

Unsung heroes and unlamented victims: Some reflections on untold stories

by Yiannis Gabriel

I will start by reflecting why the words 'untold stories' evoke sadness, disappointment and even anger. I will propose that a never born story is currently associated with a silencing of voice which is regarded as a violation of a fundamental human right. This usually invites a proxy, usually a journalist, a researcher or a spokesperson to take it upon themselves to tell the story of the other, the unsung hero and the unlamented victim. This, in my view, frequently involves a misappropriation and a dissimulation – the story's central emphasis shifts to the exposure of a cover-up, a much told story about supposedly untold stories.

I will then move on to address different types of untold stories, the story in permanent incubation awaiting a happy or unhappy closure, the story that is too boring or that we are too lazy to tell, the story that is a prisoner of a person's determination to keep it private and, relatedly, the story choked in shame, sadness and trauma, a story of betrayal, secrets and lies. This last one is where the main weight of my presentation will lie.

Victims of abuse cannot communicate their experience for a variety of reasons – there is no audience to listen, they lack the confidence, courage and skill (what the Greeks referred to as *parrhesia*) or, more significantly, their emotions are too overwhelming, conflictual and raw to allow a narrative to emerge. In this connection, I will propose the term 'emotional sensemaking', to suggest an inability to invent a story that makes emotional sense.

This is very clear when a person has experienced a deep betrayal or loss so harrowing that it cannot be told without diminishing the experience ("Words cannot be found to describe this") or without opening wounds that are too painful to endure. It may be that shock and grief begin to turn into mourning when a story begins to take shape and be articulated, often with the help of others.