

Narratives to Live By: The Exploration of Past and Present for the Future

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Advocates' Forum

Abstract

This first-person essay attempts to promote the usefulness and necessity of vulnerability for social work. In it, I share personal stories for the sake of what Mary Ellen Kondrat calls reflective awareness; working in and through these stories to better understand myself, the importance of self-narration, and the ways in which vulnerability is requisite for social work. This essay thus aims to implore others to think of their own narratives, critically evaluate them, and share them in ways that may seem uncomfortable, because collective vulnerability is the only way to bring about collective societal growth.

During my short time at the University of Chicago's School for Service Administration, I've been taught the benefits of vulnerability. Vulnerability is not only beneficial for one's mental health, but it builds community, promotes social growth, and generates higher quality connections. As a prospective therapist, I want to use this essay to practice the uncomfortable, yet necessary, task of being vulnerable. Since I'll be asking clients to bare their emotional selves, I thought it necessary to do it first myself, and prove that being open and vulnerable about who we are, where we're from, and what we struggle with, understandably brings fear and anxiety, but also freedom and new connections.

We live in a "suck it up" society. We are told that our strength lies in the walls that we build, not in the doors we can open. It seems the

most effective way to live life is to hold your cards close to your chest because self-exposure has no real benefit, right? The very function of social work is the opposite of this idea.

In fact, in social work, we believe the real way to survive is to be vulnerable and emotionally exposed. For me, there is anxiety and fear in this. I wonder how my community of fellow academics will see me, how my biological family will see me and how my family of faith will see me after I expose my experiences. The possibility of rejection from any of these communities is enough to give me pause. I still question if it's fair that I include them in an essay and exercise that they didn't ask to be a part of. However, I've made peace with these apprehensions by remembering that our journeys being intertwined is proof that we are genuinely connected, and that, secondly, by being as honest as possible, I ensure that no matter what other reactions my respective communities might have, they may still respect what I am writing here. I know our stories are nothing to be ashamed of, and without that shame, only my truth, critical reflection, and growth remain. I'm hoping that this is enough for everyone who reads this.

I have always enjoyed telling stories, especially personal ones. I find it interesting how my thinking, memory, and feelings about experiences become fluid as I gain more knowledge about life and invest them with new meanings. I recognize that I am constantly creating new rules, boundaries, and expectations for myself to live by, while, at the same time, returning to certain tales from my childhood. I've also learned that from these stories and experiences, I've adopted different internal working models, or rules and boundaries that shape my life. In other words, I use my stories about my experiences to give myself identity.

I am African American and Christian, and for a long time I attributed my family's privacy to these two identities. While I was consistently getting in trouble for "talking too much," my mom was schooling my sister and me on the necessity of privacy. I grew up

hearing stories about serious offenses committed within the family, stories in which no one would call the police. When I asked why, I was told that it was just something that was never done. Everything was to be solved *within* the family.

When I asked my mom if someone in the church wrongs you, is it a sin to sue them, she said, "Yes." She told me that God would not want me solving Christian problems with the "outside." This is when I first learned that the distinction between us (Christians) and them (non-Christians) was so stark that I could defy societal systems of justice just to protect a fellow Christian.

During the weekly prayer circles at church, I loved talking about the exciting things that happened in my house. This reporting took the form of "praise reports" for all the great things I'd experienced that week and "prayer requests" meant to ease some of my family's subsequent struggles. I wanted God to take care of things, but I didn't consider the fact that it was not just God listening to my prayer request but other church members as well. One Sunday, I asked God to turn our lights back on after the electricity was shut off for an unpaid bill. After my Sunday school teacher came up to my mom and asked if she needed financial assistance, I got a whooping.

When I reflect on that day in the prayer circle, I don't think I would have gotten disciplined for praying that God made sure that we had everything we needed. This type of prayer request can be defined as "open." But the details that I used in my prayer request crossed a boundary. My mom wasn't obsessed with perfection, but the line we weren't to cross was one that marked vulnerability. I learned very quickly not to cross that line. As I got older, this lesson was affirmed because I learned that while sharing personal struggles can yield help in the form of advice and sometimes resources, sharing my struggles would sometimes turn into fodder and gossip for those waiting for me to fail.

Now that I am an adult I see how private I am about the issues and challenges that I face. I trust in myself while also avoiding

the embarrassment that comes with sharing mistakes. This has sometimes confused the people I love; they've expressed concern about whether they are truly gaining access to me. Though this dynamic worries me for my more cherished relationships, in some ways, I also enjoy this. I like being seen but also being a mystery. I like presenting the cover while denying access to my pages. But I know this comes at a price. It can leave me feeling overwhelmingly lonely at times, and I can see this play out with my classmates at SSA and with those I meet out in the field. While I may be open to hearing and understanding others, I am not always open to being understood.

When I was five years old, my mom secretly moved my sister and me away from my father, to a completely different part of Chicago. She left him no way of finding us. After years of verbal and financial abuse, my mother had had enough. I saw great power and autonomy in her decision. She had taken absolute control of her fate and that of her children. She tended to remind my sister of this whenever my sister would endure a cycle of estrangement and reconciliation with her teenaged boyfriends. I took this as a lesson about romantic relationships—bad relationships didn't just end on their own and the only way to end them, no matter the logistics, was abruptly.

My introduction to romantic relationships was abusive in nature, and I too witnessed the cycles of disrespect and disappointment that I had seen play out with my mother and my sister. My first relationship was with a man who was ten years my senior. The relationship was a pattern of him baiting me with "official relationship status." I assumed that his consistent pursuit of me represented love, a love that he was not yet ready to admit to himself. This relationship ended with university lawyers, policy change, and a very broken heart. My next relationship was even more difficult to escape. It was filled with verbal and emotional abuse and infidelity. Although this relationship was draining me, I could not end it on my own. The loss of my

grandmother, thoughts of her legacy and her hopes for my future, helped aid in my escape.

This experience with domestic violence helped me understand the emotional and mental stripping of one's autonomy. Every time I wanted to leave my ex-boyfriend, I was truly, truly exhausted. Every time I was called names, I was ready to leave. I thought his desperation would finally bring about change, and because change never came, I was always tired.

There is an all-too-common American narrative rooted in the myth of absolute autonomy: "Pull yourself up by the bootstraps" we say. This belief undermines the systematic and emotional obstacles that leave people in destructive cycles. When I relate this narrative to domestic violence, I also see now that it problematically insinuates that the only time a woman can exert power in an abusive relationship is at the very end. This undermines the strategic harm reduction tactics that abused women use to keep themselves and their families safe in the face of abuse. It also doesn't make much sense that somehow a woman is weak throughout the entire relationship, but then suddenly finds strength. I operate under the belief that strength begets strength. If a woman finds strength at the end of a relationship it's because it was always there and it is important for survivors to know that.

I work now as a domestic violence counselor. I worry about becoming jaded and falling back into old ideals of strength and oversimplifying the experiences of any client because I do not want to blame the survivor. I don't want to contribute to, or aid in others, perpetuating the low self-esteem that keeps victims bound to their abusers in the first place.

On the surface, these stories of mine seem very different. One speaks to the importance and necessity of privacy while the other speaks to one's autonomy, or lack thereof, in an abusive relationship. Both,

however, explore themes of control. When it came to my family, my mother made the rules. She decided what qualified as open and what qualified as vulnerable. In my early romantic relationships, it turns out that I didn't feel I had as much control over my emotional and physical person as I'd been taught I should have.

Kondrat (1999) famously explains the need for the consistent presence of self-reflection in the professional and personal life of a social worker. I believe I am now in possession of what Kondrat calls reflexive awareness, or "the self's awareness of how their awareness is constituted in direct practice" (p. 460). I am conscious of my beliefs, values, strengths, and limitations and the ways in which they emerge from experience and practice. I am aware of myself and how I experience life, but I know that maintaining this awareness takes work and consistent effort.

Analyzing how I feel during interactions is a recent behavior change. During my abusive relationship, I would suppress my feelings and compartmentalize. This was the only way I could cope with balancing an extremely taxing and toxic relationship and an already stressful college life.

Looking back, I understand what Kondrat (1999) means when she claims that we cannot compartmentalize ourselves out of the world. "Individuals," she writes, "are engaged in constant transactions with other human beings and with other systems in the environment [that] reciprocally influence each other" (p. 462). This means no matter how small I made myself in attempts to avoid negative "transactions," it still wouldn't be enough to make the relationship emotionally healthy.

Working to understand the reasoning of the circumstances surrounding my relationships has given me hope. According to Kondrat (1999), the goal of critical reflectivity is to understand the "sociohistorical reality" that shapes overall lives and an individual's "capacity to transform that reality" (p. 469). When I can see my ex-boyfriend as less of a monster and more as a human being, it gives me understanding, which, I hope, is the first step to

forgiveness. By giving him a new story, or a new narrative, I can contextualize my experiences with him differently.

Doctors Richard and Jonathan Buckman (2016) argue that narratives have tremendous power: “Within the new stories, people live out new selfimages, new possibilities for relationships and new futures” (p. 395). They argue for a form of therapy built on narratives, narratives built from the words of the client. If, as they say, “stories are a form of social control” (p. 400), by helping clients shape their own stories, I might help them be both open and vulnerable, as well as ultimately, in control. In my work as a domestic violence counselor I want my clients to feel they have control throughout their relationships. I want to encourage women to know that they not only have the power to end dangerous and harmful cycles, but they also have power during the relationship. They are not weak because they are not making the decisions that others feel they should. Charles Garvin (2016) articulates a feminist therapy that “focuses on [the] woman as the agent,” while recognizing the “social, historical, and political context” that she finds herself in.

Helping my clients understand their autonomy and strength during abusive relationships is a personal and professional goal of mine. Contextualizing my own stories, coming to see their lessons in new lights, and developing a greater sense of critical reflectivity has been crucial in moving me towards that goal. But there is one very important component that pulls all of this together; that truly solidifies my freedom and that of my current and future clients. It is a willingness to pull these stories out of their dark resting places and analyze, grieve, and appreciate them with the silent support of those around me; simply put, to be vulnerable and reap the benefits of the solidarity that comes with it.

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