

WHEN DOES A STORY BEGIN?

When does a story begin? I mean a real story, not just a fragment of life, an adventure, a love affair, but a whole story?

Perhaps it begins at birth. "I was born on the twenty-third of July..." Surely, that must be the beginning of stories, at the beginning. But that seems arbitrary. Perhaps I began when I was legally viable, say, twenty-eight weeks *in utero*; or perhaps even at the real beginning, at conception. "My story begins on the twenty-third of October, when my mother and father..."

But then, to be able to write such a story, one needs an overview, so surely one can only begin a complete story on one's deathbed. "Now this is my story, at last I can tell it to you..."

But one may not be in the mood to tell one's story as one is dying, even if one could. Not that certain stories cannot come to fruition on deathbeds. Consider the story of Juliette, whose father confessed his guilt on his deathbed. He expressed sorrow to Juliette for not taking the opportunity to move his family to England, and thereby 'causing' Juliette's mother's death in the Holocaust, and Juliette's suffering.. That had been the reason for his distance from Juliette all those years. Father and daughter reconciled before father's death. The knot unravelled, and each continued their stories in different directions.

Or consider Joe's father who as his mind was slipping into Alzheimer's disease told for the first time how he was the sole survivor of his aircraft unit. He determined that Joe would never be a soldier, and that was why he had attacked Joe's every masculine trait.

Perhaps stories die, perhaps there cannot be a good time to start a story. Perhaps, if one feels one has to write a story, one should just begin: "When I was two, this happened. At four the other. I did this when I was a teenager, then I married Teena, had four kids, and I'll tell you some stories about their doings, and here I am now after thirty years of work, retired, writing my story."

But such a story is boring, like a child recounting in detail what he or she did in kindergarten.

People crave to hear, and to tell stories. But how to begin to tell a real story? Aha, emotional presence, or evoking emotions in the reader. So it may not be a 'when' in life, but 'how', whenever, to tell a story. "From the age of eight, my father always looked coldly at me..." – Juliette's story; or in Joe's case, "...castigated me." The puzzlement, the distress can be conveyed. But the story is incomplete until the fathers tell their secrets; if they ever do.

So for a complete story one must know the truth, otherwise one is dangling in uncertainty, or making wrong assumptions, and telling a false story. Even if the truth is available, what about the chameleon-like understandings of facts? "Oh, when I was fifty years old, going through my own grief, I understood that it was not that my mother did not love me, nor that I was unlovable as I had always sensed (the words only came to me in the last decade, prior to that I could not even think about this, I only experienced it), but she was depressed ever since the death of my father when I was a young child." So once again, perhaps one can only tell a story at the mature end of one's life, and even then it may be misinterpreted, for does one ever achieve real maturity?

To tell stories one needs words. And when do words actually come? Some come at eighteen months of age. But what can a person mean, when at fifty he says, that words only came to him in the last decade? Do some words never come, just like some languages do not have words for certain concepts? May many words remain in limbo forever?

We now know that experiences in the first years of life, and those fragmented in trauma are stored in the nonverbal unaware, unself-conscious right side of the brain, or if you do not believe this, certainly in some part of the so-called unconscious brain or mind. What if images, sensations, body feelings, emotions, meanings and philosophies never attain words? How can you begin their story?

The unconscious does not recognise time. So a fifty year old may feel as unlovable as he or she did as a child. It may take a peculiar form of awakening to know that there is a story to the unlovable feeling, rather than it being an unformulated, unquestioned fact that one simply 'is' unlovable.

So stories are a function of memory. But memories and their significance can be suppressed or distorted in order to maintain hope. So stories can also be distorted, fragmented, incomplete, amenable to others' and one's own unconscious judgements.

It seems then that stories can only be attempted to be told. In the telling stories may unfold, and that is one reason to tell them. Stories are mutually supportive, and explorative, between teller and listener.

I have not even begun to tell my story. Or have I?