recognition of humanity can effectively relieve a burden.

As empathy must involve human connection, it also then must involve sharing someone else’s dehumanizing experience. Most times, it is not possible to fully identify with a traumatizing experience, but it is still possible to attempt to understand. These two tales demonstrate this suggestion by bringing up a

common theme of sharing another's burden during the storytelling process. In "The Smuggled Person's Tale," G hands over the bird, symbolizing his story, and asks J to hold it for a little while so he can drink a glass of water and eat some bread (Kay 111). By explaining his physical relief, G expresses a larger reality: although J's empathy may not have the ability to fully resolve all his pain, it can at least relieve some of its burden. Furthermore, G experiences emotional relief when the bird is released from her back door. He explains that he is able to leave the house with his bag "beautifully light" after leaving the bird, representing leaving some of the pain of his story behind (Kay 111). The lorry driver, in contrast, takes his opportunity to relieve another's burden in a very practical way. In the conclusion of the tale, it becomes clear that the driver has offered to take many refugees along in his lorry. He reports the following to the journalist: "You realize if they can carry all that, maybe you can take some of the load" (Cleave 34). The burden that the driver experiences is two-fold. He begins to understand the emotional burden of these people and expresses his care by offering to alleviate the physical pain in their bodies. After recognizing the weight of all a refugee must consider during their journey, he resolves to help in a pragmatic way. In examining these two situations, it becomes evident that a desire to relieve another's burden is a direct outcome of human connection.

Both the lorry driver and J are examples of privileged individuals who cannot begin to identify with the content of these stories. From an outside perspective of the refugee situation today, it can be easy to dismiss any effort to action by simply feeling like we are too dissimilar from those affected. However, these tales remind us that although we may not ever identify with or understand certain stories, we can use our privilege to make space for someone else's storytelling process by asking ourselves the following questions: "Am I creating a safe environment for vulnerability?", "Am I recognizing the humanity of the storyteller?", and "Is there a way I can relieve a burden for this person?" When these questions are taken into consideration, especially as displayed through Cleave and Kay's tales, an important idea surfaces: it is not necessarily a shared experience that helps us empathize with a storyteller, but an acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

Works Cited

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