

# Hearing the Story

## Types

### Narratives of Hope and Despair

Sociologist Arthur W. Frank, identifies three main narrative types: (1) Restitution, (2) Chaos, and (3) Quest. Each of these narrative types is characterized by a certain kind of hope or hopelessness (despair).

#### **(1) Restitution**

The basic plot of the restitution narrative is: "Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again." Metaphoric phrases like "as good as new" are the core of the restitution narrative. Restitution narratives are characterized by **CONCRETE HOPE** which is oriented to specific or material results, expressed in themes relating to the technology of a medical cure and the restorable body-self.

#### **(2) Chaos**

Chaos stories lack order and plot. They reveal feelings of vulnerability, futility, powerlessness and disorientation. The chaos narrative is always beyond speech, and thus it is what is always lacking in speech. Chaos is what can never be told; it is the hole in telling. Chaos stories are characterized by **HOPELESSNESS (DESPAIR)**.

#### **(3) Quest**

Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. The quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience. Quest narratives are characterized by **TRANSCENDENT HOPE** which embraces novelty, mystery and openness to change.



### Other Narrative Types

John Savage classifies story types as follows:

#### **(1) Reinvestment**

Stories that tell of new commitments and loyalties.

#### **(2) Rehearsal**

Stories that tell of events in the past which are retold (rehearsed) to inform the listener of what is really going on in the present.

#### **(3) "I Know Someone Who"**

Stories that project inner conditions onto someone else.

#### **(4) Anniversary**

A type of rehearsal story told at a given time of the year, to deal with the unfinished pain or joy of that event.

#### **(5) Transition**

Stories that contain themes of endings, confusion, and new beginnings.

#### **(6) Counterstory**

Stories that rise to the listener's consciousness as a result of hearing another person's story.

*What types of stories do YOU hear?*

## Tolerance

Telling, hearing and honoring chaos stories can be an extremely difficult, risky, complex, delicate, and precarious process for all involved.

Thus, the concrete hope of restitution narratives and the transcendent hope of quest narratives tend to be **preferred** to the hopelessness and despair of chaos narratives. Restitution and quest narrative types are thus **fore-grounded** and **celebrated**, while others are **marginalized** and **silenced**.

***What is needed, specifically in clinical work and more generally in any interpersonal relations, is an enhanced tolerance for chaos as a part of a life story.***

~ Arthur Frank

Robert Mundle, MDiv., STM, ThM;<sup>1</sup> Brett Smith, PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>St. Mary's of the Lake Hospital site, Providence Care

<sup>2</sup>University of Exeter, School of Sport & Health Sciences  
Qualitative Research Unit

## Transitions

Narrative transitions – movements from one type of story to another type – are neither straightforward nor easy. People may struggle to move out of one type of story due to it being an embodied habit of thought, behaviour, and taste. Having limited narrative resources to draw on in order to live by a different story can make transitions difficult too. Moving out of a story and taking on board a different story to live by can also be constrained because some stories are denied legitimacy, feared, or not listened to well or at all by others.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, sometimes people do need to move from one type of story to another type in order to find meaning in their plight, to positively adjust to a life changing event, and to develop differently valued body-self relationships. Encouraging people to reflect on the types of stories they identify with, and to imagine and entertain different stories to live by, may help in this process. Moving from one type of story to another might also be enabled by sharing different narratives with both those people in plight and caregivers. Caregivers may also enable transitions by knowing many types of stories well, by preparing their minds to be able to hear what story the person feels most part of, and by thus being able to listen actively and stay with people in their stories.

### References

Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body Illness and Ethics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Savage, John. *Listening and Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Smith, Brett, and Andrew C. Sparkes. "Men, Sport, Spinal Cord Injury and Narratives of Hope." *Social Science and Medicine* 61 (2005): 1095-1105.