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The Danger of MCC's Own Single Story

The Christian peace position is a radical thing: radical like students in the Civil Rights Movement in organizing restaurant sit-ins at the cost of their physical beatings, verbal abuse, and extensive jail time. The Christian peace position is radical like the Canadian abolitionist Bass, from *12 Years a Slave*, who risks his life to free Solomon Northup. Radical practice, often in the form of a costly embrace, is essential to the Christian peace position. Mennonites and organizations like Mennonite Central Committee are good at acting out their radical peace position; the stubborn nonviolent resistance of the Mennonites, in the face of violence, is one of their strengths. That being said, Mennonites often have significant trouble knowing how to communicate violence. On the one hand, it is glorified in the example of the Menno-martyrs. On the other hand, it is repressed from the Mennonite identity. Many progressive Mennonites have even divorced themselves from images of a violent God, for example. For Mennonites, violence is unacceptable, and it is to be rejected and avoided at all costs.

Millions have viewed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk *The danger of a single story*. Adichie's speech was shared widely, perhaps among Mennonites more than most groups. Among Mennonites, it was shared most comprehensively to employees and volunteers of Mennonite Central Committee. As it turns out, I was one of those volunteers last summer, and I quickly discovered that the four-year old TED talk had become essential working knowledge for all MCC staff.

Adichie's talk names "how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story." She describes how one story is never enough; only one story "robs people of dignity," and forecloses the possibility of human complexity and connection. Furthermore, stories are a matter of power: "how they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power." For Adichie, "power is the ability not just to tell the story of another

person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

It is no wonder the talk became so popular in MCC circles so quickly; the synergy of *The danger of a single story* with MCC's peace position is extensive. Both are intended to be subversive strokes, undermining power hierarchies and the dominant narrative to make space for everyone and all stories. The synergy is there for MCC because the organization does not have a naïvely humanist peace position; MCC has a Christian peace position, and at times that means following the path of radical nonviolent resistance. The TED talk was so important to MCC because it articulated a powerful operating guideline. It reinforced MCC's care for all stories and, most importantly for the topic today, gave MCC a seemingly failsafe way to communicate; it gave MCC the option to focus on telling many stories, and to let the popular media stories of the world remain unchallenged.

In adopting Adichie's powerful words, MCC risks losing its radical subversiveness. When the catch phrase 'the danger of a single story' is used without Adichie's complexity, it is all too easy to become formulaic, to adopt one's own version of the straight-edged acceptable single story. It is all too easy to soften the Christian peace position and leave the dominant stories be.

Recent Oscar-awarded best picture *12 Years a Slave* exemplifies this. The movie tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free man who is taken and sold into slavery. The film documents Northup's 12 years of abuse around the 1840s, and it does not shy away from inviting the audience to see slavery vicariously through painfully long stationary camera shots of a hanging and beatings. It is only too natural for the typical danger-of-a-single-story-indoctrinated Mennonite to suggest that *12 Years a Slave* shows too much violence; that it desensitizes us to violence, and implicitly, that it represents the single story of violence in slavery. It is true; there is a fine line between desensitizing and realizing, between getting used to violence and seeing

violence become unacceptable. This is where we need Adichie's complexity. Adichie argues that, "it is not that the single story is untrue; it is that it is incomplete." It is true that retelling the story of slavery risks giving a single story of horrific brutality, and that single story is necessarily incomplete. But too long have the sterile and tidy slave narratives created a comfortable story disconnected from a monstrous past of slavery; too often have we repeated our collective trauma and maintained the cycle of violence, rather than using the power of stories to acknowledge and heal the trauma. *12 Years a Slave* opens possibilities for acknowledging the trauma of slavery we have failed to acknowledge in the past. It is true there is a danger in the single story of violence. However, it is also true that there is as much danger in fearing the single story to the point of neglecting important narratives.

Last summer, I was a volunteer English teacher with MCC Honduras. I planned to write a blog and was encouraged to do so by MCC Honduras staff. From the start of my orientation, we talked about blogging and how perceptions of Honduras are communicated to people in the U.S. The biggest concern for the staff was how violence is communicated. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, and popular representations of Honduras in the media focus exclusively on its violence and drug trafficking. The MCC staff encouraged me to approach the topic of violence with Adichie's talk in mind. I was encouraged to tell the stories of Honduras, but to avoid talking about violence in Honduras.

My experiences made it important for me to try to talk about violence: to acknowledge the narrative, to begin to work through it for those reading my blog and for myself. I drafted a blog acknowledging Honduras' statistic of having the highest murder rate of the world, and acknowledging the violence I had witnessed and experienced. The most extreme example was being just down the city street in Tegucigalpa from a murder. I saw a crowd gathering around the

house where it happened: onlookers or family perhaps. My blog concluded by saying that although I had witnessed violence, even though I was just down the street when it happened, “one can only imagine the violence in Honduras.” My blog readers, and now you as well, have experienced the violence as directly I had, as the reality of violence is left to the imagination. I concluded by writing that perceptions of violence are “dependent on the stories one chooses to hear and how one uses all of those stories. Eight-six murders per 100,000 people can be one’s only story of Honduras. I’ll take the other stories too.”

I decided to pass this blog draft I had written to MCC staff because we had previously talked about the importance of communicating violence carefully, and I knew it was an issue with which they were concerned. The staff responded, advising that it would be best to leave out my experiences with violence, especially the murder--they deemed it inappropriate content for an MCC worker’s blog. MCC named the single story of Honduras as ‘violence’ and censored my approach to that single story. I viewed my blog as a way of communicating and complicating perceptions of violence; I wanted to undermine assumptions about violence to open up possibilities for reworking the popular narrative. MCC viewed my blog as buying into the single story, dramatizing and reinforcing the dominant narrative.

This is not to say MCC was completely wrong about my blog. In some ways, just talking about violence will reinforce popular assumptions and maintain its status as a dominant narrative. But in this case, MCC has similarly adopted a single story to compensate against the dominant narrative. By censoring experiences of violence, MCC risks falling into the Mennonite trap of not knowing how to communicate stories of violence in radical ways. MCC risks not affecting or subverting those dominant narratives even when it is within their power to do so. Just as *12 Years a Slave* forces its American audience to view violence as deplorable and

incomprehensible, rather than as the epitome of entertainment, MCC needs to communicate the truth of violence, as something that is neither inevitable nor acceptable, rather than leaving the dominant narrative run its course.

There is a critical difference between sharing a generalization of violence and sharing a personalization of violence. The danger of the single story is in the incompleteness of a generalization. I was in Honduras experiencing violence, and it was more than a statistic or a generalization. I lived with people who wouldn't go out at night, who have to pay gangs for their safety; I was giving voice to that experience by telling their particular story—not the single story. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie concludes her TED talk by saying that “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.” The Mennonite community, including you, me, and groups like MCC, need to challenge dominant narratives of violence. Following the example of *12 Years a Slave*, we need to share our particular stories about violence to break down generalizations. We need to see violence as neither inevitable nor acceptable. Let us acknowledge our stories of violence, let us retell those particular stories, and let us never give in to a single, generalized story of violence.