Storytelling and its Transformative Impact on the IDPs in the Philippines

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Abstract

Storytelling is an effective tool in transforming the negative energy of trauma into something constructive, especially in settings where oral tradition remains strong. The entire process of storytelling as this article suggests, can bring the whole community to a consciousness of history with a strong appreciation of their individual and societal resilience. The experience of telling stories enables a community to plan and implement the course of action that people want to undertake, and further affirms their being active participants in social healing and community building.

Having worked in the field of community-based trauma healing and peacebuilding in various conflict-affected areas around the world for thirteen years now, I came to observe that storytelling can be an effective tool in transforming the negative energy of trauma into something positive and constructive, both on individual and societal levels. For survivors of armed conflict, for example, including those who go through the cycle of silence in reaction to deep traumatization, the coming out into the open through storytelling is empowering and affirming, enabling them to redefine their sense of identity given their new normalcy.

In her article, "Stories of We the People," Victoria Fu (1999) writes, "Lived-stories (narratives) are catalysts for conversation (dialogue), and conversations are catalysts for change." (5). Fu emphasizes that life stories of family members, friends, colleagues, students, and strangers, for example, prompt us to reflect and understand different standpoints in the contexts of life. Understanding the transformative impact of storytelling on the lives of people, from the perspective of this article, must stem from the belief that "lived stories are 'acts of meaning,' for they deal in human or human-like intentions and actions and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course (Fu and Stremmel 1999, 5). In this context, the narrators of the stories are active participants in effecting social change.

This article highlights the importance of storytelling from the perspective of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mindanao, Philippines in their attempt to make sense of their experience of war and displacement. The content of this article is based on the output from a storytelling workshop that I facilitated with the IDPs in Mindanao through the assistance of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS)-Mindanao in the months of November-December 2004 in Bukidnon, central Mindanao. CRS-Mindanao helped identify twenty-one internally displaced participants who were all key individuals in the area so that they can echo the activity to their respective home communities and share their learning experiences with others. Participants were local community and religious leaders, health workers, farmers, out-of-school youth, as well as local facilitators. I will be using the terms 'IDPs' and 'participants' as well as 'stories' and 'narratives' interchangeably in this article.

Background Information of the IDPs in Mindanao and their war experience

The storytelling workshop comprised of three different groups of people living in co-existence long before the wars in Mindanao began. They call themselves *tri-people* and consist of the *Lumad* or the Indigenous people (particularly the Manuvu tribe), the Muslim/Moro (particularly the Maguindanao group) and the Christian or the *migrant settlers* from central and northern Philippines. During the workshop, CRS-Mindanao ensured equal participation in terms of the number of representatives from each group.

The name tri-people has now become part of their sense of collective identity. They became internally displaced as a result of the conflict which has claimed more than 150,000 lives and displaced more than four million people since early 1970's (Bengwayan 2002). The IDPs of central Mindanao regarded three major wars as most devastating: the 1970-1976 Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) rebellion and the 2000 and 2003 government offensives (Quitoriano 2004, 10). The conflict in Mindanao continued to rage despite a deal between the MNLF and the Philippine government in 1996 that established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao

(ARMM), which gave the area a degree of self rule (Bengwayan 2002).

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines *internally displaced persons* (IDPs) as persons or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (Kalin 2000, 6). This definition of IDP is a descriptive term and not a legal definition conferring special status in the same way the Refugee Convention assigns special status to refugees. Kalin explains this difference in his annotations to the Principles: "In international law, refugees are granted a special legal status because they have lost the protection of their own country and, therefore, are in need of international protection not necessary for those who do not cross international borders. Internally displaced persons do not need such a substitute protection. Rather, as human beings who are in a situation of vulnerability they are entitled to the enjoyment of all relevant guarantees of human rights and humanitarian law, including those that are of special importance to them" (6). However, the reality suggests otherwise. In Mindanao, for example, IDPs who participated in the workshop indicated that they did not usually get the kind of protection they expected to receive from the government. This was reinforced by the fact that their displacement was instigated by their very own government, waging war against its own people and other armed opposition groups through its total war policy. Going back to Kalin's definition, IDPs do not usually get the kind of international attention that refugees do such as pressuring the national government to address problems related to internal displacement. Internal displacement is considered primarily a national problem that must be addressed by the national government or by the host country alone. In the case of the IDPs in Mindanao, they received very limited supply of food, clothing, housing, medicine, and other daily necessities in order to survive through non-government organizations and the Department of Social Welfare and Services of the government. They did not feel safe and secure living in their home country.

The wars of 1997, 2000-2001 and the first quarter of 2003 between the Philippine government security forces and various armed resistance groups such as the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)* and *the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)* on the southern island of Mindanao, displaced more than 400,000 civilians, according to the Global IDP Project report (11 Feb. 2005) on the state of internally displaced persons in the Philippines. Local residents were forced to leave their homes and livelihoods for fear of being killed. However, the absence of any major clashes since May 2003 paved the way to a gradual return for the majority of the displaced to their homes. By the time the workshop was conducted, a significant number of them – estimated at 60,000 – still remained displaced in Mindanao (Global IDP Project Report, 11 Feb. 2005). Many were reluctant to return to their homes. The continued presence of armed opposition groups or government forces in communities of origin, the traumatic memories of the violence the displaced people have witnessed or endured, the lack of basic social services, and limited housing possibilities constituted a few of the reasons for not returning. These were compounded by the absence of any peace agreement between the warring groups, creating a feeling of insecurity among those displaced. Some lived in what have become permanent evacuation centers or stayed with friends and relatives. Others established new livelihoods in their area of displacement and *did not wish to be relocated again.* Several IDPs were often forced from their homes for the second, third or fourth time; and were also generally moved from one evacuation center to another before reaching their final relocation site. During the 2003 war, for example, the same people who were just starting to recover from the 1997, 2000-2001 wars, were again rushing back to the evacuation centers; the same faces of children, the same faces of mothers, fathers and elderly, and the same evacuation centers (Layson 2003, 62). For those who returned to their home communities, they struggled for their daily survival in an environment of severe economic deprivation. Many still called themselves IDPs saying, “We are IDPs who have returned home.” The reason given was that they have been displaced on several occasions. Even

though they were back in their home communities, many anticipated that they will be displaced again in the near future as their previous experiences suggest.

The Storytelling workshops

At this point, let me first emphasize at least two theories that informed the design and conduct of the workshop. First was the *theory of literacy* by Paulo Freire (2000). According to this theory, every human being (no matter what context he or she is from) is capable of engaging the world in an (interactive) encounter with others. Freire calls this a dialogical teaching/learning process, a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about people's experiences shared in the dialogue or in the interactive process (17). During the workshops, IDP participants acquired an ever present curiosity about their experience of war and its impact on their lives and communities.

Another theory was *person-centered theory*. This theory suggests that human development is an ongoing process. Individuals belonging to a community change and adapt to meet the demands of their environment. This means that people have the capacity to learn from experience, to change and grow through creativity and openness to experience. What this implies is that IDPs have the capacity to name and define their sense of reality. They have resilience which enables them to move on with life despite their situation and remain active participants in their own healing and rebuilding (Fuertes 2004, 495).

Going back to the workshop, participants had the option to decide which methods they wanted to use in telling their stories: oral or written, the use of metaphor, poetry, song, drawing, collage or through people's theater.

Two levels of the Storytelling workshop

The entire workshop came in two parts: Workshop 1, which was held from November 23-25, comprised the actual sharing of individual stories in small groups of three to four

members. On one occasion the grouping was based on the geographical location where participants came from, which was a mixture of Muslim, Christian and Lumad. The other grouping was based on their ethnic or religious affiliation. Here, they had a chance to hear stories based on how war and displacement affected their collective identity as belonging to the same ethnic or religious community in relation to the other groups.

During Workshop 2, held on December 6-9, participants revisited their stories from Workshop 1 which were all then collated by my documenters according to a) geographical locations and b) ethnic/religious affiliations. We conducted narrative analysis of the stories by establishing themes and issues that were common and unique to their narratives, in light of their respective traditions, beliefs and practices. The process enabled the participants to make sense of their stories by associating meanings and interpretations, and relating them to the larger socio-historical and political context. They generated narrative summaries based on the collated or assembled stories from the first workshop. Narrative summaries, according to Maxwell and Miller (2007) can take the form of thumbnail sketches of narratives, capturing a few pertinent highlights or can be extended descriptions of the event or story (such as the actual attacks, or when they were running away or when they arrived in their first relocation site or evacuation center), representing at length the contextual relationships in the narrative. Participants explored different ways of coping. They examined what healing requires and the role non-government and government agencies play in addressing the impact of war and displacement on them. Looking at questions on how people's war trauma informs their resiliency by way of coping mechanisms and at the same time, how resiliency addresses or processes their traumas were also explored during the second workshop.

Participants during the first workshop returned to attend the second one. This helped ensure consistency of output in terms of insights and perspectives, and in establishing continuity of the storytelling process.

Storytelling Process

Figure 1 shows the storytelling framework which embeds the overall storytelling process, including the methods that participants used in sharing their narratives.

Phase 1	**Transition A**	**Phase 2**	**Transition B**	**Phase 3**	**Transition C**	**Phase 4**
Guide question *What was life like before you became displaced or before your village(s) was attacked?*	Guide question *Were there early warnings of an impending attack in your village(s)* *Or* *Was/were the attack(s) a total surprise to you?*	Guide question *What was life like during the attack?*	Guide question *Where were you before you arrived in your first refugee camp or relocation site?*	Guide statement *What is life like inside the refugee camp?*	Guide question *What do you do to help yourself? Why?* *What does your community do to cope with the effects/impact of war? Why?* *What values and principles in life do you embrace in order to get to the future?*	Guide question *What kind of life do you wish to live in the future?*
Process Individual and Group storytelling Specific approaches 1. Verbal/Oral 2. Written 3. Use of objects as symbols and representations 4. Poetry 5. Drawings/ Collage	Process Group discussion	Process Individual and Group storytelling Specific approaches 1. Verbal/Oral 2. Written 3. Use of objects as symbols and representations 4. Poetry 5. Drawings/ Collage	Process Group discussion	Process Individual and Group storytelling Specific approaches 1. Verbal/Oral 2. Writtem 3. Use of objects as symbols and representations 4. Poetry 5. Drawings/ Collage	Process Group discussion	Process Individual and Group storytelling Specific approaches 1. Verbal/Oral 2. Written 3. Use of objects as symbols and representations 4. Poetry 5. Drawings/ Collage

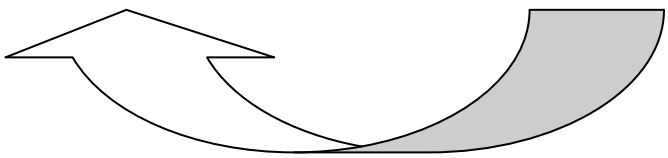

Figure 1 Storytelling Framework (Fuertes 2008, 34)

The actual telling of stories by IDPs did not assume a linear understanding of time, as shown in Figure 1. The two arrows (top and bottom) pointing at opposite directions suggest a more circular or spiral approach in storytelling and in exploring meanings and interpretations of people's stories. Here, participants referred back and forth to the different periods of their lives as represented by the different phases, including transitional phases in an attempt to reconstruct a collective narrative and come up with a more holistic picture of their experience. From Phase 1, for example, they jumped to Phase 3 then back to Phase 1 before proceeding to Phase 2, and finally to Phase 4 or vice versa. Telling their stories from various starting points became the 'order' of the storytelling process. At one point I asked them to observe the linear approach based on the sequential pattern of the four phases but then it did not have the spontaneity of the actual telling process. It became mechanical. Participants commented they would prefer to tell their stories without having to follow a specific order. This gave them a sense of freedom and control of the process. Figure 2 illustrates the flow in terms of how IDPs narrated their stories given the four phases in a non-linear pattern:

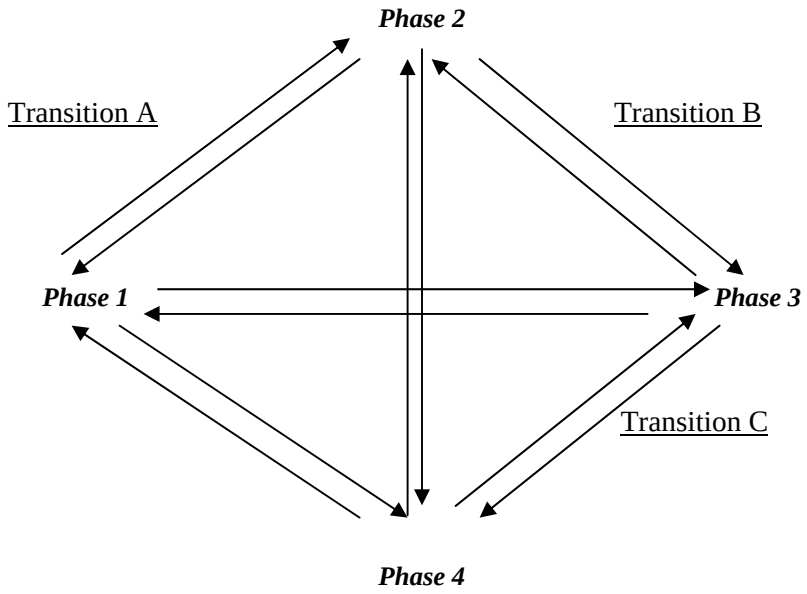

Figure 2 Flow of the actual sharing of narratives (Fuertes 2008, 35.

Phase 1: Life before displacement or before attack.

Phase 2: Life during attack.

Phase 3: Life before arriving in the relocation site or evacuation center

Phase 4: The kind of life they want to live in the future. This phase constitutes people's hopes and dreams of a future reality.

In-between phases are *transitional phases* – sub-phases – each consists a set of stories that connects one phase to the other. For example, after sharing their stories in Phase 2, participants looked back to see if there were early warnings or signs that would have prepared them for any possible military attack or if the attacks were a total surprise to them. This connects the stories in Phase 1 to the stories in Phase 2. The second transitional phase which connects the stories in Phase 2 to the stories in Phrase 3 asks, "Where were you after the attack?" "What was life like before you arrived in your first refugee camp or relocation site?" The third transitional phase deals with displaced people's shared values and principles they needed to embrace and live by. For many IDPs, holding on to the picture of a relatively peaceful and abundant future in terms of good harvest, good health, having food on the table, children being able to go back to school, and families being able to sleep at night without having fear of being attacked, was a major factor sustaining and enabling them to move on despite the odds. There were a few IDPs who felt uncertain about their future.

Lessons learned

Mediating in Central American conflicts, Lederach (1995) asks himself: "Why is it… that in the middle of listening to someone give their side of a problem I have a natural inclination to make a list, to break their story down into parts such as issues and concerns? But, when I ask them about issues, they seem to have a natural inclination to tell me yet another story (81). The difference, Lederach explains, lies in the distinction between analytical and holistic thinking. Our

North American conflict resolution approaches, he said, are driven by analysis; that is, the breaking of things down into their component parts. Storytelling keeps all the parts together. It understands problems and events as a whole" (81).

Lederach's observation reminded me of how IDPs articulated their experience within the context of their narratives, shaped by their direct experience of war and displacement. People's traumas were very much embedded and intertwined in their narratives that to compartmentalize them into different categories for purposes of analysis would be like walking on a very fine line. It is important, as Avruch (1998) points out, to look very carefully at the presumed culture-transcendency of human reasoning (92). What is being referred to by "presumed culture-transcendency of human reasoning" is the way IDP's articulate, explain and reason out their views of war and displacement.

Why did IDPs tell stories?

IDPs acknowledged that storytelling is part of their oral tradition. News about people and political events were usually passed on by words of mouth. Many of them did not have transistor radios or television sets. Hence, storytelling played an important role in keeping villagers up-to-date with the latest news and local events happening in their respective communities. They mentioned gossip as another tool that helped sustain their social relationships. Based on their experience, storytelling became a way of retaining, reinforcing, and transmitting norms and values, traditions, and history.

Storytelling for many IDPs took place in various settings: along the riverbanks while doing their laundry; in the farm while tilling the soil; or at night on street corners or under the tree over a glass of local-made alcoholic beverages. "Storytelling does not have boundaries," they said. As to the reasons why the needed to tell their stories, IDPs came up with the following:

- "We tell stories so that our children and the next generation will know the stories of their parents and the older generation."

- "We tell stories because we want our children and other people to know and understand the experiences that we were going through and the causes of our displacement, and what brought us here in the evacuation center."
- "We tell stories because we want our children to learn about the good deeds that their parents and the older generation did; in the process, they will be guided accordingly in terms of how to live a better life and survive difficult situations such as war and displacement. Therefore, through our stories, they will know, understand, and learn from us. The problem is that many of our children are not interested in listening to our stories."
- "We tell stories because storytelling is good for health. When you tell stories, you cry, you laugh, you smile, and you get upset. It enables you to release heavy emotions – but these are all part of the storytelling process. The important thing is that after you tell your stories, you feel relieved and become more relaxed."

By the end of the second workshop, participants were asked to summarize and describe the kinds of stories they shared. Most of their stories overlapped in terms of the events involved and the emotions their stories evoked. Describing their stories gave them a sense of affirmation; many felt validated by others. They described their stories as sad stories (stories that involved oppression, fighting, destruction and killing), hurtful stories (stories of how they were being treated unfairly and unjustly), scary stories (stories that reminded them of their attackers, torturing and killing their loved ones; stories about destruction of people's properties and means of livelihood), unforgettable stories (stories that left them with life-long problems), and stories of hate (stories about how their attackers hated them; stories that made them ask, "Why did they do those terrible things to us? What wrong have we done?"). Some IDPs expressed hate against the government military and/or the MILF forces and other Muslim extremist groups, pitiful stories (stories that made them feel sorry for themselves, including other displaced people from around the world

who suffer; stories that made them lament).

Participants were constantly reminded to tell stories they were comfortable sharing. Should the telling become overwhelming, they can leave the circle and rejoin when they were ready. They came up with community guidelines which included being respectful, being open-minded and not passing any value judgment, listening attentively, being courteous when asking a question or point of clarification, not interrupting while others are talking, observing confidentiality in terms of not quoting people's statements or ideas out-of-context, and affirming every person of his or her life story.

How the workshop experience has made me believe in the transformative impact of storytelling on storytellers.

The stories participants shared revealed not only the facts about what happened but also the strong and heavy emotions they carried. In terms of how they felt while telling their stories, some said they could not help but cry as they remembered the pain of the past. One person felt she had a big lump on her throat which made her difficult to talk. Others shook as they recalled their experiences. Some felt as if they were re-experiencing the story of others while listening to their own stories. However, the experience was different after the telling of stories. They felt more relax. The telling was freeing especially in the company of those who were interested in listening. The lump in the throat flew away. Listening to others' stories enabled them to also listen to their personal stories in depth in a way that the telling established in each one of them a sense of connection and a common experience. Their stories reminded each one of them of the courage they had while facing the attackers, for example, as well as their strong determination to survive and having the will to live. They learned how others cope with their problems and difficulties. Many were challenged by the experiences of others and were inspired to do something to help, particularly the new arrivals in the evacuation center who were still in the transition phase. Many thought of starting a storytelling activity for fellow displaced women and

create a support group for those who need.

The storytelling experience established a sense of interconnectedness among the participants. Their shared traumas became a common thread which brought them together. They realized during reflection time that every one's story is worth telling. As Green explains, "In telling and listening to stories we find meaning in our lives and invent our lives… In telling our stories we are challenged to reflect on our experiences and their meanings, and hence, master the 'ways of knowing' about our own and other people's perspectives" (Fu and Stremmel, 1999, 5).

Reflecting on the stories of IDPs reminds me of Lederach when he said that conflict does impact people personally, relationally, structurally, and culturally (Lederach 2003, 23). That while conflict is normal and continuously present in human relationships (4), change happens as well. The IDPs in Mindanao were not a static community; they were dynamic, always adapting and changing for the better. What the storytelling did for IDPs was that it maximized its potential for personal expression in the form of catharsis by associating meanings and new interpretations to the experience of war and displacement. Transformation in this context became a deliberate intervention to minimize the destructive effects of displacement and maximize personal and social growth as individual human beings. Relationally, the process of storytelling brought people together and created a sense of bonding and support system. Their stories provided a human face to the word, 'internal displacement,' which inspired and challenged many to do something about their situation. As a tool for transformation, storytelling enhanced mutual understanding, including bringing explicitly to the surface the relational fears, hopes, and goals of the people involved.

As IDPs analyzed and interpreted their stories, they discovered underlying causes of conflict embedded in their narratives and how these conflicts affected the socio-economic and political structure of their communities. According to Lederach, this aspect focuses attention on how social structures, organizations, and institutions are built, sustained, and changed by conflict; at the same time, it presents ways people build and organize social, economic, political, and

institutional relationships to meet basic human needs, provide access to resources, and make decisions that affect groups and communities (25). In this context, storytelling provided people the opportunity to analyze and understand the issues surrounding their displacement, giving them insights on how to start anew. Culturally, storytelling as a tool in conflict transformation enabled people to identify, promote, and build on the resources and mechanisms within their own culture for constructively responding to their situation.

Summary

Storytelling transformed the negative and destructive energy of trauma by bringing together the IDPs to a consciousness of history, thereby locating their selves in the unfolding of a newly constructed collective story based on individual experiences. In this process, a picture of an entire community in agony and destruction emerged. Not anymore did one person focus purely on him/herself but that one began to take into consideration the life and condition of the whole community where they all belonged.

Second, as a result, a sense of origin and identity as displaced was established against the origin and identity of those who exploited and caused their displacement. This gave IDPs some clue to questions such as who they were before and who they have now become and why to what they shall become in the future. Third, storytelling allowed the IDPs to process their suffering and pain, meaning, they appropriated their own stories as an instrument in generating creativity and imagination alternatives. Fourth, storytelling helped IDPs plan out the course of action they would take in response to their present reality, which proceeded the realization that no matter how victimized they may have been, they remained active participants of their own healing and community building. This was reassuring. Finally, storytelling clarified IDPs' faith resources - the underlying power of resistance and endurance, and the will to move on with life.

In that whole experience, the storytelling workshop became a form of intervention in that it played a crucial role in social healing and community building. By telling their stories, IDPs

were able to articulate their experience and how best they would like to address their new normalcy or new reality. Not only did the IDPs narrate their stories, they found the experience of telling cathartic. As they told their stories individually and in groups, they acquired new knowledge and understanding about the nature and dynamics of the impact of war and displacement and also gained new skills in dealing with its effects. Many were affirmed of the strengths they possess and were validated of their stories and coping mechanisms. Problems they were open to share were discussed; and aspirations, including dreams of a future reality were defined further. While healing is an ongoing process, the storytelling workshop made them become more cohesive as a displaced community. The bonding they were able to form became a support system which they hoped to sustain and expand to include others even after the duration of my stay during the workshop.

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