

Chapter 1

The Power of Narratives

ABSTRACT

Narratives are foundational to the lives of every human being. Each one contains countless stories, along with four key elements: beliefs, values, emotions, and schemas. Narratives can sometimes collide, creating both tension and opportunities for new learning, and because of their complex nature, diversity stories are especially ripe for conflict. Empathy for the stories of others can help us maneuver through these difficulties and result in the construction of newer narratives that may deepen our perspectives. In this chapter, examples from one author's early childhood illustrate the power of narratives and their ability to promote change over time. Additional stories provide a gateway to better understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

I was raised in the south where I learned the basics of race and class and how these things can sometimes clash. It always brings me back to one particular story of how my mother – who grew up there during the Jim Crow era – dealt with small race issues. So I remember when I went to elementary school, there was a little girl who said she wouldn't play with me because I was Black. I came home and I told my mother about it – it's such a long time ago that I don't know how I actually felt. But my mother looked at me and she looked at her shirt, and then looked at me again and said, "Well, my shirt is black. Son, you're brown. She just doesn't know her colors." With a little humor, that's how she dealt with the pain of racial conflict when it came up. ~Brandon

Our stories reach for miles and miles. They are told and retold, fulfilled and unfulfilled, truncated and magnified, and somehow they wind up in different realms of our consciousness. Childhood exploits, dreams both realized and out of reach, and pathways that have brought us from the very first steps we took to last night's meal are tightly woven together. Personal chronicles hail from lived experiences and the experiences of others, such as the opening video narrative in which Brandon's encounter at school was inexorably tied to his mother's painful history. We incorporate stories into greater narratives, causing us to ponder deeper meanings: What have I learned from the past? What knowledge is most valuable and what have I lost sight of? And what new truths lay in front of me? Just like those who leave the comforts of home for college classrooms, we fervently seek answers to these age-old questions.

Narratives are crucial in building thematic elements within our lives (Barwell, 2009). They govern our learning and awaken new horizons for the future, and yet they can also grow hard and inhibit our desire to move forward. Emotions, beliefs, values, and schemas all play a part in the narratives we construct and those that are constructed around us. Fear often cautions our thinking and can be integral in shaping our autobiographies. Additionally, our families, friends, numerous casts of characters, global and local events, and time itself – the past, present, and prospective futures –are all connected in ways that determine the choices we make, and even the moods and attitudes we experience along the way. Finally, experiences of cultural diversity are crucial to the formation of our identities. As we begin to compare ourselves to others through skin color, body attributes, and other factors, we foster our own internal system for navigating multilayered differences.

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