

Is there still a place for telling District Six stories?

On occasion, the District Six Museum has been described as being a place which gives voice to people's stories. Our response more often than not has been to say that we do not presume to give voice to people who have their own voices, but we see ourselves as enabling the many voices that are frequently ignored or rendered silent by other louder and more compelling ones.

This difference is more than a linguistic one. 'Giving voice' implies a speaking on behalf of people, while 'enabling' implies a deeper level of conscious honouring in which all conversational forums including oral history interviews, take into account and carefully consider the power dynamics inherent in speakers and listeners. It is the difference between building agency in people who have felt unheard, and those who will continue to lead 'lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them'- in the words attributed to David Thoreau.

In our work, we are always mindfully aware that storytelling in our context is not a competitive opportunity for the most eloquent speakers to dominate the less confident ones. There is no question that it is a delight to be enthralled by the energy of a lively and engaging storyteller but this is not always the primary purpose of the storytelling as practised at our Museum.

Storytelling has frequently been hailed as the panacea for trauma. Processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa have done much to reinforce this association between storytelling and healing, but often it has not sufficiently taken into account that telling their stories has sometimes had the opposite effect on people as they are required to dig into the deep recesses of their minds, into memories which have been intentionally or subconsciously buried because they are so painful. In addition, there are a number of other components to healing that include economic redress and honouring all the tenets of the country's Bill of Rights - and storytelling cannot stand apart from these other conditions that need to be fulfilled.

Notwithstanding the limitations, District Six Museum has been able to tap into the regenerative and community-building aspects of storytelling which has been at its core since it started as a movement in the late 1980s and launched formally as a museum in 1994. Before there was a Museum, there were stories. Stories that fulfilled many functions: they comforted, they asserted the right to remember as well as the right to claim restitution, they educated, they contributed to healing, even disturbed and contested some narratives.

Nostalgia – described by David Lowenthal as ‘memory with the pain removed’ has its place in all of this. My younger, more cynical self used to wonder at the copious amounts of sugar and onions which District Sixers and others from various areas of forced removals, shared with each other! This cynicism emerged from conducting and listening to a number of oral history interviews. Hardly an interview or storytelling session would go by without someone sharing about how easy it was to knock on their neighbour’s door in District Six, to borrow a cup of sugar if they were short of that commodity, or to borrow an onion, an essential staple for most cooked meals. When I took my mind away from trying to establish the veracity of the sugar and onion stories and applied my mind to understand what people were trying to communicate about the nature of their communities before destruction, I was able to listen much more empathetically to the essence of what was communicated. Sugar and onions had moved from being very literal items shared by neighbours, into the realm of being a metaphor for good neighbourliness, consideration and sharing. It spoke to neighbourhoods where scanty pantries were destigmatised, and people expected to receive support by asking because they were also able to offer it when called upon to do it. A simple story about simple everyday items from which much can be deduced.

Storytelling has been valuable in contributing to the incomplete written histories written under Apartheid, which glossed over forced removals and destruction of communities. Subsequent generations were born into racialised communities, and it became as if their families had lived in no other place. Anwah Nagia, in an interview conducted with him 1999, speaks of the importance of young people knowing this. Of young people coming to the Museum, he says: ‘Everytime they come to the Museum, the kids, all of a sudden, realise that their parents’ or their grandparents’ roots were not in a ghetto... they say “listen, we stayed in the City man,. We didn’t always stay in No.9 Block E, Hangklip Hof in Manenberg.’

The District Six Museum became a space for the telling of stories of life that pre-dated the Apartheid experience of racialised living, and that told of diverse and coherent communities such as District Six. In the early days there were stories that inspired the birth of the Museum and supported the case for a return to the land in the new South Africa. Current stories retain the continuity with this, but are focused much more strongly on foregrounding meaning for current generations, and on building a robust and engaged citizenry.

‘Memory heals, it regenerates. It is an affirming god, a transcendent guide in the ritual of continuity. But when spurned, when repressed, memory mutates into a trickster imp and seduces the wayfarer to the precipice and beyond.’¹

¹ Biyi Bandili in the Introduction to ‘Things Fall Apart’ by Chinua Achebe (2001: x)

The District Six Museum takes seriously the call to be a place of healing and hope, of restitution, celebration, and the re-energising of the resilience that formed the backbone of the community. We continue to be mindful of the dangers of the loss of continuity alluded to in the above quotation, and the dangers to our social coherence which could result from the spurning and repression of memory. As a nation, we have much to lose through the loss of our collective memory as activated through the telling of stories.

There are many stories still being told and we have to ensure that we are in the right places to hear them.

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February 2018