The Power Of Storytelling and Reading in Healing Children Orphaned or Traumatized by War in Northern Uganda

By

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Abstract

I am very conscious that Words are compelling. They invoke our emotions. They speak to our six senses. Storytelling breaks through barriers no other mode of communication would. Words captivate me. Words lure me into creating stories because writing is deep and it comes from deep down the heart.

This paper is going to deal with storytelling and reading needs and interests of former child soldiers and victims traumatized by the war in northern Uganda.

The experience of reliving their suffering has been painful. Most have conveyed immediate feelings of relief and helped them rationalize their fears and overcome their psychological distress through art. But this paper will handle specifically story telling and reading how these victims of horrifying violence have through reading and story telling been able to recover from flashbacks, panic attacks and isolation.

I learnt after visiting and through interaction with these children that their pain was healed through listening or reading and story telling. These modes expressed their anger with greater poise and poignancy than any other form of communication could muster. The story telling and listening therapy shown remarked improvement from their nightmares and conquered their fears as they begun to live a normal life in their villages.

Paul

On the way to Sudan I was given 20kilograms of maize flour and coffee to carry. Many children died from thirst and infirmity/weakness. The weakest were killed by other children. I was forced to kill as well. If I did not I would be killed. One boy would not kill his friend. Then the friend was forced to kill him.

We used big sticks to hit children on the head until they died. Normally they died after five hits. If I had trouble walking I knew it would be my turn next.

At night I had dreams that I tried to run but was killed.

Iris

In Sudan I was given to one of the rebel leaders as a wife, but he died in battle. Then the training started. It took place in the forest and lasted three weeks. Then there was no more food and we starved. My first battle was close to Gulu. They (rebels) treated me very harshly because I am from the southern part of Uganda, and I was very fair and small so they thought that I sympathized with
President Museveni. Many (people) died and many were injured. We won anyway. When you are right in the middle of it, it is as if you do not realize you are fighting. I heard a buzzing in my ears. Nothing else. Oh yes, a big bomb. (Ladegaard and Otto, 2002: 20-24)

For millions of children like Iris and Paul, around the world, childhood is stained with brutality and conflict. Since 1986, violence conflict has gripped the region of northern Uganda. The war has resulted into countless deaths, the abduction of more than 10,000 children, widespread human rights violations, the destruction of social and economic infrastructure, and displacement of over half the population-many of whom live internally Displaced Peoples Camps (IDP). The ordeal for many children continues long after the events, to be relieved in nightmares, sleeplessness, hallucinations, fainting fits, visual disorder, withdrawal, hostility, despair.

According to Robby Muhumuza (Muhumuza, 1995) of World Vision who provides trauma counseling for returned children the children are sick malnourished, with low appetites. They have quilt feelings, are depressed with low self-esteem. They have swollen feet, rough skin, chest infections they tend to be aloof with little confidence in themselves or others. They tend to lapse into absent mindedness as well as swift mood changes.

Thousands of children of northern Uganda have been abducted by the Lord Resistance Army (LRA). The time spent in captivity varies from one person to person. Time for education is lost. Many do not know how to read or write, although this paper should include reading as means of healing. Reading is not intensely used due to illiteracy rate. This paper therefore dwells more with storytelling as mode used by rehabilitation center to heal children.

Former child soldiers carry the reminiscences and emotions of painful experiences, a reminder of they were forced to do while in captivity. Many remain haunted by the acts of violence they suffered or were forced to commit. Some have nightmares, emotional disconnections. To many of these young people, these dreams and experiences reflect spiritual distress, the spirits of those they harmed troubles them, and they feel they are wrecked by spirits of guilt (A report for Womens Commission For Refugee Women And Children, 2000).

Formerly abducted children know that they are vulnerable to Lord Resistance Army (LRA). If they are re-abducted and recognized they are likely to be killed as an example to the rebels who want attempt escape. Relative and friends of those who escape may also pay the price. Many former child soldiers are afraid of re-abduction by the LRA that each night they sleep in the bush instead of their huts or commute to towns to sleep. Believing that that they are less likely to be found although some of them fall victims again and again.

Many former soldiers are haunted many worries, will their family, peers, community accept them? That they will be stigmatized as killers and thieves, incase of sexually abused girls especially those with children they are ashamed: that they are affected by HIV/AIDS, will they fit in school? Will they cope at school? These weighty emotional burdens former child soldiers have lost much trust in the world that failed to protect them. (A report for Womens Commission For Refugee Women And Children, 2000).

Child soldiers are usually indoctrinated by LRA. The rebels warn them that despite the Amnesty, the UPDF will punish, torture and kill them rather than allow them return home. They are brainwashed with Kony’s (rebel leader) teachings. Kony claims that the Holy Spirit controls everything and speaks through him. It can for instance say that all girls aged ten should be killed.
The children are subjected to rigid discipline. If they walk too slowly, refuse to obey orders or try to run away other children are forced to kill them.

When child soldiers return home, their village bears the stamp of war and the poverty problems are magnified (A Report for Womens Commission For Refugee Women And Children, 2000) Frustration and lack of opportunities may lead to a new war. Many families reject their children when they return from the bush. They believe that they are rebels and no amount of counseling will heal them. The children become more rebellious and distance themselves from the adults who should provide them love and support.

According to Sheila Melzak, Head Of Child Troubled Children, Children slowly gain a sense of belonging and their extreme experiences are normalized. They begin to find the words for unspeakable ordeals.

Expression in different ways allows a child to become more aware, gain meaning and control of the emotional dynamics that are linked to traumatic events. Ways to express traumatic experiences may vary from child to child, depending on local culture and tradition. Some of the most common methods of storytelling are speaking, writing, picture drawing, music, dance, drama these are forms of Therapy used by both World Vision Children Of War Rehabilitation Center And Gulu Support The Children Organization (GUSCO) where I visited and interacted with the former child soldiers.

Storytelling contain seeds of healing. The seeds are fertilized through storytelling as the images and meanings evoked by the unique reception of image in listening, excise the inner muscles of intuition and emotional intelligence necessary to function in such crisis.

Stories convey important information to others in ways few other forms of communication can accomplish. The counselors at the rehabilitation centers use story telling to allow the child soldiers to explore safe and non-threatening way. The story telling stimulates their imagination and makes tem comfortable to reveal their experiences.

Story telling has been designed to offer survival tools to an increasingly complex society (Cox, 2000) by using sensate description that matches peoples everyday experience, rapport is established and stories become real to the listener and the storyteller.

Storytelling tackles the challenges that confront northern Uganda. The former child soldiers when they have just arrived at the rehabilitation center draw pictures of rebels/ soldiers shooting at defenseless people, rebels slaughtering a civilian because that what they know and thats what has an impact in their lives. Later on after counseling and living at they center they begin to draw pictures of the church, school, peaceful home, their dream of a better world, evidence of healing.

The counselors do believe that we as storytellers they can help former child soldiers with their own healing by sharing some of their own difficult and heart rending, along with encouraging them to tell us what they did while in the bush. The more the child soldiers listen to the stories the better the relationship between them and later he he/she can open up.

Story telling builds resiliency because it provides appropriate models for behavior and remind young people that they are not alone in their struggles and pain. The fact that many children are abducted and they have been treated well and are healed make the children believe in what the rehabilitation centers does for them.
GUSCO and World Vision help the former child soldiers find their families and integrate to their communities. They believe that music, drawing and other creative sports example football; activities have a positive healing impact.

**Other forms of therapy**

Many former soldiers find solace in churches. The rehabilitation centers bring them up in Christian principles. They learn the principles of forgiving because in the centers the torturer and the victim meet. To reduce the level of stress among the former soldiers reconciliation is emphasized. The churches provide space prayer and forgiveness from God and the community. The young people rely on churches and belief in God for strength and to create a bridge to full community acceptance. (A report for Women’s Commission For Refugee Women And Children, 2000)

In Northern Uganda most children and adults are Christians but Traditional rituals are still much alive. It is very normal for a former child soldier to undergo a traditional cleansing. Almost every family has its own traditions to welcome their children into the community for example some families believe that you have to break an egg before the child enters the home. It brings good luck. That way the child can feel clean again after having killed. When the child has been cleansed, people stop being afraid of the child, and they forgive it for all the things it has done. By being openly forgiven by everyone else it is easier for the child to forgive himself or herself.

**Evidence of recovery**

When the children begin to narrate his/her experience. This shows tendency to healing because when they arrive at the center they isolate themselves and don’t talk at all. According to David Odong, counselor, world vision then he/she is healing. This is the intimate relationship between the child soldier and they counselor dwell on for a better future for the child.

Many former child soldiers commitment to education is overwhelming they cling to the possibility of an education with hope (qtd. In Ladegaard and Otto 2002) if they do not go to school they still desire to go. In the picture drawings they draw pictures of themselves as lawyers, doctors and some of them bluntly say I want to go to school.

Many former child soldiers turn to God or the spirit for the strength. The process of prayers, community acceptance, forgiveness and serenity that comes from religion assist many young people (qtd. In Ladegaard and Otto, 2002) many are altar boys in church.

Traditional cleansing rituals also help the formerly abducted children recover from their experiences in captivity.

Many formerly abducted children are engaged in creative groups. Through art and drama they provide the entertainment for others but they also they also use the opportunity to address important issues (qtd. In Ladegaard and Otto, 2002) in Alokolum village for instance AVSI sponsored a competition for youth drama, music and dance groups on around the theme “Living Happily Amidst Difficulties” the young revived the storytelling tradition through depiction of alcoholism and its effects on the children, as well as the problem of orphans.

Many of the formerly abducted children cope with on going circumstance by spending time with their peers, talking laughing and having fun when possible. The girls enjoy talking with each other.
at boreholes when they go to fetch water. Peer support and recreation opportunities are important ways for children to keep their minds off their worries.

Some formerly abducted children in the village of Omiya Aminya and Awer IDP camp have formed their own support groups. They sit together to plan project. The meeting help them feel supported and give them confidence. While the former abducted children interact with other people they find solace and support in one another.

One other way young children cope their own problems is to help others who they consider more vulnerable. At the rehabilitation center the new arrivals are treated with care. Their colleagues chow them around the place. This helps them to feel good when they help others.

**Okumu**, 14 revealed that
One elderly lady called me son of (rebel leader) KonyOI am sure that I would have beaten her to death or done something else I would have regretted later, if I had not undergone trauma counseling at World Vision Center.

Despite the numerous obstacles in the way of healing and reintegration, communities have worked hard to welcome and accept the former child soldiers. The communities also understand that healing is such a long process for the young people and their families, which requires determined and on going follow up.

Ladegaard says
When you help a child heal its psychological wounds, you help the entire community (qtd. In Ladegaard and Otto 2002)

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