Introduction

This essay addresses the use of narrative inquiry in qualitative research and speaks from a personal voice of author J. M. Keefe. Narrative inquiry values the rich content found in subjective accounts of an individual's lived experience. In my own journey following a qualitative model for my PhD dissertation in Transformative Studies through the California Institute of Integral Studies, this method proved a perfect match for my own inclination toward the use of therapeutic presence, active listening, and my deep interest and curiosity in the personal, social, and spiritual stories as told by the others as a means of understanding phenomena. I was able to explore and develop a deep understanding of my participants, as I navigated through all the complexities inherent in the sharing of personal story, allowing for the emergent and new that only happens between two people when there is deep listening, and the presence of a listener holding the sacred container for the 'story' to be told.

My research was participatory and feminist. The mothers, women who wished to offer voice to their held convictions, were invited to tell their story and were informed by the same foundational principles of organic food and farming for health of person and planet that I was. I wanted to explore the origins and processes and lived experience of a small purposeful sample of mothers who made a conscious and deliberate choice to slow down, and follow a lifestyle that allowed for a more natural approach to raising a child, especially when it came to choices of sourcing and preparing food for the health and resiliency of themselves, their spouse, and most of all, their growing child/children. As women, as mothers, there was not much avenue for what they felt was
very important to share with mothers of the future. What kind of lifestyle were they opting into, and why? Was it available to other women, and if so, how?

Relational and Intersubjective

I was determined to guard against what Charon [4] refers to as ‘hierarchical principles’ that create a power asymmetry between two people, such as the “expert” (doctoral student), and the client (mother, whose story is not known by the general public). “The ultimate goal of a participatory and nonhierarchical principle is power symmetry”. Indeed, active listening implies that there is a co-construction of the story, that the story telling only works through a relational and intersubjective process. “Narrative acts of telling and listening or writing and reading affirm that there is no work of art without a spectator the presence of narrative co-construction in professional, pedagogic, personal, and societal transactions: the listener or reader. There is an intimacy and transparency that emerges. I have found this to be true in the classroom with college students, but narrative medicine in curriculum will be a topic for a future essay in this series of manuscripts.

Story emerges in many forms, as the spoken word, as the written word such as essay and poetry, and as in collage or some other variety of visual art form. It was the latter that provided a container for the ‘wholistic’ nature of the exchange with my research participants: They were asked to draw or create an image of their personal world as a woman in the role of mother who is informed by the restorative food and regenerative farming movement in our world today. Combined with a very open ended interview outline, suggesting a beginning (‘what brought you to this lifestyle?’), a middle (‘what does your week look like?, what are the important elements that have emerged for you?’), and an end, (‘What do you see as the outcomes for the health of your children?’ “What would you like to say to parents of the future?’), the mother was free to engage with her story organically, to begin with the important elements as they emerged from her drawing or image, to get to the “whole” of her lived experience.

Narrative Humility and Tolerating Ambiguity: Presence as a Noun, and as a Verb

One of the most important aspects of getting at the ‘truth’ of another’s experience as they share their story is to view the storyteller as a presence, and also to practice presence even as there is a diminishing of self in the process to practice being, with humility, without bringing assumptions to the intersection of communication, or practicing pre-conceived judgement. Charon [3] quotes Christian existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel writing about presence: “The truth is that there is a way of listening which is a way of giving capable of being with the whole of himself”.

As researcher, I lived with my participants’ stories for about 6 months, allowing for themes to emerge naturally as they occurred in the temporal sense of the mother’s telling. While in conventional quantitative research there is an attempt to capture some fixed truth, I found that what was required of me was a narrative humility which demanded to be present, to protect the mother’s claim to her own very personal telling. A colleague of Charon, who has written extensively on narrative humility, Sayanani Das Gupta writes: “We cannot ever claim to comprehend the totality of another’s story, which is only ever an approximation of the totality of another’s self-Narrative humility acknowledges that (personal) stories are not objects that we can comprehend or master, but rather dynamic entities, that we can approach and engage with, while simultaneously remaining open to their ambiguity and contradiction, and engaging in constant self-evaluation and self-critique” [4].

In fact, everything I read on the process of narrative inquiry, every piece of guidance I received, prepared me to enter into this sacred space ready to be surprised, to remain curious and alert to that which I did not expect, and simply to respond to those moments with a request such as, “could you say more about that?”. This is truly where meaning is made, and what made this approach to my research so very rewarding and open to multiple levels of discovery within the wholistic realm: physical, emotional, mental, and, especially, the spiritual. Meeting these women on levels of the spiritual proved to be integral to my conclusions and analysis. It brought me to eco-spiritualist Satish Kumar [5], who so eloquently works with the paradigm, Soul, Self and Society, to acknowledge the need for an awareness of the spiritual in our lived experience, to ground and make whole that which we find most compelling [6,7].

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

References