

**Restorying my self and my academic practice:  
Applying narrative counselling techniques to ecological memoirs**

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*Seminar given 27 November 2008 in Counselling and Psychotherapy, the School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh.*

In this seminar I propose to do two things. The Masters students in my Between Counselling and Research 1 tutor group have inspired me to include some personal reflection in this presentation, so I will begin this seminar by telling you a bit about my academic journey from geography to counselling studies. I will then introduce the particular reflective narrative method of doing research I came to use in my PhD. My objectives with this seminar are to provide you with some insight into how methods are chosen to match research interests and researcher values, as well as to give you a brief sketch of a specific qualitative method derived from the practices of narrative counselling.

**The Journey**

I thought it appropriate to begin a seminar on narrative with a version of a portion of my own life-story. Like many new graduate students, I arrived in my PhD program with a very clear idea of what I wanted to research. I had concerns about climate change and the general lack of action in Canada to either mitigate it or adapt to it. The only political level at which any positive change seemed to be happening was at the level of municipalities. I entered the PhD program intending to use my dissertation to explore what was happening at the municipal level to enable progress. I set up three case studies with municipalities of different sizes, and set to work. My proposed methodology involved a discourse analysis of documents produced by environmental organizations and interviews with key informants. I also intended to produce a report for policy makers and activists with informed recommendations on municipal level climate change actions. This was all very standard social science research.

Toronto was my first case study. I identified a dozen key activists and made arrangements to interview them. I'd already conducted a couple of interviews when I received news that would ultimately lead me to abandon my dissertation topic. Tooker Gomberg, one of the most influential and best-known activists in this area and one of my key informants, had committed suicide.

The death of Tooker Gomberg hit the Canadian environmentalist community hard. For my own part, it made me stop and reflect on my own emotional response to researching climate change politics. When I started to pay attention to my feelings, I realized that I had a great many anxieties about the issue, anxieties that were heightened by many of the pamphlets put out by the environmental organizations I was researching. Reading these documents in the context of the political apathy common at that time led me to a sense of frustration and ultimately depression. Actions taken seemed too little, too late. The future that was being painted in my mind was a bleak one. At night, after a long day of research into this issue, I tossed and turned chasing sleep but catching little of it. I was feeling exhausted and hopeless.

In Canada, a PhD usually takes between four and five years to complete. At the point of Tooker Gomberg's suicide, I was a year and a half into the program. Although changing my topic could mean adding another year to my schooling, that seemed a more desirable prospect than spending two more years being anxious, depressed, and on edge.

I still wanted to contribute to social change around issues of environmental sustainability. However, I was beginning to wonder whether the confrontational, fearmongering tactics dominating environmental politics at that time were effective, let alone healthy. I also began to question prescriptive, policy-oriented social scientific research. Academics seemed to be as impotent to effect political or social change as activists. My supervisor suggested I read an article written by Annette Buttimer in 1974 called "Values in Human Geography." The article nicely summed up my ambivalence to academic research:

"If we could be relatively certain about the reasonableness of rationality, if we could still have faith in the gods of the Enlightenment, we could then perhaps conscientiously set about convincing people's intellects of what needs to be done, and rest fairly confident that a moral commitment to doing so would follow. But today we find ourselves morally incapable (or unwilling) to live the kinds of lives which our highly trained minds realize are necessary. We add to that ambivalence by mouthing dogma or rhetoric which has little meaning in our own living." (34-35)

Rather than have academics prescribing policy, Buttimer proposed they take on a supportive role in society:

"the social scientist's role is neither to choose or decide for people, nor even to formulate the alternatives for choice but rather, through the models of his discipline, to enlarge their horizons of consciousness to the point where both the articulation of alternatives and the choice of direction could be theirs."

This was a professional story to live by<sup>1</sup> that addressed many of my concerns. However, I still had no idea how I could actually practice as an engaged, supportive academic.

Rather than focusing on answering a research question, my PhD became a quest to learn how to be such an academic. Fortunately I had a counsel of wise women to guide me, otherwise known as my supervisory committee. This committee bestowed upon me three gifts that had the power to expand the realm of the possible. The first gift was a paper by Margaret Somers in Sociology that proposed that people's selves, who they perceived themselves to be, were made up of the stories they and others told about them (1994). This included stories told one-on-one as well as stories that circulate more broadly in society. Somers, and others I found through her work, proposed that outside of these stories there is no self.<sup>2</sup>

The second gift was a book by Arthur Frank called The Renewal of Generosity, in which he used the memoirs of healthcare workers and patients to create a beautiful and moving argument for overhauling Western healthcare systems. In another paper, Frank proposed that a legitimate vocation for social scientists is to uncover and amplify the moral impulses contained in people's self-narratives. I added this vocation to my story to live by.

Methodologically, Frank drew on family therapy and narrative therapy in his sociological work. Which leads me to the third gift: a chapter from a book on narrative counselling by Michael White and David Epston (1990). Narrative counselling is a social constructionist form of therapy that draws creatively on the theories of Foucault. As with the works I've mentioned above, narrative therapy conceives of the self as fundamentally storied both by the person and by others, including by broader social-cultural narratives circulating in organizations and in the mass media. White and Epston use the ideas of Foucault and the idea of the narrative-self in emancipatory ways, claiming continuity between counselling and social change work. As a method, narrative counselling is "a way of working in the space between the person and the community" (McLeod, 2003: 238).

White and Epston write of people coming to counselling when they find themselves in narrative crisis. A narrative crisis is brought about when a person is subjected to stories about who they are that they find oppressive and which make it difficult for them to achieve the things they want to achieve and to be the people they want to be. Narrative therapy focuses on helping people to free themselves from these dominant stories and to identify alternative stories that enable them to move towards desirable, positive futures. Because narrative therapy conceives of selves as inter-subjective, as being embedded in relationships, an important part of the process involves providing opportunities for people

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<sup>1</sup> The term "story to live by" comes from Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) collaborative work on narrative, autobiography and teaching.

<sup>2</sup> See also Bruner (1990), White and Epston (1990), Maines (1993), Polkinghorne (1988), Frank (2002), Riessman (1993), Gergen (1992), Gubrium and Holstein (1999).

to share their alternative self-stories in a public but supportive setting, most commonly in something called a definitional ceremony, which I will explain further in the second half of my presentation.

White and Epston also propose that social activism should be a part of counselling. It is not enough to help individuals to free themselves from dominant narratives, the narratives themselves need to be challenged at the societal level. Also on a societal level, the goal of narrative therapy is to open up possibilities for being. A goal that resonates with the one proposed by Buttimer.

It occurred to me that Western societies could be understood as suffering from narrative crises. The current stories that dominate Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and other Western states, stories reducing humans to consumers, stories claiming the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few would lead to an enrichment of all through the effect of trickling down, stories asserting that science and technology will inevitably benefit society, these stories limit who we are and what we can do. And these stories are failing to bring about the futures they have promised.

Personally, I was also in narrative crisis. I was searching for a new story to live by. Ultimately, the question I was trying to address in re-storying my self was how ought I to live in relation to the more-than-human-world.<sup>3</sup> Since I was in the process of working on my PhD, how I approached my PhD would need to be part of my temporary and provisional answering of this question. I did not want to be one of those academics whose research has no impact on the living of their lives. I wanted to use my dissertation to explore this question for myself but also to open up possibilities for living in those who read it. In what remains of my presentation, I will outline the academic practice that I developed through my PhD dissertation.

## **The Method**

At its most basic, I drew on the literatures of narrative counselling to develop a method of engaging dialogically with ecological memoirs, but let me pause here and unpack some of these terms. "Narrative counselling" I have already introduced and I will describe in more depth shortly. However, before I get to that the phrase "engaging dialogically" requires a bit of explanation, as does the term "ecological memoir".

### *Dialogical Engagement*

The term "dialogical" in this case alludes to the theoretical writings of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). "Dialogical" refers to taking an orientation to another person, in conversation or even in reading, in which space is made for both voices. When

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<sup>3</sup> Many researchers propose that the narrative self comes into being through answering the question, "what ought I to do?" (Frank 2002, 2004; Nelson, 2002; Zoloth and Charon, 2002). Since this question is at the core of ethics according to such ethical thinkers as Socrates (Lynn, 1998), the narrative-self is fundamentally concerned with ethics.

you are interacting dialogically with someone you are speaking *with* them. This is what we usually mean when we use the term "dialogue" in everyday parlance. Unfortunately, as Bakhtin pointed out, interactions between people do not necessarily live up to this idea of dialogue. Often people with authority talk *about* someone rather than *with* them. To talk about someone is to talk monologically.

An oft used example of a monological orientation to an other is the medical or psychiatric practice of diagnosing a patient. To reduce a person to a diagnosis is the epitome of speaking about another person and it tells a very limiting story about who they are. Bakhtin refers to occasions when persons with authority take monological orientations towards others as "finalizing." He points out that "finalizing" is a form of violence. As someone who spent a large part of his life in Siberian work camps because of the way in which the Soviet authorities storied him, he was in a good position to recognize this aspect of "finalizing." In academic practice there is a tendency to speak with the authority of expertise *about* the people who are the subjects of research rather than *with* them.

Subsuming one's self in the self of another, over-identifying with them, also reduces two voices to one, and is therefore monological. In such an over-identification, the self of the researcher gets lost, as does the potential for growth in understanding. As Sack says, it is only through real dialogue that we can winnow and sift through to the "real and the good."

#### *Using Memoirs*

I chose published memoirs for a number of reasons. Because I was interested in contributing to social change I wanted to engage stories that already had some circulation in society. In this way, I could start a dialogue with the reader of my dissertation that could be continued afterwards. Anyone who picks up my dissertation can access the full stories that I refer to through libraries and bookshops. In reading these memoirs themselves, they can continue the conversations started in my thesis.

As published books, memoirs were already in the public domain. Many of the memoirs touched on difficult and sensitive issues such as the death of a loved one, child abuse, and alcoholism. It would have been difficult to get ethics clearance to address such issues with interviewees in the context of my research question. Moreover, in order to protect the confidentiality of interviewees I would have had to restrict the amount of information I provided about peoples' stories and blur the details of their lives. With published memoirs, there is no confidentiality to protect. I could let all the nuances of their voices and details of stories into my work, thus maintaining a more openly dialogical relationship with them. Engaging with memoirs also saved me time since it bypassed locating potential interviewees, interviewing them and transcribing the interviews.

Every method has its limitations. In relation to published memoirs, one must keep in mind that these stories have been developed for public consumption and may have been altered in ways to make them more publishable, more marketable, and more palatable to readers. The public generally accepts that a memoir writer will take small liberties with

the exact details of a life to protect confidentiality and for aesthetic purposes. The controversy over James Frey's Million Little Pieces, which he presented as memoir, but was discovered to be fiction, indicates the extent to which there is an unwritten contract between writer and reader of memoirs. This is a contract that the majority of memoirists strive to keep. While memoirists are not expected to remember and report conversations verbatim, or to describe the settings of events that took place a decade ago in exact detail, they are expected to report on events that happened and that they participated in. Readers read memoirs to vicariously experience the events of others' lives.

Writers of memoirs are expected to do their best to tell some "truth" about their lives, just as interviewees are expected to do during social science interviews. Qualitative interviewers are well aware that the questions they ask, the place they conduct the interview, even the clothes they choose to wear impact on what interviewees tell them. This impact of interviewer on interviewee is not that different from the impact of the publishing process on what a memoirist chooses to write about and in what terms. Memoirists make assumptions about their readers and that shapes what they write. Interviewees make assumptions about the interviewer and that shapes what they say. Rather than see this as an impediment, researchers who take a narrative approach to their work see this as a fundamental part of being human. They assume that self-stories are created in interactions between tellers and listeners, writers and readers and that the stories told will, therefore, differ according to context and participants.<sup>4</sup> Narrative researchers set out to explore the ways such interactions contribute to the storying and re-storying of peoples' selves.

### *Ecological Memoirs*

The specific question I wanted to explore both in my personal life and through my PhD dissertation was "how ought I to live in relation to the More-than-human-world?" In order to do this, I needed to engage with people who had struggled with the same question.

There are some famous North American memoirs that touch on nature such as Walden, by Thoreau and A Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold. In Canada the most famous memoirist of this genre is Farley Mowat. His children's book Owls in the Family, a memoir of growing up with a menagerie of wild animals in Saskatoon, was the first chapter book I read on my own. Thinking back, I realized that reading Owls in the Family had been quite influential on the development of my own values. This observation lent some personal and anecdotal credibility to the narrative approach I was proposing to make.

I could have chosen to engage with these classics. Many people continue to find them inspiring to their own lives, even in the early twenty-first century. However, I was more

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<sup>4</sup> Taking this to its conclusion, Maines (1993) argues that even quantitative researchers using closed-questions such as multiple-choice or true and false need to take narrative into account since their respondents will be drawing on their self-stories in choosing an answer.

interested in the experiences of my contemporaries than in those of the environmental greats. There is some evidence that Western societies and identities have shifted in significant ways in relation to modernism, science and the environment since 1980. Memoirists post-1980 are more likely to write about their *relationships* with place and with non-human elements of place than those who came before--when stories of nature as separate and of naturalist as objective had nearly complete dominance. Bearing this in mind, I narrowed my focus to books written after 1980 that fell into the category of "ecological memoir," a term I have adapted from the work of Schauffler (2003):

"Because nature writers have traditionally focused primarily on the external environment, those who describe the dynamic interplay between inner and outer ecology are more accurately termed *ecological writers*, which suggests an integration of human and natural realms and helps dissolve the traditional divide between them...The reflective personal accounts of ecological writers can best be seen as a form of natural autobiography, a memoir of their evolving relation to the more-than-human world" (11-13).

All in all, I read over one hundred essay- and book-length ecological memoirs including those written by field naturalists, farmers, eco-activists, ranchers, philosophy professors, ex-AIDS workers, writers, English professors, cancer survivors, mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons.

#### *The Definitional Ceremony in Narrative Counselling*

Once I had identified the ecological memoirs I intended to use, how did I actually go about the *doing* of the dissertation work? To answer this question, I need to return to my discussion of narrative counselling.

In narrative therapy, as I have said, the first task is to shake loose the hold that a dominant narrative has over a person. Then the person is helped to find events that contradict this now separate but still dominant story. Once the person has developed a story about his or her self that she prefers, that story is brought out into the community through a definitional ceremony. The goal of this ceremony is to make the person's preferred self-story public and to thicken it, to make it richer and to make it stick. Outsider-witnesses are invited to attend the ceremony. These are people who are in a position to help thicken, enrich and support the person's preferred self-story. They could include people with some particular expertise, such as other therapists, or people who have had similar experiences or who have developed similar narratives, usually people who have gone through narrative counselling themselves.

During a definitional ceremony, the person who has just completed a session of narrative counselling tells his or her preferred self-story to the assembled outsider-witnesses. When the person has finished, he or she switches places with the outsider-witnesses. They re-tell the story they have just heard while the person whose story it is listens.

In order to keep this ritual a dialogical one (in the Bakhtinian sense of the term), the outsider-witnesses are asked to maintain two orientations during the ceremony. First,

they are asked to be open to having their own self-stories changed by what they hear. Second, they are asked to keep the person's story at the centre of what is talked about in the ceremony. When they are re-telling the person's story, outsider-witnesses thicken it by reflecting on how it resonates with events from their own lives or insights from their own fields of knowledge. The idea behind the definitional ceremony is that while how we story ourselves is central to who we are, how others story us is in some ways even more important. Hearing others reflect our preferred self-stories back to us dramatically strengthens that identity for us.

*Dissertation as Definitional Ceremony*

My interest is in how people come to satisfying, meaningful answers to the question, what ought I to do in relation to the more-than-human world? I wanted to explore this question in a dialogical way, respectful of the voice of the other and open to being changed in my own life by what I encountered.

Memoirs are written in the messy space between the individual person and society. Each author I engaged with struggled to come up with their own temporary and provisional answers to the question, most of them writing through narrative crises of their own. In the language of narrative counselling, their memoirs can be understood as their preferred plot-lines at the time they were written. Terry Tempest Williams, whose memoir covers a span of a few short years in which she lost her mother and both grandmothers to cancer and a beloved wild bird refuge to the flooding of Great Salt Lake, alludes to this when she writes:

“Perhaps I am telling this story in an attempt to heal myself, to confront what I do not know, to create a path for myself with the idea that ‘memory is the only way home.’

I have been in retreat. This story is my return.” (2001[1991]:4)

But it is not enough for a memoir writer to write through to an alternative story-line, they are also compelled to share that story with the public. Memoirists want their story to be read by as wide an audience as possible. Moreover, these writers write with the hope of impacting in some way upon their readers. They ask to be read in the way that outsider-witnesses are asked to attend a definitional ceremony.

However there are many ways of reading. In the West we are schooled to read critically, to think *about* stories. Books are also marketed as means of escaping the everyday world and we sometimes read in order to lose our self in the story. Neither of these approaches to reading can be construed as dialogical, and so neither approach would be suitable to creating a literary form of definitional ceremony. What I needed was a method for thinking *with* stories.

I found the seeds for such a method in an article by Michael White (2000). In this article, White lists questions that he provides to outsider-witnesses in order to help them to maintain an openness to being changed and a focus on the story as told by the person at

the centre of the ceremony. I adapted these questions in order to help me read attentively, openly and reflexively in relation to my own experiences and self-narrative:

1. As I read the stories this person has written about his or her life, what captures my attention and/or my imagination?
2. What is it in particular about these events, sentiments, and/or expressions that captures my attention or imagination?
3. What images of people's lives, identities, relationships, and the world more generally are evoked by the events and expressions in the memoir?
4. To which areas of my current life do these images relate, and in what ways do they do so?
5. Are there any experiences or events in my past (personal, relational, work etc.) that resonate with these images? (This can include dialogues with other people or other texts I have encountered.) If so, in what specific ways do they resonate?
6. In what way(s) am I “becoming other than who [I was]” by re-engaging with my own life and work in dialogue with this memoir? In what way(s) is this dialogical re-engagement “taking [me] beyond the limits of what [I] would routinely think” and aiding me in developing “options for action in [my] life that would not have otherwise occurred to [me]?” (the direct quotations included in this question have been taken from White, 2000: 78-79).

My methodological practice centred around reading the memoirs and answering these questions in my research journal. As I read, I paid attention to my responses physically, emotionally and intellectually. I wrote down the memories that were evoked by the memoirs and examined how they resonated with what I was reading. When I arrived at the end of a story, I went systematically through the list of questions, answering each with reference to notes I had made while reading. In this way, I practiced being an outsider-witness to the ecological memoirs I read.

I wanted to engage dialogically with the life-stories of people asking the same questions I was asking in my own life; but as an academic, I also wanted to enter into dialogue with social theory. In his book *The Renewal of Generosity*, Arthur Frank used what he called a "virtual reflecting team" of social theorists and philosophers to reflect on the memoirs of patients and healthcare providers. Following suit, I included some social theorists and philosophers of environmental ethics as virtual outsider-witnesses.

In order to facilitate a dialogue between the memoirs and my virtual team of social-theorist witnesses, I interspersed my memoir reading with theory reading. I adapted some of White's outsider-witness questions specifically for use with social-theory and went through these questions once I'd finished my personal reflections on each memoir. The questions I used to help me bring theory and life-story into dialogue were as follows:

- 1) What ethical orientations are invoked by or resonate with the particular events of this story?
- 2) What representations of people's lives and relationships do these events evoke? What understandings of identity are implicated in these representations? Which theoretical approaches relate to these identity conclusions?
- 3) What do these events and representations touch on in the theoretical approaches of the virtual outsider-witnesses generally?
- 4) In what ways does this "touching" affect the thick description of these theoretical approaches?
- 5) In what ways does this "touching" open up new possibilities for action for these approaches?

In order to amplify the moral impulses in each of the stories I read, I also brought the memoirs into dialogue with each other, reflecting on what resonated between the different life-stories. And so the memoirists took on the role of virtual outsider-witnesses to each other.

In this way I produced dialogues between my own self-story and the memoirs, between memoirs and between social theory and memoirs. In writing up my dissertation, I focused on the themes that had been thickened the most through these dialogues. Again, by not having a preconceived agenda of what themes ought to be highlighted, I was able to keep the preferred self-stories of the memoirists at the centre of my work.

## **Conclusions**

In engaging with ecological memoirs in this way, I was exposed to a range of answers to the question: how ought I to live in relation to the more-than-human world? Through reading the memoirs reflexively and dialogically, I was able to open up my own life-story to be changed. I adopted some of the options for action I had read about. I put up a birdhouse, took to reading on my front porch, started volunteering with the local city stream watch program, and planted some trees.

The memoirs also helped to thicken my self-story. Their writers tended to share similar values to my own, which helped to reinforce those values in my own life. The hold that dominant narratives had over me began to loosen and it became easier to live an alternative narrative, one with a hopeful future. I was less conflicted about what I ought to be doing and more able to stick to my preferred storyline of who I was and to base my decisions on that narrative. Overall, my self-story became less about resisting dominant narratives and more about living alternative ones.

In terms of my academic life, taking a narrative counselling approach to social science provided me with a professional story to live by that resonated with my personal values and my preferred self-story. It provided a way of practicing as an engaged academic interested in excavating alternative knowledges of living and opening up new possibilities for taking action in the world. I actually enjoyed working on my dissertation right up to its completion.

I will leave you with one final reflection. In my experience, the most profound change brought about through the process I described above was in my basic perceptions. In doing my dissertation I literally began to see beyond the limits of what I had routinely seen. I started noticing plants and animals where my eyes had previously overlooked them. To give you one example out of many possible ones: taking a walk in my neighbourhood the day after reading a beautiful reflection on roads and train tracks as linear slaughterhouses (Hopes, 2005), I noticed the shrunken corpse of a fox on the verge of a road. The state of this fox body was such that it had to have been there for many weeks. I passed this place every day and yet had not seen that dead fox until I had read about the importance of bearing witness to roadkill in someone else's life story.

The stories we tell about ourselves do not simply impact on how we view the past, they shape our present experiences and our future possibilities. It is for these reasons that I believe it is important for social science to pay attention to narrative and for activists to take care to tell the stories that will take us into desirable futures for all.

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