

PERSONAL NARRATIVES DO NOT COME EASILY TO THE PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED SELF

The growth of philosophical and cultural views challenging the hegemony of our modernist perspective comes from a variety of directions and defies description under one unifying banner. The most commonly used term referring to these broad changes is "postmodern", an umbrella term unclear in its definition. It is not surprising we evaluate our narratives by this inherited criteria. We are not only uncomfortable with the new emphasis on subjectivities previously taboo in professional writing, we find it almost impossible to avoid conventional evaluations, judgements and conceptualizations rooted in Western philosophical thought.

by Roberta Wells Imre

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WRITING NARRATIVES CORRECTION

Leslie Leighninger

Dr. Leighninger's name and affiliation were listed incorrectly in the Spring 1995 1(2) edition of *Reflections*. She authored "The Role of Narrative in History." She is Professor and Associate Dean, School of Social Work, Louisiana State University.

Interest in writing narratives within a professional context has risen at a time of ferment and changing perspectives within the academic world. Western philosophical and historical traditions that provided the grounding for much of modern thought are being questioned, and different ideas, languages and points of view are surfacing amid the dominant stories in the culture. New voices are discovered as narratives make it possible for those previously silenced to tell their stories. The growing literature on the lives of women, past and present, provide notable examples of this trend (Conway, 1992). We are only now discovering some of the broad dimensions of human life hidden by the way much of the population has been defined as "other" not really part of "us" (McKenna, 1991). As many individuals and groups formerly considered as "other" come to be recognized as worthy of being heard (Delaney & Delaney, 1993; Kotlowitz, 1992), the "other" in ourselves breaks through in unexpected ways in our own stories.

Unfortunately, these growing opportunities to explore stories in new ways evoke conflicts for human service professionals. Stories are a major part of their lives, but it is the nature and formatting of these stories that present problems. Our education has been essentially "modernist," a term used to apply to Western philosophical and historical ways of defining and describing the world in which we live. Long historical roots have brought us into an intellectual world in which knowledge is considered to be "objective," something outside ourselves, reflecting a reality already there, awaiting discovery by prescribed methods considered universal avenues to truth. In this view the techniques of the physical sciences are necessary to the social sciences to minimize, if not eliminate "subjective" factors rooted in persons involved in research.

From this perspective stories are suspect. They are "anecdotal," a term that has become pejorative in professional education. That which is anecdotal is unproved, not objective and suspect because of

the unabashed inclusion of the feelings and personal perspectives of the narrator. Definitions of anecdote found in Oxford and American Heritage dictionaries refer to stories that are interesting, often having historical connections, and, significantly for our purposes, unpublished. If asked to really think about it, few of us would be prepared to say that publication is necessarily the best criteria we have for judging value in our work. Too many factors influence what gets published, where, when and by whom. Actually the reference to something unpublished in the dictionary refers to the ways anecdotes have so often been part of an oral tradition that was not committed to writing for any of a variety of reasons.

The changing environment that reawakened interest in narratives and other opportunities for exploration suggests it may be time to rescue the anecdote, to restore it to its proper place in the intertwined narratives of our personal and professional lives. As the intellectual foundations upon which we depend appear to be eroding; and we get an uneasy feeling that we may be standing on unstable terrain, our narratives, including anecdotes, can help us understand what grounds our work.

We have labels for aspects of the current upheaval, and general terms like modernism and postmodernism are used to describe some of the philosophical changes taking place. Professional vocabularies tend to connect modernist views. Descriptions incorporate terms like objective, unbiased,

rational, and that equivocal word "intersubjective." often used by researchers. These words are designed to reject a world described to us in ways not requiring the participation of our selves, a world known through the techniques and discoveries of science. In this context, moral issues, while usually not considered to be objective in the same way as science, are best settled through a rational decision making process based on an established hierarchy of values (Reamer, 1990). As we explore the uses of narratives, our own and those of others, and experience their emotional effect, we quickly discover they do not fit the modernist heritage. Our emotional responsiveness collide with ingrained attitudes incorporated into professional language and ways of thinking that structure our understanding of life.

The growth of philosophical and cultural views challenging the hegemony of our modernist perspective comes from a variety of directions and defies description under one unifying banner. The most commonly used term referring to these broad changes is postmodern, an umbrella term unclear in its definition. Different persons mean different things when they use the word. For our purposes, it is useful for way it recognizes and accredits the importance of the subjective in human life, and calls into question the subjective/objective dichotomy. The subjective is not a neat category in contrast to what is thought to be objective. We begin to see the extent that our

world and our view of it has been constructed by human beings, and that many aspects of this world have actually been structured by those whose privileged portions have given their particular constructions power.

It is not surprising we evaluate our narratives by this inherited criteria. We are not only uncomfortable with the new emphasis on subjectivities previously taboo in professional writing, we find it almost impossible to avoid conventional evaluations, judgements and conceptualizations rooted in Western philosophical thought. Given this context, writing personal narratives is difficult and often painful. We tend to believe a narrative is good if it follows traditional patterns and meets pre-established standards of rationality. In a professional context we expect that a story will be useful in a concrete way: i.e., aid us in our goals of the conceptualization of methods, techniques and outcomes. All these terms reflect the conventions of our Western Heritage and its modernist views of science and rationality, and emphasize our ability to know an objective world without personal knowing.

One danger that results from this situation is that our stories will sound like tales designed to reinforce culturally inherited values and ways of thinking. A good narrative must be allowed to test and sometimes threaten conventional boundaries. In social work, the effort to tell a story by way of a personal narrative can often

slide into a "mea culpa" about giving rein to subjectivity, an apology for letting ourselves be seen and heard in ways we have been taught are inappropriate. Our first impulse is to suppress such transgressions of professional expectation by conceptual and linguistic framing. Confronted with the emotional impact of a good narrative, we become like the exasperating music commentator who cannot let the music speak for itself, but must explain it. The meanings in narrative have the same vulnerability. As in music something important gets lost in translation when artistry is encased in linguistic conventions.

In writing narratives it is hard to let go, to let things be. It is hard to stop intervening and trying to rearrange the thinking of ourselves and others, and to listen and let meaning seep into the cracks and spaces around our concepts and expectation. Sometimes we can do this with the narratives of others, but most of us have not learned how to listen to our own lives and stories without having to frame what it all means in advance. We are often at risk of shutting down our stories before they come fully into being; changing them where necessary so they fall safely within the allowed conventions.

Individuals who are human service professionals may personally enjoy reading fiction, but there are not very many writers of fiction or poetry in social work and similar fields, perhaps because of the same problems we find in writing

narratives. We have been taught there is a clearly distinguishable reality that must not be tainted by fantasy. All kinds of dangers lurk in blurring the line between demonstrable facts and imaginative interpretations. If we intentionally encourage mixing fact and what might be fiction in stories, how will any of us know where we are and how we should conduct ourselves in the "real" world. We worry that we will be saying that there are no standards, that all ideas are equal, and there is no moral responsibility. We fear loss of the power of grand narratives, often religious stories, that we have been taught are literally true and that we depend upon in our lives (Parry & Doan, 1994). We look at the changes in the world around us and do not like what we see. We are surfeited with stories of self indulgence and/or victimization and the all too frequent loss of any sense of communal responsibility. As a result we tend to see danger rather than hope in anything that seems to further shred our heritage.

At this point in our thinking we confront the impoverishment of our present situation with its limited languages and concepts in the face of inevitable change. The kinds of rationality, scientific and technological thinking embedded in modernist views have offered security that we could know our world, that there was a grand idea out there waiting to be identified. Many of the ideas associated with what has loosely been called postmodernist thought are experienced as

a mixed blessing. Even though costly in terms of conceptual security and comfort, we can see that potential rewards are "immeasurable," a word that in itself strikes fear in our hearts since we have been taught that measurement is the ultimate test of reality.

Thus, while we become fascinated with narratives as part of a new, postmodern milieu, we straddle two worlds and are constantly being pulled back into the old while tentatively stepping into the new. Addressing the complex issues involved in postmodernism and the social science; Rosenau (1992, p.173) speaks of what she calls "affirmative" postmodernists whose focus is on persons that have been marginalized, on those whose lives have been controlled by others. A goal of some postmodernists is to encourage "those who have never been the subject (active, human) but who are rather so often assumed to be objects (observed, studied). They would include new voices and new forms of local narrative, but not in an attempt to impose discipline or responsibility."

If we are going to be able to plumb the depths of wisdom available through narratives, our own as well as those of others, we have to somehow learn to let go of our conventional professional ways of thinking and framing long enough to hear and see what has previously been hidden from us. Stories can do this if we can learn to let them emerge. For those of us in human service professions moral imperatives do not disappear,

but our comprehension and understandings of them change. In learning to acknowledge our own subjectivities our whole outlook is broadened. We do not have to abandon rationality and all we have learned, we do need to recognize that "reasons explains the darkness, but it is not a light." (ben Shea, 1989). Light has to be found elsewhere — perhaps in a story. □

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Author's note

The author wishes to thank Yetta Appel for her thoughtful reading and discussion of the first draft of this article — a gift to both author and reader.

* In the References, the writer of this essay seeks to identify each authors' gender by citing her/his full name.

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