

## PERSONAL NARRATIVES DO NOT COME EASILY TO THE PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED SELF

*The growth of philosophical and cultural views challenging the hegemony of our modernist perspective comes from a variety of directions and defies description under any one unifying banner. The most commonly used word we have for referring to these broad changes is "postmodern," an umbrella term with a very unclear definition. It is not surprising that we tend to evaluate our narratives by the criteria we have inherited as part of our tradition. Often we are not only uncomfortable with the new emphasis on subjectivities, an area previously taboo in professional writings, we find it almost impossible to avoid conventional evaluations, judgments and conceptualizations rooted in our Western philosophical heritage.*

by **Roberta Wells Imre**

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Interest in writing narratives within a professional context has arisen at a time of ferment and changing perspectives within the academic world. Western philosophical and historical traditions that have provided the grounding for much of modern thought are being questioned, and different ideas, languages, and points of view are surfacing amid the dominant stories in the culture. New voices are increasingly being discovered as narratives make it possible for those previously silenced to tell their stories. The growing literature on the lives of woman, past and present, provide notable examples of this trend (Conway, ed., 1992). We are only now discovering some of the broad dimensions of human life that have been hidden by the ways so much of the population has been defined as Other, not really part of "us" (McKenna, 1991). As many

individuals and groups formerly considered to be Other come to be recognized as worthy of being heard (Delaney and Delaney, 1993; Kotlowitz, 1992), the Other in ourselves breaks through in unexpected ways in our own stories.

Unfortunately these growing opportunities to explore stories in new ways can arouse internal conflicts for human service professionals. Stories are a major part of the lives of people who do social work, but it is the nature and formatting of these stories that presents problems. For the most part, our education has been essentially "modernist," a term generally used to apply to Western philosophical and historical ways of defining and describing the world in which we live. Long historical roots have brought us an intellectual world in which knowledge is considered to be "objective," something outside ourselves, reflecting a reality already there, awaiting discovery by prescribed methods thought to provide universal avenues to truth. In this view the techniques of the physical sciences are necessary even in the social sciences in order to minimize, if not eliminate, "subjective" factors rooted in persons involved in the research.

From this kind of perspective stories are suspect. They are "anecdotal," a term that has become pejorative in professional education. That which is anecdotal is consid-

ered to be unproved, not objective, and particularly suspect because of the unabashed inclusion of the feelings and personal perspectives of the narrator. Definitions of anecdote found in Oxford and American Heritage dictionaries refer to stories that are interesting, often having historical connections, and, significantly for our purposes, unpublished. If asked to really think about it, very few of us would be prepared to say that publication is necessarily the best criteria we have for judging value in our work. Too many factors influence what gets published, where, when, and by whom. Actually the reference to something unpublished in the dictionary definitions probably refers to the ways anecdotes have so often been part of an oral tradition that was not committed to writing for any of a variety of reasons.

The changing environment that has reawakened interest in narratives and other opportunities for exploration suggests that it may be time to rescue the word anecdote, to restore it to its proper place in the intertwined narratives of our personal and professional lives. As the intellectual foundations upon which we have depended seem to be eroding, and we get an uneasy feeling that we may be standing on unstable terrain, our narratives, including anecdotes, can help us understand what really grounds our work.

We have labels for aspects of the current upheaval, and general terms like modernism and postmodernism are often used to describe some of the philosophical changes taking place. Professional vocabularies tend to reflect modernist views. Descriptions incorporate terms like objective, unbiased, rational, and that equivocal word "intersubjective," often used by researchers. These words are designed to reflect a world described to us in ways not requiring the participation of our selves, a world known through the techniques and discoveries of science. In this context moral issues, while usually not considered to be objective in the same way as science, have been seen to be best settled through a rational decision making process based upon an established hierarchy of values (Reamer, 1990). As we explore the uses of narratives, our own and those of others, and experience their often emotional impact, we very quickly discover that they do not fit well with our modernist heritage. We find that our emotional responsiveness collides with attitudes that over the years have been ingrained in us and as a result have been incorporated into the professional languages and ways of thinking about things that structure our understanding of our *raison d'être*.

The growth of philosophical and cultural views challenging the hegemony of our modernist perspective comes from a variety of directions and defies description under any one unifying banner. The most commonly used word we have for referring to these broad changes is "postmodern," an umbrella term with a very unclear definition. Different people mean different things when they use the word. For our purposes here, however, it is useful for the ways in which it recognizes and accredits the importance of what has been considered to be sub-

jective in human life, even calling into question the subjective/objective dichotomy itself. The subjective it turns out is not a neat category in contrast to what is thought to be objective. We begin to see the extent to which our world and our view of it has been constructed by human beings, and how many aspects of this world have actually been structured by those whose privileged positions have given their particular constructions power.

It is not surprising that we tend to evaluate our narratives by the criteria we have inherited as part of our tradition. Often we are not only uncomfortable with the new emphasis on subjectivities, an area previously taboo in professional writings, we find it almost impossible to avoid conventional evaluations, judgments and conceptualizations rooted in our Western philosophical heritage. Given this context, writing personal narratives is difficult and often painful. We tend to think a narrative is good if it follow traditional patterns and meets certain pre-established standards of rationality, logical progression of thought, and what has been assumed to be objective reality. Within a professional context we also have expectations that a story will be useful in a concrete sort of way, i.e., aid us in our goals of the conceptualization of methods, techniques and outcomes, all terms reflecting the conventions of our Western heritage and its modernist views of science, rationality, and our ability to know an objective world without being personally involved in the knowing.

One of the dangers resulting from this situation is that our stories will sound like tales designed to reinforce our culturally inherited values and ways of thinking. A good narrative, however, must be allowed to test and sometimes threaten these conventional boundaries. In social work the ef-

fort to tell a story by way of a personal narrative often can slide into a mea culpa about having given rein to subjectivity, an apologia for letting ourselves be seen and heard in ways we have been taught are inappropriate. Our first impulse is to suppress such transgressions of professional expectations by way of learned responses and conceptual and linguistic framing. Confronted with the emotional impact of a good narrative, we become like the exasperating music commentator who cannot let the music speak for itself, but must explain it *ad infinitum*. The meanings in narratives have some of the same kind of vulnerability. As in music something important gets lost in translation when artistry is encased in linguistic conventions.

In writing narratives it is hard to let go. To let things be. To stop intervening and trying to rearrange the thinking of ourselves and others, and to just listen and let meaning seep into the cracks and spaces around our concepts and expectations. We can sometimes do this with the narratives of others, but most of us have not learned how to listen to our own lives and stories without having to frame in advance what it all means. We are often at risk of shutting down our stories before they come fully into being, changing them where necessary so that they fall safely within the allowed conventions.

Individuals who are human service professionals may personally enjoy reading fiction, but there are not very many writers of fiction or poetry in social work and similar fields, perhaps because of some of the same problems we find in writing narratives. We have been taught that there is a clearly distinguishable reality that must not be tainted by fantasy in our writing. It is felt that all kinds of dangers lurk in blurring the line between clearly demonstrable facts and imaginative

interpretations. If we intentionally encourage mixing fact and what might be fiction in our stories, how will any of us know where we are and how we should conduct ourselves in the "real" world? We worry that we will be saying that there are no standards, that all ideas are equal, and there are no moral responsibilities. We fear loss of the power of grand narratives, often religious stores, that we have been taught are literally true and that we depend upon in our lives (Parry and Doan, 1994). We look at the changes in the world around us and do not like what we see. We are surfeited with stories of self indulgence and/or victimization and the all too frequent loss of any sense of communal responsibility. So we tend to see danger rather than hope in anything that seems to threaten to further shred our heritage.

At this point in our thinking we confront the impoverishment of our present situation with its limited languages and concepts in the face of inevitable change. The kinds of rationality and scientific and technological thinking embedded in modernist views have been ingrained in us and have offered security that we could know our world, that there was a grand design out there just waiting for us to identify it. Many of the ideas associated with what has loosely been called postmodernist thought are experienced as a mixed blessing. Even though costly in terms of conceptual security and comfort, we can see that potential rewards are immeasurable, a word that in itself strikes fear in our hearts since we have been taught that measurement is the ultimate test of reality.

Thus, while we become fascinated with narratives as part of a new, "postmodern" milieu, we straddle two worlds and are constantly being pulled back into the old while tentatively stepping into the new. Addressing the complex

issues involved in postmodernism and the social sciences Rosenau (1992, p. 173) speaks of what she calls "affirmative" post-modernists whose focus is on people on the margins, on those whose lives have been controlled by others. A goal of some of these postmodernists is to encourage "those who have never been the subject (active, human), but who are rather so often assumed to be objects (observed, studied). They would include new voices and new forms of local narrative but not in an attempt to impose discipline or responsibility."

If we are going to be able to plumb the depths of wisdom that is available through narratives, our own as well as those of others, we have to somehow learn to let go of our conventional professional ways of thinking and framing long enough to hear and see what has previously been hidden from us. Stories can do this if we can just learn to let them emerge. For those of us in human service professions moral imperatives do not disappear, but our comprehension and understandings of them change. In learning to acknowledge our own subjectivities our whole outlook is broadened. We do not have to abandon rationality and all we have learned, but we do need to recognize that "reason explains the darkness, but it is not a light" (ben Shea, 1989). Light has to be found elsewhere—perhaps in a story. □

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\* In "REFERENCES," the author of this essay seeks to identify each authors' gender by citing his/her full name.

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