

# TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS—TRANSFORMATIVE STORIES

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*In this narrative the author reflects on how events meld into transformative stories and how being out in the classroom is a political act that invites a spiritual response in that it requests the learner to acknowledge presence, understanding, and inclusion of others. The story is told in the classroom to bring lived experience to the learning process, constructing the possibility of spiritual reflections on dominant discourses, thus creating space for human relationships to take precedence.*

“When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.” (Rich, 1986, p. 199)

Rich powerfully articulates the experience of exclusion. As a social work educator, I have a responsibility to be inclusive of all people. One way I am inclusive is by being transparent in the classroom. Freedman and Combs (1996) define transparency as “explaining enough about our situation and our life experience that people can understand us as people rather than as *experts* or conduits for professional knowledge” (p. 36). I am a lesbian who is “out” in the classroom. There is no event, such as an announcement: I simply am fully me. This full identity means that I openly discuss issues that might reveal my orientation and I refer to my partner when appropriate.

## **The Classroom, Politics, and Spirituality**

The Council on Social Work Education sets certain expectations as to what is to be included in syllabi with regard to core social work values. Values pertinent to this discussion include social justice, the worth of

all people, and the value of human relationships (NASW, 1996). Exercises, media, lecture/discussions are all ways to facilitate the understanding and acceptance of these values. However, classroom activities often fall short of the desired goal for students not only to understand the relevance of these values to social work practice, but, at a deeper level, to embrace them. Perhaps this difficulty in embracing social work values is because learners find this content to be in competition with dominant cultural discourses, which frame stories about people’s lives in ways that are in conflict with social work values. It is not sufficient to simply articulate these values as additive to content. I, like many of my colleagues, strive to construct learning experiences that bring people’s lived experiences up close and personal.

This dynamic is all the more reason to make one’s own lived experience come alive for learners. Being out in the classroom is a political act that invites a spiritual response in that it requests the learner to acknowledge presence, understanding, and inclusion of others. The personal is the political and, I would add, the spiritual. Spirituality, for me, requires stretching the boundaries of one’s personal experience and self-reflection in relationship to the experience of others.

Coming out, whether in the classroom or elsewhere, is a gift that keeps giving. The presumption of heterosexism has a sort of “deadly elasticity” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68), bringing the possibility of new walls springing

up with every new encounter. One never knows what people's responses will be. This dynamic is particularly true given the current political climate.

### Social Constructions and Real Effects

Some have the power to construct social narratives that may not represent *truth*, “but that doesn't stop them from having real effects” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 36). In the past decade, a public debate has emerged regarding the rights for gays and lesbians. In an effort to roll back gains and block future privileges, rhetoric of hatefulness has ensued, promoting certain “truths” and creating a climate for certain stories to promote a paradigm condemning gays and lesbians. Trent Lott, who was the Senate majority leader at the time he made this statement, said, “You should try to show them a way to deal with [homosexuality] just like alcohol...or sex addiction...or kleptomaniacs” (as qtd. in Lacayo, 1998, p. 32), and he went on to suggest that gays are “sinners” and he got his views from the Bible. Pat Robertson, of the Christian Broadcasting Network stated, “...the acceptance of homosexuality is the last step in the decline of Gentile civilization” [and Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council (FRC) has encouraged] “...waging the war against the homosexual agenda” (as qtd. in Lacayo, 1998, p. 32).

In September of 2004, hate crimes protection aimed at gays and lesbians was attached to a bill that passed in the Senate, and the House of Representatives passed a motion to keep in the protective language; however, the language was then stripped in conference even after what appeared to be bipartisan support (D. Fenwick, personal communication, June 2, 2005). Many believe this was strategic politics at play, but at the expense of gays and lesbians (Allen, 2004). And then in November of 2004, eleven states voted to define marriage as a union of a man and woman, thus banning the right for gays

and lesbians to make their commitments legal by marriage. The current President reiterated that his agenda will promote an amendment to the Constitution of the United States defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Meanwhile, public discourse sets the stage for this exclusion to take place. It is a discourse of discrimination.

Gays and lesbians are at times portrayed as demons that add to the social and cultural ills of society. Narratives are strategically constructed and pose as truth. These narratives are not even “...*partial knowledge* masquerading as general, even universal” (Minnich, 1990, p. 178). They are full of errors that are representative of what Minnich refers to as “faulty generalization...circular reasoning...mystified concepts [and]...*partial modes of knowing*” (p. 178), all of which are used to perpetuate exclusion. However, they present a challenge to the understanding of social work values. How does one begin to transform knowledge of this nature—i.e., powerful narratives constructed by dominant culture posing as truths?

The rhetoric that constructs this knowledge is destructive to individuals, families, and society. I believe this kind of rhetoric is responsible for incredible acts of violence, such as the death of Matthew Shepherd. Also, I believe it is responsible for the estrangement I experienced from my own parents who, for several years, behaved as if I did not exist. It is so easy and attractive to think this kind of hatred is perpetuated by “bad people,” but the discourse that portrays gays and lesbians as evil circulates amongst us all, including “good” people.

### Events and Stories

During a discussion of marginalized groups, a graduate student asked me, “May I ask you a personal question and you don't have to answer it if you don't want.” I smiled and replied, “Ask, then I can decide.” She continued, “How did your parents respond



to your being gay?” “Not well,” I replied. “What happened?” she asked.

For a moment I reflected as to whether I wanted to share my experience. But, because it is one of struggle and hope, I believe it is an important story. Stories bring lived experience and voice to the classroom that sometimes is otherwise not heard. I am their teacher. I am in a certain position in relationship to the learner. Relationships can be transformative and facilitate the understanding of the personal as the political. Personal stories encourage this understanding in unique and powerful ways.

Here is my story. But, like all individual stories, it has stories within stories—layers of revelation and interpretation constructed from life events by multiple participants. These stories weave myriad truths into both the mystery and the substance of spiritual knowledge.

I came out to my parents in the mid-1980s, at the age of 35. They responded with surprise and anger. This response is a common experience for many gays and lesbians in that surprise is indicative of not noticing; anger is indicative of being forced to notice an alternative story about their world. Both of these emotional responses are supported by dominant discourses. My parents said many harsh things to me personally and rejected my partner in the rudest, meanest imaginable ways. Their hateful and cold ways of being toward me were a reflection of the political discourse. Knowing that they were caught up in the ignorance of their fundamentalist upbringing provided no comfort, however. Their own rhetoric mimicked the tripe of their fundamentalism, as—standing on what they referred to as religious principles—their exclusion claimed holiness and righteousness.

Politics are personal with very real effects. After coming out, my relationship with my parents became increasingly difficult and distant. I requested and eventually demanded they treat me, my partner, and our relationship

with respect or forfeit my relationship with them. They chose the latter for many years. My father would call occasionally and pretend all was well, and I even joined him in the charade on occasions. He tried to hide the uneasiness in his voice and I tried to hide the hurt. I rarely talked with my mother, but when we did, anger always erupted. She would make some hateful, perverse statement and I would come back with what she called a “smart mouth.” My brother was appalled by their behavior, but not surprised. He kept his distance from my parents in solidarity. His solidarity was a gift, as for many this sort of sibling support is not the norm. Families stay divided for years and I really thought mine would do just that, except an unpredicted turn of events brought us together.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my cousin told her mother, my maternal aunt, that if my partner and I were not invited to Christmas dinner, she would not come or she didn’t want my mother to come. She, in fact, told her mother to tell my mother that she had to stop destroying the family. My cousin, due to her age, seems more like a niece. She often recalls times together when I was the teenager who drove her around in my VW Beetle, letting her eat jellybeans to her heart’s content while listening to ABBA. My cousin made her demand in the fall of 1993.

My father came to talk to my partner and me on an autumn day that same year. I remember the day vividly. Brilliant red and orange leaves swirled in the breeze. It was chilly enough to require a jacket. My father stood in our kitchen with his coat on the entire time we talked. I can still see him leaning against the kitchen counter, arms folded, not so much in defiance, but in what seemed more like fear. He said he wanted to talk about his relationship with us. He stood there and claimed his lack of worldly experience and education were at fault, but he wanted to change. I really couldn’t bring myself to be empathic. I pointed out to him that many had

experienced the same sort of poverty of experience but yet did not display poverty of spirit. He offered no apology, but said he wanted things to be different. I told him he would have to bring mother along in this journey. He claimed he had no control over her, and we parted ways with civility but little hope of change.

Weeks followed. I heard nothing. No calls or invitations. Hope for some reunion seemed remote and unrealistic. Again, I began to find solace in sameness of the past and the probability that nothing had changed. My goal: just accept it. Some things don't change, I thought. Two weeks before Christmas my mother called to extend an invitation to attend the traditional holiday Christmas gathering held at my aunt and uncle's home. I asked if my partner was included. The answer, much to my surprise, was "okay," with a sigh.

In spite of my reluctance, and warning my partner of what was possible, she insisted we accept their invitation. I had in fact shielded her from some of my parents' hatefulness. I knew exactly how they could behave. We accepted because we had always said we would accept invitations that included us both, but I was not looking forward to the occasion. My aunt and uncle live in a small town about an hour and half drive from where we lived. My mother said that my partner and I could ride with them. "No need to take two cars," she said. I thought to myself, only if you don't need an escape plan. "Lovely," I said to my partner sarcastically, "Trapped in the car with the enemy." We accepted the offer.

On Christmas morning my stomach ached like a little kid who wants to avoid the test at school. We arrived at my parents' home and, just as my mother promised, coffee was on the table with freshly baked blueberry muffins. We had the stiffest conversation imaginable. I don't remember the content, but I do remember how stilted it was. I remember thinking that I could not believe my partner

and I had given up being with our friends for this charade.

Much to our surprise, a light blanket of snow covered the ground while we sipped coffee and picked at muffins. The snow had not been predicted and it covered the roads, making them quite slick. If we had realized just how treacherous the driving would be, we would have stayed put. Reflecting back on it, I think we were distracted by the beauty of freshly fallen snow as a counterpoint to the tension between us. Some twenty miles before reaching our destination, we crested a hill to find two cars askew in the left lane and two other cars stopped. An accident had just happened moments earlier. A man approached the car and my partner asked, "I'm a nurse. Can I be of help?" "Please come," he responded, "There is a little girl not doing well. She is gurgling and I don't know what to do."

Without hesitation, Peg went to the car. She had been an emergency room nurse for years and was accustomed to critical injuries. I, on the other hand, had in previous years worked psychiatric triage in a city emergency room but had never developed a stomach for trauma. However, I followed her to the scene of the accident, even though my mother told me to stay in the car. I turned to her and said, "I'll be okay. I have to help Peg." My father pulled off the road and got out of the car. He followed us, took one look at the wreckage, and decided he was best suited to direct traffic around the accident scene.

"Has anyone called for an ambulance?" Peg asked. The man who had approached our car answered, "Yes, there is one on the way." Feeling helpless, I turned to Peg and said, "Just tell me what I can do."

She replied, "Just be here. Ask the people in the other car if they are okay." I did just that. I could smell alcohol as I peered into their vehicle. They were conscious and did not seem to have serious injuries, but were

sealed in their vehicle due to the impact. I reported back to Peg, “They seem okay.”

“This is not good,” she replied. The car with the family was twisted and crumpled. All doors were sealed and windows broken by the impact. The parents, in the front seat, were in and out of consciousness and their two daughters were in the back seat. We later learned that one girl was sixteen and one eleven. The eleven-year-old, “Dana,” was not doing well. Peg could barely get to her through the broken window. She turned to me and said, “I can’t hear her breathe—I don’t want her to die here because her airway is blocked.” She did a jaw thrust while stabilizing Dana’s neck. Immediately, we heard a deep breath and another. They were not steady, but they were supplying air.

“We are going to need access to this car,” Peg said, while continuing to attend to Dana. The older sister said, “There are keys in my mother’s purse.” I reached through the broken passenger window and took a handbag from the front of the car saying, “I’m going to get in your purse to get your keys.” Dana’s mother did not acknowledge. Riffing through the bag, I found an extra set of car keys that enabled me to open the back of the hatchback.

Large flakes of snow continued to fall, blanketing the ground in beauty and in silence. Snow has a way of making time seem still and muffling sounds. Even though we could hear a siren in the distance, it seemed we heard it for hours. I got the hatchback open and sat Christmas presents in the snow to make room for the EMT to get in the back seat of the car. I will never forget the vision of brightly wrapped presents sitting in the snow. They represented hope for a day filled with the possibility of laughter, sharing, and love.

Dana was dying. Peg had cleared her airway, but the trauma to her head was so severe that breathing only gave her moments. Upon their arrival at the scene, Peg assisted the EMTs by providing some information

about her assessments. One EMT rushed to the back of the vehicle and turned to Peg, requesting some items. She rushed to the other EMT, requested the items, and raced them back to the scene with the precision of an emergency room nurse. Peg and the EMT attending Dana made brief eye contact. The non-verbal communication was momentary, but unmistakable. Dana was dead.

Another ambulance arrived. Peg was thanked and we left them to do their work. As we moved toward my parents’ car, Peg and I held hands. Tears and snowflakes mingled wetly on our cheeks. I remember the face of a man sitting in a van. He was the same man that had come to the car and asked for help. He looked at us with such depth of concern and compassion. It was in his eyes. We had shared a moment with him that was not articulated; yet, in our common human experience of caring and tragedy, we came together in an inexpressible spiritual encounter.

My mother asked, “Is she going to be all right?” Tenderly, Peg answered, “I don’t think so.” We were all silent in that moment and for much of the day. It was meditative. When we arrived at my aunt and uncle’s house, we told them what had occurred. But, it seemed to be a hollow story. Just the facts of the incident could not reveal what had transpired. At that point in time the transformational nature of the experience had not been fully felt. It seemed disrespectful of Dana to acknowledge anything but her passing. Yet, I knew at some level that the relationship with my parents had changed forever. As one family struggled with grief and loss through the death of a child, another experienced the birth of hope for new relationships.

In the days that followed, my parents, my partner, and I recalled the story. Over and over again, we narrated the event to one another from our perspectives, debriefing from trauma. We talked about it over the phone, over coffee, and over dinner. We told it until our being together took on new

meanings, and new stories emerged. If anyone had told me that my parents, my partner, and I would have the relationship we have had since that day, I would have told them: “Impossible!”

The event recounted above qualifies for the kind of experience that inspires what Miller and C’de Baca (2001) refer to as quantum change. These are external events that cannot be fully articulated in any theoretical sense, but produce transformative change. Others watching the events unfold have no idea what is taking place. Yet, a kind of spiritual change happens that clearly goes beyond individuals and labels. A change of this nature brings a spirituality representative of “wholeness of what it is to be a person-in-relation” (Canda, 1998-1999, p.13).

### **Stories, Change, and the Classroom**

Let’s return to the classroom where the student asked about my personal story. I could have continued the class on the assigned topic, without sharing my story. Students would have learned important information. However, information, e.g., course content, about people’s lived experiences sometimes falls short of facilitating understanding of those who are “different” from the dominant group. As a social work educator, I strive to bring alternative, diverse stories to the classroom. Stories evoke connected knowing—connections to human lives and multiple meanings.

Through an event that happened on a cold, snowy, sorrowful day, a shift in relationships took place and the story lives on through changed lives. My parents, my partner, and I lived the story and came together in the telling of it. Events told and retold by those who experience the event and by those who hear and tell the story challenges to move beyond individual differences and intolerance. Stories have a way of bringing people in relation to one another—

transcending differences that dominant discourses construct to divide.

As with the first time I told my story to students, each time I tell it silence follows. It feels meditative. Perhaps it is a meditation for loss and perhaps for hope. Stories provide a human face to people’s troubles and ask us to respond human-to-human in “compassion and solidarity...not by appealing to some general notion of goodness, but encouraging people to respond to specific human lives” (Loeb, 1999, p. 120). By telling my story, I model transparency. When I tell my story, I teach students how to “look in the mirror” and see fuller visions of inclusion, hope, and possibility. Perhaps through these spiritual reflections, dominant discourses and the personal lives mirrored in them can be transformed into wholeness.



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