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Narrative Inquiry in Qualitative and Feminist Research: The Power of Story

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Narrative medicine or narrative therapy can be an approach to healing in the clinical setting; it is the work of the co-creating of meaning with persons who are in relationship: one of clinician and client, or with partnerships of the giver of care, and the receiver of care. There are also the phenomena of using narrative methods in pedagogy, in the transformative teaching of therapeutic presence by using activities of close, deep reading, or exercises of active listening with each other. The power of Story as a narrative inquiry has been supported as a methodology for re-search in nursing according to Wang & Geale [1]. According to Chou, et al. [2], a Story makes the implicit to be explicit, the hidden to be seen, the unformed now formed, and the confusing more clear. The narrative process can describe individuals' experiences that are constantly shifting meanings. The storytellers construct and share their Stories with their own perception of the experience for the purpose of narrative inquiry to reveal the meaning of the individuals' experiences [1]. Wang & Geale [1] further state, that Stories heal and soothe the body and spirit, provide hope and the courage to explore and grow. The process of storytelling, a fundamental element in narrative inquiry, provides the opportunity for dialogue and personal reflection, each intertwined and cyclical.

Novelist Henry James reminds us that "expression" connotes putting sensations and perceptions into words and a process of delivering the essence of something into view [3]. Hence, the subject and meaning of what gets expressed comes simultaneously from the one writing or telling a story. The representational act requires the expressive force and creativity of the writer along with the contained meaning of that which is now in view, unifying unseen and seen in the creation of the text. What emerges as a written text might be a prose paragraph, a poem, a scenic dialogue, a diary entry, or a letter which, when examined closely by readers or listeners, conveys its meaning by both its content and its form. The spoken words of a story can be recorded and later reflected upon the meaning of the narrative [3].

Keywords: Narrative inquiry; Storytelling; Feminist; Qualitative research**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 other 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 ap-proximation 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

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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