

Reflections from the Editor

by Mary Ann Jimenez

Stories are fundamental to the human experience. They are indisputably the oldest means of conveying meaning and arguably the most profound. In Western culture, Herodotus and Thucydides captured the histories of the early Greeks as powerful stories of human triumphs and failings, creating the historical narrative. In the same period, Aeschylus and Sophocles created compelling fictional narratives in the Greek tragedies *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus Rex*. Religions involve stories of the human relationship to goodness and the supernatural. God, acting in the world, is the storyline of the Old Testament; likewise, the power of the narrative can be vividly seen in the parables of the New Testament. The lives of Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha and their awakening as enlightened guides to human conduct and godliness are powerful stories that have informed cultures for centuries. The protean Hindu gods and goddesses are endlessly recreated by the stories woven around them. Great narratives have a literary beauty and a sense of chronological time. In a narrative something happens—there is a becoming movement, a sense of crisis. The best narratives convey what we have been, what we are, and what we might be.

Narratives braid the meaning we give our own personal history—they frame our lives and make the knowledge

of our inevitable end bearable. As shared stories, our personal and cultural narratives reassure us that we are part of the broader human experience. If we are unable to make a meaningful story out of our solitary experiences, we may be condemned to a terrible solipsism, possibly to madness.

The narrative form saw a decline in respectability in the United States over the last 50 years but has recently re-emerged as a vivid and unique means of communicating knowledge and meaning. When the social sciences achieved academic stature in the universities at the end of the 19th century, many of them initially embraced the narrative form as the most natural way of conveying the meaning of inductive research. This was especially true for anthropology, sociology, and psychology—stories of other cultures, our own culture and of our personal histories.

After World War II, the effort to generalize and systematize the inductive data led to a move toward more quantification and scientific research as the model of positivism, borrowed from natural sciences, and infused the social sciences. The narrative seemed a poor relation to the sweeping statistical analyses offered as more verifiable and more accurate renditions of the human experience. Quantification is an important

tool to present some aspects of stories about many people. The stories told by quantified data are typically about how many people felt or thought, how they behaved and under what conditions, what qualities in themselves were linked with this or that behavior or attitude. The narrative at the heart of this form of scholarly writing rarely was recognized, because it seemed to diminish the importance of the findings, the narrative having gone out of style.

The helping professions, especially social work, have embraced this scientific trend with elation and vigor, perhaps hoping that the long sought credibility would be conferred when the methods of investigation paralleled those of natural science. Meanwhile, physics moved on to quantum physics (hesitating to embrace the supremacy of linear knowledge), and western medicine's presumed superiority over traditional healing techniques is in question (medicine has been increasingly acknowledged to be an art as much as it is a science). Historians have recently discarded the elusive search for scientific probability in records from the past, and returned to earlier narrative forms. The professions of social work and psychology have witnessed vigorous debates between advocates of the scientific method and proponents of the qualitative method. Were textured stories about

a few as good as the simpler stories about many? The narrative is back in top form in the social sciences, riding the wave of renewed respectability of qualitative research. Impassioned debate about whose voices have and should be heard in literature has given added life to the narrative as a rich purveyor of human knowledge, wisdom, and values. Some may wonder whether the narrative form is muscular enough to sustain real insight and conclusions about professional issues that divide, whether narratives can offer substantive demonstrations of professional and academic merit. Can narratives contribute to professional growth? Can narratives suggest new ways of thinking about ourselves and people we work with? As an historian, as well as a social work educator, I have always believed that the narrative was one of the most provocative means of rousing thought, dispelling intellectual torpor, and inspiring action.

Sonia Abels was one of the first in social work to recognize the power of the written narrative. This journal exists because of her vision, her creativity, her and resourcefulness in making something new where nothing had existed. Few of us have that opportunity in our professional lives. As the succeeding editor, I want to acknowledge Sonia Abels's signal contribution to reviving the nar-

rative as a means of enhancing professional knowledge and development in the helping professions. She played a significant role in the dramatic revival of the narrative in scholarship as well as in clinical practice. I hope to continue to realize her vision and to offer my own perspective as the journal continues to grow and develop. The Associate Editor, Rebecca Lopez and I, along with the Executive Editorial Board, would like to see the narrative forms and voices in the journal multiply. We seek to publish more narratives about the process of doing research, including the creation of a research idea, and what inspires and confounds the researcher. Narratives about policy, practice, and stories about the struggle for social justice at every level of community and political organization will be very welcome here. We solicit more historical narratives—both from written records and from oral histories. We are committed to diversify the voices in the journal. We want to provide a forum and audience for narratives about signal events that have changed people's lives and led to paradigm shifts in thinking and practice, teaching, research, and administration. We want to broaden the journal's audience to all the helping professions, including the health and healing professions, other human service professions, public health and social policy advocates, religious leaders, and

practitioners. We are indebted to those who have shared their unique experiences in past journal articles and look forward to new voices which reflect the vitality and commitment to social change of the helping professions. Join us in the compelling human experience of story telling and carry forward the textured reflections of our struggles in the world.

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Corrections: In the last issue, we incorrectly spelled the name of Joanne Riebschleger, author of "A Helper's Treasure Chest: Memorabilia from Special Clients" [*Reflections*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 1999) p. 24] on the table of contents. □

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