The single story

We need to sit with stories that resist easy categorization, stories that make us question the official narratives, no matter where we happen to fall in them.

By Ryan Dueck

March 27, 2017

In 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie delivered her famous TED talk entitled, "The Danger of a Single Story," which discussed the problematic nature of reducing human beings and cultures to a single narrative. She talked about negotiating her own African identity in cultural contexts that often only countenanced a single narrative of what it meant to be African. For so many, Africans were poor and they were victims (of corruption or famine or war or some other combination of circumstances). This was just what it meant to be African. There was no room for anything else in the story. No room for an African who *wasn't* poor or a victim or in need of Western aid. No room for her.

I think Adichie identifies something crucial (and virtually ineradicable) about human beings and how we think about the world. We are constantly drawn to the single story. Reality is complex. Identity is complex. Every story is a combination of history and sociology and biology and anthropology and psychology and, yes, often even theology. The story of who we are and what we do and how we arrived where we are is an incredibly complicated and nuanced one. But we human beings don't always do complicated and nuanced very well. We don't have the time or the inclination to dig into the whole story. We prefer clear, simple, understandable categories. The single story is easier, whether we're talking about race or sexuality or this or that social problem or church dynamics or whatever. So the single story is the story we tell.

Recently I came across a CBC article called “Uprooted” that, in my view, admirably resists the temptation of telling a single story. The author, Terry Roberts, tells the tale of the tiny town of Roddickton, Newfoundland, which has over the last decade or so become a kind of home for numerous indigenous children from Nain, Labrador (nearly 1600 km away). As of December, according to government statistics, there were 45 foster homes in the area, caring for 55 indigenous children. A combination of addictions and inadequate housing and poor social support had led to these children ending up with social services and, eventually, foster care.

Now, the story at this point could go in one of two “single story” directions.” The single story could be of the heroic and compassionate white families taking in underprivileged non-white kids and caring for them. It could be a story of poor victims being given a chance by magnanimous westerners or Christians or whatever. This single story would be a feel-good one of opportunities, of rescue from hardship, of newness and hope.

Or, more likely in our present cultural climate, the single story could be one of a kind of well-intentioned but misguided colonialism. We could talk about the loss of indigenous culture and language, the imposition of foreign customs and religion upon vulnerable children; we could talk about the severing of family bonds that are so crucial to navigating questions of identity and self-understanding. We could talk about the legacy of residential schools and all the destructive effects that have trickled down to the present. This single story would be one of lament and loss and injustice.

The remarkable thing about the way that Roberts tells this story is that he refuses either of these single stories. He acknowledges that both are true and that both contribute to the complex whole. He quotes indigenous leaders saying that it would be good for parents to see how white foster parents are raising their children, and to realize that they need to take care of their kids this way too. He includes indigenous voices that acknowledge that foster children in Roddickton seem well-adjusted and happy. He refers to an unnamed leader who, when asked about the loss of culture and identity that these kids will experience, said, “preserving a culture should not be a priority if it involves drunkenness, drug abuse, and violence.” This is not a popular story or one that we hear often. Yet it is part of the truth.

He also tells the vitally important story of indigenous parents who grieve the loss of their children, of families torn apart, of communities struggling to cope. He

includes critical voices that wonder if or how foster parents are profiting financially from these indigenous kids. There are some who quietly say that fostering has become something of an industry in Roddickton. The foster kids have allowed the school to stay open. Visits from parents from Nain provide a bit of a boost to what was a sleepy economy. And there are, of course, the big-picture truths about how Canada's historical treatment of indigenous people has led to the social realities that make situations like this possible. Roberts does not shy away from our deep and troubled national history of colonialism and racism that persists to the present and that has played a massive role in the conditions that lead to indigenous kids needing to go into foster care in the first place. This, too, is part of the truth.

We need to encounter difficult and nuanced multilayered stories like this. We need to sit with stories that don't neatly confirm what we already think or are inclined to think or would prefer to think. We need stories that resist easy categorization. We need stories that make us stop and think and question the official narratives we're given or have chosen to accept, no matter which side of a given story we happen to fall on.

I had coffee with a man in his nineties the other day. He wanted to talk to me about the "Sixties Scoop." He was angry about a story that he had read in the media that presented white foster parents as participants in colonialism. He proceeded to tell me about how in the 1960s he and his wife had a procession of indigenous foster kids in their home, about how they had treated them with love and kindness, about how they did the best they could to show the love of God to kids coming out of horrible circumstances. He told me about one day when a social worker had dropped off a three-month-old-baby boy with diaper rash on their front door with a jar of baby food and not much else. He told me about how they ended up adopting this little boy.

I thought back to the previous Sunday, and how the middle aged man that this three-month-old boy had become had made his way to the front of the church during communion, about how I had held out the cup to him and said, "This is the blood of Christ, shed for you…"

Is this another story of colonialism? Another white Christian family snuffing out an indigenous identity? Or a story of hope and rescue and opportunity? Or both? It depends on how you tell the story. And it depends on whether you're prepared to tolerate more than a single story.

Of course, I am not some dispassionate evaluator of the stories we tell when it comes to indigenous children and white parents (foster or adoptive). As a father of indigenous kids, I have a profoundly personal interest in stories that are big enough to encompass all the disparate components of the truth. I want my kids to know the story of colonialism. I even want them to be able to walk into the messy and painful parts of the story of how they came to be with us and how we came to be with them. I want them to be proud of their Ojibway and Metis heritage and for this to be a deep part of who they are and who they become.

But I don't want them to stop with this single story. I also want them to know that there is a story that is being told and an identity that is being forged in their lives that goes beyond their ethnicity and the complex history that brought us together. I want them to know the truth of what Parker Palmer said in a recent post:

> There is no more important work human hands can do than to hold a child with a fierce tenderness that says, in a way words never can, "You are loved, you are safe, you can trust."

I want my kids to resist the lure of the single story—whether it's the story of colonial lament or the story of paternalistic rescue—when it comes to how they understand who they are and where they are going.

And I want the same for all of us, in light of all the stories we read and hear and tell and share with others in all the various domains of our lives. The single story is easy and convenient. It's just rarely big or true enough in a world as complex as ours.

Originally posted at Rumblings