Narrative and Truth in a World of Alternative Facts:
The Moral Challenge for Education

What is the role of educators in our current environment, where truth and truthfulness must fight their corner in a world of 'alternative facts'? If we know that some seemingly contradictory truths can co-exist, and others cannot, how can we keep these important distinctions clear in our own minds, much less provide our students with tools for doing the same? And are there particular implications of this challenge for narrative scholars, those who, like myself, celebrate the world of subjective and dynamic meaning-making?

In my previous work, I have argued that imagination does not, as is often posited, sit in opposition to reality, but rather has complex relationship with it (Andrews 2014). To imagine other worlds, other possibilities, one has first to start with where we are. Confronting what is real is critical to moving beyond; not looking away, but rather directly upon the troubles and joys of the world as we know it. But if there is no firm ground upon which such documentation is built, then the scope of imaginings is severely compromised. This is what is at stake in the current state of affairs, in our post-truth world. Truth here is taken to be a statement or statements of facts which are believed to be true. Facts are of a rather different nature. What Kellyanne Conway says notwithstanding, facts are always true, though often claims about facts are incorrect. While one could reasonably argue that there are additional facts (there always are) which might affect one's understanding of a situation, that is substantially different to claiming there are 'alternative facts.' In a post-truth age, there often appears to be little regard for facts; rather, people, be they politicians or journalists or

whomever, present a non-reality as if it were real. Reality, following Wittgenstein, refers to the external world and its facts: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things." (Proposition 1.1 of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*).

So how then can we proceed as educators? Is a return to empiricism the only response? The answer is not simple for those of us whose focus has traditionally been on subjective meaning-making. The challenge for today and tomorrow is that we must return again to that age-old problem: what does it mean to tell the truth? And how can we assess truthfulness? Is this only related to verifiable factitcity? The challenges for educators in general is significant, and for moral educators all the more so. What does it mean to promote moral education in an amoral time?

Several questions arise when contemplating this complex set of issues:

- are the current conditions of our social and political lives substantially different from that which has gone before, or does it only seem so because of the 24/7 cycle of news which dominates so much of our existence?
- When we speak of moral identity, what is it we speak of? Can this really be taught?
- What is the role for moral mentors, and is there such a thing as 'amoral' or even 'anti-moral' mentors?

Let us look at each of these in turn, before coming to consider the implications of these discussions for the future of moral education.

Life as we know it

It is very tempting for many of us living in the West, witnessing the rise of populism and a flagrant disregard for human rights of unknown 'others', to feel that the world is descending into moral decay. For those of us who came to maturity in the final quarter of the last century, we have witnessed fundamental change, and many of us feel that the world as we knew it is disappearing.

While changes which have occurred do merit deep concern – accelerating climate change, global refugee crisis, the rise of populism , being just three examples of ongoing crises – looking across global trends over the past few decades a different, and less uniformly dismal, story emerges. In a recent BBC Futures report, Julius Probst identifies seven key global trends in which the fate of the world is in fact moving in positive direction. In a series of graphs, Probst provides evidence of favorable developments in the following areas: 1) rise in life expectancy; 2) decline in child mortality rates 3) decrease in fertility rates (movement toward global population statbilisation); 4) acceleration of GDP growth in developed countries; 5) downward trend of global inequality (between countries); 6) increasing number of people living under democracies; and 7) decrease in number conflicts. *New York Times* writer Nicholas Kristof (2019) has written numerous columns in a similar vein, providing different indicators. He writes that Americans (as well as citizens of other countries) are "spectacularly uninformed" on a number of issues, providing examples such as how many children are vaccinated globally (Americans estimate 35%, whereas in fact "86% of all 1-year-olds have been vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.") Both Probst and Kristoff refer to the work of Dr. Hans Rosling, recently deceased scholar of international health, and author of the

posthumously published *Factfulness* (2018). Rosling summarises his research: "Every group of people I ask thinks the world is more frightening, more violent and more hopeless – in short, more dramatic – than it really is" (quoted in Kristof 2019).

Why is this so? There are numerous possible reasons for this, but for the moment let us stick with three, all of which have to do with the reporting of news: 1) firstly, there is the modern phenomenon of the transformation of the news cycle. Since 1980, when Ted Turner launched CNN, the first 24-hour cable news operation, the reporting of news does not stop. That means that we as news consumers live our lives with the sense that things are constantly happening. This might in itself lead to quicker action and reaction times for involved parties, but for most of us it just means that our access to unfolding news never ends. Secondly, most news which is reported is negative. Newsworthy stories tend to be dramatic events – fires, earth quakes, riots – and these are almost always unfavorable developments. As Probst comments:

> "Who wants to hear about the fact that every day some 200,000 people around the world are lifted above the $2-a-day poverty line? Or that more than 300,000 people a day get access to electricity and clean water for the first time every day?

And finally, in the West, we are overly focused on events in our own countries. Listening to the news in non-western countries, one cannot help but be struck by how many countries are reported on in the days' headlines. This is in stark contrast to, most particularly, news reporting in the United States which widely ignores events happening beyond its own borders. As many of the earlier positive trends identified by Probst, Kristof and others are in fact global trends,

they are not only not dramatic, but they may well fall under the radar of those not geographically affected. Instead we spin our wheels on Trump's latest outrageous tweet, or the endless debates about Brexit.

Still, while it is important to keep things in perspective – to recognize that broadly speaking the movement of human history continues to be in a positive direction – that is not cause to denigrate the importance of what many feel is the current moral crisis of our times. Trump's lies do matter; it does make a difference that as of spring 2019, the most powerful man in the world was lying, on average, 23 times a day (Gessler, Rizzo and Kelly, 2019). Returning to the question whether the current conditions of our social and political lives are substantially different from that which has gone before, we can assert that the disease of mendacity, while not new, is in ascendance, at least in this public arena. But here again there are some examples from which we can draw hope. Finland, according to the Media Literacy Index 2019 Europe's most resistant nation to fake news by a long shot, has 'multi-platform information literacy and strong critical thinking ' built into its core national curriculum from primary education up to university level. (Open Society Institute 2019). It turns out that we can, indeed, teach ourselves to be better equipped to identify 'fake news'. As Kari Kivinen, a headteacher in a Finnish state-run college, explains:

> "The goal is active, responsible citizens and voters… Thinking critically, factchecking, interpreting and evaluating all the information you receive, wherever it appears, is crucial. We've made it a core part of what we teach, across all subjects. (Henley 2020).

Information literacy is critical for basic democratic freedoms. The Finnish example again is inspiring, as that country is 'at or near the top of international

indices for press freedom, transparency, education and social justice..” (Henley 2019). In order for us to know whether or not the conditions of the world in which we live are improving or not, we must equip ourselves with the tools we need to be able to assess the information which we are fed. With those skills, we are far better equipped to be engaged citizens.

A Compromised Moral Identity?

This leads us to the second question: what do we mean by moral identity? If moral identity is connected to the question of how much personally held values matter to an individual, then we can see that some forms of moral identity are in full bloom in the present day. Indeed the noise surrounding debates of character can be deafening. But here we should take seriously Lawrence Kohlberg’s distinction between ‘a bag of virtues’ and a moral framework; these days in public life we often see a heightened awareness of and sensibility towards the former, coupled with an almost strident disregard for the former. How often is heated public debate concerned with maximizing justice for all – the pinnacle of a moral consciousness, according to Kohlberg? Are we often asked to imagine ourselves covered in a ‘veil of ignorance’ whereby we do not know what benefits us personally an encouraged to be guided instead by those principles which would be most fair for everyone? My own sense here is that this is rather rare; instead, arguments are made which are pitched in a framework appealing to our own personal best interest. In this sense, our moral identity has been compromised in the dulling of our moral sensibilities. How else can one explain, for instance, the championing of historical events such as the kindertransport while at the same time turning our backs on refugees who risk their lives just

across the channel in their attempts to seek a better life on our soil. No one who advocates closed, heavily patrolled borders imagines themselves as one who is kept out.

The Search for Moral Mentors

Turning to the third question, who might serve us as moral mentors? Who in our society might show us how to live our lives with a greater sensitivity towards questions of justice? I use the term 'mentor' here to indicate someone who might help to show us the way, help us to realise the best version of ourselves. These persons might or might not be teachers, or grandparents, or neighbours, a public figure, or even a character encountered in a novel. The quest for a mentor is both a personal and public encounter. We are nearly suffocated with images and words of those who would have us believe that they are our moral leaders; the louder the claim, the less I am drawn to them personally. A moral mentor must somehow be a person who captures our spirit, and helps us to realise that we can dig deeper to become our better selves. I cannot say who might serve this role for others; rather I will just offer my own thoughts on the matter. I recently had the experience of visiting the highest security prison in Uganda, where my daughter was helping to run a legal clinic for and with prisoners. The prisoners I met were all engaged in studying law in some capacity (which my daughter was also helping to deliver). It is hard for me to think of an environment I have been in where questions surrounding justice were more at the fore. Some of the men I met at the prison had committed atrocious crimes, others had been falsely accused; but all of them shared a passion for justice, for learning the law and for attending to its fair application. Listening to the debates they had in the class we

ran made me realize that these principles are not abstractions for them; rather, they are a reason for living. One person I had the privilege to meet at the prison was Pascal Kakuru. Pascal was nearing the end of 14 year prison sentence, where he began as an inmate on death row but graduated with a law degree.

> In my time in prison, I have not been blind to the injustice of others around me. Poverty does not allow efficient legal representation, causing the poor to be convicted on the strength of evidence they failed to adequately challenge. This problem is larger than Uganda and is prevalent wherever poverty, disadvantage and marginalization are found.

Having left the prison far behind, I could not help but think how much I had to learn from these men. Perhaps it might be where justice flounders – where people can lose their freedoms for crimes they did not commit, or serve years as an adult when they are a child but lack the necessary paperwork to prove date of birth, or wait for years before ever seeing a lawyer, much less a judge, to have their sentence conveyed – perhaps it is in these conditions of adversity that we might encounter moral mentors.

Moral Education in Hard Times

This brings me finally to the question: what are the greatest challenges for moral education in the years to come? Kohlberg argued that moral education was essentially preparation for citizenship. How can we be better citizens in today's world? How can we both acknowledge the challenges which we face, but not be overcome, indeed paralyzed by them? And where can we look in our search for hope? The current piece has already indicated some of my thoughts on these issues: first, we must not despair of the moment in which we live. Even as each

new day feels like it reveals yet new depths to which our society has sunk, still over time movement is in the right direction, progress still prevails despite the many impediments. This should not give us reason for complacency, but rather more muscle to help us act. We are stronger than we seem.

Second, we would do well in our considerations of morality and moral identity to return to concerns of justice – not exclusively so, but surely as a key focus for the lives we wish to live and the citizens we wish to build. This means amongst other things remembering 'the golden rule' – thinking of others as ourselves and ourselves as others. Here a critical factor is that of imagination, which lifts us from our lived, real experiences into a realm where we entertain other possible lives – our own, and others.

Where should we look for moral mentors, who can teach us about leading lives with a heightened sensitivity for and dedication to realizing justice? Here I have suggested that my very limited exposure to inmates on death row in Uganda provided me with ample food for thought on this important topic. Impoverished though the conditions of their lives are, nonetheless they work tirelessly towards building systems of justice, so that others may not suffer as they have done. Doubtless there are many, many examples in all of our lives of such moral mentors. Equally, there are those who occupy positions of leadership and yet who seem to care little for these sensibilities, with bragging about grabbing women's genitals only one of the more crude examples of what has become everyday moral obscenity.

And now, to return to the final question of the key challenges for moral education. If the goal of moral education is that of an engaged citizenship, what are the characteristics that are deemed desirable? One of the most important skills that we as educators can give our students is that of a critical thinking which is founded upon compassionate understanding, to be able to better assess the veracity of a claim, to engage with the perspective of another with very different experiences, to apply both their intelligence and their imagination in their attempts to understand new material, new people, new experiences.

Martha Nussbaum has argued that compassionate understanding is essential for civic responsibility. How can we enhance our ability to feel with another, even while recognizing the differences between people, and how can we teach this to our students? In order to do this, first we should begin with a critical self-examination, identifying our strengths and our vulnerabilities. Laying ourselves open, we might be more open to the worlds of others (Nussbaum 1997: 91, 99). Even while "we cannot actually know what it is like to be somebody else" (Von Wright 2002:412) we can try, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "to think with an enlarged mentality [which] means to train one's imagination to go visiting" (cited in Von Wright 2002: 412), thinking our thoughts in a world which is not our own. This then is the greatest challenge for educators today: how do we provide nourishment for the imagination – encouraging our students to enter into the lifeworlds of others so very different from themselves, letting go of some of their most fiercely held assumptions and entertaining the very different possible lives of others – not abandoning the pursuit of truth, but engaging with its multilayered complexity. And through all of this, it is important for us to

remember that even while we explore subjective meaning making – how people understand and experience their worlds – facts do matter. In the words of Deborah Lipstadt in the film *Denial*:

> Not all opinions are equal. And some things happened, just like we say they do. Slavery happened, the Black Death happened. The Earth is round, the ice caps are melting, and Elvis is not alive. (cited in Plummer 2019: 119).

As Ken Plummer has noted, the current sense of moral crisis in which we live causes us "to become extremely critical of the very idea of narrative" – stories are constructed, and truth seems slippery, malleable, unstable. The antidote, Plummer argues, are "wider panoplies of wisdoms" including "critical narrative wisdom" (Plummer 2019:121). Here then lies the challenge for moral education in the years ahead, to critically train our students to see what is before them, to engage fully with their hearts and minds, and to be sensitive to what is absent – the interplay between presence and absence being the key to the creative functioning of the imagination. In the words of philosopher Mary Warnock:

> … there is a power in the human mind which is at work in our everyday perception of the world, and is also at work in our thought about what is absent; which enables us to see the world, whether present or absent as significant, and also to present this vision to others, for them to share or reject. (Warnock 1976:196).

Warnock describes this power as 'thought-imbued perception' – which engages the heart and the mind, combining the subjective and objective dimensions of truth and lived experience. It is this capacity which we must aim to build in ourselves and in those we have the privilege to teach.

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