

Broken Levees and Broken Narratives: A Hermeneutic Engagement of Post-Katrina New Orleans

On Monday, August 29, 2005, the levees broke. At the 17th street canal and the London canal, water poured in to the heart of this city, and the history of New Orleans was permanently altered. But the levees were not the only thing that broke. Over the course of the next few days, those who were still in the city – along with everyone who had access to a television – began to realize that the way we thought things worked were not in fact the way things actually worked. In other words, our narratives broke as well. To suffer from a broken narrative is every bit as traumatic as suffering from a broken bone – or even more so. What does it mean to have a broken narrative? It means that the narrative structures we ordinarily use to make sense of our lives no longer work. They're broken. As hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans, many people stayed through Saturday, working within the confines of the “ostrich” narrative: so many previous hurricanes, up to and including Ivan in 2004 had turned and missed the city. Stories were told about having barbecues and parties after most of the city evacuated. Then even the most hardened hurricane partiers realized that evacuation was necessary and most of those who had the means left. The ostrich narrative was broken: New Orleans was no longer a place that hurricanes missed.

But there is also a the “disaster” narrative. As most of us watched from positions of relative safety, the storm blew through, and we began to make plans for our return. On Monday, we projected our story into the future, envisioning a fallen trees, damaged roofs, and a broken windows. We thought about cleanup, the work involved, and how long it would take to get back to normal life . Then, when we woke up on Tuesday, we found a

thoroughly flooded city. Places that had not seen flooding in years or even decades were submerged. At this point, any attempt to project a future narrative to give an orderly account of what was happening and what future events might look like in New Orleans was a very difficult task. And then, over the next several days, as we watched the suffering of those left in the city, the incompetence of the emergency management, we ceased even trying. The “disaster” narrative – storm tracking, evacuation, damage assessment, cleanup, recovery, and return to normalcy – was officially broken. It no longer functioned.

To have one’s personal narratives break in this fashion is damaging to our sense of well being in much the same way that the breaking of the levees was damaging for the city. Our narratives protect us. To understand just how traumatic broken narratives can be, we must first come to a clearer understanding of their relationship between narrative and human identity – that is, the relationship between the stories we tell about ourselves and who we actually are as human beings. Then I would like to move on to the concept of deformed narratives, ways of telling our stories that lead to unhealthy consequences. I will then argue that the breaking of these narratives, as painful as it is, also presents us with a unique opportunity to restructure those narratives into a healthier configuration.

The Self as Narrative

The word “self” is common in our discourse, but it is not always clear what is meant. It would seem to be a word, much like the pronoun “I” or “me”, that indicates who we are. But what about reflexive statements such as “so I said to myself” or “I was thinking to

myself” or “you take care of yourself”. The “my” and “your” embedded in those statements indicate that the “self” is something that we *possess*, “myself” is mine, and “yourself” is yours. Who is doing the speaking and who is doing the listening when you say or think something to yourself? And when I say “take care of yourself,” who is taking care of who?

The word that crops up the most when these questions arise is the pronoun “who”. The shortest answer to what we mean by “self” is: what we are indicating when we use the word “who.” What does this tell us? If someone asks you who you are, the answer will invariably involve a narrative. If you try to limit yourself to non-narrative elements (physical characteristics, location, etc.), you will end up describing yourself as a “what,” as an object. Even if you say “I am a human being,” you are merely telling me “what” you are. It is only when you arrange the various facts of your life into a structured narrative that your sense of “who-ness” – your sense of “self” – emerges.

So, to be human is to be a narrator. The simplest way to explain why this must be the case is to point out that we are temporal creatures, we live *in time*. If we are to make sense of the facts and events in our lives, if we are to have a *coherent identity*, we must select what is important and arrange it in some meaningful order. Cosmological time is very different from human time – it is a function of space and motion, innumerable things occur simultaneously. Narrative is the means by which we translate cosmological time into human time. As Paul Ricoeur explains in his massive work, *Time and Narrative*, “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of

temporal existence.”¹ Narrative is the means by which we take the virtually infinite number of sensations that we experience and unify them into something that can be understood.

For example, this presentation is now part of the story of your weekend. So tomorrow, when you get to work or to class or wherever, and someone asks you, “what did you do this weekend?” you will, quite unconsciously in most cases, select and arrange. The fact that you select is important. You will not include every single detail in your narrative; that would be impossible. If you were to try – “I woke up Saturday, I went to brush my teeth, noticed I needed a new toothbrush, found one and opened it, then had toast instead of cereal for breakfast, spent ten minutes wandering the house... – this would only be to ensure that you were never asked again. It is not the acceptable narrative structure.

So selection is necessary. But there is also the matter of arrangement. Some of what you select will be talked about at length, even if it actually lasted only a very short time. This is because you think it is somehow *important* either to yourself or your listener. But it is crucial to note that when you are doing this selecting and arranging, you are making *choices*. And because this act of narrating involves choices, it must then be considered an *ethical act*. In fact, what I would like to suggest here is that the decisions we make in the act of narrating are among the most profoundly ethical decisions we make in our lives. In fact, the word we use to give our ethical assessment of someone’s “self,” the unity of identity that emerges in this process of narrating, is itself a literary-narrative term: we talk about *character*.

¹ TN I, 3.

It is important to note that there is a difference between a “story” and a “narrative.” Perhaps the best way to think of this is to consider a journalist who has uncovered a good story. The journalist says to herself: “I have a good story here, now how do I tell it?” In other words, she is asking how to structure the telling of the story in a way that it will communicate the things that she wants communicated. To accomplish this, the facts of the story have to be introduced in a certain order, perhaps a setting needs to be established, and characters need to be set up in relation to one another so the reader is able to follow along. In the process, some facts (otherwise relevant) will be omitted, not because they are being concealed, but because they would clutter up the narrative and make it difficult to understand. (Here we’re limiting ourselves to narratives that can reasonably be called “true,” where there is no conscious intent to deceive. Obviously, if the facts or events are outright false, then there is a more serious problem.)

One does not “compose” or “make up” a narrative the way one would a story. A narrative represents a structure that can exist apart from the story, and one that pre-exists the story being told. We all have access to numerous such narrative paradigms. In general, there is the “hero” narrative, the “success” narrative, the various “comic” narratives, the “dramatic” narratives, the “tragedy” narrative, just to name a few. On a more informal level, there is even the “how was your weekend” narrative, often a source of stress because it requires a signature moment or event that justifies the weekend, and without it the narrative is flat, and the narrator simply looks boring. (Since you’re here tonight, now you have your signature event, so you’re all set for tomorrow.)

Narrative Anaesthesia

If how we engage in narrative involves choices, and is thus an ethical act, then the selection of narrative structures that are available to us in our culture must also come under consideration. Let me give you an example of how a simple everyday narrative structure might be unethical. When a person narrates their suffering to themselves or others, there is a tendency to do so in a way that minimizes discomfort. This is not an uncommon occurrence. For example, let's say you've applied for a position. You really want it, and you invest a lot of energy in the application. But you get rejected for the position. Upon receiving the rejection notice, there is a temptation to engage in emergency re-narrating. You deal with the rejection by saying, perhaps, "I didn't really want that anyway," and focusing on the now negative aspects of the once desired position. I call this *narrative anaesthesia*. In this case, the narrative act takes what was keenly desired and attempts to render it undesirable, thus functioning as an *anaesthetic* that dulls the pain of the disappointment. But we must recall that narration is an intrinsically *ethical* act, all the more so when one is narrating actual events, and uniquely so when one is narrating events from one's own life to oneself. There is a fundamental dishonesty to this anaesthetized narrative; crucial elements are being omitted, not because they clutter up the narrative or make it less meaningful, but because they make it *too* meaningful, and thus too painful.

An ethical issue is raised from the second person perspective as well. Let's say a friend tells a story of disappointment, perhaps they have just been rejected by someone with whom they had a significant relationship. The common response is to offer an anaesthetic, to point out all the suddenly intolerable flaws in the now ex-partner's habits

or personality, or perhaps even offer the pithy “it wasn’t meant to be.” Is this really an attempt to help the person work through their disappointment, or is it an attempt to avoid expending the emotional energy required to help them do the work? I fear such responses are often motivated by a desire to “feel better” temporarily, not to actually “get better,” which would involve recovering from the emotional blow. (I don’t want to be too glib in judgment here; maybe the pain is acute enough that a little anaesthetic is just what is needed). What I really want is to convince myself that you are not really doing that badly, so that I can avoid the claim on me that your suffering would make. So I verbally inject you with a little anaesthetic, your pain is dulled, you feel better, I go happily on my way and congratulate myself for being a good friend, and when the pain returns in full force, I have already moved on.

The logic of the anaesthetic narrative is that there is something wrong, something unseemly, about openly and unapologetically suffering. There is an undercurrent in the narrative that the world is a fundamentally good place, and that suffering is the exception and not the rule.

Finally, the problem of narrative anaesthesia is applicable at the group level. For example, there are many New Orleanians who are presently living elsewhere, and are telling themselves that they weren’t really fans of living in New Orleans anyway. Last year, they were very happy to be here, but there has been some emergency re-narrating to help them cope with being in exile. On the other hand, some who are here have developed an almost mystical belief in the inviolability of the West Bank – a way to avoid facing the precariousness of our situation. Others put their faith in the inability of a hurricane to hit the same place two years in a row. The ostrich narrative was broken, but

it's being reassembled in a hurry. Pulling out our focus even wider, the whole country is also availing itself of narrative anaesthesia. New Orleans has largely dropped off the national radar, and many Americans are telling themselves that while New Orleans had a bad go of it, the rebuilding is underway and things just aren't that bad. As with the personal version, this collective narrative anaesthesia allows many Americans to avoid the claim that the continued suffering of New Orleans would make on them.

Deformed Mythologies

In *Confessions of a Siamese Twin*, John Ralston Saul advances the theory of “deformed mythologies.” To understand the theory, we must first debunk some “myths” about myths. Myths are not simply false. A myth is not the opposite of a fact. A myth is an attempt to explain something about human existence through narrative. Actually, the myths that Saul addresses all make a claim to historical veracity. To the extent that we accept these myths, they shape our view of how the world is, and furthermore shape our view of who *we* are.

When Saul speaks of a mythology as being “deformed,” he is referring to political communities who tell stories about themselves that lead inexorably to damaging behavior, both as a community and in its individual citizens. He is not saying that the stories are *false*, he is saying that the selection and arrangement of the facts emphasize the wrong things. Certain events are exaggerated in importance, and others are overlooked altogether. By retelling the same history using a different narrative structure,

a different pattern of selection and arrangement, Saul argues that we can change the behaviors of our political communities for the better.

I would like to address two deformed narrative structures that are operative in our society, which – along with our addiction to narrative anaesthesia – have a direct bearing on the survival of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina.

Individualism

Individualism is the theme of the most dominant narratives in our larger culture. This narrative is central to American identity, and is constitutionally enshrined in the listing of our most basic rights, especially the “pursuit of happiness.” The individualist narrative asserts the possibility of transcending the limitations placed on us by our socio-economic standing, and celebrates over and over again the triumph of individual effort and persistence in the face of obstacles. The specific narrative instance of this are too many to list, but in cinema they range from *Rocky* to *Rudy* to anything starring Clint Eastwood. It is an implicit theme in virtually every speech given in acceptance of an award, as well as following victories in sports.

The ethical defense of individualism is its realism: the fact is that people are most motivated to look after their own interests. If each is given responsibility for their own welfare, then everyone is motivated to work harder. More wealth will be created in the process, and, given a properly designed set of political and economic procedures, the rising tide will lift all boats. In other words, the genius of American society is that it has recognized the awesome power of individual self-interest and harnessed it for the creation of wealth. But as Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has so elegantly pointed out, this becomes a “self-fulfilling prophecy”:

... a social order that is designed to work on the presumption that people are self-interested tends to produce that kind of people. (*A Community of Character*, 79)

The narratives which used to offset individualism in our culture, ranging from the Christian celebration of “love of neighbor” to the classical Republican narrative of “civic virtue,” have largely fallen by the wayside. The narratives of the icons we hold up for emulation in our society no longer need to show them as good or even responsible people: they need to be *successful*. The logic of the success narrative, which is a logic of *competition*, permeates our lives at every level.

One of the other problems with the ascendancy of the individualist narrative is that the logic of competition dictates that there will be those who are left behind, those who are not successful. And despite the fact that the “unsuccessful” massively outnumber the “successful,” their stories are not told. They go against the grain of the narrative. Furthermore, if one pauses to spend time and energy helping those who are left behind, then that time and energy must come from somewhere – it is energy not being used to ensure success. And it is success that will be rewarded. And by rewarded, I am not referring to the trappings of money and material goods, but that if you are competitively “successful,” you will be rewarded by the affirmation of your peers (or even the whole society, if you are successful enough), in the form of being held up as an example to emulated by others. So those who are intent on success not only have every incentive not to help those less fortunate, but the force of the narrative make one want to ignore that the less fortunate even exist.

Every time we tell a story about someone who was successful without reference to whether or not they are in any way a good person, we do our part to retrench this

narrative. The consequences of this should give us pause: If this individualist success narrative remains in its customary position of dominance during the national discussion on the fate of New Orleans, then the fate of this city is sealed. New Orleans is going to die.

Quirky Fatalism

A central theme in the narrative of New Orleans is its remarkable uniqueness as an American city. The rich blend of cultures – French, Spanish, African, Haitian, Cajun –the historical exigencies of being the major port, the role of New Orleans in the Confederacy, the development of blues and especially jazz; these and many other aspects combine to made New Orleans a very interesting place. And one can hardly turn around in this city without hearing someone telling a story about some aspect of the city’s history as a way of explaining why things work the way they do now. Thus the narrative structure of New Orleans is one where seemingly incongruous elements exist side by side with no attempt to absorb one another – each contributing in its own way to the “rich culture” of the city. Let’s call it the “quirkiness” narrative. New Orleans is chock full of little quirks, and the people in it are almost resolutely quirky. The logic of the narrative dictates that assimilation – the attempt smooth the rough edges to remove the quirks – is to be thought of as a violent act, a lack of respect for the city’s diverse cultural mix.

In many ways, the narrative is a beautiful one, but there is a dark side to it. The “live and let live” aspect of the city’s narrative has led to an odd sort of fatalism. I’ve not lived here that long, but when the conversation turns to the problems of injustice,

incompetence, corruption, or suffering, it always heads in the same direction. It is remarkable that the number of times discussion closes, and closes quickly, with “welcome to New Orleans,” or “that’s the Big Easy for you.” In one of the panels Loyola hosted back in January, two of the panelists told stories of their experience of corruption while growing up in this city. The odd part is that they were being *nostalgic* – they were *celebrating* their experiences of corruption as a charming quirk that made them love the city.

We can tell that this narrative is deformed because it enables us to ignore uncomfortable truths, and even celebrate injustice. It seems like this shouldn’t need to be said, but apparently it does: corruption, poverty, ignorance and suffering; these are not charming. They are not lovable quirks. Moreover, the deformity of this narrative seeps into the lives of individuals. Living in such a cultural narrative encourages New Orleanians to be unconcerned by our own flaws, our own weaknesses. We come to expect less fairness and competence from one another, and finally come to expect it less from ourselves. Our failure to live up to our human potential is actually *affirmed* by our narrative – after all we are embodying the “quirkiness” that makes New Orleans what it is.

Poor Like the Nolas

Let me bring these narrative structures – anaesthesia, individualism, and quirkiness – together into a single story, a form of which I posted on “After the Levees” last week.

When I’m talking about poverty in my ethics classes, I’ve always felt like I’m missing something. I cannot successfully communicate the sense of helplessness that goes along with it, the sense of being the victim of forces too large to understand. But

above all, I cannot communicate the sense of humiliation that comes with accessing an impersonal system, or in receiving charitable support for one's family in order to survive. I myself have never been in that position.

No longer. To be part of post-Katrina New Orleans is to understand something of the helplessness and humiliation of poverty, regardless of your personal income. Let me tell you about the Nolas.

New Orleans is the equivalent of a family (let's call them the **Nolas**) that lives in a very affluent neighborhood (let's call it **Bush Gardens**). The Nolas have always been a bit of an oddity among the other families in Bush Gardens. They're not all that well off, but that's not it. Their closest neighbors on the southern edge of the neighborhood are no better off, but they never seem as unkempt, never quite as scruffy as the Nolas. The Nolas are just weird, but in the eyes of the neighborhood, it has always been a *good* weird. They are a hospitable family that throws *great* parties with the best food and spectacular music, and pretty much the whole neighborhood has fond memories of the Nolas and all their weirdness.

It's been a very bad year for the Nolas; as disastrous a year as anyone can remember. Their house burned to the ground, the entire property is destroyed, and they can't even think about the expense of rebuilding the family house until all sorts of even more expensive repairs are done to the property. Much of the family is bunking with neighbors. Some died in the fire, and a few are unaccounted for. And while the fire department and other emergency services haven't done such a great job, most of the people in Bush Gardens are great. They seem to feel really good about helping the Nolas. But, as it becomes clear that the help needs to be ongoing, the enthusiasm of many is starting to wane. Because the causes of the Nola's sudden "poverty" are very complicated and not easily fixable, many quickly become distracted by other things. Some are actually quite hostile, as though the Nolas' flagrant suffering is an insult to their sense of propriety.

This last group can be awfully brazen, and turn out to be very influential. This poor family, asking for help in its tragic circumstances from a neighborhood *it helped build*, suddenly finds itself being lectured on all its faults. The Nolas begin to hear

mutterings that they're asking for handouts. The neighbors wonder aloud what the Nolas' predicament will do to property values and the overall economic health of the neighborhood. The very well-to-do Cato family offers a hectoring lecture on the Nolas' lack of sensible financial preparation. (Of course, the Cato's were wrong. But then, the Catos think that the failures of the fire department only goes to show that there should be *no fire department*. The Nolas think the Catos need to get out of the house more.) Other families launch aggressive attacks on the Nolas' character, and some on the neighborhood council oppose any financial aid to a family so dysfunctional. (The Nolas are fully aware of their family's dysfunction. It's just that they think the council is pretty dysfunctional itself, and should not be throwing stones). The Nolas are asked, with no irony whatsoever, why the neighborhood should chip in to help *them*.

The Nolas, when they have time to think about it at all, are mystified by all this. "When did we become a *them*?" they wonder. Less than a year ago, the Nolas were part of the "we." The Nolas were so cool that they made the whole neighborhood look cooler. Despite the neighborhood's impressive wealth, travelers would often choose to come to hang out at the Nola's messy and slightly dilapidated house. When the neighbors traveled, they were proud to claim the Nolas as their own, and were pleased to accept that the coolness of the Nolas were part of what made the neighborhood so great. Those crazy Nolas were firmly in the "we" column.

But now the Nolas are finding out what it's like to be a "they," to be "those people." It is not a whole lot of fun. The various demands being made on the Nolas make it seem as though they have to *earn* the help that they need. The Nolas never had the most polished social skills, and they are having a difficult time in the other neighbors' houses. Nor are they the most articulate people, so they have trouble explaining why they think the Nola family should be still part of the "we," or how hurt they are that they're not. They know that historically they were the gateway to the neighborhood's wealth, and that the process of getting energy to the neighborhood houses had destabilized their property and made their plight that much worse. They had *contributed* to the neighborhood. The Nolas find it a cruel irony that they became a "those people" at the precise moment that they most needed to be a "we". And they

find that their less savory relatives want to cooperate with the neighborhood and let most of the family property rot. On the nicest corner of the property, the neighborhood would build a banquet hall -- a brighter, shinier version of the Nola's old, rambling house -- and people will come to the banquets and *pretend* that they're at one of the Nola family's amazing parties. But the Nolas won't live there anymore.

The Nolas are a complex family, and different members have different responses to all this. The younger and more idealistic Nolas are just waiting for things to go back to something like the way they were before. Older and more experienced family members understand that things will never be the way they were before, that their family will never fully recover from this. But they hope that if they work hard and learn to make do, they'll salvage the most important parts.

But the wisest members of the Nola family are the ones most worth watching. They're heartbroken, and you can see the impending sense of doom on their faces. Every day, they become more and more convinced the neighborhood will abandon them, that they are the poor that the neighborhood wants out of sight. They work on the property alongside their family, but they are humiliated, and they work without hope. In their darkest moments, they have come to suspect something awful: *There is no neighborhood*. They realize that if Bush Gardens could do this to the Nolas, who had been such a celebrated part of the neighborhood, then it could do it to any other family in a similar plight. It is dawning on these wise Nolas that not only will they be abandoned by Bush Gardens, but that the neighborhood they were always so proud of is nothing like they thought it was. And that hurts even more.

I fear for the Nolas.

I fear for the neighborhood.

When I put this analogy together last week, I had three things in mind. The first goal was to personalize the plight of New Orleans in such a way that readers from other areas of the country would feel implicated as members of the neighborhood. Now that New

Orleans is getting very limited press coverage, it is all too easy for those in other areas of the country to think of this as “someplace else.” The second was that I hoped it would give voice to the sense of confusion and despair that I see in many New Orleans residents. But the third reason, and the key one for tonight, is to present a challenge to New Orleans itself.

If my analogy works, and we are the Nolas, then we are now getting a bit of a taste of what it’s like to be the poor and the outcast. If that’s the case, then it should re-orient our thinking about how we treat our own poor. If it is humiliating for New Orleans to have to beg for the help we need – and, as John Biguenet put it recently, it is as though we’re orphans at an orphanage who have clean ourselves up and be on our best behavior when the potential benefactors visit – then we should have a new compassionate understanding of what it means to be poor in this city. If we look to the Golden Rule, which asks us to treat others as we would wish to be treated, then it might be fair to say that we are now getting exactly what the Golden Rule would dictate. As a rule, we avert our eyes from the plight of the poor in this city, we make a token effort to throw money at causes without getting to the root of the problem, we argue that they would just waste the money we would give them anyway. So why should we be surprised when the rest of the country treats us the same way?

The deformed narrative devices that I have described – the anaesthetic narrative, the “quirkiness” narrative, and this individualist narrative, are mutually reinforcing, because they are united by a single impulse: The desire to disengage from a situation that causes us discomfort, to create space between ourselves and the world that makes a claim on us. They function much like levees. The anaesthetic narrative is used to avoid facing

suffering, to avoid the arduous task of *working through* the pain that is ever present in human existence. The individualist narrative allows us to wall ourselves off from the injustice and suffering around us, to deny our solidarity with our fellow human creatures. We can nobly say that we are honoring their most basic freedoms by allowing them to work their way out of their situation using their own efforts. If the deformity of this narrative becomes too obvious, we can inject it with a little anaesthetic, and claim that the desperation and humiliation of poverty really isn't that bad. After all, they have TVs and they can afford cigarettes, can't they? Besides, it's better to be poor in America than anywhere else in the world. But when all else fails, we can always fall back on the fatalism of the "quirkiness" narrative. If we are forced to acknowledge that the perpetual suffering of others in our city makes some sort of claim on us, and we find ourselves unable to deny that such suffering is both real and not simply a result of moral failings, then we can say "well, that's New Orleans for you, it's a very strange place. There's not much you can do about it." And then we can go off to grab a drink and listen to some jazz.

A member of Loyola's Board of Trustees was recently reported as saying "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste." It's true, crises present unique opportunities because our habits, our political structures, our *narratives*, things that were taken for granted as "just the way things are," are suddenly broken apart. While they were intact, we could console ourselves that they were not very good, they were good enough, and not worth the trouble and energy it would take to dismantle and fix them. But now that they are broken, we have a chance to re-construct them in a more positive way.

Anyone who has paid even the most casual attention to the situation surrounding the levees understands that if we rebuild the levees in exactly the same way, then the same thing is going to happen again. We would be foolish to miss this opportunity to collectively re-think how New Orleans can best be protected and act on it. It would be a shame if we missed the opportunity to give our broken narratives the same attention that we are giving our broken levees.