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A Dialogue on Generative Journalism with Peter Pula

Image

‘Our goal is to discover someone’s story. Our goal is not to fix anybody.’

A circle of local citizens who are also aspiring media makers ended up in a deep exploration of the concept of Generative Journalism with Peter Pula at the Axiom News studio in Peterborough.

This is an edited and condensed version of a portion of the dialogue with one of the citizen journalists, active community leader Bill Templeman.

We begin with Peter’s answer to a question that had been posed to start the conversation: “How do you connect with and express the story within your soul?”

Peter: I struggle with that question, because I believe that if you touch a soul, you touch infinity. That's a pretty big audience.

I also think you do it in partnership. You do it by being present for another. You do it by asking into what you see. You do it by knowing your question. You know your question by knowing the spirit.

You create your story, discover your story, uncover your story and create it at the same time in partnership with others who are present and know their question.

I don't actually think that. (Laughter)

I know it.

Peter: And, now that we're talking about it, when you're sharing a story or part of a story — because you only ever share part of a story, the part that moved you most in the moment — when you share that story, you show others what it is to be seen in your giftedness.

So if I can see someone or part of them in some part of a story — anything that we make together to capture that particular moment and that particular spark of life — if you do this really well — the shock of seeing a soul is stunning. How do you write that? It's a big job. But if you can figure that out, even a little bit, it's going to resonate, because you've touched deeply. That's going to open the gateway for other people to come out and explore in the same ways.

Bill: Part of me wonders, based on what you just said, should I go back to my cave then and be making art? Is that it? Should I go back and start some sort of divine community? Should I start a movement?

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Bill Templeman

I'm just trying to bring the conversation back to Generative Journalism and this idea of helping people tell their story.

Peter: Yes, the context of what we're doing is Generative Journalism and the New Narrative Arts. So yes, you could create a movement. Maybe that's a narrative art. I

don’t know. But art certainly is. To stand in a room and do art by yourself, probably not. But to do art in a way that exhibits your partnership with somebody else, an exploration of who they are and their soul, absolutely.

I think there are two pieces to a sacred story. One is that each one is fundamentally unique and, two is that it’s in relationship; it’s created in relationship.

And, yes, you can express these things through movements, buildings, architecture, city spaces, illustrations.

Bill: But in this space, it’s journalism.

Peter: I actually feel that as we walk through this discussion that we’re not all about Generative Journalism. Generative Journalism is one expression of a way of being and it just happens to be the expression that we’ve decided to focus on professionally because that’s where our skills, talents and passions lie.

Bill: But it ain’t the only thing.

Peter: But it ain’t the only thing. All the things we just talked about are also related to how you host a community dialogue; it’s how you have a community conversation. Same principles.

So what we’re really talking about is being generative.

Bill: Being generative…

Peter: We’re being generative as journalists.

And I do want to say something else on that. Because I think there is a distinction in the storytelling. I’ve been involved in a lot of circles where we do storytelling. And what I see often is storytelling that is not generative. It tells my story as it was a long time ago. It becomes habitual and repetitive. So it actually keeps me where I was. So it can shape an identity that keeps me in the past.

> The social and economic systems we live in have taught us to bury ourselves so we can function.
>
> Peter Pula

That’s a difference with Generative Journalism. We’re not asking questions to discover what happened; we’re asking questions to discover what is happening. That is a fundamental difference.

In some storytelling circles we are now complicating the way we analyze people’s stories from the past. There are methods being developed to do deep dives on these stories. What makes me, personally, wriggle a bit is this sense of, does this heap attention on something that happened a long time ago rather than midwifing new life? I feel as though such analysis of the past seems scientific and analytic. Sometimes I have felt the life leave the room and the story.

So a key distinction with Generative Journalism is that the questions have to be seeking what is emerging, what wants to come to life. That’s why when we talk about touching someone’s soul, that is as deep as it goes, that is the source of life. Can you get there with every article, with every story, with every question? No, in fact if you did, you might blow people up. And it takes time.

So what wants to be born?

The social systems we live in, the economic systems we live in, have taught us to bury ourselves so we can function.

So Generative Journalism is an act of total rebellion, because we're seeking people in their sacred selves and what they're deeply connected to, not their function as units of production in a socio-economic system built for repetition and control.

It is a way to stop the destruction that those systems can bring.

Bill: How does this tread the line between exploration and therapy? The universe abounds with sometimes destructive forms of cheap, self-indulgent therapy posing as deep wisdom of the ages.

Peter: I don't know because I'm not a therapist. But that's not your goal. Your goal is to discover someone's story. Your goal is not to fix anybody. Your goal is to discover someone's story and to work with them co-creatively to do it.

That's the other difference between this and typical journalism. A typical journalist interviews you, keeps their notes to themselves, writes the story they want to and you're not even part of it. It can be a disembodying, disassociating experience. Whereas in Generative Journalism you work with somebody co-creatively to shape a story that you both want to live into together. You are in relationship all along the way.

I have to ask you a question for you to be able to answer it. I have to be committed to you and have a subjective experience with you; my intention is going to show up in my questions. And the way you dance with my questions is what's going to feed my next question. We're entwining each other all the way through.

I'm not writing a story about you; I'm writing a story with you.

Bill: So, if I was an Aboriginal person who survived a residential school and I have relatives who are missing, Aboriginal women, this is not about journalist Peter going about writing about Bill's pain. This is about us together opening that and seeing what we can make of this, what's the dream, what's the hope.

Peter: What wants to be born.

Bill: What wants to be born.

Peter: In a case like that, in a story like that, there is going to be tremendous pain…

> The purpose of what we're doing is to create a story together. It's not therapy. Or even coaching. That's not our goal. Our goal is to discover and share a story together.
>
> Peter Pula

Bill: It's going to stick me back there, like you were saying.

Peter: Or, you're going to uncover it. You're going to be witness to it coming out. And then, if you're going to be a Generative Journalist, you're going to have to stand with that person, in that heat, to seek out the thing that it wants to give birth to.

Bill: Sounds like pretty intensive therapeutic skills in this example. As a Generative Journalist, if I'm that guy (you're interviewing), I hope you have your stuff together in terms of psychodynamics because there might be some nasties in there.

Peter: Well and I think that's something else, is that — we all hold the field. So whoever shows up is the right people. Each person brings some element to the conversation. People will only say as much as their trust will allow them, as their sense of safety will allow them. So you have to sense into that as the journalist, as the curious one.

You have to be curious. We've talked about how you can't have an agenda; you can't be trying to convince anybody of anything.

If you want to shut down a soul discovery experience and a sacred story experience, come in with an agenda. Come in thinking you're going to fix somebody or change somebody. Go ahead, do it. Watch the sacred story run for the hills. You won't even get a chance to see it. The spark will go before you have a chance to see it.

So, yeah, you've got to have your stuff together. But if you don't, I don't think your partner, the person you're having the conversation with, will come out to you.

And the purpose of what we're doing is to create a story together. It's not therapy. Or even coaching. That's not our goal. Our goal is to discover and share a story together.

- More to Come

Submitted by Jean Koning (not verified) on Thu, 04/28/2016 - 16:42

Permalink

You have caught my attention

You have caught my attention with the referral to the First Peoples and the history of Indian Residential Schools and Murdered and Missing First Peoples Women and Girls. To me, the need for sharing in the truth-telling and truth-listening between the First Peoples and The Rest of Us is one of the most pressing issues of our time. And I like what you have said here. But I would ask: do we have to consider that the culture of how to listen to one another effectively may have to be explored, and understood - before true sharing can take place? I ask this because my 50 years of walking with, and listening to, First Peoples brothers and sisters has taught me that I

and my people (I am one of The Rest of Us) do not really know how to listen to the First Peoples. And I have come to believe that because we have never learned that, we are several hundred years behind in knowing how to listen to them effectively. Is this something that perhaps you will be giving more thought to as time goes on? I would suggest, in fact, that if we are to listen to one another's stories and share in gnerative journalism, we ("white people" in particular) must be prepared to consider the many cultural differences we may meet as we undertake the listening/hearing process with many other people. In the spirit of peace, respect, justice and friendship, Jean Koning.

- Reply

Submitted by Michelle S. (not verified) on Wed, 05/04/2016 - 10:26

In reply to You have caught my attention by Jean Koning (not verified)

Permalink

Thanks Jean. You raise a

Thanks Jean. You raise a vital point about giving careful thought to the listening space we hold when it comes to the First Peoples. If you have further insights on shaping that space, and the kinds of things to think about in doing so, we'd be happy to hear. Warm regards, Michelle Strutzenberger on behalf of the Axiom News team

- Reply