

## THE ICE, THE DARK, AND THE STORIES: THE HEALING POWER OF SHARED NARRATIVES

*We want to tell you a story. Like any good story, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. We began with the point of view of the scholar, objective. Our aim was to do a descriptive research design to measure the impact of the Ice Storm of 1994. The setting was North Mississippi in March of 1994. We began by looking for what went wrong, how things had messed up, assuming much in drawing our conclusions before we had even talked to the population, the "client." However, we were confused by our findings, faced by something we had not anticipated, and forced to look at another set of possibilities - as the myriad colors and sounds, and other voices began to emerge, voices not crying in defeat but singing in relief, in survival, in reflection, in learning.*

**By Hanna Boatright and  
Jim Stafford**

Hannah G. Boatright, ACSW, LCSW is Rehabilitation Social Worker, North Mississippi Medical Center Rehabilitation Services, Tuelo MS.

Jim Stafford, DSW, ACSW, LCSW is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Field Instruction, Social Work Department, University of Mississippi, University MS.

*Crackling of Bark-life  
Trees screamed all night, all day  
Like mortar fire, gun shots echoing,  
Echoing all night, all day  
Majestic trees on their knees  
A prayer? A lament? Repent! Repent!*

*White ice encases, makes brittle the  
Pines, Oaks, Cedars, and  
Pecan that once stood a silhouette at the  
Edge of the wood.  
Breaking, uprooting, in pieces, in whole*

*The cruel, cold creature with mighty grasp  
Pulled and snapped, leaving miles,  
And miles unfamiliar to the gaze*

*Ice-laden power lines, telephone lines...  
Fall hard, Snap! Pow! Bang!  
Explosions without fire,  
all night, all day*

*The pervasive grey Fog cloaked  
The Day after The Day after  
Nature's Anarchy  
Technology stood stilled...  
Scanners that read labels, told prices...  
Gas pumps, water pumps, Television,  
Still and Silent.*

*Interstate, a winding trail of  
Fallen trees that hid asphalt and median  
Cars and trucks, immobile,  
Too big and modern for such meandering.  
No road map marks this course or shows the way.*

*Still and Silent  
Modernity torn and uprooted  
Brought to its knees  
A prayer? A lament?  
Repent! Repent!  
All day, all night*

(journal excerpt)

### A PERSONAL ACCOUNT (H.B.)

I knew we were in trouble when I saw the pines beginning to bend under the ice that night as my dog and I were taking our evening walk. It was raining steadily, and the temperature was holding at 28 degrees. We live in the middle of large pines, and my sleep that night was punctuated by occasional loud cracks very similar to gunshots, to be followed seconds later by a crash as the branch or tree hit the ground. In an ice storm, the soft wood goes quickly. The lights flickered around 2:00 A.M., then there was only the darkness and the crashes. The dawn brought to light a devastated landscape of shattered trees and sagging power lines. The house was quite cold, and my family and I stared numbly out over the icy landscape, unsure of what to do. The rain continued to fall, and the ice continued to grow. Fearing the prospect of getting separated, and getting colder by the minute, we struck out together in our four-wheel drive to try to get to my father-in-law's supply of wood for our fireplace. We had gone but a short distance when two massive trees blocked the highway. Turning back, we





realized that we were now also blocked from getting back to our house. Pulling off the road, we chanced that we could get through a muddy field and get back on the road on the other side of the blockage. We made it only to find that a power line had fallen across the drive up to the house. The only way left to get back to the house was to hike through the woods on the side of the house, trying to avoid the limbs and tops of trees which were falling all around us. It was one of the scariest times I've ever experienced.

Several hours later, with my family safe inside the house, I managed to get to a neighbor's house several miles up the road. We managed to load enough wood into the back of the jeep to give us firewood for the rest of the

day and night. It took over two hours to make the round trip, which under ordinary conditions might have taken 20 minutes.

Over the next several days the temperature warmed and the ice gradually melted. We had been very lucky. The large pines that had fallen in our front yard had fallen the right way. Only the top out of one tree had hit the roof. We would, however, be without power for 18 days. Responding to the emergency, power crews from several surrounding states worked daylight to dark for days on end. My kids took up the "truck watch" looking for the utility trucks on the highway below which might mean electricity. We ate every type of canned food imaginable, heating it on the wood insert. During the day, my

son and I cleared debris from around the house. At night we used pack after pack of batteries to run the radio, tape player, and a small battery operated TV, which became the great event of the evening — 30 minutes per night of the one channel we could pick up. We all became great fans of Garrison Keeler's tapes, and any other taped entertainment we could find. Sitting around the tape player in the dim lamplight, I was reminded of those old stories my parents had told about gathering around the radio at night.

We slept huddled in the den, which could be closed off from the rest of the house. We all smelled of wood smoke, even thought we sponge-bathed every day or so. On the 18th day just

before dark, my son and I were engaged in the seemingly endless process of hauling limbs when we spotted a power truck from Alabama on the hill behind our land. We waved and yelled, running toward them to shake their hands. When the lights came on we all cheered and hugged. It was one of those "I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing" experiences.

Ironically, this story was not brought forth as meaningful. The details were hidden beneath the intellect and the scholar's gaze. But first, let us begin at the beginning of our "research".

The following is an account of the authors' experiences as we worked our way through our project. The use of "we" throughout the rest of this narrative refers to both authors.

We want to tell you a story. Like any good story, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. We began with the point of view of the scholar, objective. Our aim was to do a descriptive research design to measure the impact of the Ice Storm of 1994. The setting was North Mississippi in March of 1994. We began by looking for what went wrong, how things had messed up, assuming much in drawing our conclusions before we had even talked to the population, the "client." However, we were confused by our findings, faced by something we had not anticipated, and forced to look at another set of possibilities. We had looked at only the negative aspects of the experience. In reading the journals we began to realize that more was being expressed besides the negative experiences. The negative was coupled with

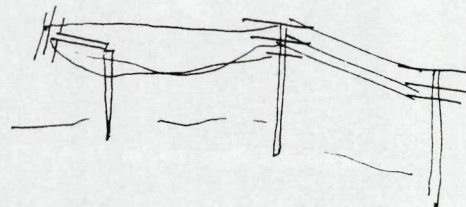
the positive. We had failed to consider both. The journals inspired us to revisit our own experiences.

### THE BEGINNING

The Ice Storm of 1994 was an event not easily forgotten. The destruction, the inconvenience, the experience itself. Just exactly how it occurred to us that this might be an interesting topic for investigation we are not sure; maybe the fact that both our families were without power for 15 and 18 days, respectively, had something to do with it. We had our own experiences of no utilities, dirty clothes, seeing the "haves" and being one of the "have nots." We experienced the frustration of seeing lights coming on in neighbors' houses while we remained in the dark. We witnessed the electric power trucks drive up, our hearts delighted thinking we would soon be a have, then feel a twinge of despair as they left and we still remained without.

After hearing several horror stories about family violence and mental crises that occurred as an outgrowth of the storm, we decided that it might be worthwhile to document the numbers. We had read in the newspapers about the fights that had occurred while people waited in long lines at gas stations, grocery stores, and fast food restaurants. We had read about the price gouging by some business owners and the prosecution of these owners following the ice storm. We read articles on the after effects of natural disasters. We read about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that can emerge following disasters, about the

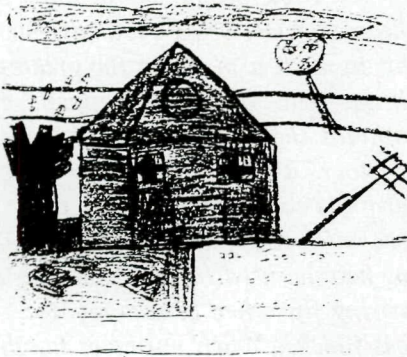
break down of the infrastructure, about the need for organized helpers, i.e., Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc. We read about the exacerbation of preexisting medical and mental health problems. We looked for the pathology and for the recommendations that the research could support regarding how we as professionals could help in subsequent disasters. We also had our own job-related stories about a particular client or referral.



So we started out with a straightforward quantitative study to determine the impact of the ice storm on the number of contacts received by social service agencies and law enforcement agencies in the area. We sent out over 60 questionnaires to agencies over a 15 county area. We began to plan how we might write up what we thought would be obvious results showing that the storm had undoubtedly resulted in increased family violence, increased reports of child abuse and neglect, and aggravation of mental illness. We had a good response rate. Over 60% of our questionnaires were returned. To our surprise, however, the numbers were not there. The overall impact appeared negligible and puzzling picture began to emerge. While some agencies, particularly law

enforcement, did report some mild increases in calls, other agencies reported either no difference, or an actual decrease, in activity during and after the storm. Even those reporting increases were not reporting them in anywhere close to the numbers we had expected. The handful of tragic stories we had heard did not seem to have any hard numbers behind them.

At this point we did what good researchers are supposed to do, we discarded our original hypothesis and went in search of another explanation.



## THE MIDDLE

The idea of the story was not in our agenda yet. Our survey was not what we had expected. We found ourselves needing reports from the inside of the experience, not the periphery. We began to look for where we could tap into the pulse of the experience — to seek qualitative data.

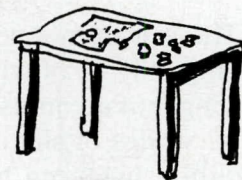
As a former teacher and member of the Ole Miss Writing Project, Hannah had experience working with high school and junior high school students. We discussed the honesty of students when they are asked to write about personal experiences. We concluded that we could do some content analysis on student jour-

nal entries related to the ice storm experience in order to acquire the data to support what we really anticipated as high incidence of family stress and depression. Hannah contacted the directors of the Ole Miss Writing Project and the Delta Area Writing Project to get mailing lists of area teachers who may have been affected by the ice storm. Writing project teachers regularly use journals in their classrooms, and these teachers are taught to value authenticity in student writing. The initial request made in September of 1994 had asked teachers to share any journal entries written shortly after the storm. We received about 85 journal entries written in class in March of 1994 from one teacher who had asked her students to write about the most memorable events of the 1993-1994 school year. Of these 85 journals, 80 were about the ice storm. Most teachers responded to this first request by saying that they no longer had the journals students had written for the 93-94 school year.

In October of 1994, another request was sent to these teachers asking them to give a 10 minute in-class journal writing assignment on the Ice Storm of 1994. Teachers were directed to inform their students that the journals would be sent to researchers who were writing about the storm, and that they were not to put their names on their entries. Writing project teachers were specifically chosen to give the instructions due to their training. We could insure that the instructions would remain open-ended and that the teachers would not give leading statements or try to influ-

ence students' writings.

We received 500 journal entries, along with a few drawings, as a result of this second request. All but 50 discussed both negative and positive aspects of the ice storm experience. The other 50 entries were from students who had not been here during the storm. The rest were from students who wrote about what an ice storm was but did not include any other content. We should note that as these entries were being written, some six months after the storm, the effects of the storm were still clearly visible. Scarred and broken trees, huge piles of brush and limbs, and broken utility poles were everywhere.



As we began to read through what we had gathered, common themes began to surface. For many families, the pain and suffering brought about by the storm had been offset by how they had managed to cope. Many families, who had been living the fast-paced "leave me a note on the 'fridge" life style, had actually spent long dark evenings together, playing games, listening to a battery powered radio, and maybe most importantly, just talking.

*At our house, we turned it into a place to camp out. Everyone gathered together in the living room reading by candlelight, as the stock*

of batteries slowly disappeared while we listened to *The Grateful Dead* on my sister's tape player. We played monopoly with flashlights and worked jigsaw puzzles by the light of an old lantern. Dad tried to show us how to pop popcorn without a microwave, since that's how he always had to do it, but something didn't work right, and we decided on s'mores. We made quite a mess as we tried to melt the chocolate with a lighter, but they did turn out better than the popcorn, and at least we didn't catch anything important on fire.

Those were some of the longest days of my life. But I have to admit that some good things did come out of it. My family grew a lot closer because we all had to stay in one room TOGETHER AND COMMUNICATE!

These were not accounts of suffering only — of what had gone wrong, but accounts of discovery — stories of sharing, being together, listening to each other. As our search continued, we realized that these stories were not hard to get at all. People wanted to tell them. Telling the stories appeared to make people feel better. When we first presented our findings at the Mississippi Chapter Annual Conference of National Association of Social Workers in Jackson in March 1995, a group of initially rather silent people, who thought they had come to hear us talk, ended up talking not just to us but to each

other. Some of the participants had experienced the Ice; others were in another part of the state and shared hypotheses similar to our original ones as to the effects of the disaster. The stories shared by those who experienced the disaster had the same themes as those found in the student journals. Some the participants who shared their stories also commented that... "We wish you would tell more about how people actually manage; it provides more hope in what sometimes seems such depressing business."

The gist was that as professionals, we often think that we have the answers, the medication, or the panacea that will cure or ameliorate the pain of our clients. But maybe we just need to listen a little harder sometimes.

*Mama found all of her wedding candles... we put the food into a big cooler...in the bathroom there was a tree where the ceiling had been....*

*That night we rearranged the living room so that the whole family could sleep around the fire. We spent the rest of the night listening to the radio and using our lanterns for light. All that night my parents stayed up filling the fireplace with wood. I don't exactly know why, but I felt really good.*

As we started looking at the power of narrative, we realized that the search had been leading us to a rediscovery of something we should have known. Stories, and the telling of them, have great value, whether it is a grandmother telling the kids how things used to be by the lamplight,

or a kid telling us how that story affected him or her. Story telling is a natural form of coping, of reframing, and of healing. Narrative therapy tells us this, but maybe one has to happen upon this fact through a journey in order to understand just how powerful it can be. We did not see more pathology because people seemed to cope, often surprisingly well. The power of shared suffering encircled the experience and no one was alone in reflecting on the event.

*Most people would think of the ice storm as being a total disaster, but to me it was one of the greatest things that could ever happen. It brought me and my family closer together...it's amazing how a disaster pulls everyone closer together. I was enthused when my dad showed me how he used to heat food over a roaring fire when he was my age. I was touched when my mom taught me how to study by candlelight. And most of all, I was overcome by the love and hospitality my family showed after our lights were turned back on. I can't explain the generosity my family showed to others around us who didn't have heat or electricity.*

We often felt that we were involved in one big support group. Everyone had an experience, and needed to tell it. Many people were around who wanted to listen and to talk, to exchange stories — whether these people were at conferences, in grocery lines, in coffee shops, or waiting for classes. We recognized the "communal spirit" of the experience and in looking deeper, we began to find and add value to the experience. When explicated, these



stories exposed some common themes of family, community, hardships endured, and meaning-making.

One adult we came into contact with while gathering our stories shared with us a journal she had written about the death of her mother at the peak of the ice storm. She said that in going back to that time and sharing the experience, she somehow felt better.

*Thursday morning it was raining and very cold or at least we thought it was raining. We looked out of the window and we were so surprised. It was sleeting and the ground was covered with ice. The trees were hanging very heavily and the limbs were breaking. Our hearts were also very heavy and breaking. My mother called me over to her bedside and she said, "I hate to leave but I have got to go." I could hear the cracking and popping and a loud crash outside. I told mama, "I know, I know." We had to wait until the ground thawed and the roads were cleared before we could bury my mother. ...Now I look back and I know that we have to go through trials to make us stronger. But I realize that this was a trying time in my life, but I had Jesus as my shield and knew he was by my side and he could help me get through this. I know there will probably be other storms in my life but I hope that the Ice Storm of '94 has prepared me to be a little stronger and to have more faith in God. ...we can weather the storm.*

Not every account we came across was positive and nurturing. Situations which were already bad became worse. Miracles did not happen — sick

families and sick people did not become well because the TV went off. Families with strained relationships were strained even further. One account told of a mentally ill man who became extremely agitated at the loss of his favorite pastime — watching TV. One night after the power had been off for over two weeks he attacked his sister. His brother came to her defense, and during the struggle in the darkness the mentally ill man was fatally shot. These "on-the-brink" situations probably accounted for most of the increase in social services contacts that our original survey did show. Some people were definitely "pushed over the edge."

*Those were some really some bad days and nights. I was bored out of my mind. I couldn't watch TV or listen to the radio. All that any of us could do was sit and look at each other. We had to go outside and get ice to put on the stove to melt for water. Everything was so scarce, especially gas — people were lined up at the gas station, actually fighting over gas. When and if a grocery store opened, there were long lines.*

*Most people where I live mainly just stayed in their homes and tried to keep warm and keep food in their stomachs. Most people's food ruined, all their clothes got dirty and they couldn't wash them. At night some folks didn't even have candles so they could see where they were going in their homes.*

Many of the journal entries seemed to reflect the search for meaning in the event, "the ice storm was a message from God..." Several mentioned God's assertion of His power — "He wanted

to show us that no matter what works we [man] can do, He retains ultimate power..." I guess it made you appreciate all the things you have. I've never thought much about power. We just always had it. It also made me realize who was in control... God showed us that He was the reason....

*...my grandmother, once when I was an upset little girl, told me that God sends us calamity not to punish us, but to make us strong.*

Some accounts talked of loss — "century old trees that had stood since childhood, brought to the ground by tons of accumulated ice." "Like old men bought down by the burdens of life." "Other trees misshapen and torn, but still standing" were for some a testament to life and the will to survive. One elderly lady spoke through tears about the only tree left standing in her yard, the one under which her late husband had proposed to her a half century before, "That's how we were — strong." In some places, the landscape was totally distorted and the familiar had to be reestablished. A sense of being lost in one's own territory permeated.

Through some of this loss there were also accounts of healing, of increased appreciation of family and friends, and realization of what was truly important. The sense of place, connections to the land, the cleaning up and building back — all appeared many times through the writings of young and old alike. Wood from trees that had fallen during the storm was often turned into symbolic artifacts. One man did a thriving business turning the wood into small crosses, another turned a fallen favorite tree into a

totem pole which he placed in his yard. Our family's memento was a limb which had been naturally coiled into a spiral shape by a kudzu vine. One of the linemen from Alabama had cut it out of some tangled growth in the process of reconnecting our electricity. He gave it to my son, who turned it into a very handsome walking stick.

Objects became ways to connect to the experience. Maybe trauma was not delivered by the storm as much as the resurrection of the primal spirit with a sense of community and agency. In revisiting the experience in our stories, we found a sense of pride, wisdom, and accomplishment. We looked with new insight at the sweat shirts and tee shirts that displayed boldly, "I survived the Ice Storm of '94." Our Heroes were the linemen brought in from different parts of the country - electric power and telephone workers, revered, fed, and housed by the communities they served.

*One of the men in the power crew from Alabama told me that his father had been part of the allied army that liberated Paris in World War II, and said how he'd always thought how great it must have felt to have been part of that liberation force. He said that yesterday he had pulled up into the yard of a rural farmhouse and people had come running from everywhere, bringing coffee and sandwiches, overjoyed to see him and his crew. He said now he thought he knew how his dad must have felt.*

We found ourselves telling more stories, dramatizing the stress, and feeling better, validated after reading or listening to oth-

ers' experience. "Through stories we learn about people, settings, and ideas...stories help people work through internal conflicts and crisis...Other people's true stories of pain and heartbreak help people (McAdams, 1993, p. 31-32). Telling was important, the actions, the emotions, and the details. The survival attitude or stance was thematic. We began recognizing the Beginning, the Middle, and the End. As we told our stories and listened to others, we revised, revisited, made meaning. The journals we read led us through the "re-vision" of our search.

In "revising or revisiting" our experiences, we noticed that our language was also changing.

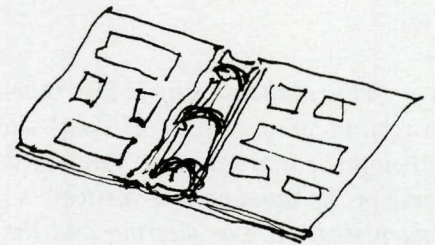
Our language became the language of the story, a literary language.

Stories have settings, characters, recurring themes, and images. Stories can be entertaining, instructive, and healing. Plots can be ironic, romantic, heroic, tragic, or a combination of all four. Plots have initiating events, attempts, consequences, and reactions to the consequences, climax, and conclusion. "In subjective and embellished telling of the past, the past is constructed - history is made...

In narrative mode of thought, we seek to explore events in terms of human actors striving to do things over time." (McAdams, 1993, p. 28). "Storying causes us to improvise constantly...in the jazz musician, each playing off what the other introduces...(Friedman, 1994, p. 458).

After reading the journals, we began to realize that for us the telling of the story of our own expe-

riences was our way of establishing meaning to the experience for us. Our story telling had a value of its own. We embellished, seeing ourselves as heroes. Along with hundreds of other "survivors," we were creating our own family myth, which would become part of the larger community myth of "The Ice Storm of '94."



Stories can be viewed from the perspective of setting, of plot, of character, of theme. Choosing any one view can alter our assumptions. We had failed to recognize or acknowledge all the elements of the "Story". We had the setting. We had the characters. We had a plot and subplot. In deconstructing this story, we found action around agency and community. We found communal characters, "those characters who act, think, and feel in communal ways" (McAdams, 1993, p. 134). We found agentic characters, "those who seek to overcome, conquer, master, control, create, produce, explore, persuade, advocate, analyze, understand, win" (p. 134). We discovered that parents were comforters, neighbors were guardians, children were nurtured and safe. Within each of us also were these communal and agentic characters.

*...my grandmother and I became really close. We started putting to-*

gether family photo albums, starting with her family and my grandfather's...

*My parents taught us to use candles and lanterns... to be sure no one suffered. Our family cooked for others on our gas stove. Neighbors were glad to share bags of thawing meats. ...while it introduced the youth to past lifestyles, it taught many people to express love by sharing, helping, and giving.*

*My grandmother sat by the candles and prayed...the weatherman said that the sun would be out tomorrow...we all hugged each other...I went over and hugged my grandmother... she said it was God's blessing.*

Out of boredom emerged insight and admiration of our elderly. The cultural and religious values of a geographic area encompassed meaning-making. Time was structured by survival tasks, meaningful tasks, whether it was gathering wood for a fire, telling stories as shadows danced on the wall as candles burned, or family members just talking and listening to one another. This was manageable. A myth was emerging through the journals, "I Survived the Ice Storm of '94."

According to Campbell (1968), "myth springs from individual experience" (p. 84). Hirsch (1988) stated that myths are "stories we share that provide us with our values, goals, and traditions" (p. 27) and that a "story is any account, written, oral, or in the mind, true or imaginary of action in a time sequence with a beginning, middle, and end" (p. 27). Campbell (1968) stated that man makes meaning of his experience,

gains a "higher integrity of self" through myth (p. 16) — that "the shaping force of a civilization is lived experienced — a perspective and a processing" (p. 138).

We endured the dirty clothes, no baths, no toilet, no hot coffee, no way in or out of our driveways, ice-covered county roads, and city streets. We endured having to melt ice to have water to take a sponge bath or flush the toilet. Somehow maybe people found something thought lost — a sense of empowerment, control, i.e., cutting trees along and off the roads and driveways, cooking over fire, telling stories.

*I now know why pioneers went to bed with the chickens — because there was nothing to do after dark*

## THE END

As helping professionals we think we listen with the third ear. What we often listen through, however, is the filter of the textbook. We often have a hard time hearing our clients without this filter. Sometimes it masks the essence of individual stories. Until we began listening to the experience of others, our own experience was silenced by this academic filter. We found ourselves enjoying our own healing process that we shared with an entire community that was geographically defined as well as culturally defined. This is the land that Faulkner wrote about, and there is a definite sense of place to be found here. We found resilience and coping that was connected to this sense of place.

There are some implications here when it comes to teaching our students how to become

effective social workers. One obvious point is the value of listening to what a client has to say and learning to facilitate the telling of stories. Beginning social workers are not good at this because we somehow give them the idea that they are supposed to run the show, and that means they do most of the talking. They are uncomfortable letting the client talk for very long, because they get the feeling they are not "doing" anything. We need to teach that active listening is a perfectly legitimate social work skill, one to be learned and practiced. We must as Friedman (1993) suggested "help people exchange old plots for new" (p. 454). These plots, however, must be the client's, not our own assumptions.

Telling the story of one's life is integrative and expanding for adults as well as for children.... Participants find it much easier to tell a story than to disclose their feelings in a more abstract way (Hynes & McCarty, 1994, p.185).

Through...story...among everyday people, lessons, and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation (Smitherman, 1977, p. 73).

In any culture...language is a tool for ordering the chaos of human experience. We feel more comfortable when we have names for events and things (p. 77).

We have a tool that demands nothing except acknowledgment. We have to explore again how we gain knowledge from the world. Friedman (1993) quoted Bruner's theory about two modes of knowing - the narrative mode and the paradigmatic mode.



Paradigmatic Mode of thought seeks to comprehend experience in tightly reasoned analysis, logical proof, and empirical observation...It is not able to make sense of human desire, goals, and social conduct. Narrative mode of thought is concerned with human wants, needs, goals.

This is the mode of stories, wherein we deal with the vicissitudes of human intention...Words mean more than they say...It seeks to explain events in terms of human actions striving to do things over time (McAdams, 1993, p.29).

We began in the quantitative search (paradigmatic mode) only to find an empty net. We turned to the qualitative (narrative mode) to find our nets overflowing. As we explore the concepts of narrative or constructive therapy and learn that we are what our stories tell us, we can define ourselves as mice or men, as heroes or villains, as saints or demons.

This process was both a learning experience and a rediscovery of some ideas we had lost. We had forgotten the power of narrative and the strength of connection to the land. We had looked for pathology, we found some to be sure, but we found more positives than we could have imagined. Most importantly, we had underestimated the resilience of people and the various ways they will find to cope, whatever the challenge. By listening, we have learned how the telling of stories, an age-old process, still functions as an instrument of sharing, coping, and ultimately, healing. □

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