

Stories

By Sahlan Diver

I have been writing a play. The setting of the play is a party for the local members of an obscure and fading spiritual movement with a tiny membership but with grandiose aspirations, who are under the illusion that despite what they do, or don't do, their eventual world-wide triumph is specially guaranteed by Almighty God.

During the play someone tells a Zen story. Actually, not a real story but a story that I as the author of the play have invented. One of the challenges of play-writing when you are dealing with make-believe is that you nevertheless have to write something sufficiently convincing that the audience feels it could be real. Same with the Zen story. Although I am not a Zen master, not even a student of Zen, I have to create a believable impression of Zen. That got me wondering about how many 'spiritual' stories have been written not by people with real wisdom but by people just seeking a 'spiritual' effect.

Yesterday, while clearing out a box of old Subud magazines from my attic I came across just such a story. A member had been talking to a helper and had asked this question: 'If there is a God, how can so much injustice be permitted in the world?' The helper replied with a story he had read. The story was a long one, but to summarise: A man comes to a pool to bathe. After he has bathed he dresses and leaves, but forgets to take his purse full of money. A second man arrives, sees the purse and runs off with it. Then a third man arrives to bathe. The first man comes back for his purse, accuses the third man of stealing it and kills him. So an innocent man has died and the thief has got away. How can this be allowed? The story then rewinds to the lives of the ancestors of these men and we see an ancestor of the murdered man murdering someone in cold blood, and an ancestor of the owner of the purse stealing a purse from someone else. Big conclusion: justice has been done; all past accounts have been settled. The Subud member who hears the story feels that her question has been answered and goes on to enthuse about how lucky we are to have the latihan so that all such matters can be put right for us without our having to suffer a similar fate.

Acceptance of such explanations may indicate a naive willingness to accept folk wisdom or beliefs from a foreign culture, but, whatever the reason, this is a perfect example of the danger in Subud of not using the mind enough, allowing our judgements to be on the basis of whether our feelings are satisfied.

Firstly, even if this story is a true description of spiritual justice, where is the evidence that the latihan will excuse us from a similar settling of accounts?

Secondly, what is being described is not sustainable: You get murdered because your ancestor murdered someone, but why did that someone get murdered – did they also have an ancestor who murdered? If no, then the glib justification of the theory falls through. If yes, what you have is a kind of spiritual Ponzi scheme – the chain of murders can't go back through history for ever; eventually you will get to a murder of someone who did not commit any murder. So how is that original murder justified according to the theory?

Thirdly, what about the man who stole the purse at the pool? Is his crime excused

because by chance he's doing God's work by balancing out an injustice committed by his victim's ancestor, or will one of his ancestors have to have their purse stolen to balance up this new crime?

It seems to me that stories like this feel spiritual because they feed into our individual unconscious assumptions. If we assume that the reality of the spiritual world is 'all wrongs shall be avenged', then we will see this story as being supremely 'spiritual'. But we could take a very different view of it. In North Korea if a person is found to be guilty of criticising the State, not only they can be executed or imprisoned, but so also can their innocent parents and grandparents. The 'logic' is that three generations must be purged of the poison of dissidence. Pretty evil, huh? But where's the difference between that political theory and a supposedly 'spiritual' theory that claims it's okay for an entirely innocent man to be murdered to atone for a crime that his ancestor committed? And less comfortable for us Subud members, where's the difference between this desire for the satisfaction of vengeance and the well-known story Bapak tells of a man in Indonesia who met some terrible end as a result of cheating Bapak out of some money?

In my play, riled by the smug spiritual superiority of an organisational apparatchik, one of the characters launches into a furious monologue in which he criticises the harm wrought by religion. 'People think they don't do idolatry any more,' he says, 'that it's some quaint practise described in the scriptures. But modern idolatry is far more insidious and dangerous. Nowadays you don't build a statue in your own image, you build a mental picture of God in your own image.' And he goes on to give the example of how the sick and twisted mind of the religious terrorist creates an image of a God who constantly approves of the sacrifice of human blood and flesh.

But that's not the end of the story. Not only can a tale seem 'spiritual' because it aligns with and reinforces our existing assumptions, those very assumptions can be completely re-aligned if we trust the teller of the tales to have spiritual authority. This is the means by which a cult leader can brainwash his followers. For whatever reason, the leader is regarded as being special, so all claims he makes either about himself or about the spiritual are given special credence, to the point that they eventually replace the listener's former assumptions. Thereafter anything that does not align with the newly acquired mindset is likely to be rejected, the new belief system thus becoming self-reinforcing.

So next time you are told a spiritual story, a Subud story, and especially a Bapak story, don't absorb it uncritically, take a step back and ask yourself what are the hidden assumptions behind the story.