

*Becoming, belonging and sharing:
Striving to live in the spirit of ubuntu in Portugal*

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Abstract. In this paper I examine the non-formal education programme of the Ubuntu Academy in Portugal, a non-profit organisation that aims to empower and train young adults with strong leadership potential. The participants, who come mostly from African immigrant communities and contexts of social exclusion, are trained to develop and implement social entrepreneur and outreach projects in their communities. I explore the Ubuntu Academy's use of the Southern African communitarian philosophy of *ubuntu* and draw on *ubuntu* literature to argue that this specific education programme's focus on the notions of humaneness and interdependence encapsulated in the concept of *ubuntu* has introduced a paradigm shift from an individualistic worldview prevalent in the West to a communitarian form of becoming, belonging and sharing. In this context, I consider the role of testimony and narrative in both promoting personal growth and developing a sense of interdependence and connectedness among people of diverse backgrounds and identities.

Keywords: *ubuntu*, storytelling, interdependence

Ubuntu: the very essence of what it means to be human

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to

someone we say ... 'Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life. We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.'

Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999)

Commonly translated as personhood, humanness, humanism or humaneness, the word *ubuntu* is found, with phonological variants, in the Nguni and Bantu languages of sub-Saharan Africa (Battle 2009; Munyaka and Motlhabi 2009). Although varied definitions may be found in literature, according to Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009), *ubuntu* is said to derive from the word *mntu*, meaning a person or human being, and denotes a positive quality, an inner state, or a disposition towards good. It is, they conclude, "a person's self-realisation and manifestation as a human being" (64-65). Scholars are unanimous in claiming that this self-realisation can only come about through meaningful and positive interaction with others (Munyaka and Motlhabi 2009; Murithi 2006; Murove 2009; Nussbaum 2009). In this regard, *ubuntu* constitutes a social ethic and a strong sense of community. As Dirk Louw (2001:15) writes, "It not only describes human being as 'being-with-others', but also prescribes how we should relate to others, i.e. what 'being-with-others' should be all about".

My starting point is Desmond Tutu's definition of *ubuntu*, as I wish to signal what, according to what has become known as Tutu's *ubuntu* theology, are the central tenets of the philosophy of *ubuntu* — most notably, becoming, belonging and sharing. I consider how these have been applied to the non-formal teaching project of the Ubuntu Academy in Portugal and reflect on how it establishes amongst its participants a network of interdependence and a shared sense of belonging. More specifically, I examine the programme's use of personal storytelling and testimony to encourage personal growth, promote a sense of self-identity and a strong social consciousness. I contend that storytelling, developed within the framework of *ubuntu*, enhances the lived experience and voice of the individual but, essentially, it enables participants to think of themselves as inextricably bound to others. As Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009:69) suggest, "This belonging does not only make one complete but gives one a sense of identity and security. Seeing oneself as part of the community leaves little room for narrow individualism."

Personal narrative provides an avenue for introspection, self-interrogation and a search for meaning. As Richard Kearney (2002: 132) notes, "Life can be properly understood only by being retold" and further concludes, "life is always *on the way* to narrative, but it does not arrive there until someone hears and tells this life as a story" (emphasis in the original) (133). In this sense, the linguistic mediation of a life gives meaning to that particular life script, but the meaning of a life script is, I wish to suggest, only fully comprehended if teller and listener enter into an ethical relation that gives rise to engaged storytelling. When the encounter between the teller and the listener takes place against a backdrop of ethical responsiveness, the act of telling involves a willingness to delve beneath the surface of one's existence and to expose one's vulnerability. By virtue of one's vulnerability, much of who one is is revealed. As Erinn Gilson (2014:2) has shown, "vulnerability is the basis for learning and for empathy, connection, and

community ... only by being vulnerable can one extend beyond oneself.” Exposing one’s vulnerability is, I would add, an act of denuding oneself that beckons an ethical response – what Emmanuel Levinas (1985) terms an infinite responsibility, a being-for-the-other before oneself.

In this context, listening entails a willingness to attend to the narrative of the Other. It requires humility and the predisposition to, in Levinas’s (1969:51) words, “receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I”. The ethical relation between the teller and the listener is then developed through a dialectic of offering and accepting. The generous act of offering one’s life (hi)story stems from both a recognition of one’s interdependence with others and the desire to have others co-author one’s narrative. The gesture of accepting the other’s (hi)story, and engaging with his/her vulnerability(ies) generates, in turn, not only an awareness of one’s own vulnerability(ies) but also a responsibility for the Other. When the other exposes him/herself, responsibility becomes, as Alphonso Lingis (1998) observes, not only a form of recognition, but also a relationship with the other where one puts oneself in the place of the other.

This experience of alterity is pivotal to *ubuntu* and informs the Ubuntu Academy project, which draws primarily on the application of the concept in South Africa during the transition from apartheid rule to democracy and currently. I would therefore like to briefly place the concept into historical context and consider its political and social significance. *Ubuntu* gained salience during South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy (following the 1994 democratic elections) and particularly during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process. The philosophy of *ubuntu* formed the central matrix of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu’s conception of a post-apartheid society oriented towards a mode of human togetherness in which individuals are able to establish relations of reciprocity and solidarity. On this basis, *The Interim Constitution of South Africa* (1993) and subsequently the 1995 *National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stressed the “need for understanding, but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimization”.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up to, among other tasks, examine the nature, causes and extent of gross human rights violations committed between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994 (the date of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as President). Perpetrators and victims of human rights violations were brought face-to-face in non-judicial public hearings across the country between 21 April 1996 and 29 March 1998.

It is not the purpose of this paper to examine the accomplishments and shortcomings of the TRC. These have been amply discussed in an extensive body of literature that reveals the complexity of a process grounded in ideological, political and teleological premises. However, it is worth recalling that, for the first time in the history of South Africa, victims were given the opportunity to tell their stories and, ultimately, to confront their perpetrators before an audience; perpetrators were given the same opportunity to disclose publicly unknown information about crimes committed during the apartheid regime. Particularly important, in light of South Africa’s history of repression, concealment and silencing of the majority of the population, the TRC created what Deborah Posel (2006:91) termed “a platform for the narration of personal

stories”, thereby entrenching “new modes of speaking — a politics of speaking out predicated on newfound democratic freedoms” (93).

It has been widely recognised in literature that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, the TRC’s Chairperson, played a crucial role in defining the guiding principles shaping the TRC’s work. From the outset, the TRC was framed in a discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation pivotal to the model of restorative (rather than retributive) justice adopted (Amstutz 2005; Graybill 2002). As Desmond Tutu (1998:9), explains in the Foreword to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume One, “We believe ... that there is another kind of justice – a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships – with healing, harmony and reconciliation”. Accordingly, this model of justice “seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured” (Munyaka and Mothlabi 2009:72). *Ubuntu* renders restorative justice possible because it promotes exercise of the responsibility of the self for the other as both the precept of social existence and the recognition of a shared humanity.

Although many critical voices articulated misgivings about both the model of justice adopted and the constant appeal to forgiveness and reconciliation, it was also acknowledged that the South African TRC created conditions that favoured the rehabilitation of an ailing social character afflicted by the apartheid legacy of strife and conflict and fostered the development of humanistic values and effective interpersonal relations. *Ubuntu*, forgiveness and reconciliation framing the ethical discourse of the TRC opened a horizon of affective responses not only for those enduring suffering, but also for those responsible for the suffering. Many attested that the compassionate gaze encompassed in *ubuntu* radically transformed restraint, mistrust, hostility and a sense of alienation towards the Other — endemic to the apartheid’s pathological construct of race relations — into a sense of communion, of fraternity and solidarity. On this score, one of the TRC’s most important contributions was that it framed inter-subjective relations in a new semantics, proposing a course of action capable of transfiguring social exchange and providing new grounds of human community.

I suggest that this aspect of the TRC process was crucial at that particular socio-historical juncture in South Africa but could be equally meaningful for societies with a legacy of conflict, injustice and political violence, as is the case with Portugal, whose dictatorial regime (1926-1974) lasted for forty-eight years. The question that concerns me here, though, is how the ethic of *ubuntu* has extended beyond the context of the TRC and, more specifically, how and where it has resonated in Portugal.

***Ubuntu* in education programmes**

In the years following the South African TRC process, the philosophy of *ubuntu* has gained prominence in a myriad of fields and discourses, both in South African and in other countries, ranging from politics to business management, restorative justice, conflict resolution, information technology and education. Of relevance to this paper is

the application of *ubuntu* in non-formal and values-based education programmes in South Africa and countries around the world.

Founded in 2013, the Ubuntu Academy Cape Town works with youth from isolated communities struggling with unemployment, poverty, violence, crime and gangsterism. It adopts a positive youth development approach to maximise participants' potential. Through entrepreneurship, leadership and talent development, it guides youth to a sustainable living, and encourages participants to become social change-makers and role models to the next generation. The programme uses participants' talents in music, dance and drama to train them in these disciplines, but also in design, film, photography, social media, life skills and business skills. It thus combines arts education – that stimulates creativity and inspiration – with leadership and entrepreneurship to promote personal growth and skills development (<http://ubuntuacademy.co.za>).

Other Ubuntu projects have been developed in Austria, the UK, the USA, Brazil, Uruguai, Australia and Portugal. All these constitute the Ubuntu Global Network, an international network that was launched in Lisbon in 2014 to promote multilateral co-operation and partnerships between organisations whose social-minded projects use *ubuntu* philosophy as core values to their work (<http://www.ubuntuglobalnetwork.com/charter/>). Chief among these is the Ubuntu Academy in Portugal, a non-formal education project (NFE) that was founded in 2010 to provide training and education to young descendants from African immigrant communities. The programme targets young people (aged between 18 and 35) with leadership potential and helps them plan and implement social entrepreneur projects that respond to the social needs of their community. The values underpinning the philosophy of *ubuntu* of ethical responsibility, solidarity, humility, generosity, a willingness to share and communalism are the programme's guiding principles.

The first semester of the programme is structured around theme-based seminars, workshops and two residential weekends. Citizenship, leadership and social entrepreneurship are explored through the lens of *ubuntu*. An emphasis is placed on a leadership model that prioritises respect for the dignity of others, group solidarity, teamwork, interdependence and service to others (Mbigi 2002). In this regard, the central references and sources of inspiration are Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta (<http://academiaubuntu.org>).

Ubuntu Lives: the experience of storytelling

Leadership qualities are developed through a range of activities and techniques that include film screenings, discussion and reflection about real life experiences of *ubuntu*, and workshops or seminars with individuals whose life and work reflect the values of *ubuntu*. The programme culminates in two one-day sessions titled Ubuntu Lives, in which participants share their personal narratives in a semi-formal environment for an audience that includes guests, family members, friends and other Ubuntu Academy participants. In the lead-up to the Ubuntu Lives session the participants develop public-speaking skills and begin the process of composing a personal narrative.

This brings me to the importance of storytelling to the Ubuntu Academy Programme. As was the case with the TRC, the Ubuntu Academy recognises the value of testimony and storytelling. Explained from the perspective of narrative theory, storytelling has the social value of enabling individuals to reconstruct the meaning and significance of past experience. For Michael Jackson (2002:15), “To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination”. During the TRC the deployment of narrative as the matrix upon which both a sequence of events could be placed in time and space and a plurality of stories could intermesh to facilitate another understanding of the past allowed individuals to develop a sense of themselves as subjects and to perceive their stories as “something that endures and remains across that which passes and flows away” (Ricoeur, 1991:22).

Scholars have been unequivocal in stressing that the conditions created for black South Africans to relay their personal stories in the public realm had both historical and political purchase (Godobo-Madikizela and van der Merwe 2009, Graybill 2002, Ndebele 1998). Within the fabric of the TRC, narrative was the way in which, to borrow from Ricoeur (1991:30), “the story of a life [grew] out of stories that [had] not been recounted and that [had] been repressed in the direction of actual stories which the subject could take charge of and consider to be constitutive of his *personal identity*” (emphasis in the original). The multiplicity of the lived stories, shared across what de Kok (1998:62) terms, “the dialectic between language and the grieving mind”, provided the locus for individuals to reinvent themselves – to (re)negotiate their identity – as they dealt with trauma, suffering and loss.

In the context of the Ubuntu Academy, storytelling is the central methodology through which the participants gain an understanding of their identity, the values that guide their relationship with others, and how they contribute to others’ self-realisation and well-being, thereby engaging with the values of *ubuntu*. As Richard Kearney (2002:129) has observed, “Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is *always already* an implicit story” (emphasis in the original). Articulating a personal story, that is, making one’s life into a lived story, entails examining the course of one’s life and making it present again. It is the act of drawing a self-portrait from, to borrow Brady’s (1990:45) words, “one’s prior selves and images of significant others without which the story cannot be completely told”. Inevitably, this involves reflection about the people, the experiences and the environments that have shaped one’s life. As Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009:70) write:

The personal growth of individuals happens in community. Only through the co-operation, influence and contribution of others, can one understand and bring to fulfillment one’s own personality. One is able to discover a sense of self-identity only in reference to the community in which one lives.

The experience of narration offers a means through which storytellers (re)interpret events from their personal history, thereby “reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (Brady 1990:47). As I was able to witness in the two Ubuntu Lives sessions that were held in Lisbon on 30 November 2013 and 15 March 2014, when storytelling becomes part of a communal process of sharing personal stories, an emotional

connection is established between storytellers and listeners. Under these circumstances, a “communion of persons” (quoted in Coetzee and Roux 2003:349), as Leopold Senghor phrased it, is created.

In each Ubuntu Lives session, twenty participants told their personal stories. Most developed a timeline from infancy to adulthood, reflecting on significant events or turning points that framed their lives or those of their immediate family. Stories were infused with memories, emotions and everyday life or academic and professional experiences. Some were intimate revelations of abandonment, a parent’s illness, drug and/or alcohol addiction and of how difficult moments had been overcome. Many stories were filled with sadness, others with humour. Some evoked a sense of place or expressed gratitude about nurturing mothers and fathers, devoted siblings, spouses and friends, generating insights about the storyteller’s sense of values and connection to community. Others honoured family members who had passed away or invoked the stories of people who had, either at a personal or professional level, played an important role in the storyteller’s life. Visual metaphors or photos of family, friends and places were combined and juxtaposed to create additional layers of meaning.

At the end of each session, a mosaic of life stories had been formed, revealing, as Barbara Nussbaum (2009:101) writes, “our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to one another that flows from that connection”. The personal narratives also revealed that, according to Joe Lambert (2010:10) “while stories sometimes have a journey built into them, ... that journey occurs for both the storyteller and the audience alike”. Three stories among many illustrate this well. I have singled out these three stories because of the very different ways in which the storytellers engaged with their (hi)stories and how they chose to convey their lived experiences. Even though the storytellers had been exposed to the same teachings at the Ubuntu Academy, they each interpreted *ubuntu* in their own way and reflected on how the philosophy of *ubuntu* applied to their own concrete experience. Importantly, these three stories reveal that there was not a unified way of conveying life stories but there was a process of self-understanding, self-respect and growth that was common to the three storytellers.

Twenty-five year old Marino relayed a story of courage and resilience. Abandoned by his father and neglected by his drug-addicted mother, Marino was taken in by his maternal grandparents, who were awarded legal guardianship of their grandson. His childhood was spent assisting his grandmother and ensuring his diabetic grandfather had adequate medical care after his leg had to be amputated. During a temporary stay with his drug-addicted and prostitute mother, Marino would have to stay out in the streets to escape the hostile environment at home, often missing school. Upon returning to his grandparents’ house, Marino found it difficult to come to terms with his circumstances and attempted suicide. His teachers at school and spiritual leaders provided the guidance he needed to overcome his struggles and continue his studies away from home. Now he works in information technology and is a volunteer animator in youth groups from high-poverty communities. The only image Marino chose to illustrate his story was that of a burning candle that conveyed his message of gratitude and hope. He ended his story questioning whether his life is *ubuntu*, and concluded that, indeed, it is. He is who he is because of the people who kept him on track: teachers, doctors, counsellors, tutors and family.

Although Marino's story was interspersed with humour, the audience was deeply moved by his courage, dignity and integrity. Another moment that captivated the audience was Carolina's creative and spontaneous presentation. The central theme in Carolina's story is the lessons she learnt as a child, as an adolescent and as a young adult. It was a meditation about what gave her life meaning: home, family, friends and relationships and, more recently, the Ubuntu Academy. It was a depiction of her search for her place in the world: as an artist, a storyteller and a volunteer in a youth arts and crafts programme in a poor neighbourhood. She ended her presentation with an illustrated story titled "Those from Above, and Those from Below". Told with great insight, the story was about the inhabitants above, who lived exactly like the inhabitants below. Yet, those from above thought that those from below were different, and those from below thought those from above were different, but what, in fact, told them apart were minor differences. What those from above had in common with those from below was that they all dreamed they could fly. The story ended with a question: Who are those from above, and who are those from below? The reply was that once in a while we ought to change (and be changed by) our gaze.

This compassionate gaze was also conveyed in Raquel's honest and moving tribute to the people and experiences that have shaped her life. Spoken with authenticity and humility, Raquel's story was a reflection about how her family values — humbleness, honesty and truth — have informed her life and helped develop the spirit of *ubuntu*. She chose forty-five photos to encapsulate her ancestry, her personal and professional journey, her dreams and ambitions. She claimed that through photos we reveal much of who we are: the books we have read, the journeys we have made and the people we love. Hence, Raquel carefully chose photos from her family album that reflected this affective connection to her personal history. Each slide comprised a collage of photos, some taken by herself and others from the family archive, generating a visual narrative about meaningful moments in her life: a birthday party, a school event, her graduation ceremony, and her work, first as a volunteer in Mozambique, and later with deaf-blind youths in a catholic social institution for underprivileged and disabled children in Lisbon, and finally with prisoners. The latter experiences motivated a deep respect for the particularity of the other, sensitising her to different forms of communication, in particular, to "the dance of words in the air", as she called it. That is why she had a sign language interpreter accompany her.

Ricoeur's (1991:26) treatment of narrative focuses on how narrative acts upon the reader and how the reader acts upon it. He argues, "the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative". To transpose Ricoeur's theory to the Ubuntu Lives and, in particular, to Marino, Carolina and Raquel's stories, the experience of narrating, and/or interpreting the narratives opens before the several agents in the process a horizon of affective responses. By exposing their vulnerabilities, and sharing thoughts and experiences that had previously been experienced only in private to a receptive audience, the storytellers' life stories gained recognition and intensity. Crucially, the willingness to lay bare what had previously been private beckoned an ethical response from the audience. To put it in Levinasian (1985) terms, the face-to-face encounter with the vulnerable other engendered a mode of engagement that was both responsive and responsible. As a member of the audience I felt that in this other's face I recognised my own vulnerability. Responsibility claimed on me the ethical demand of not only taking cognizance of these life stories but affording them the

respect they deserved. This awareness resonated with *ubuntu* ethics that prioritises the encounter with the human other and, most importantly, leverages this encounter on the understanding of one's humanity through the humanity of others.

Conclusion

Each storyteller who contributed to the Ubuntu Lives came with a unique personal history. Some stories dealt with loss and grief; others with race and ethnicity, home and family, but common to all the life stories, and in particular the three stories highlighted in this paper, was an ethic of service to others and an awareness of the speakers' identity in relationship to others. All three reflected on how the concept of *ubuntu* was ingrained in their life trajectories. In a personal interview in December 2015, Carolina and Raquel revealed their thoughts about the Ubuntu Academy and the experience of telling their life (hi)stories. Both considered that the Ubuntu Academy's leadership programme, and the storytelling methodology especially, is unique in that it provides participants with a sense of self-identity and self-respect, as well as with an awareness of and respect for the Other. The deeply affective process of sharing life stories is revelatory and empowering and, in some cases, healing. It is a humbling experience that teaches the value of giving and receiving and encourages participants to put themselves in the place of the Other. Both felt enriched by the life stories they heard and considered that reflecting on their own lives not only gave them a sense of gratitude but also contributed to their personal growth.

These testimonies suggest, then, that narrative rooted in individual subjective experiences is the matrix upon which both a sequence of events is placed in time and space and a plurality of stories intermesh, enabling participants and audience alike to realise that we all have shared human experiences that connect us. Most notably, the web of trusting and reciprocal relationships that grows from this process generates community. In modelling leadership around the importance of communal relationships, the respect for human values and the recognition of human worth at the centre of *ubuntu*, the programme enables the participants to consider how they can promote the ethic of *ubuntu* and become agents of social transformation. More specifically, it provides the participants the opportunity to experience the unifying character of *ubuntu*. As Louw (2001:24) observes, "Ubuntu unites the self and the world in a peculiar web of reciprocal relations in which the subject and object become indistinguishable, and in which 'I think, therefore I am', is substituted for 'I participate, therefore I am'."

The Ubuntu Academy might be interpreted as attempting to achieve a utopia, or some kind of homogeneity, during the programme. This view might naturally raise the question: what further application has the concept of *ubuntu* had in the participants' lives beyond the Ubuntu Academy or, more specifically, what is the reach of the Southern African worldview in Portugal? The three participants mentioned in this paper have developed/ collaborate in projects whose conceptual framework is *ubuntu*. Carolina has spearheaded the *Vidas Ubuntu: Histórias para Contar* (Ubuntu Lives: Stories to Tell) programme for primary, secondary and professional schools in Lisbon and the north of Portugal since October 2014. The methodology of personal storytelling is used in 4/5 day workshops with students, aged between fourteen and twenty-five, from vulnerable contexts, immigrant, minority or refugee communities.

The process of constructing and telling their personal stories allows participants to develop an awareness of the context of their lives and personal trajectories. This generates an understanding about when and where a change took place in their lives, as well as the circumstances and people that contributed to that change. In many cases, it has helped participants to find the courage to reveal experiences of domestic violence, abuse, racism or bullying, enabling teachers and school counsellors to address their students' problems and provide adequate help. As Carolina noted in a personal interview, the personal storytelling methodology has proved to be a constructive and transformative process for the more than 500 students who have taken part in the workshops. It opens pathways for self-reflexivity and engaged listening, and elicits an awareness of the life of the Other. By approaching their life stories, as well as that of others, through the lens of *ubuntu*, the participants learn the importance of tolerance, acceptance, respect, empathy and reciprocity. Importantly, in ethnically and racially diverse classrooms plagued by suspicion and conflict, engaging with the philosophy of *ubuntu* encourages students to reposition themselves in relation to the Other and realise that every life matters. As a result, relationships have been strengthened and a sense of community has been built. As one of the students who participated in the Ubuntu Lives: Stories to Tell workshop reflects, "My story might not change the world, but it might change someone who listens to it".

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