

Stories of Love and Hatred – The Narratives that Shape our Present and Future

On 24 March, I had the privilege to moderate a fascinating virtual conversation on the role of narratives in shaping societies. Titled ‘Stories of Love and Hatred – Narratives that Shape our Present and future,’ (Historias de amor y odio – las narratives que dan forma a nuestro presente y futuro), the panel was made up of the following members:

Leonardo Garnier, Costa Rican economist, professor at the University of Costa Rica and former Minister of Planning and Minister of Education. He is also a writer of fiction for both children and adults.

Francisco Goldman, American novelist and journalist based in Mexico City, and professor of literature at the Trinity College in Hartford Connecticut. His books include *The Art of Political Murder* and, *Say Her Name*. His latest work is an autobiographical novel, *Monkey Boy*.

Nina Pacari, Ecuadorean jurist of the kichwa indigenous nation, and a leader in the indigenous rights movement. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and judge of the Constitutional Court, she now heads the Pacari Institute of Indigenous Sciences.

The conversation ranged over various topics related to the role of narratives – the different kinds of narratives and stories being told in the world today and how they have evolved, the link between narrative and identity, the power of the arts, the role of young people and the influence of social media among others.

FOGGS organized this discussion as part of its quest for a new collective narrative of hope that can help build a more inclusive, just and sustainable world.

The panelists brought very different perspectives to the topics, and at the same time, coincided on some fundamental ideas. Here are some of the key takeaways:

Narratives give us an identity and meaning to our lives and to the world.

In the words of Leonardo Garnier:

Narrative is enormously important for human beings, because it is what gives us meaning, what allows us to put together the pieces of the puzzle, to find our place in the world. I remember not long ago reading a book by Amin Maalouf. He said that he was Lebanese and that allowed him to establish a link with all Lebanese people while distinguishing himself from those who were not. But he was also Christian and that allowed him to establish a link with those who were Christian while distinguishing himself from those who were not. He was also an immigrant which made him identify with other immigrants and distinguish himself from those who were not. He added up all those identities and concludes in the end, ‘I am unique because I am the only one with exactly that combination of determinants.’ Everyone has their own combination of identities, and need a narrative that gives meaning to their existence, which in part is unique and in part is shared with everyone else.

It helps us – and others -- to see ourselves and to understand our own experiences.

Francisco Goldman said this, about writing Say Her Name, an autobiographical novel about his love for his wife, Aura, and her sudden, tragic death:

I wanted to get as close as possible, through my writing, through memory, through empathy, imagination, poetry, to Aura. Who was this person that I loved so much? That famous quote from Proust about love and death having something in common – it's talking about the mystery of the personality. Why do we love a person? What is the essence of that person? When that person dies, where does she go? And if you can capture that person in words, does something of that person survive? I also wanted to look at my own pain, my own life. I simply wanted to see it with clarity, with honesty without lies. If you can clearly see that traumatic experience of mourning, capture it, write about it well, you are going to help people. There are going to be people who recognize themselves and not feel so alone.

Yet there are narratives that also erase certain groups of people, such as indigenous peoples, and their experiences, from public awareness.

Nina Pacari spoke about this:

When I speak about globalization pushing for uniformity, it is about trying to control. What is uniform can be controlled but when there is diversity, it is difficult. The history of indigenous peoples has been about usurpation and controlling the different, the distinct as a policy whether national or global. Throughout history we have had inequality with the aim to control certain groups from the perspective of hegemony of power and of economy, subordinating the rest. Part of this process has been about taking us down the path of individualization and weakening the collective organization of the community.

One would think that leftist ideologies would be more open but they still position indigenous peoples simply as peasant farmers when we are societies with millennia of history. You can see vestiges of our architecture based on our knowledge of mathematics, geometry and so on. We also have our art and literature that we preserve, but if we are only seen as agricultural societies, that's it. For example, now with the pandemic, in the absence of the state, we are having to use our knowledge of indigenous medicine to preserve our health and our lives.

But indigenous peoples are resisting with new and different narratives, that are now penetrating broader society.

Nina Pacari:

In the 1990s, indigenous peoples become more visible. Narratives started to change, not only around the economy or education but around ideas of a new kind of state. They go beyond the narratives of class struggle or the struggles of union movements or the fight for land rights. Land for indigenous peoples means their own territories and autonomy. The indigenous movement has contributed new paradigms to Ecuador and to Latin America – new concepts, new praxis, toward a life of greater equity and the principle of sumak kawsay (the good life). We have even had visitors from Asia and Europe to see what this is about.

But this concept has become too distorted with the intent to absorb it into other cultures. They do not consider even from an academic perspective the aspect of the collective subject of rights. This is completely different from the sum of individual wills. It's about collective entities with its own history and memories. From that standpoint, indigenous peoples have also contributed to the consolidation of democracy, for example approaches to consensus building.

We used to tell stories around the fire, about history, about the economy and about politics. But now we are in such a rush with all the technology that we do not even talk with those by our side. We need to think about how to reflect, pause and start over.

We live in a time when diverse narratives coexist and evolve and are interwoven with one another

Leonardo Garnier:

There are always narratives that take on weight in certain eras. In the 1960s in Latin America, there was a modernizing narrative of industrialization and urbanization that had a great impact on what was happening in our countries during those years. Then there was the narrative of the Cold War and the good guys and the bad guys depending on where you positioned yourself in that narrative. Then, toward the end of the crisis of the 70s, our continent, as in the rest of the world, was marked by the neoliberal narrative of the 80s – of the commodification of society, supposedly based on the criterion of efficiency.

Religious narratives are particularly important for human beings. They are attractive to a lot of people and they combine with the other ones that I mentioned. In the 1980s in the United States, the Reagan Administration linked the narrative of the fundamentalist Evangelicals with the economic right wing. Then there was the emergence of a narrative full of hatred that has been behind the insanity of the Trump presidency of the last four years. Paradoxically, it starts from a religious narrative and turns into a narrative not of identifying with the other, but of separating from, and making an enemy of the other.

At the same time that we have this type of narrative that we can call perverse, because they are narratives against something, not an ethical narrative that integrates us with others, we find other narratives also circulating. The environmentalist narrative is gaining a lot of importance among young people – that preoccupation not only for all humans or for social issues, but for the planet that we live in, our relationship with nature. It is something that the indigenous communities understood very well and that we lost. The human rights narrative has different origins but it is interwoven with the feminist narrative, the narrative of gender diversities and of different ethnic groups, and the narrative of concern about inequality.

The arts play a crucial role in shaping narratives and in giving meaning to life, hence also in social and political change

Leonardo Garnier:

One book that caused a great impact in me when I was studying economics was a book called *The Joyless Economy*, by Tibor Scitovsky. Scitovsky puts forward an idea that seems very simple. He says, 'Look, supposedly in economics, the increase in production and having more goods makes

people more satisfied, more contented, happier. But if we compare the level of life toward the end of the 19th century and the level of life in the 1970s – which is when he wrote the book – the quantity of goods is infinitely greater, and people should be infinitely happier. Yet, in all the studies about how happy people were a hundred years ago and how happy they are now, there isn't a big difference.' What he says is that human beings need material comfort, but they also need stimulation, excitement, something that gives meaning to their lives. And among those stimulating activities is art. Also relationships with others. Scitovsky shows that developing a taste for the arts and for esthetics turns out to be super important for human beings, yet it is something the market economy does not do well enough.

When I entered the Ministry of Education, one of the things we insisted on was that while one of the objectives of education had to be training for economic life, for future productive work and for having an income, education also had to be about sharing life with others, learning to enjoy the company of others, to appreciate artistic expression.

Nina Pacari:

Art and culture form part of the principle of integrality in the life of indigenous peoples. Economic and political activity and the institutions would have no meaning if we did not have the arts and esthetics. They are what give meaning, that integrality, harmony and balance. But this ideology of domination has undervalued the artistic and literary production of the indigenous peoples. At best, they have been reduced to crafts.

We have fabulous painters, including women. I remember in 1992 or 93 we organized a painting competition among the indigenous nationalities. One woman came with an enormous painted rock that had to be carried by several men. We call it *mamarumi* or mother stone. It was not only a painting. It told a story, not only of her family but of her whole village. It was a beautiful piece of artistic expression.

I would add to our artistic production our symbols – geometric symbols, mathematical symbols, and some related to nature. One of them is the *chacana*, which in the West is known as the Southern Cross. For us, it symbolizes fundamental principles, such as complementarity, coexistence, horizontal relationships under conditions of equality, reciprocity and proportionality. Symbols are what have allowed us to survive. When we look at colonial architecture, particularly the churches, which were built by our ancestors, we can find our symbols there, for example in the famous Jesuit Church of Quito.

Francisco Goldman:

I am a novelist – it's my vocation, my love. Whether I do it well or badly, I feel that it was what I was born to do. The only way to write novels is for each writer to write what preoccupies him or her. You cannot tell a writer, 'You have to write this, about this topic.' Novelists are going to write what is within them, their own thoughts, feelings, mysteries. It is a constant search. You are searching always, the ugly, the beautiful, the painful, the joyous, everything. Then you are trying to connect all that to the world.

I am against prescriptions and rules for writers. That is the enemy of the freedom of creation. But that doesn't mean that novels do not have their place in a collective struggle.

You see the progress being made by the black community in the United States, for example. It's a community that has very much united over the past years. They have had an enormous impact on all of our daily lives. Obviously, there are politicians and activists, but all the voices has been very, very important, including the novelists and poets – Toni Morrison, James Baldwin...Of course they have had an impact. But that isn't something a writer can expect. You launch your novel into the world and it's something that others will decide.

Young people are a reason for hope – for better narratives and a better future

Leonardo Garnier:

I like to think that in some things we are getting better. If I compare our generation with those of the boomers, our parents, our grandparents, it seems to me that we were better. And if I compare myself with the generation of the kids today, it seems to me they are better. The way in which they relate with one another is much nicer than the way we related to one another, in particular, with issues to do with diversity. For example, the gender relationships between men and women, with kids of diverse sexualities. The problem is far from resolved, and I am not going to say that the young people of today are perfect, but they are much more open than we were, and the way our parents were. On racial issues too.

Nina spoke about globalization. I know that in certain ways, globalization can be a threat, but in other ways it is wonderful. The way the kids in one country are communicating with kids on the other side of the planet through internet and games without worrying about all those barriers that we had placed there because we were different from those other kids. The kids today don't allow themselves to be stopped by those differences. I

We have to find spaces for dialogue with young people because they have a lot to teach us and they have some things to learn from us, too. Curiously, art separates the generations when it should be bringing us together. One day in the Ministry of Education, we were in a meeting with 'problem kids,' those that had discipline problems. I was talking with them, and there was a boy with a black T-shirt full of skulls and with spikes in his hair and a bracelet with spikes, really aggressive looking. And he looked at me with hatred in his face. At some point in the conversation, I established a dialogue with him. It was not very fruitful and the boy was very aggressive. At one moment I said to him, 'Tell me something. What kind of music do you like?' How his face changed with that question! His features softened. Then he said to me in a defiant tone, 'What I like is Gothic opera.' I said to him, 'That's great! Do you think your teachers have listened to gothic opera?' And the kid said to me, 'You're crazy.' The next day, I had a meeting with teachers and I asked them, 'Have any of you heard gothic opera?' And all the teachers looked at me like I was crazy. I said to them, 'Look, if you don't listen to the music your students listen to, how are you going to communicate with them? How are you going to understand them? We have to listen to their music, we have to read the literature they read. We have to see what they like, just as they need to read and understand some of the things we like.'

Nina Pacari:

In the case of indigenous peoples, it's a little bit different, because we don't separate the generations. Rather, our starting point is an *ayllu*. That is to say, the family, and the principle of the family can reproduce itself in the collective leadership of the community. It's not a vertical

leadership based on one person but collective decisions within a body of colleagues as an authority. It isn't only the elders that know more and say what should be done, but the young people are there to learn, the older people to share their experiences.

Our educational model is based on learning by doing. That is why young people also have their responsibilities according to their age. For example, at twenty, you can have sufficient conditions to be an authority. So, in Ecuador, the leaders of the indigenous organizations are not permanent. There is a constant generational change. We were the leaders in the 90s and we were younger then – 30, 33 years old. And now, we also have young leaders of 25, 30, 40.

In a family there are the children, the adolescents, the adults, the elderly. That collective is what has to build together because the vision and the wisdom is not only with the elders, not only with the youth, not only with the adults. It's a collective construction where you seek a balance between the individual and the collective.

Francisco Goldman:

I completely agree that the young people are our hope. I love my students and I admire what this generation has done a lot – all this summer in the United States with the marches, here in Mexico with the feminist movement against the femicides and abuse toward women.

Perhaps to get back to the theme of narratives, I live with a three year-old daughter, and it is extraordinary to see the power of narrative in her world. It is through narratives and stories that she starts to explain the world that she lives in, with all the emotions. She finds narratives of justice, of adventure. She opens her world through the magical power of storytelling. I brought her a book from New York last week about a girl and her kitten, that explains why she has to stay home. It was the first book that she had read about the pandemic. The book says, 'You have to stay inside so that other people can go out to work, like the people in the hospitals doing such noble work for us.' And this book gives her the sense that this thing that is happening is not a strange and mysterious thing. She begins to understand how her own story is part of the story of the community. She asked to have the book read to her three times yesterday. You see the beautiful education that the book is giving her -- to her heart, to her understanding of what she is living. There is all the hope that you would want.

And some ideas for the future:

Francisco Goldman on healing the narratives:

The German philosopher and writer, Walter Benjamin believed that narrative and storytelling could heal everything. He talks about narrative as a river and how a dammed up river is in pain and can explode. It's a vision of how narrative should function in our lives. But what is the reality? We are living in a river of narratives and we are drowning, in a river of completely decadent, false narratives of disinformation, racist, violent narratives. We are living the opposite of Walter Benjamin's vision. If narratives and stories aren't healing us, we have to heal the narratives.

We have to come together after this pandemic goes away. With our friends in cantinas and bars and talk. We have to make a change in the way we think and use our time every day. Think about

how we can make good use of our talents. You have to seek change through many different kinds of influences. We can do better.

Nina Pacari on dealing with the root causes of polarization:

There was a question about what to do with polarizing discourse. It seems to me that we have to find the cause of the polarization. And the cause is extreme inequality, going hand in hand with corruption. And society in general, including indigenous peoples, are fed up with so much generalized corruption and the concentration of decision making in a few hands without consultation. In Latin America, with the recovery of democracies, we thought there would be more dialogue, more consultation, but this did not happen. So, when governments come to power under the guise of democracy and turned into authoritarian regimes, it betrays the aspirations of the people. Democracy is not just about the electoral process but also about economic, social and cultural policies, with dialogue under equitable conditions.

In the case of the indigenous movement, it has to put forward viable proposals on where we want to go, for the population as a whole, and there has to be a dialogue with various sectors of society and with the state, that can lead to new ways of working and new policies.

Leonardo Garnier on using social media for good:

There was a question about how to use social media to propagate positive narratives in the way that fake news is spread. Social media have a lot of defects and we can't be ingenuous about that, the algorithms used by Facebook and so on. Even so, they are spaces that didn't exist before that allow people to come together. So, the challenge is to learn to use the tools until now used by the others to separate us. We need to learn to use them to bring us together. There is an enormous potential there, and there is no one better than the young people for knowing how to use it. There are a lot of details to look at. For example, on Facebook, it isn't so much the initial post that the people look at but all the comments that people write. We are all a bunch of gossips. We love to read those comments. Sometime people ask me, 'Why do you take the time to write those comments?' I tell them, 'Because people are reading them.' Someone insults you and you answer them with patience and with arguments, and pretty soon you see others making their arguments. I think this is a space that should be rescued.