

The Power of “Story”

Facilitator’s Guide for Common Book Discussion on Story

This guide should take approximately 45 minutes as developed here and is appropriate for groups that have or have not read *Little Princes*. Please adapt freely as you need.

Invitation:

Today we are going use some of Conor Grennan’s work with the Common Book *Little Princes* as a platform to explore *story*. I’m going to ask you to be willing to wrestle with complexity and the idea that things can be both good and bad at the same time. I would also ask that, for this session, you agree to value questions at least as much as answers.

Introduction:

As a group, share the reading of “Why I Wrote *Little Princes*” aloud. Discuss initial reactions. Ease transition to next part. [5 minutes]

Dangers of Story:

Read and Discuss: [15 minutes]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED talk “The Danger of the Single Story” tells us:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

Next, please think about a particular person or social identity group that seems to have their story told for them in a way that might be disempowering, dehumanizing, or oppressive;

Facilitate discussion -- With that example in mind:

- 1) How do we know when storytelling is potentially dangerous?
- 2) I... and I imagine we in this room (in this university, in this nation, etc.)... often don’t fully understand the role we play in shaping our cultural and institutional stories - “how they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told.” As we tell the stories of others, what wise words of advice can we give ourselves about that process?

Use Image [here](http://www.flickr.com/photos/80468793@N00/2649419124/) to help remember a key takeaway. Credit: hoabinh_biotech
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/80468793@N00/2649419124/>

Possibility of Story/Storytelling:

Read page xi of *Storycatcher* aloud as a group sharing the responsibility of reading.

Think, Pair, Share: [15 minutes]

Pick one of the following quotes/questions to respond to. For now, please try to pick just one. You will have 2-3 minutes to think/write, 5 minutes to discuss with a partner, and then we will chat as a whole group.

- 1) Christina Baldwin says “We make our lives bigger or smaller, more expansive or more limited, according to the interpretation of life that is our story.” What does *bigger* mean in this context? *More expansive?* What possibility exists here?
- 2) Baldwin says “...we constantly weave life events into narrative and interpret everything that happens through the veil of story... we make the world fit into the story we are already carrying.” What does the word *veil* mean to you? What kind of possibilities and limitations does it entail? What if *veil* were replaced with *lenses* or *filters* does that change the interpretation at all?
- 3) Baldwin says “People become real when we put interaction into words: story is the foundation of relationship. With words alone we can create connection, establish community. With words alone we can recognize ourselves in each other’s life.” How have you seen story create deep meaningful connection or community?

Wrapping Up:

Focus on excerpt from Conor Grennan’s “Why I Wrote *Little Princes*”

Based on the discussion we had here, if you were to tweet at Conor Grennan or to sit with him over coffee, what would you say or want to discuss? Write it down or somehow play that conversation over in your head.

Pick a *Pleasantly Haunting* question or three that you can wrestle with based on this discussion. Or, write your own. [5 minutes total]

Gratitude:

Thank you for your honest and thoughtful participation. Thank you for being open to wrestling with complexity and to valuing questions more than answers.

Participant Handout for Common Book Discussion on Story

Please find some text and images we will use for this discussion below.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED talk “The Danger of the Single Story” tells us:

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Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

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- 4) Christina Baldwin says “We make our lives bigger or smaller, more expansive or more limited, according to the interpretation of life that is our story.” What does *bigger* mean in this context? *More expansive?* What possibility exists here?

- 5) Baldwin says “...we constantly weave life events into narrative and interpret everything that happens through the veil of story... we make the world fit into the story we are already carrying.” What does the word *veil* mean to you? What kind of possibilities and limitations does it entail? What if *veil* were replaced with *lenses* or *filters* does that change the interpretation at all?

- 6) Baldwin says “People become real when we put interaction into words: story is the foundation of relationship. With words alone we can create connection, establish community. With words alone we can recognize ourselves in each other’s life.” How have you seen story create deep meaningful connection or community?

Source - http://img.thesun.co.uk/aidemitlum/archive/01577/AlanCarrcovershot_1577436a.jpg



Conor Grennan writes:

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If you have any questions about this guide, please contact Jake Grohs at jrgrohs@vt.edu

*Each of the children I knew there remains permanently etched in my mind; I can conjure any of their voices and movements and little traits that identify them—especially the 18 children of the Little Princes Children’s Home, with whom I lived for eight months. They were the ones that changed my heart about Nepal and inspired me to first try to find the families of all those lost children. I named the book “Little Princes” in their honor—it couldn’t be any other way. **It’s their story.***

*But in writing it, I realized **it was more than just their story.** It was the story of how somebody like me, somebody with no relevant skills whatsoever, no deep passion for volunteering, no profound desire to make an impact on anyone’s life but his own, found himself sacrificing his comfortable way of life to try to improve the lives of these young children on the other side of the world.*

If you were to tweet at Conor Grennan or have coffee with, what would you say or want to discuss? Write it down or somehow play that conversation over in your head.

I like the phrase *pleasantly haunting*. For me, it conjures up the feeling of wrestling with some important idea that makes my heart and head hurt... but that usually serves as a precursor to some significant learning or growth for me.

Please pick a *pleasantly haunting* question (or write your own!) to wrestle with long after our time together. Cross out ones that don’t resonate. Highlight the ones that do.

- In what ways is Conor Grennan’s story of the children of Nepal incomplete? In what ways does it empower children of Nepal and facilitate social change?
- To what degree can we tell another’s story? To what degree is it a beautiful honor? To what degree an oppressive act? To what degree a responsibility?
- In what ways might your own story bump up against other LCs, RAs, or residents you work with in a way that might be harmful if you aren’t careful? In what ways might it help you better connect?
- In what ways are you cradling the carefully entrusted stories (told *and untold*) of other LCs, RAs, or residents with whom you work?
- What defines your *veil*? In your own personal life experience, what has the power to make your interpretation *bigger* or *smaller*?
- What stories do have power over? (“*How they are told, who tells them...*”) How does that make you feel? Does that carry any particular responsibility?
- Conor Grennan says “And I believe each of us has a responsibility to know what those lives look like, even if we give only one single day of our life to discovering it.” Do we have a responsibility to see and hear the stories of others?
- Write your own...

Dare to blog about your musings. Invite a friend for coffee over it. Dig deep. Enjoy.