The Secret Knowledge of Peacemaking

John Winslade

In this article, the author tells stories of relationship conflict in which the trajectory of the conflict narrative is disturbed by one of the participants instigating a shift to a different story line. He analyzes these shifts in terms of narrative theory and accounts for them in terms outlined in the narrative mediation literature, interrogating the knowledge called upon by the protagonists to initiate these narrative shifts. This knowledge seems to be pragmatic knowledge, local knowledge, and performative knowledge, with implications for professional practice. Practitioners are urged to be alert for opportunities to privilege such knowledge.

Key words: mediation, narrative, narrative mediation, narrative analysis, local knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, performative knowledge.

A Personal Story

I begin with a personal story that has given me cause to think about conflict resolution. It happened at my mother's funeral in 2001, which was a significant event in my life, as it must be for most people. You do not forget things that are said in a context like this. My father was still alive at

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the time (he died about two years later), and he chose to stand beside her coffin and tell a story about my mother. Out of what was two months shy of fifty years of marriage, he had chosen just this one story to tell, so I was curious about what story it would be. As it happened, it was a story that I had never heard before.

"I want to tell you all a story about Maida as a peacemaker," my father began. "This is what she would do when we had a quarrel." As someone with a professional interest in the world of conflict resolution and peacemaking, I was more than intrigued, but had no idea what would come next. It was a story of a ritual that my mother used to enact with him.

"In the middle of an argument," my father continued, "Maida would stop and pause and then say to me, 'Norman, come and sit down beside me!' "

"Her tone was authoritative. I, somewhat reluctantly, would sit down beside her. 'Now I want you to give me a kiss,' she would demand."

"A little sheepishly, I would give her a quick peck on the cheek."

" 'No, that's not good enough!' she would say. 'Do it again!' "

"I would then make a better effort and kiss her again. By this time, we would be laughing. And it was hard to go on arguing."

That was it — the one story that he wanted to share. I have pondered this story often and have thought about it in terms of the narrative perspective that I have been seeking to build upon in mediation practice (Winslade, Monk, and Cotter 1998; Winslade and Monk 2000; Winslade 2003; Winslade and Monk 2008). Somehow, it seemed that my mother had found a way to break the spell of a conflict narrative. It was not as if her ritual had resolved the argument, but it had disrupted the conflict story enough to introduce a moment of laughter. The laughter then opened the door to a different narrative that also existed in my parents' relationship. From within this different relational narrative, they could find a way to go forward in a way that did not allow the conflict narrative to dominate the moment.

I began to retell this story in workshops on mediation to illustrate the idea of shifting from one narrative trajectory to another. I was not advocating that students reenact my parents' little ritual, I hasten to add, as a method of conflict resolution. It would surely not have worked in anyone else's relationship, but it worked for them enough for my father to refer to it as peacemaking. This raises the question of just what was happening in these moments and what that might mean for other such moments.

Other Stories

I was teaching a workshop one day and something happened that changed my perspective on this story. I had been thinking of it primarily as an example that served a particular teaching purpose and I had shared it many times for that reason.

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On this occasion, I told the story shortly before lunch. When we broke for lunch, I headed for the bathroom. I found myself standing at the urinal next to a workshop participant whose name I have since forgotten. As men do in such situations, he made a remark to me that began as a piece of ritual social acknowledgement.

"I am enjoying the workshop," he said.

"Thanks," I replied. "I am encouraged to hear that."

As we left the bathroom he added, "I particularly enjoyed the story of your mother. In fact, it reminded me of a story from my own family that I haven't thought about for a long time."

He then told me the story of his father's remarriage when he was young following his mother's death. He described his stepmother's habit of getting angry with his father after some difference between them and entering a kind of rage in which she would stay angry for a couple of hours and continue shouting and blaming him. It was horrible for him as a child to witness and it had seemed to all that there was no way out of this state that she had worked herself into.

"Then one day," he said, "my stepmother's sister came to visit." During the visit, his stepmother entered this state of anger and continued in the usual way. Her sister, after a while, interrupted. "You remember when we were kids . . .," she said. And she continued to engage her sister in a memory of a time when they were young that apparently had no connection with the thing that she was angry about. She retold a story of shared childhood experience that went on for several minutes, which was apparently enough to dispel his mother's anger.

As I thought about this story, I began to consider the possibility that such stories might lie hidden in many other relationships. Far from being just an illustration of a teaching point, these stories might point to a set of subordinate narratives that exist, in fact, all over the place. A few days later, I taught another workshop and this time asked if anyone knew of similar examples of what I referred to as "the secret knowledge of peacemaking."

One woman described how her husband would become quite critical of her when he was under stress, which was not easy for her to handle. One day, they were both rushing to catch a plane and stress was at a high level. As they were both ascending an escalator, she was adjusting a bungee cord around her suitcase.

Her husband saw what she was doing and said harshly, "Be careful of that! It will rip your eye out!"

The expression was so absurd that she stopped and laughed, and said to him, "What did you say?"

He too realized the absurdity of what he had said and they both laughed. The moment was so memorable, however, that on other stressful occasions, one of them would turn to the other and say, "Be careful of that! It will rip your eye out!" It became a refrain that they would use over and

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over again to reduce stress, relax, and laugh. During any kind of discord, each would know what the other meant if he or she suddenly interjected, "Be careful of that! It will rip your eye out!"

In Sweden, a woman approached me after a workshop and shared a similar story. It also began in an airport. She and her husband were standing, waiting, when the woman noticed a cat across the departure area and remarked to her husband about it. He was standing a few feet away from her and replied, "That's not a cat, it's a dog."

"No. it's not. It's actually a cat," she said.

"Do you think I am stupid or something? That's definitely a dog," repeated her husband.

Then they both moved slightly and it became obvious what had happened. A pillar in their line of sight had given them different views. On one side of the pillar was a cat and on the other side was a dog. They had both been right but had seen things differently from their different perspectives. Like the couple with the bungee cord, they began to refer to this incident in moments of conflict. When differences in their perspective on life intruded and set them against each other, they would ask, "Is that a cat or a dog?" This enabled them to step out of the contest of perspectives and to appreciate the importance of taking perspectival difference into account.

In many relationships, I have learned, people use little refrains to destabilize a conflict narrative that appears to be gathering steam. Someone told me about a silly jingle from an advertisement that one couple used to dissipate their seriousness. Another person described a tacit agreement that a family member was allowed, on occasion, to "have a Vesuvius!" and erupt in anger. Others in the family at such a moment were also entitled to ask, "Are you having a Vesuvius?" and thus not react immediately.

One Maori woman in New Zealand told me of an agreement that she and her husband had reached. If they were talking together in English and started to find themselves in a heated exchange, they would deliberately shift into speaking in *te reo* (the Maori language). The shift for them was enough to change the quality of the interaction in a way that made it more manageable.

Another young man told me a similar story. His girlfriend's first language was Swahili, his was German. Neither understood each other's native language. They had agreed that in moments of tension, it was acceptable for each one to express himself or herself freely in their native tongues. The other person would listen without comprehension, but would appreciate the strength of feeling present in the words. Again, this young man reported noticing the effect of this switch in terms of relational shifts. It opened a space in which each person was able to appreciate and respect the other person's strong feelings, with less need to comprehend the substantive details.

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In my own relationship, my wife and I have made use of a particular comedy sketch from the *Monty Python* television show portraying the "Argument Room." When we cross words, one of us will say to the other, "Is this the Argument Room?" The appropriate response from the *Monty Python* script cannot be refused.

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is." (Repeat *ad infinitum* or until at least a smile appears.)

Narrative Analysis

In each of these instances, the effectiveness of what was done could not be appreciated outside of the context of the telling of a story. Without the story, it would be hard to imagine the central action as having any significance. It, therefore, seems reasonable to turn to a narrative analysis of conflict to make sense of what happened in each of these cases.

In each of these stories, an important shift occurs. How can we describe it? Narrative inquiry is always about change that takes place through the temporal dimension (Clandinnin and Connelly 2000). In none of these stories could we say that the conflict is resolved. In each story, however, it has become easier for the protagonists to find a way to move forward. In other words, some learning takes place. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) argued that such learning is a product of narrative continuity, the reassuring force that people gravitate toward in the face of the chaotic turmoil of life. In each story, too, the characters experience discontinuity, a break in the story. For Bateson, these twin experiences of continuity and discontinuity are critical to the formation of the narrative accounts by which we live.

Each of these stories also contains an element of repetition or of refrain. Some of the narrative significance seems to lie in the process of telling and retelling. Retelling involves remembering how one handled conflict on a previous occasion. This repetition provides us with a useful redundancy — we can think about a new situation in an old way and proceed forward along a narrative trajectory.

If we assume that every relationship contains a range of narratives or story lines within it, then we can postulate a series of relationships for each couple rather than one single or foundational relationship. New narratives can be added as a relationship develops. Indeed, the strength of a relationship may perhaps be measured (if such measurement were possible) by the range of different narratives it contains.

This idea is akin to the social constructionist account of multiple identities for individuals (Gergen 1991). Kenneth Gergen argues that the modern conditions of life produce selves that participate in multiple communities across a single day, and we are each frequently different people in each of those communities. He coins the term "multiphrenia" to describe our multiple identities. The social constructionist account of relational

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identity is a nonfoundationalist account of a relationship that is not embedded in an underlying reality (such as need fulfillment, personality projection, or cognitive structure) so much as in the world of discourse out of which people fashion stories of who they are and what is happening between them. These stories are then given life by being rehearsed and performed. Sometimes, the performances are, like a long-running Broadway hit, performed every night. Others are like fringe theater events that come and go more frequently, constantly fighting for recognition.

Each version of relationship is embedded in its own story lines with its own narrative trajectories. Once launched, a narrative takes on a life of its own and seems to carry us along toward some kind of denouement. For example, the denouement for a conflict narrative may be some kind of fight in which one party defeats the other. A denouement may or may not be reached because of the tendency for stories to overlap and interrupt each other, and may be repeatedly delayed until one day circumstances compound to allow it to happen.

Some relationship narratives are conflict saturated. Others are saturated in things like laughter, or companionship, or sexuality, or shared projects, or parenting responsibilities. We might see all of these narratives as relationship resources that can be called on as needed. As Sara Cobb (1994) has argued, we can also distinguish between different narratives in terms of how coherently developed they are. Some stories are simply more coherent, more persuasive, more detail rich, more reminiscent of other stories performed in the past. Such stories tend to dominate and stand a better chance of being effective in the production of relationship events.

No story, however, contains enough resources to deal with all possible eventualities. Because each is limited in some way, people often draw from other narratives in their repertoire when they come up against a challenge. Knowledge of other narratives and the ability to borrow from them and switch between them can turn multiple narratives into resources for relationships in times of difficulty. In each of the stories above, the protagonist shifted the narrative in some way. They either shifted into an alternative narrative trajectory or they changed the context of the conflict narrative so that it lost momentum.

Jerome Bruner (2002: 5) argued that what gives any narrative its intrigue and its momentum is the presence of what Aristotle described as *peripeteia*, "a sudden reversal in circumstances" that "swiftly turns a routine sequence of events into a story." "A story," Bruner wrote, "begins with some breach in the expected state of things — Aristotle's peripeteia. Something goes awry, otherwise there's nothing to tell about. The story concerns efforts to cope or come to terms with the breach and its consequences. And finally there is an outcome, some sort of resolution" (Bruner 2002: 17).

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In each of these stories, the conflict that ensues upsets the state of harmony or equilibrium in a relationship. It sets in motion a movement toward a conflict-saturated denouement. The *peripeteia* is the moment of intervention in the trajectory of the conflict narrative. It is often accomplished by the introduction of humor or by some reference to a different narrative of relationship. What captures our interest is the sudden switch that takes place. It is unexpected and could not be predicted from within the existing conflict narrative. It is also not subject to laws of narrative consistency; it may seem like a *non sequitur*. It initiates movement toward a different relational outcome and offers relief from our fear of what the conflict may lead to. But what has brought the shift, the reversal, about? In each case, it has been the application of some form of knowledge built out of previous experience. It involves remembering another telling of another or a similar story. In each case, as onlookers, this knowledge is accompanied by some degree of surprise. In each instance, the knowledge used by the person initiating this shift in narrative is not widely known to observers and has a high degree of contextual specificity.

What Kind of Knowledge Is This "Secret" Knowledge?

Because I am describing knowledge that is of practical use that makes a difference in the lives of people, then it is worth asking just what kind of knowledge it is. The philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1993: 216) argues for a vision of science that is open and anarchic enough (rather than closed by strict adherence to conventional scientific method) to include such knowledge as worthy of study. He distinguishes between knowledge that derives from "observer questions" and that which derives from "participant questions." Observers ask questions like, "What happens and what is going to happen?" (Feyerabend 1993: 216) to generate laws and predictions. Participants ask questions more like, "What shall I do?" They are focused on the pragmatic value of knowing how to act. What Feyerabend (1993: 217) refers to as a "pragmatic philosophy" of science leaves room for developments that are "temporary makeshifts" rather than "lasting constituents of thought and action."

Clearly, the knowledge that each of these stories represents is pragmatic knowledge of a "temporary makeshift" kind. It is not of the kind that can be generalized and codified into academic texts on conflict resolution. It is not produced by systematic observation or by the tenets of what Jean Clandinnin and Michael Connelly (2000, after Donald Schön) call "technical rationalism" (Clandinnin and Connelly 2000: 35). It cannot necessarily be taught to other couples or families. This is knowledge that has developed out of the unique circumstances of the life of the participants involved in the story. It seems to be knowledge of the kind that can be referred to over and over again by those involved. It is also intentional, rather than accidental or unconscious knowledge, at least insofar as the person making this

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shift has decided to try something new, even if he or she is unsure of the outcome. Those using this knowledge are following a rule, albeit one that applies narrowly.

It has, therefore, the characteristics of what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) referred to as "local knowledge." Geertz describes local knowledge as that which deserves to be understood from within the cultural framework of those who participate in it. In this case, the knowledge exists within the cultural discourse of a particular relationship. In Geertz's terms, it is not the kind of knowledge that is produced by or can be appreciated within the familiar constructs of modern social science. It is not derived from, nor can it be organized into, a general theory. It is not generated out of objective observation. Nor does it reveal its value to an observer who uses objective methods. It yields little to systematic interpretation or a formal sense of orderliness. It is instead a very particular form of knowledge and it has value within its own particular world. Local knowledge, according to Geertz, is decidedly irregular knowledge.

In this case, each of the stories above is a "family story" and the culture referred to lives within the particular, small-group, cultural world of a family. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (1993: 73) argued that such family stories serve a productive or "strategic" function. They serve to constitute the family as a family. Family storytelling, they suggest, orders the shape of family rules and patterns of interaction. It creates forms of relationship through which conflicts are worked out and thereby constitutes power relations between genders in the family.

It is noticeable that all the relevant stories I have been told about couples involve heterosexual couples. I know of no reason why such stories may not exist between same-sex couples, but there may be more work needed in a workshop situation (where all these stories were told) to create the kind of context in which participants feel comfortable telling such stories.

The knowledge lodged in these stories is also a pragmatic knowledge embedded in particular relational contexts for which the rules of engagement are known to the participants, but the rules are specific to those who know them. This knowledge helps those in the conversation make choices about how to act. It is therefore a performative knowledge such as that described in J. L. Austin's (1962) theory of the speech act (see also Vikki Bell 2006). In a performative utterance, for Austin (1962: 163), "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action."

Utterances that are made on the base of such knowledge can be characterized as performances in a relational drama. Gilbert Ryle's (1949) distinction between different kinds of intelligence is relevant here too. Ryle (1949: 25) argues that the dominant status of propositional knowledge, "knowing that . . .," has devalued the kind of intelligence that can be found in performative knowledge, "knowing how . . ." He sought to accord

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pragmatic knowledge greater status than it has often been accorded and to show that it does not have to derive from theory, or facts, or "knowing that . . ." It is its own kind of knowledge and people call on it in relevant circumstances without ever needing to formulate it in psychological laws or principles of conflict resolution.

It is hard to imagine how such knowledge could be taught to someone else. It has grown in the particular history of a relational context that is not available for other speakers to call on. But for these particular speakers, this history releases meanings that are finely nuanced and that serve a communicative purpose.

Implications for Professional Practice

These stories, and the knowledge that I have suggested lies incorporated within them, deserve attention. They are not, however, templates for generalization. In itself, each story does not constitute generalizable knowledge. To generalize, or to routinize, would be to destroy the specific character of the particular knowledge and rob it of its spirit. Regrettably, this kind of generalization does happen often enough. It is the source of many of the books that appear in the self-help and popular psychology sections of bookshops. Someone takes a piece of local particular knowledge and extols its virtue for all and sundry. The problem here is that perfectly respectable "knowledge how . . ." has been turned into crassly unhelpful "knowledge that . . ." Pragmatically useful knowledge has been reconstituted in the form of trite propositional declarations.

I would rather avoid this kind of operation. Instead, I suggest that it is more important to respect each piece of such knowledge as embedded in a context of its own and to treat it as important within its own limits. Professional practitioners might even train themselves to listen for and appreciate the value of such knowledge. Indeed, I find that if we are curious enough to listen for it, there are nearly always instances of very particular local knowledge that people can tell us. All it takes is a willingness to listen for the cracks in the conflict story, an openness to what is not predictable, an ear for what does not get told in conventional, rationally organized accounts. In order to develop such an ear, I believe it is necessary sometimes to let go of our cherished methods. I include here some of the methods that I myself have promoted under the rubric of a narrative practice.

If we are prepared to let go of method, perhaps there will be surprises in store for us. The people we work with may offer us openings into their private worlds of conflict resolution knowledge, often very localized knowledge. Perhaps all of us have such knowledge stored within our reservoirs of experience. We all have pathways that we have found that can lead us out of the pain of entrenched conflict, even momentarily. We might all have secret knowledge of how to connect with a sense of humor, with a spirit of

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lightness, with a desire for cooperation, with an appreciation of justice and fairness, with a hope for peace. At times, in the course of conflicted interactions, we might get disconnected from such varieties of knowledge. It is at this point that professional assistance can make a difference. The right kind of listening and the right kind of respectful inquiry can reconnect us with our own neglected forms of knowledge in a way that enlivens them again.

I doubt that all this was formulated in my father's mind on that January day in 2001 when he told the story of my mother as a peacemaker. He probably just had a story to tell and a desire to honor his life partner. In a way, I still want to do the same — to honor my mother. And I also want to honor my father's telling of their story, as well as the many other tellings of similar stories that have been shared with me. I also want to honor the process of telling and retelling of the kinds of secret knowledge that is seldom recorded in the annals of conflict resolution literature.

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