

"The capacity of shared stories to function as myth and encourage inclusive participation."

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Abstract

Beginning with a description of the way the myths of incarnation and trinity function to encourage collaborative social participation in the experience of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission (<http://www.morecambebaypovertytruthcommission.org.uk/>), the paper will attempt to show that shared stories operate as myths that transform corporate behaviour. In Timothy Stacey's words they "help people expand their imagination, overcome the instrumental lens through which they perceive their own lives, and revivify the spirit of political participation." The paper will draw in particular on Stacey, *Saving Liberalism from Itself: The Spirit of Political Participation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022); Julie Tomlin "The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom" in *The Kenarchy Journal* 1.3, 2020

(https://kenarchy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Kenarchy_Volume1.3.pdf) and Sue Mitchell and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa, “Love your enemy? An aesthetic discourse analysis of self-transcendence in values-motivated altruism” in Roger Haydon Mitchell, ed. *Cultivating New Post–Secular Political Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019). Stacey’s applied research findings from his years researching among participants in the Metro Vancouver Alliance (<https://www.metvanalliance.org>), Tomlin’s work on the instatement of feminine myths and Sue Mitchell’s iteration of the skills of dialogic listening are harnessed to substantiate the proposal that a greater recognition of the role of myth in contemporary society will encourage and facilitate genuine participation. The capacity of shared stories to offset the Western liberal tendency to see knowledge as a rational mathēsis by means of which experts induct the individual into a more or less passive role will be indicated. In conclusion some of the practical outcomes of Round One of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission will be outlined in evidence of the socially transformative potential of shared story telling.

Introduction

This paper was triggered by Timothy Stacey’s recent book *Saving Liberalism from Itself: The Spirit of Political Participation*.¹ A convenor of the Religious Studies Project² and Religious Studies lecturer in the University of Utrecht, Stacey applies Myth, Ritual and Magic in a highly innovatory way to his experience and research among grass roots community transformation initiatives related to the Industrial Areas Foundation begun by Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the middle of the last century. Stacey’s contemporary experience is as an applied action researcher in the London based Citizens UK which succeeded in

¹ Timothy Stacey. *Saving Liberalism from Itself: The Spirit of Political Participation* (Bristol: BUP, June 2022).

² <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com>

getting major recognition for the Living Wage during David Cameron's coalition government, and most recently with the Metro Vancouver Alliance. His work relates strongly to the similar but different work of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission (MBPTC)³ in the north west of England and it was this that prompted it as a starting point to expose what they discovered to be the extraordinary capacity of shared stories to encourage inclusive social participation at a grass roots level.

The paper is unashamedly brief, interdisciplinary and exploratory and gestures across theology, sociology, politics, and social psychology. It is in four parts. The first explores the potential of particular applications of the Christian myths of trinity and incarnation to provide motivation for inclusive identification with the poor and marginalised in the specific experience of the MBPTC and allied initiatives such as the Morecambe Bay Love and kindness conversations initiated in particular by Dr Andy Knox, GP, associate medical director for population health for Lancashire and South Cumbria.⁴ The second articulates the way that each of the four aspects of myth which Stacey sets out resonate with the nature of this shared story telling. The lived experience of MBPTC Community Commissioners provide powerful examples of this. Thirdly, Stacey's recognition that a problem with liberalism is its dependency on continuing modern enlightenment thinking, is developed with recourse to Julie Tomlin's work which focuses on the displacement of the role of women as stewards and guardians of myth and in particular those myths rooted in the world of nature. Finally, Sue Mitchell's work on self-transcendence in values motivated altruism in *Cultivating New Post-secular Political Space* is utilised to demonstrate the epistemological

³ <http://www.morecambebapoveritytruthcommission.org.uk>

⁴ <http://www.lovemorecambebap.co.uk>; <https://reimagininghealth.com>.

and ontological reshaping that story telling can achieve and offer dialogic tools for deep listening.

(i) Trinity and incarnation

The particular configuration of kenotic political theology known as kenarchy understands God as by nature gift.⁵ The consequence of this is to deliver basic theological myths as gifts available for contemporary use even or perhaps especially in the post-secular political space in which western societies find themselves. Here, what Stacey describes as spirited⁶ participation is called for but is hard to re-energise after so many setbacks of the kind the poor and marginalised and those who identify with them typically experience. The initiators of MBPTC regarded the gift of God's trinity as the originary egalitarian source of humanity in creation, and incarnation as the trinity's full identification with humanity in creation, especially the poor and the marginalised. This moved them to identify with and cultivate contexts in which people with lived experience of poverty and the trauma associated with it (designated community commissioners) could tell their stories in egalitarian space first to each other and then in relationship with those of socio-political power and influence (known as civic commissioners). As they describe, this powerful mythical rooting helped explain the magical socially transformative capacity of this shared story telling way beyond their expectations, some of the outcomes of which are described in the final section of this paper.

(ii) Four aspects of myth

⁵ See Roger Haydon Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arram eds. *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014) and *The Kenarchy Journal Volume Four, ii*, 2022 www.kenarchy.org

⁶ Stacey, 6.

Each of the four aspects of myth which Stacey sets out resonate with the nature of this shared story telling. These are, first, that they engage with existential, weighty why-questions and issues; second, that they carry poetic justice – the idea that positive change can happen; third, that they are exceptional and profound, telling of extraordinary acts that shift the expected norms; and fourth, that have agentic motivation for people who are exposed to them.⁷ The shared stories of the lived experience of Donald and Geoff, MBPTC community commissioners, bear this out.⁸ Firstly, in the case of Donald, he is a disabled veteran of the Iraqi war, a recovering alcoholic and suffering with PTSD. Behind his story lie, at least, questions about weapons of mass destruction, British Colonialism, the so-called special relationship between Britain and the USA, the availability of veteran support, and one man's personal crises, the list continues. For Geoff, personal trauma, homelessness, addiction, criminal activity to sustain addiction, incarceration and lack of support on coming out of prison also similarly raise both existential and profound socio-political questions.

Secondly, both individuals have stories of personal transformation, ongoing despite setbacks. They have found help in positive collaboration with others whose stories they have come to share and add to. They are now in recovery in their own accommodation and are valued friends and colleagues in the work of social transformation. Thirdly, beyond this they have become exceptional and profound role models, local legends who have instigated and managed charitable initiatives to provide help and inspiration to others in similar circumstances who are constantly drawn upon for advice and consultation at a community, local and national level. Finally, and unsurprisingly, they have become agentic motivators for many others including both community and civic commissioners.

⁷ Stacey, 76-77.

⁸ Their names are changed and there is some crossover between them and other commissioners for the sake of confidentiality, which means that they are composite characters of real people.

(iii) Neo-liberal thinking and the displacement of myth

The need to re-invigorate grassroots agency and participation may seem surprising to those who grew up in an environment typified by the British welfare state and widespread student protest and worker participation in a powerful union movement and imagine it might still exist. However, for those engaged in community social work since the days of Thatcher and Reagan it has been an encounter with increasing powerlessness and consequential apathetic disillusionment, a near-insurmountable barrier to action experienced both in the Metro Vancouver Alliance and MBPTC. Stacey sees this as a result of the vestigial strength of neo-liberalism's dependency on continuing Modern Enlightenment rationalism, which tends to dismiss or elide the power of myth. The significance of the rise of new solidarities around shared stories is seen in their ability to redress these failures and restore integrity to Western liberal democracy as newly functioning myths. As he concludes, "The denunciation of magic has been a core component of liberal culture. The same philosophy that said political decisions must be logically or empirically justified rather than divinely ordained also, as a result, placed global imaginaries in a hierarchy with Enlightenment rationality at the top and magic at the bottom."⁹ As a result "experts" have little or no interest in stories from lived experience but construct policies based on quantitative statistics and externally imposed solutions with little understanding of the concerns of qualitative research based on the real situation in which people find themselves. In his attempts to redress Liberalism's faults Stacey draws on a wide range of responses to substantiate the nature of its exclusionary tendency, in particular that of Saba Mahmood who cites post-structuralist feminists to the effect that rational enlightenment thought "secures its universal scope and authority by

⁹ Stacey, 136.

performing a necessary exclusion of all that is bodily, feminine, emotional, nonrational and intersubjective.”¹⁰

Julie Tomlin, drawing on the work of contemporary feminists,¹¹ develops this Liberal displacement of the feminine in her exposure of the role of women as stewards and guardians of myth and in particular those myths rooted in the world of nature, noting how the post enlightenment centuries of capitalist industrialisation also saw the burning of 40-50,000 so-called witches, the majority of whom were just such guardians and well keepers.¹² She focusses on the ancient Celtic myth of the Well Maidens where the actions of a King and his followers, the impact of their shocking transgression of a sacred trust by rape, and their theft of the connection with the feminine and the Otherworld, forerun the ongoing experiences of those displaced to the margins of contemporary Western societies by patriarchal and rationalistic systems. She advocates instead a newly feminised understanding of myth in the “interaction with stories, myths and legends, as well as biblical texts in order to discover feminine wisdom that is rooted in life, and in the wellbeing of both the land and the community.”¹³ This newly feminised understanding is one that preferences an alternative way of being that is energised by love and rooted in embodied, practical wisdom and gives expression to the realm of the soul and the desire for the wellbeing of another.¹⁴

(iv) Dialogic listening

¹⁰ Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2011, 13-14).

¹¹ In particular Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006); Clarissa Pinkola Estes. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Sharon Blackie. *If Women Rose Rooted: a Journey to Authenticity and Belonging* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2019).

¹² Julie Tomlin. “The Spiralling Dance of Wisdom” in *The Kenarchy Journal* 1:3 (2020, 31-45).

¹³ Tomlin, 35.

¹⁴ Tomlin, 32.

Unless we listen deeply, and truly hear each other across differences of body, gender, culture, land and the dislocation of people within it by poverty, capital, extraction and oppression, we will not be able to collaborate in myths that can transform us. Sue Mitchell describes how experiences of self-transcendence emerge in just such contexts of difference by the choice of altruistic values which identify with the other, even at cost to personal selfhood, in pursuit of a truly well society. Focusing on a series of conversations between people from starkly different backgrounds around the text of the parable of the Good Samaritan, evidence is offered to help understand the epistemological and ontological reshaping that story telling can achieve. Dialogic tools that observe conversation via genre, chronotope and emotional intonation are set out. This innovatory research calls for further work. However, what is clear is that the otherwise clashing genres characteristic of different life experiences come together in what Mitchell describes as “a form of vitality” which carries the discourse towards changes of sensibility that move past the inflexible and exclusive interventions of experts to issue in changes of behaviour.¹⁵ The terrain of conversation is described in terms of chronotope, which can either function as a closed box or Gordian Knot outside of which the discussion cannot move beyond, or, most significantly for the achievement of dialogic transition, can be a living malleable willingness for the more feminine internal emotional intelligence to move relational conversations forward. Instead of facing a dead end, stories of poverty and inequality are no longer a closed communication but have the potential to unravel the Gordian Knot of preconceived assumptions and embark on a course of new discovery. This kind of dialogic listening is costly. The facilitators of MBPTC have found that it can take months to achieve and stories that come to function as myth come into place only via patient and collaborative learning. These emphasise skills such as

¹⁵ Sue Mitchell and Francisco Jose Eiroa-Orosa “Love Your Enemy? An aesthetic discourse analysis of self-transcendence in values-motivated altruism” in Roger Haydon Mitchell ed. *Cultivating New Post-Secular Political Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 96.

recognising that deep listening typically moves through five stages: my turn, my memory, my fix, my pause, my active listening and that many of us rarely get past the first three, but that we must in order to arrive at the level of shared story that can motivate us as agents for change. Another tool is the hula hoop which is passed around the group to the next person to speak and which depicts the circle of the difference which they represent together and that they are affirming when everyone listens intently while only the person holding the hoop speaks.

Outcomes and Conclusion

The outcomes of these contemporary myths in the experience of MBPTC has been a new and mutual sense of self-transcendent agency. This new agency formed between the community and civic commissioners has expressed itself in outcomes that have exceeded the expectations of both groups. There have been small direct changes to the day to day practices of local authorities and service providers from brown to white envelopes for late rent or utility bills. The stories of the fear with which brown envelopes were greeted and the frequent tendency to simply let them pile up unopened while debts multiplied led the commissioners to approach the institutions concerned and in which the civic commissioners were often located and changes were rapidly made. Similarly the realisation of the paralysing impact of red bills when civic commissioners from utility companies heard the stories led to positive interventions in the earlier stages of difficulties to pay from utility providers.

However, there have also been much larger direct changes. Two of the most dramatic have been the reversal of proposals for the Mellishaw Park traveller site and the pilot scheme for the new role of Citizens' Representative. In 2019 Lancashire County Council announced plans to sell the local travellers' permanent site commercially, thereby making many families potentially homeless. At the commission launch the previous summer the traveller

community commissioners had such a sense of isolation and rejection that while they were willing to stand and be introduced they asked for their stories to be read out by an intermediary. When the commission offered to help them lobby the local city council to purchase the land on their behalf and refurbish the site for them at a cost of £1.2million they could hardly believe it. When the proposal finally came before a council meeting the whole commission turned out in strength together with them in the public gallery. The civic commissioner for the university spoke for them together with the civic commissioner from the council, and when despite the racist objections of a few councillors the proposal was put to the vote, all the rest of the commissioners held hands with the travellers. When the votes were counted in their favour they erupted in tears and laughter. The outcome, already the consequence of the developing power of shared story, is that this has now become a perennial myth for subsequent commissions.

Some of the most frequent stories shared by the community commissioners were the experiences of those with complex needs that combined physical and mental disability with poverty. The need for them to repeat their traumatic stories over and over again to the authorities in order to be granted benefits, make appointments or find desperately needed support on top of the requirement to fill in complicated forms, attempt to make applications online or wait for literally hours on the phone hugely exacerbated their already poor health. This was the case even if their applications for help were successful, which they frequently were not because of the deliberate creation of a hostile environment by the UK Home office. As a result of listening together to these stories, the working group of Community Commissioners several of whom had complex needs and Civic commissioners some of whom were NHS staff and doctors, came up with the idea of a new role of Citizens Representative to properly represent those with such needs. Funded by the NHS this highly successful pilot scheme is now in its second year.

There have also been the hugely impactful but harder to claim indirect changes such as the leadership and direction of Lancaster City Council itself, where a variety of influences and events have contributed to its new and encouraging openness to those on the margins of the community with lived experience of poverty and neglect. However it is clear that the living myths emanating from MBPTC have been a significant part of the magic. With these outcomes in view it would seem safe to conclude that shared stories really do have the capacity to function as myth and encourage inclusive and spirited participation.

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