

“DEAR NARRATOR:” THE UNTOLD STORY OF A MANUSCRIPT REVIEWER

The communication between narrative author and manuscript reviewer is itself a story but one which usually remains hidden and untold. As the initial representative of the intended audience of the author's narrative, the reviewer's comments and critique often shape the author's original account, helping in the transformation of a life-story from private experience into public narrative. Because we never have direct access to the experience of others, the reviewer's work (ideally) helps to bridge the gap between the primacy of the author's immediate, authentic, lived experience and the meaning-making work of future readers who will look to the narrative for moral lessons to apply to their own lives. However, a profound challenge to this transformative work may occur when differences in life experience, gender, race/ethnicity, and culture exist between author and reviewer. This article provides one example of this usually hidden work.

By
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Recently, I came across a copy of a letter I wrote to a colleague who had asked me to pre-review a narrative manuscript draft, intended for *Reflections*, prior to formally submitting it for publication. In re-reading the letter, I was struck by the fact that—like a narrative—it told more than I (as author) was initially aware of:

First, the letter provided an example of what is usually hidden—how representations of one individual's life experiences become shaped and transformed by the process of attending, telling, listening, writing, analyzing, and reading narratives (Riessman, 1993). Of necessity, these activities involve others, such as reviewers, editors, and eventually the readers. This pre-review letter, therefore, provides a rare opportunity to examine the normally private communication between narrative author and manuscript reviewer. (I hasten to add, the letter is my own viewpoint about narratives, not a statement of this journal's editorial policy. The editors of *Reflections* and other reviewers may see things quite differently.)

Second, the letter provided an opportunity to examine what is implicit in reviewing manuscripts—the impact of cultural differences between author and reviewer in understanding an individual's personal experiences and life-story. In the formal peer review process, the author's identity remains anonymous (although sometimes identifying characteristics can be inferred or deciphered from the narrative subtext). Yet, typically the identity and cultural characteristics of the manuscript reviewer, who may exercise a profound influence in shaping the form a manuscript ultimately takes, is completely obscured. However, because I am personally acquainted with this colleague (a former student), and know that we differ in race/ethnicity, gender, country of origin, age, and other key life experiences, I can reflect upon my own efforts to understand someone else's experience. By transforming this letter into a public narrative of its own, it becomes possible to scrutinize the degree to which a reviewer's work either facilitated or obscured the original

narrative of an author's life-story experiences.

Third, because of the incredible power of my colleague's narrative, I attempted to pull together (in a more coherent form than usual) some specific suggestions about how to strengthen the manuscript. These suggestions may be helpful to others similarly engaged in the development of their own narrative manuscripts.

With the consent of my colleague, an adaptation of my original letter is shared below. I have attempted to broaden it, using the convention of "Dear Narrator," in order that the letter may address some universal aspects of writing narratives of professional helping. The article ends with some concluding reflections about my own work as a narrative reviewer.

A Letter to a Colleague

Dear Elizabeth:

Thank you for thinking of me when you decided to share this powerful and challenging life-story. This narrative demands that your voice be recognized and your experience be heard. I am honored by the opportunity to serve as a resource in your continuing personal and professional development.

From your paper, I realize that you are in the midst of the conflict and crisis that your narrative is recounting. I don't mean to be insensitive to the issues you're facing at present. However, I have focused my comments below on a number of issues about your "talk-story" which I hope might be helpful

to you in preparing your manuscript for publication submission. (Perhaps some of these comments might also have some practical usefulness in dealing with the current struggles, since a narrative perspective suggests that "changing the life-story" is one way to change "the life-as-lived.")

There are a number of both technical issues related to the narrative format as well as substantive questions about content that I would like to raise. These comments are not meant to diminish the authenticity of your experience, but rather to suggest some ways that your story might be heard more clearly and responded to more deeply by future readers.

Technical Issues:

I think that the manuscript, in its present form, is not yet a fully formed narrative—although it is very clear that there is an important story needing to be told. Some specific issues about the narrative format to consider:

1. In a narrative, there typically is a "plot" (comedy, tragedy, drama, etc.) or story line which describes dramatic action and dialogue between the narrator (self-in-the-present), protagonist (self-in-the-past), and other characters contained in the story. This is not to say that a narrative has to be framed in a Western, linear "beginning, middle, end" fashion. In fact, you seem to have woven the story from different temporal perspectives (i.e., an Eastern sense of the unfolding or cyclical nature of temporal experi-

ence) alternating with the Western "day one, day two" linear approach. You might consider highlighting the contrast between these two different temporal approaches as a way to convey further the struggle you currently are experiencing.

2. There may be a conflict between the traditional Western narrative format and the Eastern talk-story format you are employing. While both seem to prize personal experience, the narrative format seems to adhere more closely to a first person accounting of experience, followed by telling (to self and others) the "moral of the story" (i.e., meaning and explanation). I gather that the talk-story format you are employing may be more ambiguous and abstract, ending with unanswerable questions for further reflection. I don't know whether it is necessary or possible to resolve this conflict, but I thought it is important to point out that it may exist.

3. In the manuscript, you dominate the story as both protagonist (and as antagonist) and as narrator. While your complexity comes through very powerfully, other characters seem one dimensional. For example, the various people mentioned in passing appear to be stage props in your drama rather than characters with complexities and struggles of their own. There is a difficult balance here—since it is your story you're telling, not someone else's. Nonetheless, I think readers need to be able to see your experience through multiple eyes—both yours and (at

least in part) the characters in the story. If you make your characters a "caricature" (to make a bad pun!), you run the risk of reducing the complexity of the situation and the drama of the experience that you are trying to convey.

4. Of all the characters in your story, your father seems to speak most clearly to me as a reader. Being also a father, I could understand his point of view and experience the intensity of his love, which made it easy to identify with him in the story. However, I had the impression that other characters—particularly the Eastern grandmother spirit-figure—spoke most clearly to you through prayers, meditations, poetry, etc. Perhaps because I am a Western male, it was harder to hear how this character might also speak to me. At any rate, this touches on one of the most difficult challenges in writing a narrative—how to be true in accounting one's own, unique, individual, private experiences while also crafting a public narrative which touches readers on the larger, more universal, aspects of a shared communal experience. Your readers will look for ways in which they can vicariously learn from your experience and compare it to their own. At times, your story seemed to me very much in the realm of private experience, not quite ready for public sharing and meaning making. (I am going to return to this dilemma when discussing content issues below.)

Content Issues

There are some important content issues in your narrative which might be useful to address as well:

1. Remember that *Reflections* is a journal focused on publishing narratives of *professional helping*. As a reviewer for this journal, one of the things I encounter all too frequently are manuscript submissions in which authors set forth evocative accounts of their own particular personal and professional challenges, yet end without addressing what (to me) is the central point—how did this challenge or experience change their practice and/or teaching and/or their work with others. It is this aspect that makes it a public narrative, because readers of narratives are looking for ways to apply what the author learned to their own practice and/or lives. I think that your manuscript in its present form does not really address how the experience you're currently going through will change your own work with others. One possibility might be to expand greatly on the concept of sojourners which you introduce at the very end of the narrative. While you reflect on the importance of these "expert interpreters of multilevel realities" in your own personal and professional journey, is it possible that this narrative is calling you to become a sojourner for others, drawing on your own experience in a purposeful way to help others experiencing displacement of country and family of

origin; culture shock and alienation; and struggles for identity, authenticity, validation, and honor?

2. I hope that the following comments are not a defensive reaction to hearing the criticism of your current educational struggle. Rather, I want to raise issues about professional education from the point of view of potential readers:

(a) It may not be clear to readers why you are writing this narrative. Although you describe great frustration with the aridness of the program's curriculum and its efforts to crush your spirit, an unaddressed question in the narrative is the motivation of you (as protagonist) in seeking this educational experience in the first place. It isn't completely clear the extent to which your current education experience is elitist and oppressive and to what extent that view comes from the ghost of previous educational experiences. (It does not have to be "either/or;" it can be "both/and.") Maybe your current education is a new pathway to learn about how to travel with the burden? What are your hopes and dreams in embarking on this journey? Also, do you want to address the issues and criticisms in your narrative at a narrow level (entering one particular program) or do you want to also broaden it to professional education in general?

(b) The time frame in which you are writing this narrative and its relation to the events being described is not clear. By virtue of being person-

ally acquainted with you, I know that this narrative is about currently occurring issues. However, readers may assume than this is a reflection about some experience from time past. To me, the dilemma about the time frame is as follows: On the one hand, there is an immediacy and urgency in the narrative (will or won't you stay; will or won't the program become more responsive and culturally competent/congruent, etc.) which comes from writing about a current issue. On the other hand, I think a legitimate question is whether you have had enough time to "digest" and reflect upon your experiences so that others can benefit from reading about them.

(c) I was struck by the general absence of humor in the manuscript. A bit of playfulness is seen in the beginning of the story, but in much of the rest of the story, the emotions are those of anxiety, alienation, and anger. Do humor and laughter have anything to contribute to your story—particularly when they help overcome the obstacles you encountered in your travels?

(d) You named one particular person who strengthened your voice, but I wonder whether this will have meaning to others who are unfamiliar with the faculty of that school? Perhaps a more general description would help readers make a connection to their own memories of people who assisted them and strengthened them in their journey. Are there other people also you want to name or refer to as well? Are there commonalities among these people that

would be useful to emphasize?

e) Does the narrative leave the reader with the unanswered question(s) in the concluding section? What gifts are you leaving the readers? What, if anything, do you hope readers might do as a result of having shared your story?

I hope these comments are helpful and serve to stimulate your own thinking and creativity. I think your manuscript holds the promise of becoming a powerful, challenging, uncomfortable, and kind public narrative.

Best wishes, John Kayser

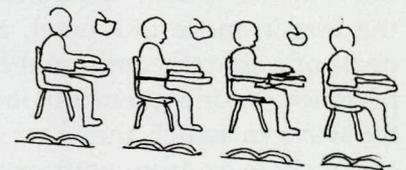
Conclusion

There are many points of reference one can take as a reviewer of narrative manuscripts. At the time I wrote this letter, I was trying to adopt the perspective of potential future readers. In offering suggestions or critique, I repeatedly considered how readers might understand the author's life story. Because the narrative created such a powerful response, I tried to suggest ways in which the author might make certain aspects of the story more explicit, allowing readers also to respond deeply to the story.

In re-reading the letter again, I was struck by another perspective. There was a parallel process at work! Just as the author's narrative was a personal account of an individual struggle to rework multiple layers of experience and to reconcile diverse aspects of cultural identity, so too was this volunteer pre-reviewer being chal-

lenged with a similar process. In order to be open to the author's narrative, I first had to recognize the cultural biases and limitations of my own experiences. This was brought home in a visceral way when reading what it was like for the author—as a person of color—to enter an educational program dominated by Caucasian students and faculty. I realized that I would not see what the author saw—"the sea of White faces." In similar situations, White male privilege (McIntosh, 1988) likely would allow me to overlook color, gender, and other characteristics of individuals so that I would see only those monochromatic "anxious students" culturally congruent with my usual frame of reference.

Whether consciously aware of this process or not, I began to re-read the author's narrative, trying to bracket my own viewpoints. I do not know



if it is possible for a Western male to emulate an Eastern mind, but I became acutely aware of "honor." I felt honored by being asked by an Asian female colleague to review such a powerful narrative and wanted to show honor in return by mak-

ing an authentic, personal response to the author's story.

The above letter and subsequent reflection is an example of the dialogue (external and internal) between narrative author and manuscript reviewer. This dialogue illustrates Riessman's (1993) point about the representation and transformation of personal experiences through the process of attending, telling, listening, writing, analyzing, and reading narratives. At each level, narratives "re-present" personal experiences. Although initially conscious of the reviewer's role in transforming lived experience to written narrative, it was only later that I realized there was

more to the story. The author's narrative evoked a parallel process within this reviewer—the recognition of sharing a common journey, even though author and reviewer come from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences. While the reviewer's experience can be only a small approximation of the author's struggle, the fact that both are experiencing it makes for greater mutuality, empathy, and sensitivity to the story. The universal struggle to reconcile multiple, often contradictory layers of experience and identity is one of the reasons why narratives have such power and meaning to readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. □

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