

Once Upon a Tomorrow

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Ways of Being

A hunting scene; a collection of handprints; images from a life lived several centuries ago — these are some of the paintings found in different caves around the world. At the time of their discovery, archeologists and historians wondered not only about who these early humans were but also why they chose to depict these events on surfaces that have stood the test of time. What was it that they were trying to say? At what point in the evolution of man as a species did the idea of documenting life, or in some cases, telling a story, come about?

There are many theories but perhaps the simplest one is that of the early man's understanding of the self — and its relationship with the other, and their place in the world. Some historians posit that the well-known paintings of hunts, featuring men and the animals they hunted, came from a symbiotic relationship that man had with other creatures they shared the land with — both species experienced interchangeable roles as the predator and the prey. The handprints have been interpreted as a way of saying “We were here,” while the scenes from the Ajanta and Ellora caves are of a time of much progress, of when people such as the ancient Egyptians had formed a more elaborate society to live in; where man, creature and god co-existed on the same plane. And with every step forward, the idea of the self and the other was sharpened into being.

When each of the narrative experts answered the question of what they hope to achieve with their presence in this world, a pattern quickly emerged. Each expert hoped to facilitate positive change in the way the people around them interact with each other. It could be by offering resources, or opportunities, by sharing their space and their tools — demonstrating an understanding that there is no self without the other.

But how can we go about understanding each other in 2022, when every bit of technological innovation and advancement brings people closer, only for us to realise how far apart in thought and practice they really are. How do we understand each other in the age of misinformation?

A simple exercise of reading the news from around the world was illuminating: in every article, there was more than one story, more than one point of view. Once we have tackled the danger of a single story, of the power it holds, how can we go about dismantling the authority of that single story? What if we tried to speak in each other's voices?

Once again, our narrative experts were tasked with an exercise: to tell each other's stories, share another person's dreams with the group. By doing so, each member was actively practicing care. How do we define care? The quality of attention paid while listening to each other resulted in a wider understanding of each other; understanding then translated into a sense of responsibility when it came to sharing another person's story, or in this case, their dream.

“My dream is to have a storyteller's shop. From dawn to dusk, sometimes also open at night, the shop welcomes anybody who is in need of a story: whether they need a laugh or a comfort, or in case they need a story tailored for their teaching activities. If people are quarrelling, they can ask the storyteller to make them understand each other's side through a story. People who feel unseen or taken for granted can share their stories with the storyteller, who can then pass it on to the general public, or tell it to a certain person who might need to hear it,” writes Martin Ellrodt in the dream exercise. If the dream were to come true, Ellrodt would find himself in this shop in Oberfranken, a small town in Germany, listening to people and telling them stories alike, seeing on each other's faces the unique, but universally similar expressions of listening and understanding, of faces breaking into smiles from time to time.

When Kavita Gupta heard Ellrodt's dream, she was filled with delight; her dream isn't so different from his after all. “My dream is to open a performing arts space for rehearsals, directors to meet, technicians to learn and perform — irrespective of art form, country, language and creed. A safe space funded by the state or arts council and managed by the artists themselves,” she shared.

Just like our lives are not simply our own, neither are our dreams. And as a novelist, Monica Cantieni is only too aware of the responsibility that comes with telling stories. “In a conversation during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, the writer Sandip Roy talked about how the pandemic is like the sea, and how, very often, he read that ‘we are all in the same boat.’ He disliked that phrase and said, ‘We're not.’ I agree with that. As a novelist, I live other people's lives. There's a huge danger in it. I try to use my work to describe feelings where we can all recognise each other, and where we can be different, and equal, in our diversity. I dream of my stories living up to that idea, I work on them, and I adore reading a story that achieves that,” she writes, adding, “I am curious about waters and boats. Whether in writing or in real life, which is somehow the same, I have to ask what the boats look like. My dream is that we ask the right questions and we listen carefully to the answers.”

There are some of us who get to see a dream come true. “In my area of work, i.e. running a children's bookstore and a children's literature festival, I am living my dream,” says Swati Roy. But the task does not end there; if anything, it has only begun. “I feel that all children are unique, and so are their reading needs. It is my dream to be able to offer a wide choice to children, so that they can find the right book.”

And perhaps, by chance, they will come across the “right” story. For decades, the cave paintings discovered around the world were associated with cavemen. A recent analysis of the handprints found in Cueva de los Manos in Argentina showed that the artists behind the work were very likely to be women, thereby upending the notion that the caveman was the sole hunter, gatherer, artist and subject. When the etchings on a stone plaque at the Paleolithic site of Gönnersdorf in Germany were discovered, they were of a woman with a baby carrier on her back, her hands free for hunting and foraging.

Now, more than ever before, it has become clear to us that we must expand our stories, not only the subjects and the themes, but also ownership. We cannot do that unless we look outward and try and see those that have been overlooked, either by chance or more importantly, by design. Who is the outsider, the Other in our narrative practices? And how can we bring them in?

Introducing the Minifesto: a postcard of possibilities. An invitation to those we have ignored or been blind to, to those whose stories must also be heard and shared, whose dreams are as important as anybody else's.

Ways of Seeing



Collages by Sijya Gupta