

Quiet Reform – Attempts of Reconciliation through Playback Theatre

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Playback AZ

1. Introduction

The International Seminar “Remembering Nanjing 2011” was held from October 5th to 8th, 2011 in Nanjing Normal University in Nanjing, China. Playback Theatre was part of the Healing the Wounds of History workshop facilitated by Armand Volkas. Friends Playback Theatre from China, Eddy Yu from Hong Kong, and Playback AZ from Japan took part in this seminar and collaborated for the playback theatre performance. In this article I will reflect on the 7 stories told during the four days, and consider the potential of playback theatre as a modality of reconciliation for the heart.

2. Playback Theatre

Just as the deep meaning and messages embedded in folktales and fairytales have taught us the truth of life and wisdom of living, playback theatre teaches us through stories.

Playback Theatre is a form of improvisational theatre in which a personal experience is re-enacted on the spot. The form offers an opportunity for a large audience to witness a personal experience, participants exchanging emotions, new points of view, and images about the future. The stories told are personal, but they are also the reflection of the condition and the structure of the society that is behind them. People interact at a deep level and share the human truth. As a result, a kind of “Social Education” is achieved.

3. Red Threads – Deep Layers of Stories

When the audience go from their usual thinking mode to the feeling mode, deep interaction unique to Playback Theatre begins. When analyzing the deeper layers of the stories, we can see that the stories contain human wisdom and universal truth.

During the workshop, three stories were told. In the evening four stories were told in the public performance. These stories are told as personal stories and each story stands on its own but they also became seven chapters that formed one big story.

The red threads woven with seven stories depicted the transformation of the Chinese and Japanese younger generations' relationship, from recognizing the feelings they held as the descendants of perpetrators and victims, to wishing peace from their hearts. Described below is the outline of the stories, meaning of the stories, and the threads of messages woven into the stories.

At the Workshop

“Attacked by A Thousand” A Japanese teacher

I thought I knew about the history of Japan and China's past. But a few decades ago, I participated in a meeting organized by Chinese and realized how superficial my knowledge was. At the venue where approximately a thousand Chinese people gathered to voice their anger and grief, I was there as the only Japanese person. I couldn't understand the Chinese being spoken, but I was hit by the energy of anger. I stood speechless, feeling utterly overwhelmed.

In this story, China and Japan are irreconcilable. Dialogue does not occur and there is no connection with the other. Here, a Japanese person is receiving the violence of words coming from the Chinese. The Japanese were supposed to be the perpetrator but here the Japanese is a victim and we can see the reversed position between the perpetrator and the victim.

As the first chapter of the big story, although this may not be at the level of consciousness of the teller and the others, a problem was presented, the reversal of the perpetrator/victim position between Japanese and Chinese. “Who are the victims, who are the perpetrators? Where is the truth? Isn’t the existence of human beings complex and contradictory having both perpetrator/victim? The history of education in the past has been limited to the passing on of the objective historical past and emotions such as anger and hatred, that the history evokes, are left unattended. From this point, can we hope for peace? Is emotional reconciliation possible?” Along the line of these questions, six other stories dialogue below the surface. At the end, the answer is presented by the last story. Below is a hypothesis that the depth of the stories may be suggesting to us.

“Gentle grandfather and the demonic Japanese soldier” A Japanese student

He was a gentle grandfather. He especially adored me. The image I hold since childhood has always been “nice grandpa.” Then I learned that he was a high class official placed on duty in China. Does that mean that he was one of the Japanese soldiers who committed inhumane crimes? I don’t know the truth but was he also one of the demonic Japanese soldiers? The image of him as a grandfather and the image of him as the Japanese soldier are dissociated from each other. Two polarized images are in conflict with each other, tormenting me.

What the image of her grandfather represents here is the complexity of human being. The teller is not able to accept the fact that the gentle grandfather could also have been a demonic Japanese soldier. These two conflicting images stand at the polar opposite of good and evil and the teller’s feeling towards the grandfather is confused.

This story was told as if to respond to the problem suggested in the first story. Human beings cannot easily be categorized into perpetrator and victim. Even though they are contradictory, they are both true. The story presented

the universal truth that we accept the contradiction and overcome the conflict.

“Optimistic Grandmother” A Chinese student

I am remembering the scene where my grandma and I are talking. Grandma’s father was killed by the Japanese and she lived a life full of hardships. The wounds in her heart and the memory of sorrow in her body will not disappear. Even then, grandmother was full of smiles and optimism. The image of grandma for me is a cheerful person. I deeply respect my grandmother.

This was a story of a woman, who lived with strength and livelihood without being crushed by the weight of the historical past. The story was about adoring the grandmother who, no matter how unfortunate or miserable life maybe, found joy in life without being defeated.

The first and the second story included the dark side of human beings. But this story emphasized the strong and cheerful side of human nature as if to balance the previous stories. Some people, like this grandmother, lived their lives cheerfully without forgetting hope even though they had hardships. Human beings have the ability to live with resilience even after the ultimate hardship has occurred. In this sense, this story also inherits the theme about the complexity of human beings. When looking at how the whole story unfolded, this story offered a hopeful message that the hardships not always led to a dark future.

Performance

The public performance changed the scenery of the venue. In addition to the workshop participants, we invited the public as well. Three stories told in the workshop were the stories about the people who lived during and after the war. At the performance, a new standpoint is introduced. The stories had shifted to those of the young people now, as if to show the flow and the shift of time.

“Only because it is now” A Japanese student

I have a Korean partner. When I was studying in Korea, we talked about our history and I realized that I was Japanese. The Japanese who used to have power over Korea, the Japanese who used to be the perpetrator, and I am a descendent. We are able to be together beyond the borders because the relationship of dominant/dominated has ended. We can honor each other just as a person. If we had met 70 years ago, I wonder how it might have been.

This brings the standpoint of the younger generations. Previously, emotional relationships like this could not have overcome the social structure of Japan dominating Korea. This is a story that showed that 70 years have passed and young people are now able to join their hearts together.

Here, the theme of perpetrator and victim has appeared as dominant and dominated. The story progressed to the next chapter and the young people of the nations that were at conflict joined their hearts together. The story suggests the fact that, the war ended, time went by, and the younger generations are making relationships different from the past. Perhaps we are being asked, can China and Japan reconcile like these young people have.

“Each have their own circumstances” A Japanese Student

The story my grandfather told me was his miserable experience as a prisoner of war. He was taken to the Soviet Union and was forced to work in severe conditions, so I thought of him as a victim. I never considered myself as Japanese and the perpetrator. But when I learned about Nanjing, I learned that Japan was also a perpetrator. I was in the midst of confusion and contradictions. But a Chinese person said to me, “Perpetrator and victims each have their own circumstances.” This was a big realization.

The theme of perpetrator/victim continues. In the Soviet Union, his grandfather was a victim, but what if he was also a perpetrator in China? Both experiences

are severe beyond our imagination. When faced with extreme situations where hatred is swirling, anyone, even my grandfather can become a cruel perpetrator. What helped this Japanese student with this contradiction were a Chinese student's words.

In this story, the response to the problem suggested in the beginning is offered as the realization of the teller. As he heard the words, "Each have their own circumstances," a stream of light shined through his heart. What saved the tormented Japanese student was a Chinese student. The whole story moved forward. Contradiction and conflicts softened and some healing seemed to have occurred. China and Japan seemed to have shifted from the enemy relationship to that of caring for one another.

"Each other's truth" A Chinese student

As a Chinese student studying Japanese, I didn't experience much discrimination, contradictory to the image I held before going to Japan. However, older Japanese people at my part time job made discriminatory comments about China. On the other hand, when I returned to China, Chinese people made negative comments about Japan. When they misunderstand, I speak up for Japan and say, "That's not true." They are alike in that they greatly misunderstand each other. In China, or in Japan, it is hard for me no matter which country I am in. I feel that we can avoid this conflict if we know more about each other's truths.

This was a story of a young person who faced the conflicts, standing in the midst of conflicts and contradictions. He does not give up even though there are conflicts. If there are misunderstandings, he tries to correct them. He is calling to us to understand deeply about each other even when we are in a difficult situation.

The light of hope brought on by the previous story is shining brighter and stronger in this story. When considering the progress of the whole story, this story suggests that clarifying the truth and learning each others' truth is the

process of realizing the reconciliation.

“One future” A Chinese student

My grandma told me of the hard labor in the Japanese military factory. So I always thought Japanese people are bad. But then I realized, I use a lot of Japanese products such as a rice cooker and camera. When the disaster struck in Japan, I felt grief and I was moved to see the Japanese people's spirit of perseverance. Japan has a lot of good things. But when I feel these things, I feel anxious because I might be betraying China. I've had this conflict. Today, I was able to actually feel that the conflicting two can become one. Instead of hardening and repelling, it is more like softening and melting. I don't want to be ruled by a narrow ethnocentrism, I want to see my own truth. I want to value life and make a peaceful future. I feel tranquil.

Stories about the Japanese atrocities have been passed down and young people hold hatred towards Japan. At the same time they benefit from the economic relationship of the two nations. Can the hatred and anger, and gratitude for the Japanese economy coexist? Up to this point, stories were about the complex nature of human character but this story suggests an even wider view. The story suggests that contradictions and conflicts exist in our everyday life and in social situations. Through HWH program, the teller escaped from the chaos.

As the last chapter of the whole story, the answer to the questions posed in the beginning was suggested. The teller commented that the wish for hope can melt the hatred and conflicts. The teller's relationship and stance had shifted but she also seemed to experience this as personal growth. In other words, while the previous teller was saved by the words he received from the other, this teller was able to regain peace through her realization in the workshop. She spoke of “not wanting to be stuck in narrow ethno-centralism” and stated that she felt tranquil. She became more able to accept the universal truth that contradiction and conflict permeates our world. The tellers and the audience may not

be aware of the deep dialogue embedded in 7 stories. However, some of the young people who were present were able to grow, integrate their conflicts, and obtained the feeling of tranquility.

4. Playback Theatre as a Tool for Reconciliation

Playback Theatre is not a place for teaching moral lessons. This Playback Theatre performance was also not a place where peace and reconciliation were directly taught. People are not forced to open their hearts, nor asked to courageously face each other. Even then, the participants shared seven stories, and whether the teller was Chinese or Japanese, showed the tears of empathy. When we witness someone's story, we are presented with the opportunity to feel the pain and grief as our own, even though our position and situation differ, because our hearts move to the other side. During this playback, when I look at the depth of the stories, there seemed to be bridges between the hearts of people. And it seemed that, by overcoming the conflicts and contradictions, their hearts were there for each other.

Why does Playback Theatre facilitate reconciliation? One reason is that because it focuses on “emotions” rather than focusing on “facts.” Even when one cannot agree with the other about the historical facts, when witnessing the landscape of the other person's heart, our hearts lean toward the other side. Even when people are at conflict about factual things, we can still feel the pain and sorrow of the other person. If we can overcome the dual structure of the two sides, we are able to meet as human beings. Even when political and social reconciliation is far from our reach, informal and individual reconciliation can occur.

In Playback Theatre, historical facts presented in politics, history textbooks, and mass media are called “formal stories.” It communicates what happened, when and where. Playback Theatre cuts out the same facts but from a personal viewpoint and presents to the society as a “informal story.” The “Informal story” includes not just the teller's words, but facial expressions, the tone, tears and everything else. The seven “informal stories” and the faces of the seven tellers will always be remembered in the hearts of the participants and will not fade. I hope that the memory of these

stories will serve as the light that leads us toward reconciliation.

5. Conclusion

I would like to express my respect and gratitude to, Zhan Lianhong, Kuniko Muramoto, Armand Volkas, and Aya Kasai, and many others who have continued this collaborative study. I deeply appreciate the tireless efforts of the interpreters of this work that involved three languages, Japanese, English and Chinese. I would like to thank Friends Playback Theatre who collaborated with us on the stage, Eddy Yu who co-lead the performance, and my Playback AZ colleagues Kumiko Satō and Makoto Tange. The Playback Theatre performance became possible with all of your teamwork.

Lastly, I would like to thank most of all to the participants, especially the seven tellers. More than ever I was able to feel the potential of Playback Theatre as a tool for peace. I truly hope that the stories continue to be told, and for us and for our future generations, our gentle and peaceful reform continues to progress.

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