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Narrative's Virtues

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Reacting to the charge that personal narratives, especially illness narratives, constitute a "blind alley" that misconstrues the essential nature of narrative by substituting a therapeutic for a sociological view of the person, this article speaks back to critics who regard narratives of suffering as privileged, romantic, and/or hyperauthentic. The author argues that this critique of personal narrative rests on an idealized and discredited theory of inquiry, a monolithic conception of ethnographic inquiry, a distinctly masculine characterization of sociology, and a veiled resistance to the moral, political, existential, and therapeutic goals of this work. Layering his responses to the critique with brief personal stories regarding the suppressed emotionality that motivates academics to oppose innovations, the author examines his own motives as well as those of the critics, concluding that multiplicity is easier to pronounce than to live and urging a commitment to a social science that can accommodate diverse desires.

In *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles (1989) tells the story of his tense and uncomfortable apprenticeship as a psychiatric resident at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Preparing for his first meetings with his supervisors, Coles recalls how nervous he was as he contemplated what he would tell his superiors, two senior psychoanalysts, about his feelings of stupidity and inadequacy in dealing with a phobic patient. At their first meeting, one of his supervisors, Dr. Binger, suggested that Coles read more of the literature so that he would better understand "the nature of phobias." Coles interpreted the advice as a teaching strategy designed to build his confidence and mobilize his authority by giving him an arsenal of theoretical distinctions and conceptual knowledge. "Dr. Binger was . . . a brilliant theorist," writes Coles, and whenever we were together, "I was ever fast to offer conceptualizations" (p. 5) that would help us formulate the case.

Coles's (1989) other supervisor, Dr. Ludwig, did more listening than talking. Compared to Binger, Ludwig was "slow on the draw, perhaps over the hill," although he did "get me going" (p. 5). Cupping his right ear with his right hand, Ludwig showed a determination to hear his young student out, urging him to speak up and talk louder. Initially, Coles sized him up as an affable old gent, a nice guy with whom he could converse easily.

As time passed, Coles (1989) realized that he wasn't getting very far with his "phobic patient," but he did feel reassured by Binger, who would remind

him that "phobics are hard to treat" (p. 6), although they could be a powerful source of more general knowledge about psychodynamics. Much to Coles's surprise, the low-key Ludwig was the one who inspired a turning point in his relationship with the phobic patient. Sensing his young student's disappointment and apprehension, Ludwig decided one day to do more talking than listening. He told Coles a detailed and suspenseful story about a female patient of his who had been paralyzed by stifling worries and fears. Coles recalls being "quite taken up by listening, even forgetting for a long spell that this was a patient's 'clinical history' I was hearing . . . as I pictured her in my mind" (p. 6). The brief lecture that Ludwig gave after his story stuck in Cole's mind for the next 30 years of his career as a psychiatrist and as an educator: "The people who come to us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story" (p. 7).

Coles (1989) had never thought of his patients as storytellers. He had learned that diagnosis was the really important activity of psychiatry. He had been taught to "get a fix" on the patient, determine what "factors" or "variables" were at work, and plan an intervention strategy accordingly (p. 7). The conventional wisdom of his medical education equated professional maturity and competence with the ability to form abstractions. One should meticulously fit a patient's symptoms to psychiatric theory and protect against getting too involved with patients. Conversely, Ludwig was saying that understanding isn't the same as formulating. Take an interest in the concrete details of life; don't bury them under psychiatric jargon. Think of the life being expressed not merely as data to be analyzed and categorized but as a story to be respected and engaged. The lesson that Coles learned from Ludwig was not so much to be critical of diagnostic or evaluative procedures as it was to be cautious of what he was missing by turning storied lives mainly into categories and theories.

For many of us in the social sciences, Coles (1989) concludes, theory is used "as a badge of membership" or as "tokens of loyalty in the company of our colleagues" (p. 20). When Ludwig urged "more stories, less theory," he was trying to say that we shouldn't prematurely brush aside the particulars to get to the general. We can call on stories to make theoretical abstractions, or we can hear stories as a call to be vigilant to the cross-currents of life's contingencies. When we stay with a story, refusing the impulse to abstract, reacting from the source of our own experience and feelings, we respect the story and the human life it represents, and we enter into personal contact with questions of virtue, of what it means to live well and to do the right thing.

* * *

I was reminded of the contrast between Binger and Ludwig while reading two articles recently published in journals that focus on qualitative research. In these articles, Paul Atkinson (1997) and one of his collaborators, David

Silverman (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), take on the sociological persona of Coles's (1989) orthodox mentor, Binger. Beginning with the premise that sociologists are supposed to be story analysts and not storytellers, these writers launch a hard-edged repudiation of the narrative turn in social science, calling it "a blind alley," a "preoccupation with the revelation of personal experience through confession and therapeutic discourse," "a vulgar realism," and "hyperauthentic," "misleading," "sentimental," "exaggerated," naively "heroic," and a "romantic construction of the self." Atkinson and Silverman do not renounce all narrative research. In fact, they are quick to point out exemplary narrative research of their own (Atkinson, 1994; Pithouse & Atkinson, 1988; Silverman, 1998). The narratives that make their skin crawl are personal, autobiographical, and illness narratives, particularly when these stories are unanalyzed, not treated as social facts, and presented without recourse to methodological skepticism. They condemn both the form of these stories and the methodology of face-to-face, "empathic" interviews that often is used to produce them.

For Atkinson and Silverman, then, personal narrative is useful only when it is subjected to some form of cultural criticism or when it is theorized, categorized, and analyzed. Like Binger and unlike Ludwig, Atkinson and Silverman express a manifestly scientific viewpoint in the worn vocabulary of disengaged reason replete with its presumption of an omniscient observer. By their account, personal narratives cannot be trusted and must be subjected to methodological skepticism. Conversely, the social analyst, armed with the weapons of "the proper sociological gaze," can be counted on to produce an unmitigated, objective account, devoid of sentiment and able to penetrate cultural conventions at work in the production of personal narratives. Although they may have grave doubts about the authenticity of illness narratives, Atkinson and Silverman seem to have no doubts at all about the sociologists who they think ought to be analyzing these stories as social facts.

* * *

I'm going to pause now and talk for awhile in a more personal voice. As I'm writing this critical response to these articles, a whole slew of thoughts and feelings run through me. On one hand, I'm inspired to write this commentary out of a critical, academic impulse to correct the mistakes I see in Atkinson and Silverman's views of narrative knowledge. I don't find their evidence, their reasoning, their citations, or their illustrations at all convincing, and I know I can point to evidence, arguments, authorities, and cases that will unravel the loose threads they've woven. I've done a lot of this kind of writing over the years. When I write this way, I use the virile, macho, professional voice I learned in graduate school, a voice that's become a familiar aspect of my academic persona.

On the other hand, there's this personal voice that's also trying to get out of me, and I'm having difficulty containing it. I felt enraged by the innuendoes, insinuations, and invective they spewed against personal narratives. Something very deep inside me erupted, something that's accumulated during 30 years of teaching and

research. Jane Tompkins (1987) calls this feeling "old anger," noting that it is the cruelest and most acute kind of anger, the kind borne of exclusion, discrimination, and hurt. I know these articles were only the sharp edge piercing the still tender scabs of old wounds—not the real source, only the symbolic one. The voices in these articles stand in for all the others that have been suppressed, the ones that insisted I conform to the rules of social "science"—rigor over imagination, intellect over feeling, theories over stories, lectures over conversations, abstract ideas over concrete events. The rage I feel also is a reflection of the anger and disappointment I direct toward myself for having buckled under the authority of received traditions when I knew I did not find that kind of social science meaningful. As a well-socialized academic, I've learned to let the polished, intellectual side overshadow the raw, emotional side, but the feeling that something was missing never disappeared. I couldn't completely suppress this nagging doubt that a lot of the models of proper social science research were inappropriate and artificial. So I became a divided self, playing the part of the rigorous methodologist in pursuit of scientific truth while feelings of uncertainty and meaninglessness rumbled under the surface. The source of my despair was not always clear to me in those days, but I knew that something about social science made me question its moral center, its integrity, and its commitment to improving the quality of human life.

Now I've got this huge problem. You see, I don't really want to engage in the kind of ritualized symbolic violence that is so characteristic of the academy. You know, the kind where one speaker courteously tries to demolish another, using polite language to show the other's stupidity, ignorance, or narrowness. In many respects, I find this kind of academic discourse all too easy. Besides, I don't like the kind of cold, aggressive, and intimidating person I become when I do it. Moreover, when I'm done, chances are they're still going to believe what they've always believed, and so will their followers, and so will I, and so will most of you. So where is this going to get us? But then I keep thinking—hoping—that maybe I can find a way to narrow the divide between "them" and "us." There's a lot of room to do interesting and innovative work on both sides of the divide, and there doesn't have to be this winner-take-all mentality. The pitfalls of singularity—one purpose, one methodology, one proper way to do and be social science—cut both ways. The question is, How do we learn to listen to each other? Is it possible to understand and appreciate our differences? If we cut ourselves off from each other and never talk or listen to one other, the divide will only widen, and the alienation will only deepen.

I'm writing this article because I feel strongly that the narrative turn in the social sciences represents something much larger and more significant than is suggested by the idea that stories are just another source of data to be appropriated for the purpose of advancing social theory and social criticism. I've always seen narrative inquiry as a turn away from as well as a turn toward (Bochner, 1994; Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The narrative turn moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted

theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. That's not to say that stories can't or shouldn't be used in the analytical way suggested by Atkinson, only that they shouldn't be used exclusively that way. I don't know where it's written that sociology (or any other social science) has (or can have) only one purpose. It may be difficult, perhaps impossible, to represent direct, prereflective experiences adequately, but that doesn't make those experiences or their articulations any less significant than the experiences that come from reflection and analysis. Knowledge doesn't pertain only to the academy but to all realms of our lived existence; and knowledge isn't something that's tested only against the standards of scientific inquiry. Each of us judges our lived experiences against the ethical, emotional, practical, and fateful demands of life as we come to understand them (Jackson, 1989). The appeal to social analysis that Atkinson and Silverman make is one useful strategy for making sense of life's ambiguities and uncertainties, but it shouldn't be privileged over other ways of interpreting life's meanings.

Oops, there's that word privilege again. After postmodernism, most of us have become very sensitive to privilege. Just about everyone I know is against privilege in one form or another. Where once it was invisible, now privilege is seen everywhere. Over and over again, Atkinson and Silverman ridicule what they see as the privileges given to personal and autobiographical narratives. Initially, I laughed when I read this, remembering what a struggle it's been to legitimize personal, autobiographical writing in the academy and recalling all the rejections suffered by those of us who have tried to publish first-person accounts. I always thought privilege was some sort of advantage, usually given to a group, a class, or a type, that is not granted to others. My gut feeling is that personal narratives and autoethnographies are being contested mainly because they threaten the privilege that has traditionally been granted to orthodox, analytical social science. At the very least, when we say a particular form of inquiry is being privileged, we ought to be able to show that it's been favored in some significant way. I can't ever recall seeing a critical, analytical article in which someone argued that our treatment of "social facts" would be acceptable if only the analysis would be written in the first person or be more personally revealing, but I know from experience how unlikely it is to get a favorable review of a personal account without any analysis or a concluding theoretical section written in a distanced, academic voice. I may have more to say about this later, but for now, I'll leave it at this: If anything is privileged in the academy, it's theory and analysis, not personal narrative. Let's be honest here: Atkinson and Silverman don't want to strip personal narrative of privilege; they want to exclude it entirely.

The point I was about to get to before I got distracted with all these other notions running through my head is that something always is being privileged. Atkinson and Silverman privilege the analyst over the story, but they don't recognize the ways in which the analyst becomes part of the story. It's not as if the analyst can transcribe a story's meanings, is it? When I sit down to analyze a story, there's the story, and

there's me. The meaning of the story is not immanent in the text. The process of theorizing, analyzing, and categorizing personal narratives is shot through and through with the imagination and ways of seeing of the interpreter. When I'm the one interpreting the story, I'm no more free from the cultural frames of reference in which I am embedded than is the storyteller. In this sense, I'm inside what I'm analyzing and part of it. If the storyteller is a cultural production, well, then so is the analyst. How much more obvious could it be that Atkinson and Silverman's views are the products of received views of sociology as a scientific discipline?

One of the most powerful received views I find myself resisting these days is the one that takes it for granted that culture has absolute authority over our thoughts, actions, and ways of talking. Atkinson and Silverman repeatedly invoke culture as the ultimate explanation for the personal and the autobiographical. Personal narratives are nothing more than cultural revelations. In their eyes, stories become products of cultural conventions, cultural accounts, expressions of culture, cultural constructions, a source of cultural inquiry, and a means of accessing culture. They have some doubt about the existence of a self, but they have none about the existence of culture that, in the aftermath of enthusiasm for cultural studies, has now become the source of all meanings—individual, personal, and social—the first and primary cause of all that we are and can be. Yet for all the importance and influence that is attributed to culture, we never seem quite able to define and understand precisely what culture is. As Adam Gopnick observed recently, "Every age has a term to explain things that resist explanation. The Elizabethans had fate; The Victorians had history; we have culture" (see Rothstein, 1999, p. A19). We say that culture is humanly constructed and that there are many different cultures. We also say that we are constructed by culture; we express ourselves through the forms and conventions made available to us by our culture. Apparently, we construct cultures, and we are constructed by them. We are the creators, and we are the victims. Edward Rothstein (1999) observed that the idea of culture is now in danger of becoming simultaneously everything and nothing. I tend to agree with his conclusion that the real problem may be "the culture of culture."

Don't get me wrong: I think it's a good sign that the narrative turn is under fire from critics. It means there's now a substantive body of published narrative work toward which people are reacting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It's also a sign that the issue of what kinds of projects are legitimate and significant in the social sciences is undecided, contested, and worth talking about to each other. Perhaps the meta-message expressed by Atkinson and Silverman is only an expression of their fears about the possible demise of traditional and received views. Disciplines can and do change.

* * *

I turn now to specific criticisms of personal narrative inquiry raised by Atkinson (1997) and Atkinson and Silverman (1997). To a large extent, Atkinson's (1997) goal is to tame and discipline narrative, "to put it in its place" (p. 343). The subtext of his article, as I read it, is that narrative inquiry is spinning out of control and if we don't stop it now, it may amplify into an unmanageable threat to the integrity of social science. Atkinson assumes the

narrative posture of a circuit in a negative feedback system, identifying error and exercising restraints to eliminate it. Personal and illness narratives are characterized as "deviation" that must be corrected. If not restrained now, these deviations could have the effect of destabilizing the system (social science as we know it) and transforming it radically.

I raise this point first because I believe it goes to the heart of what is at stake in this conversation. The question is whether we can or should fix a single standard for deciding the good and right purposes and goals of social science research practices. What kind of social science do we want? Frustrated by the pluralism of narrative inquiry, Atkinson and Silverman try to show how certain exemplars of narrative research that they consider representative fail to meet the standards of proper sociological research. They do not see the question of sociology's methods, purposes, and uses as contested or unsettled. Rather, they take for granted that the standards they apply have achieved universal consent. To a large extent, the credibility of their critique rests on their own authority to say what is or is not sociological (or social scientific). For Atkinson and Silverman, the possibility that sociology (or any of the social sciences) may be in the process of becoming something other than what it always has been does not occur, although the work they critique clearly points to sweeping changes in the goals and forms of sociological inquiry (Denzin, 1997). Instead of discussing the merits and deficiencies of these different visions of what sociology can or should be, Atkinson and Silverman attempt to discredit narrative research by applying a single standard of value that is itself radically challenged by the narrative turn. Thus, they entirely bypass what for me is the crucial issue: The narrative turn represents a radically different vision of sociology's purposes and form, one that is inspired by a desire to reform social science practices and reconceive their objectives and forms.

The goal of determining what is a proper and improper use of narrative is justified in these articles by a conception of inquiry as discretely split into discontinuous subject matters—sociology, therapy, moral philosophy, ethics, and so forth. But the correspondence theory of knowledge on which this conception hinges has been thoroughly discredited, and thus, the foundation for idealizing inquiry in this way has been lost. As Rorty (1982) observed,

When the notion of knowledge as representation goes, then the notion of inquiry as split into discrete sectors with discrete subject matters goes. The lines between novels, newspaper articles, and sociological research get blurred. The lines between subject matters are drawn by reference to current practical concerns, rather than putative ontological status. (p. 203)

Thus, sociology is no more "really" or "truly" or "properly" depicted in the language of "objectivity," "social facts," or "structural analysis" than in a moral vocabulary of "deepening community," "empowerment," or "narrative continuity." One vocabulary may be deemed more useful or more helpful for cer-

tain purposes, but this makes it neither more sociological nor more scientific (Rorty, 1982).

* * *

I recall a keynote talk that I gave at a conference on "personal relationships" held at Oxford University in 1990. In the presentation, I argued that for many social scientists, the inspiration to study close relationships undoubtedly originates in our own relationships with friends, lovers, and family. The enthusiasm and excitement many of us felt when we first began studying close relationships was muted, however, by the discovery of certain scientific conventions that equate knowing exclusively with seeing from a distance, what Dewey (1980) referred to as a "spectator theory of knowledge," which separates subject from knowledge, observation from participation, and reflection from direct experience. I believe the most devastating effect of these conventions is to establish and enforce a rule that we never allow our own experiences, feelings, or ideals to bias our scientific work. These conventions help us foster the illusion that our own relationships have little impact on our work: what we see, how we reflect on and interpret our results, what questions we ask, what answers we expect, and so on. They also help to sustain the myth that our research is divorced from our lives, that it has no autobiographical dimension, that what we do academically is not part of how we are working through the story of our own life.

I believe that the projects we undertake related to other people's lives are inextricably connected to the meanings and values we are working through in our own lives. In this sense, the therapeutic and the scholarly are mutually implicated in our projects. So at this conference, I asked these very orthodox social scientists to ask themselves the extent to which their own work on relationships was inspired, as mine had been, by their own marriages, divorces, relationships to parents, interpersonal conflicts, emotional crises, personal frustrations, and losses. "How disinterested, detached, and objective are we when we study the topics of abuse, battering, rape, racism, power, gender, and sexuality?" I asked. "Have you ever felt that you were writing about yourself when you were reporting 'data' about other persons?"

A few of the social psychologists in the audience got very defensive. They said they were angered and insulted by my remarks. Several acknowledged a grain of truth but said they wouldn't know how to judge research if the writer's story was woven into stories reported about other people's relationships, although, indeed, that might be the more forthright thing to do. After my talk and during the last 2 days of the conference, many of those in attendance made a point of telling me that my presentation had resonated with how they experienced their lives as social scientists and how tired they were of having to cover or hide their own interests, stories, and experiences and how much they wished they could speak in their own voice instead of assuming that familiar "voice from nowhere"; and then, they whispered stories in my ear about how therapeutic they had found it to do research and to write about topics that connected to their own lived experiences, even if they couldn't really say so in print, and how, after all, that's why they had become social scientists in the first place.

* * *

Edward had learned the limits of reason, of rational discourse, of explanation and analysis, and logic. As he got older he warmed to the idea of the inexplicable. He noticed that explanations, as a general class, tended to diminish the explained. The language even brilliantly and imaginatively used, seemed always to fall just short of the experience it sought to describe. Often, when he was at the university, he noted that the efforts of his professors to describe a painting, or an idea about painting, or, in another class, the power of a particularly clever business strategy almost always fell short of the fullness of his appreciation of what was being described. In the very few cases when an articulate and moving professor had attacked a problem, the explanations, while quite lovely and moving, often had less to do with the picture or text, or idea being discussed than with their own internal workings. . . . (Frederick Barthelme, 1988, p. 127)

Nevertheless, Atkinson (1997) has in mind a principled distinction between sociological and other forms or disciplines of knowledge. When investigations move beyond "the purely methodological," they are no longer properly sociological. Accordingly, he criticizes writers such as Mishler (1986), Kleinman (1988), and Frank (1995) because their emphasis "on empowerment and the promotion of respondents' insight into their own problems, experiences, and interests reveal preoccupations that go beyond the purely methodological" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 335). Although he grants the importance of patient empowerment, Atkinson points out "that such commitments do not in themselves provide foundations for an adequate methodology. Indeed, the implication of my argument is that such authors' practical and ethical concerns can lead them to miss the significance of narrative and biographical work" (pp. 335-336). In these passages, Atkinson narrows the scope of sociology, refusing any moral or ethical role for sociology that could weaken or interfere with its "methodological purity." By his account, sociology should not go beyond the purely methodological, and it should never allow practical, ethical, or moral concerns to interfere with the detached observation of sociological phenomena. This point is reiterated throughout the article, culminating in Atkinson's depiction of Frank's analysis of genres of illness stories as "stunted" because "his standpoint is inspired more by ethical than methodological preoccupations . . . and is far more committed to the construction of a narrative morality . . . and (narrative) as the foundation for practical ethics" (p. 338).

Atkinson (1997) wants to contain sociology under the terms of methodological purity: social facts, structural analysis, moral neutrality. Methodological purity may, of course, be one way to understand and describe what sociology is and what it does. But it is not the only way, and for certain purposes, it may not be the best. Moreover, when these terms are applied to work on narrative that evolved as a reaction or an alternative to the ahistorical, morally neutral, and distanced proclivities of methodologically pure sociology, they end up sounding parochial, confining, and trivial. The point of much of the work on personal and illness narratives is to move beyond the confines of traditional modes of analysis, methodology, and genres of writing. To fault this work for doing so, then, has the look and feel of a last-ditch

effort to reclaim a monolithic scientific orthodoxy for sociological work on narrative.

The burden of my argument thus far is that we should free ourselves from the notion that there is one place to put narrative. As Laurel Richardson (1990) observed, narrative connects sociology to literature and to history. An emphasis on narrative ethics and morality is not sufficient grounds for repudiating the merits of illness narratives either as sociology or as social science. From Dewey (1930) to Foucault (1973) and through the "crisis of representation," many critics of the traditions have argued convincingly to abandon orthodox notions of rationality, objectivity, truth, and method—to move the social sciences "beyond method" (Rorty, 1982). Dewey (1930), in particular, emphasized the moral importance of the social sciences. The practical, ethical, and moral focus of narrative inquiry, which Atkinson (1997) regards as a prominent threat to recognizing the significance of stories, is precisely what writers such as Kleinman (1988), Frank (1995), and Mishler (1986) believe gives narrative its importance. For them, as well as for Richardson (1990), "narrativizing, like all intentional behavior (including the writing of conventional social science) is a site of moral responsibility" (p. 116). How we use stories does not come down to a choice between morality and methodology as if one could decide not to be implicated in or by the moral imagination of a narrative. As Frank (1995) observes, one of the main challenges of illness is to construct a story that can turn mere existence and stigmatization into a meaningful social and moral life that is self-validating.

Atkinson (1997, p. 340) believes that some applications of narrative understanding—including analyses of medical narrative—are misplaced and misrepresent the fundamental nature of narrative. The applications he frowns upon are those that privilege narrative forms over narrative analysis. Although he does not state precisely how these forms are getting privileged, he does make it clear that "it is the work of sociologists to examine those narratives and to subject them to the same analysis as any other forms . . . apply the same canons of methodological skepticism we would apply to any other acts and social forms" (p. 341). Apparently, a narrative is privileged whenever it is not treated as a social fact, categorized, analyzed, and/or criticized. Although Atkinson never clarifies precisely why an absence of methodological skepticism is tantamount to a "misrepresentation" of the fundamental "nature" of narrative, his argument unmistakably privileges the story analyst over the storyteller.

Rather than misplacing or misrepresenting narrative, the decision to treat stories as a moral discourse simply places narrative in the service of an objective that is different from the analysis of social facts. When we turn stories into concepts, theories, or social facts, on the other hand, we run the risk of rupturing what makes them stories. Then, the characters aren't people caught up in life's conflicts, difficulties, and moral contradictions. As the lenses of Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) ideal sociologist zooms in on them, stories

get transformed into the "sites through which culture speaks" or the grounds for explicating forms of social action. It is difficult to understand how one is being true to (and not misrepresenting) "the fundamental nature of narrative" by slicing, dicing, and cutting out what makes a story a story.

Whereas Atkinson (1997) sees the good that can come from thinking about medical stories, subjecting them to critical, methodological, and conceptual scrutiny, Frank (1995) sees the good that can arise from thinking with a story. These are categorically different conceptions of the utility of narratives. Atkinson (1997) wants to objectify stories in the name of science; Frank (2000) wants to enter into dialogue with them for the benefit of ill persons. One is not necessarily truer to the fundamental nature of narrative than the other; they are merely preferences for taking one point of view rather than another toward narrative. Frank (1995) states his preferences succinctly:

To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze the content. Thinking with stories takes the story as already complete; there is no going beyond it. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth about one's life. Thus, in this book people's illness stories are not "data" to support various propositions that I advance. Instead, the stories are the materials that I use to model theorizing—and living—with stories. (p. 23)

Frank does not say that one should never use stories as data and analyze them; he does not reduce all interests in narrative to narrative ethics, and he does not eschew the sociologist's interest in theory. He simply prefers to explore the possibilities of theorizing with stories instead of about them. His intention is to respect the integrity of the story as a story.

The first lesson of thinking with stories is not to move on once the story has been heard, but to continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story. The problem is truly to listen to one's own story, just as the problem is truly to listen to others' stories. (Frank, 1995, p. 163)

* * *

Narrative ethics promotes what Michael Jackson (1995) has called an ethnography of caring. To remain with the story, Frank (1995) observes, is to resonate with the Other. This empathic stance plays a central role in Arthur Kleinman's (1988) conception of clinical medicine as a mini-ethnographic endeavor. Recognizing the incompleteness of the analogy, Kleinman (1988) proposes that in cases of chronic illness, the doctor can best enter the world of the sick person from the position of an "empathic witness" "to develop the ethnographic picture of the patient's world and the place of illness within it" (p. 244). Atkinson (1997) reprimands Kleinman for misappropriating ethnography and giving a wrong impression of its applications: "It is misleading insofar as it implies that the work of ethnography is to produce empathic,

experiential accounts of social actors and their worlds" (p. 331). The same condemnation is repeated in Atkinson and Silverman (1997, p. 317).

Here, again, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) do not speak as though they are offering a perspective on an evolving and changeable idea—a blurred genre of inquiry and discourse called ethnography. Rather, they speak as if there is only one way to conceive the work of ethnography. On what authority do Atkinson and Silverman stand when they condemn empathic witnessing as one possible goal of ethnography?

Consider the following three accounts of ethnography, which take a very different view of the relationships between ethnographers and Others from the one promoted by Atkinson and Silverman (1997):

1. "Dewey's is a conception of knowledge that begins and ends with the life world. Knowing is an imperative part of existence, it is not a means of getting us beyond, beneath, or behind the exigencies of mundane life. . . . Knowledge then becomes a way of carrying us into more fruitful and caring relationships with others, rather than distancing ourselves from others in the name of objectivity. . . . The objective of ethnographic fieldwork ceases to be the representation of the world of others; it becomes a mode of using our experience in other worlds to reflect critically on our own" (Jackson, 1995, p. 163).
2. "Scholars need energy to gather enough information to create full portraits. They need imagination to enter between facts, to feel what it is like to think and act as another person" (Glassie, 1982, p. 12); "ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not hypotheses, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately" (p. 14).
3. "The bottom line about ethnography is that it is about forming relationships; it is about the search for connection within and across borders" (Behar, 1999, p. 476).

Ethnography should be understood as a constructed, evolving, and contested idea, not an epistemologically objective thing (Gergen, 1994; Hacking, 1999). The meanings of ethnography are neither stable nor transparent, and they vary across different communities and fields of inquiry (see Loseke & Cahill, 1999a, 1999b). We can ask whether empathic witnessing as an ethnographic practice or stance is a good idea or a useful one and for what purposes, but it makes little sense to call it misleading or misappropriated unless we regard ethnography as some(thing) with an inherent structure that we can discover through inquiry. Atkinson and Silverman seem intent on erecting boundaries that would close off innovations in ethnographic practice that are directed toward goals different from their own. They base their case on the assumption that those of a different mind nevertheless share the same goals. But the way I see it, there is no agreement on goals, and without that agreement, it makes no sense to argue over the best or right way to achieve them. Atkinson and Silverman want to treat stories always as something to go beyond for the good of sociology and its mission. Frank, Kleinman, and others regard stories as a means for being with others, what Jackson (1995) calls

"an understanding." These are not issues to be resolved (by condemnation, parody, authority, or even persuasion) but differences to be lived with (Rorty, 1982).

* * *

All this fuss over the true nature of narrative, the correct uses of ethnography, the definitive boundaries of sociology—where does this get us? What are the motives that inspire us to make these distinctions? Who benefits from these distinctions? I'm reminded of an unpleasant "academic" encounter that took place 2 years ago, when I was invited to give a colloquium in the Department of Anthropology at a major urban university in the northeast. After finishing my introductory remarks and before I had begun the body of my talk, I was interrupted by a senior professor who immediately challenged—I could say "attacked"—the appropriation of ethnography by disciplines outside the sphere of anthropology, including sociology and communication. Several of his colleagues echoed the sentiments he expressed, implying that ethnography belonged to anthropology. Of course, I was stunned by the hostility they were displacing onto me. They didn't know me well enough to be this upset. Their anger could only stem, I surmised, from a sense that their intellectual property—ethnography—had been lost or stolen from them. I fantasized one of them pulling out a deed to ethnography and demanding that their exclusive rights be honored. "Forgive me, sir," I would say, "it was an innocent mistake. I thought ethnography was public property. Now that I see your claim, I'll never trespass again."

I think we'd be a lot better off if we had rituals for the expression of academic grief. Over the course of an academic life, there's bound to be a lot of loss and a good deal of angst, but we have no sanctioned ways of expressing these feelings. Instead, we tough it out, distorting and disguising our feelings to the point we don't even recognize them. You never hear anyone say, "I'm afraid I don't have a place in sociology anymore," or "I'm scared I'm being left behind," or "It hurts to learn that the kind of work I've done for so long may no longer be appreciated." These are heartfelt, human responses that express the pain and anguish many academics feel over the course of their careers, which I have referred to in earlier work as a reflection of "institutional depression" (Bochner, 1997). Sensing there is so much at stake and without an emotional outlet for expressing fear and grief, we are left with two choices. We can bear the burden alone, withdraw, close ourselves off, give up, ride out of town; or we can seek a showdown, a fight to the end encounter that substitutes polarizing discourses—for example, the good of social analysis against the evil of therapeutic personal narratives—for candid expressions of the pain and grief we may feel.

* * *

Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore. (Behar, 1996, p. 177)

Atkinson and Silverman cannot imagine a social science directed purposefully toward empathy, caring, or identifying with the suffering of others. Frank (1995, 2000), Kleinman (1988), and many others associated with the narrative turn cannot imagine a social science devoid of these goals. The dif-

ferences between these views are not so much differences in methods as they are differences in values. Repeatedly Atkinson and Silverman remind us that they "are not entirely dismissive of the ethical agendas" of the scholars they criticize (Atkinson, 1997, p. 335; Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 318). They simply don't see an ethical or moral agenda as appropriately sociological. Notwithstanding these qualifications, Atkinson and Silverman condemn these ethical agendas as a barrier to the development of a "proper" methodology and a blind spot that hides the real significance of narrative's connection to the self. Apparently, they see the moral dimensions of narrative as a nuisance to sociological inquiry.

The ideal sociology for Atkinson and Silverman seems unmistakably macho. A strong male ethos reverberates through the pages of their essays. The sociologist must be cool, under control, detached, and analytical. He aspires to methodological purity and disengaged reason. He never raises feelings, particularly his own, to a category of value. He is unsentimental and never shows weakness. He refuses to use language that has even a scent of a therapeutic flavor. He has no desire for or belief in revelations or self-disclosures. He distrusts interviews and discredits all personal narratives because he retains a suspicious posture toward all cultural products. He recognizes the illusion of authenticity and is firm in his conviction that the self is entirely invented. He is impersonal and careful never to slip into an uncritical posture. He has no romantic impulses. By holding steadfast to these objectifying principles of proper methodology, he can trust his own perceptions, observations, and conclusions.

Of course, I have exaggerated these characteristics for effect, but I believe my depiction is faithful to the spirit of Atkinson and Silverman's ideals. Certainly, it can be argued that some very good sociology has been produced by sociologists subscribing to these and/or similar methodological ideals. But when these ideals are universalized as the one right way to do sociological inquiry or as the rightful place or role for narrative, they become alienating, counterproductive, and in my view, absurd. The result is that we withdraw into our own little separate enclaves of like-minded researchers, and if possible, we stay out of contact and out of reach of each other. In effect, we talk to ourselves. Of course, this outcome stems in part from the feeling that our work is unappreciated outside our enclave, which is a feeling provoked and exacerbated by the tone of condemnation we hear when we read responses to our work from outsiders who do not share our objectives or our values. I felt that way when I read these two essays.

Is it possible to talk meaningfully across the divide? Let me try. Atkinson and Silverman repeatedly invoke the devil term *Romantic* in reference to personal narratives. This is one of those terms that is intended to produce an automatic signal response. If you're an academic, it can't be good, or so it is presumed, to be called "Romantic." But we sometimes forget that Romanticism evolved in response and opposition to the cold, mechanical, and unfeel-

ing "reason" of the Enlightenment. The Romantics wanted a life of the heart. They also opposed the Enlightenment's proclivity for categorical division, which they felt falsified reality; and they subscribed to a notion of insider, subjective, even intuitive knowledge in contrast to the prevailing orientation of objective, detached viewing from the outside. In all fairness, I have to agree that a good deal of qualitative research and qualitative methodology is inspired by similar concerns and in reaction to similar excesses.

Of course, Atkinson and Silverman mean something quite different. They equate Romanticism with the impulse to equate the experiential with the authentic, and their reference point for this criticism is Flaubert's "Dictionary of Received Ideas." Notwithstanding Flaubert's antithetical connection to Romanticism and his recognized stature within the realist school of French literature, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) extend Flaubert's parody of the 19th-century bourgeois to contemporary Romantics, analogizing them as people who see themselves "as birds" and "construct themselves via a language of sentiment."

Here is where they draw the line categorically. When they refer to Kleinman (1988) or Frank (1995, 2000) as Romantics, they're not giving a compliment, they're making an accusation. Among other meanings, "you're a Romantic" means you're sentimental and that your emotionality distorts your judgment and reason. No matter how much they beat around the bush, Atkinson and Silverman cannot hide their opposition to emotionality, sentimentality, heart, feeling, and the feminine—the bird. They disguise a gender conflict as a methodological dispute. When they condemn narratives that are couched in therapeutic language, they equate the therapeutic with the sentimental, the Romantic, the mushy, and the popular. Thus, the charge of Romanticism is a surreptitious expression of what feminist critic Jane Tompkins (1987) calls "the trashing of emotion," which she depicts as a war waged ceaselessly by academic intellectuals "against feeling, against women, against what is personal" (p. 178). To ridicule the sentimental, she adds, is akin to "looking down on women, with whom feelings are associated, and on the activities with which women are associated" (Tompkins, 1987, p. 178).

* * *

Where do we find these Romantic claims to "hyperauthenticity" in the work on illness narratives that Atkinson and Silverman so vigorously repudiate? They characterize Kleinman (1988) as a Romantic insofar as his work reflects a conviction that personal narratives of suffering offer a unique entry into the inner life of the patient. However, the direct quotations they abstract from Kleinman's work, by their own admission, show that he is neither naive about nor neglectful of the constructed and social qualities of personal narratives. In the absence of direct evidence, Atkinson imposes his own order on the meanings of Kleinman's work, applying such terms as "the general tenor" (of the book), "the tendency," or "the subtext," to warrant the undocumented implication that Kleinman regards a personal narrative as a mirror of the

inner experience of suffering. What Kleinman says, however, is something quite different: "The point I am making is that the meanings of chronic illness are created by the sick person and his or her circle to make over a wild, disordered *natural* occurrence into a more or less domesticated, mythologized, ritually controlled, therefore *cultural* experience" (p. 48). Later, he adds, "The personal narrative does not merely reflect illness experience, but rather it contributes to the experience of symptoms and suffering" (p. 49). Thus, Kleinman does not appear particularly sentimental nor is he neglectful of the social, cultural, or conventional qualities of narrative. If he privileges or valorizes personal narrative, it is not so much because of the access it provides to an inner self as it is to anchor the ill person's struggle to endure and survive. He merely recognizes the political, ethical, and personal consequences of validating the voices of the afflicted.

Frank (2000) is unapologetic about his desire "to make ill people's stories more highly credited primarily among the ill themselves and then among those who care for them" (p. 136). Frank's agenda is unequivocally activist and political: "I hope to shift the dominant cultural conception of illness away from passivity—the ill person as 'victim of' disease and then recipient of care—toward activity" (Frank, 1995, p. xi). Atkinson (1997) recognizes the ethical dimensions of Frank's work, but ridicules his decision "to privilege certain kinds and occasions of narrative performance . . . in the interest of establishing the authenticity of specific kinds of experience" (p. 338). Although he briefly acknowledges Frank's unsentimental view that the act of telling one's story is a form of memory work in which the past is remade and one's self is recreated out of the narrative wreckage of illness, Atkinson nonetheless takes Frank to task for treating wounded storytellers as heroic and their stories as "true to lived experience." Thus, he appears to be concerned about two distinct aspects of authenticity. The first refers to whether some experiences, such as the act of an ill person telling his or her own story, should be viewed as more authentic than other experiences, such as the doctor telling the patient's story. The second is the connection between the story that is told and the experience depicted in and by the story. Is the story "true" to the experience; that is, is it authentic?

When Atkinson uses the term *authenticity* in reference to Frank's political goal of crediting ill people's stories and thus making them activists, he tends to confuse the first kind of authenticity with the second. Frank's means of achieving his goals requires him to legitimate or, in Atkinson's terms, "authenticate," ill persons' stories. Frank wants to legitimate the ill person's own story, thus empowering the teller and giving the illness story authenticity, which in this context means credibility. Atkinson reads this move as an attempt to privilege the ill person and ignore the doctor and the social context. Quickly, he shifts away from the question of empowerment and, instead, takes up the issue of correspondence and methodological purity. Atkinson doesn't dismiss the goal of empowerment but instead changes the subject. He

complains that Frank's approach celebrates the speaking subject at the expense of the social occasion, and he dismisses the notion that some representations of experience are more or less authentic than others. He is correct, of course, to point out Frank's commitment to empowering and amplifying the voice of the individual sufferer, but his assessment of the sociological deficiencies of Frank's project misses the point. It is as though sociology had no heart or soul or ethical mission (Ellis, 1999). Would it be better for sociology to leave people suffer alone, in silence, confusion, and fear? Shouldn't "good sociology" oppose suffering, promote healing, and give agency to marginalized identities? What does sociology become when the only face it shows is critical, skeptical, dubious, or doubting?

I view empowerment as endemic to authenticity, at least the sense of authenticity that Frank is promoting. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor (1991) observes that authenticity is a moral ideal closely associated with the idea of freedom and self-determined choice. Admittedly, the ideal of authenticity as an expression of the self inevitably rubs against the self-transcendent pressures of the larger social order that inevitably makes claims against it, but this dialectical struggle does not warrant a blanket condemnation of authenticity. Nor can it sanction the sort of trivialized view of authenticity advanced by Atkinson and Silverman. What it does mean is that my desire to make my life an exercise in freedom, a self-motivated investigation of my own original and unique meanings, ultimately necessitates my responses and attachments to moral demands that reach horizons of significance beyond myself (Taylor, 1991). The question is not whether authenticity is possible but whether the ideal of authenticity is good and useful and whether it is an ideal to which we should aspire. It is not an empirical question; it's a moral and ethical one.

My point is that illness narratives have a major role to play in the ill person's quest for authenticity, a journey he or she may never reach but cannot resist. When I read or hear an illness narrative, I take note of the first-person voice, the struggle with adversity, the heartbreaking feelings of stigma and marginalization, the resistance to the authority of canonical discourses, the therapeutic desire to face up to the challenges and to emerge with greater self-knowledge, the opposition to the repression of the body, the difficulty of finding the words to make bodily dysfunction meaningful, the desire for self-expression, and the urge to speak to and assist a community of fellow sufferers. If we trivialize these stories by calling them "confessionals" or mocking them as "hyperauthentic," we not only invalidate the existential struggles for meaning they represent, but we also risk missing what they have to teach us.

What do these stories teach us? One of the main lessons is about the struggle between personal and cultural meanings. Inevitably, the ill person must negotiate the spaces between the domination of cultural scripts of bodily dysfunction out of which one's meanings are constructed and defined, and the situated understanding of one's experience that seeks a unique and personal meaning for suffering. This struggle is personal, cultural, and political. When

Atkinson (1997) bemoans the absence or demonization of physicians in Frank's work, he overlooks the power dynamics to which many illness stories respond, the distribution of influence and control between those who are ill and those who represent them in narrative (Couser, 1997). For example, Anatole Broyard (1992) eloquently demonstrates some of the power incongruities he felt as a prostate cancer patient:

To the typical physician, my illness is a routine accident, while for me it's the crisis of my life. I would be better if I had a doctor who at least perceived this incongruity. . . . I see no reason or need for my doctor to love me—nor would I expect him to suffer with me. I wouldn't demand a lot of my doctor's time. I just wish he would *brood* on my situation for say five minutes, that he would give his whole mind just once, be *bonded* with me for a brief space, survey my soul as well as my flesh, to get at my illness, for each man is ill in his own way. . . . I would also like a doctor who *enjoyed* me. I want to be a good story for him, to give him some of my art in exchange for some of his. (p. 45)

These personal narratives also teach us that ill persons want to know that their suffering matters. Turning an experience into a story is a willful act to make one's afflictions meaningful; it also is a defense against suffering in silence. Couser (1997) depicts the desire to narrate one's illness as a kind of "secular healing ritual" in which one gains comfort, reassurance, and support by sharing the story of his or her suffering body with others. Telling one's story may not heal one's physical wounds, but it may help considerably to heal the wounds to one's self-image by reducing stigmatization. Moreover, as Broyard's (1992) words above express, the thought of an anonymous illness is unbearable to most people. Shocked by the discontinuities of unexpected illness, one may turn to narrative to try to bring them under control and to destigmatize the self. By validating the lived experience of the disabled body, observes Couser (1997), one invalidates the canonical tropes of "invalidity" associated with illness and disability, thus refusing the fate one presumably has been assigned. Thus, illness narratives need to be told not only because the telling of the story can give one the therapeutic benefits of redemptive understanding but also because of the political consequences of connecting the body to the self, revealing embodiment and emotionality as legitimate and significant mediums of lived experience and inscribing bodily dysfunction with positive meaning and value (Ellis, 1998). What Atkinson (1997) questions as potentially a blind alley may better be thought of as a back alley: dark, silent, frightening, mysterious. These stories bring suffering bodies out of the darkness of the alley into the light of day, transgressing the taboos against telling and risking rejection in the name of the right to speak and the longing to be heard.

A third lesson of illness stories posits a unique kind of relationship between the storyteller and the reader. On the whole, illness narratives require an active and reflexive reader who wants to enter into dialogue with the writer and the story. Ideally, the reader is not expected to be distant to

judge the story objectively but rather to be subjectively and emotionally present to participate as an engaged, dialogical partner. Conversely, Atkinson (1997) proposes that illness stories should always be treated with methodological skepticism, as analytical grist for the academic mill. His proposal bypasses the ethical and relational dynamics of these stories, presumably for the good of sociology. Atkinson's ideal sociologist does not respond to these stories as a dialogical partner but stands outside them as a detached critic. Frank (1995) insists, however, that the tale of a wounded storyteller is told for the sake of others just as much as for oneself. The Other is a source of inspiration and purpose insofar as the wounded storyteller gains value and meaning from the expectation that the Other will learn, benefit, and be guided by the tale that is told. The ethical claim is for a dialogic relationship with a reader or a listener that requires engagement from within, not analysis from outside, the story. Thus, Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) complaint that illness stories privilege the speaking subject ignores what most of these storytellers take for granted: that their voices are never wholly unique or original, never the medium of individual speech (Morris, 1997). Ideally, the reader of an illness narrative is a collaborator who exists in a framework of co-constructed meaning. Many wounded storytellers comment on their dialogic connections to model readers. For example, Carolyn Ellis (1995) ends her story of love and loss by acknowledging,

In writing my stories . . . what I have hoped for is insight, companionship, and comfort during my grief. . . . The process of writing and the anticipation of an involved audience has provided that . . . I hoped you, the audience, would identify with my plight and gain a heightened emotional sense of what it felt like to live this experience. . . . In return, I have wanted to offer comfort and companionship when your time for personal tragedy comes . . . and provide a point of comparison for your life story. (pp. 334-335)

Ellis's (1995) dialogic focus is echoed by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins (1993), who advises, "For readers who are not themselves sick, pathography serves a preparatory function, so that when they do encounter some life-threatening illness (and most of us eventually will), this experience will inevitably be informed by what they read" (p. 11). This pedagogical function is not limited to the experience of being ill or disabled but extends to the broader interactional context of family and friends. As Couser (1997) suggests, one important purpose of illness narratives "is to teach those who are well how to respond to those who are ill" (p. 293). Of course, it is possible to treat these stories epistemically, ontologically, and/or practically. My preference is to center on the moral choices, not the methodological ones. The question is not so much how do we know but how should we live (Jackson, 1995).

* * *

It's difficult to unlearn the habits of a lifetime, and this very essay has been fueled by a good deal of the righteousness it is in the business of questioning. (Tompkins, 1992, pp. 232-233)

Most of what you've read thus far I wrote more than a year ago. The manuscript has been sitting on my desk and inside my computer since then, gathering dust, filed away from view, occupying a space in the back of my mind. In the meantime, life moved on. My 87-year-old mother turned 88. She no longer knows who I am, only that I am somebody whose face looks familiar, somebody she once knew and still seems to want to know. She's classified—I should say diagnosed—as demented. Yes, her mental powers have declined, but is she "out of her mind"? Sometimes I think she's made the most rational response to all the losses she's accumulated. If she is out of her mind, well, isn't that the most "mindful" response she could make? A few weeks ago, we were sitting quietly in her room in the nursing home and out of the blue she blurts out, "I'm not here, I'm not anywhere." "Where are you, then? I don't understand" I asked. "I'm unseen," she responded. "I think I see you, Mom," I said lowering my voice and looking directly into her blurry eyes. There was a pause; then, she said, "I'm between and betwixt." Later on, she observed, in a reflective tone, "There's nothing wrong with me. [Pause.] Oh, yes, there is. [Long pause.] I'm very mixed up, very mixed up. Arthur, don't ever let yourself get mixed up."

Never mind that she correctly called me Arthur for the first time in more than a year or that she was able to metacommunicate in this reflexive way. Suddenly, we were there, together, in the moment, as if she were the mother of my childhood again, protecting me, cautioning me, torn between her own needs and her mothering impulses. Can a demented person go meta? How could this happen? Would it ever occur again? Where are you, Mother?

I've been dealing with my mother's decline, our relationship, and my obligations as her primary caretaker and guardian for the past 4 years. I've had bad dreams and difficult awakenings. I've reflected endlessly on my life and hers and ours, trying to make sense of "now" in terms of "then" and wondering how I will look back later on at what I do and say and feel now. I've asked myself, What is my calling here? Who does this situation call on me to be? I've been trying to give my life and the situation in which I'm immersed what Mark Freeman (1997) calls "narrative integrity" and, in the context of this article, what I term "narrative authenticity." Freeman observes that narrative integrity requires considerable "vigilance," because we have to be present to ourselves, in the moment, and mindful of the ease with which we turn away, get distracted, forget what's important. We can drift along, and most of us do, moving from project to project, keeping questions of ultimate significance at a distance. As life goes on, especially as we are called on to cope with the mortality of those close to us or move ever closer to our own, the integrity of one's own life comes more into question. Heidegger (1962) saw the question of authenticity as a problem of authorship that was manifested most decisively when a person confronts his or her own death. At that moment, we can see the significance death casts on life as we encounter the distinct difference between one's own death and the deaths of others, which may bring into sharper focus the enduring struggle between individuality—"my-own-ness"—and anonymity (Carr, 1986). If no one can die for me, well, no one can live for me either (Carr, 1986). My narrative vigilance then draws me toward greater consciousness of the choices I can make about how to live and what to do.

When I ask, then, "Who am I? What should I do? What story do I want to be a part of or be remembered by?" I am asking, "What choices do I have?" My authenticity is not a claim to originality or uniqueness but to responsibility, choice, and vigilance. What I choose may be a part someone else had in mind for me, wittingly or unwittingly, even a social role, inherited or appropriated, that many others before me have played. Certainly, others in my relational world will be characters with parts in my story that I have to take into account and to whom I am accountable. Indeed, to a large extent, my recollection of the past in terms of my present predicament is an exercise in confronting my own otherness and what it calls out in me—more likely a self-transcendence than a self-absorption. My journey toward narrative authenticity is thus my looking back from where I am now on the whole of my life (and my connections to the other people in it) in an effort to place myself meaningfully into a story that is, as much as it can be, a story of my own making. How, other than through narrative, can one draw a bead on the truth of one's life, however unreachable and contingent that truth ultimately may be? As Freeman (1997) states,

It is only in retrospect, through narrative, that one is in a position to survey the whole that is one's life, and it is only through such a survey that there exists the possibility of obtaining the truth about that life, indefinite and ungraspable though it is. (p. 387)

In light of my own struggles for narrative authenticity, I have found it difficult to complete this article and send it off for publication. Frankly, I don't want to be the kind of academic who tries to kill off all opposition to the way he sees the world. Over the course of my life as a professor, I've seen far too much of this nastiness and symbolic violence at conferences, on the pages of scholarly journals, and in book reviews. I'm ashamed of the times when I was a part of it or I could have stopped it and didn't. Yet here I am, looking at myself and wondering, Aren't the same feelings that inspire that kind of conduct those that energized this article? Am I acting as high and mighty as the authors to whom I'm reacting? It's a sobering thought that makes me question whether these violent patterns I was socialized into can ever be transformed.

When I read over the sections of the essay I'd written last year, I sensed that I had failed to achieve one of my main goals. I hadn't reached across the differences that divide Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) brand of social science from mine. They complained about how personal narrative researchers see one perspective as the only perspective; then, they went on to do pretty much the same thing, defining one, single, solitary, rightful place for narrative inquiry. They took the scientific high ground and from there cast the rest of us in the role of villains: We're self-indulgent, exhibitionist, sentimental, not very smart, and we're in their way. I complain about the narrowness, exclusivity, and self-interest of their criticisms, then go on to advance the efficacy of illness narratives, pointing out what may be missed by a hyperrational, detached, insensitive, heady, analytical take on the nature of narrative. So have I done any better? Or are we both locked into the habitual, competitive, winner-take-all form of academic controversy?

I understand now that what I reacted to most strongly was the feeling that if they got their way, then we couldn't get ours. I don't want to be excluded, and I don't feel a

need to exclude their program of narrative research either. They're not villains, and neither are we. But how do we make our way out of this accustomed pattern of disagreement and demonization?

The one way out that comes to mind is to apply Atkinson's (1997) own ethical standard, which is a good one—that "what is to be avoided . . . [is] just one form of culture, just one mode of performance, just one kind of text" (p. 242)—and extend it to say let's not have just one kind of sociology, one kind of social science, or one rightful place for narrative. I can live with a scientific and/or cultural sociology that analyzes and examines narratives as a mode of social analysis applying canons of methodological rigor as long as this agenda does not exclude and may, in fact, encourage an ethical, political, and personal sociology that listens to the voices of ill, disabled, and other silenced persons telling, writing, and/or performing their own stories in order to destigmatize, empower, open up dialogue, challenge canonical discourses, engage emotionality and embodiment, and give sociology a moral and ethical center. Ideally, the question should not be which kind of social science is right (or rightful), as if one had to be lethal and the other healthful, but rather how each different agenda can be used to achieve a better social world and more enriching social practices.

* * *

As for truth, rather than being conceived in terms of the degree of correspondence to fact or reality, we might think of it in terms of that which is disclosed or made manifest to us—or, perhaps better still, re-collected—through the process of self-understanding. (Freeman, 1997, p. 387)

I want to conclude by taking up the issue of narrative truth, which is raised by what I earlier referred to as the second sense of authenticity applied by Atkinson and Silverman (1997) in their criticisms of personal narratives. Here, authenticity becomes a measure of the truth claims of personal narrative as a mode of representation. They complain that personal narratives "are not, in other words, any more authentic or pure a reflection of the self than any other socially organized set of practices" (p. 322) and that too many writers consider personal narratives to be "an especially authentic mode of social representation" (p. 312), giving access to subjectivity and reflecting lived experiences. This is an expression of the familiar narrative distortion thesis in which narratives are depicted as unfaithful to experience insofar as they provide a coherence and order that real events don't possess (Mink, 1969; White, 1981). From the perspective of postmodern doubt, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) want to say that all accounts of self dwell in language, that language is a medium of culture, and that any account of self therefore must be a conventional form of talk, a way of speaking contingent on recognizable cultural practices of representation. Thus, self-narration is inevitably and indubitably inauthentic: a construction, a distortion, a misrepresentation, or in the extreme case, a lie. But if self-narration is a lie or a distortion, then what is the Truth? How can we know it? Can we say that a self-representation is inauthentic or only an appearance if we have no conception of the authentic or the real, of what is beyond doubt, or what is certain? From where Atkinson and

Silverman (1997) view the world, "the very possibility of authenticity is in question" (p. 320); thus, the only issue of social significance becomes how narratives are constructed. They may have doubts about authenticity, but Atkinson and Silverman have considerable confidence in the categorical differences between what is true and what is constructed, between living life and narrating it, between experiences and stories (Freeman, 1997). If narratives are insufficiently authentic, it is because they don't measure up to the experiences, the selves, or the lives they seek to represent. By consigning narratives to the realm of fictions, inventions, or social constructions, Atkinson and Silverman ironically elevate the self and lived experiences to something more tangible than stories, more really real. Were this not the case, they would have no grounds for concluding that narratives are not authentic. The question is, Against what are narratives to be compared? The events they depict? The self they represent? Lived experiences? As Freeman (1998a) observes, the whole argument about the distortions of narrative usually turns out to be parasitic on an empiricist account of reality. The charge of distortion is inextricably tied to the possibility of undistortion, a getting to the true bottom of things that postmodernists usually reject.

Of course, the drift of Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) argument moves in the opposite direction. The self is no less constructed than are the narratives that represent it. If narratives fail to authentically represent the self, it is because the self is invented narratively. Apparently, the self cannot be discovered or understood; it can only be created or invented. What, then, is the difference between the self and the narratives (and other biographical workings) that invent (or represent) it? Seeing no essential difference between the self and its narrative constructions, Atkinson and Silverman cannot see the project of self-understanding as anything but fruitless. There is nothing true or authentic to be investigated or uncovered through the workings of narrative.

For two authors so concerned about the rightful place—the very essence—of narrative, this would appear to be a sad place to end up. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) are right to point to the ways in which life and narrative are inextricably connected. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it. Narrative is both about living and part of it. But the kind of truth or authenticity that Atkinson and Silverman take as representative of personal narrative research exaggerates and misrepresents the kinds of truth to which these stories aspire. The authenticity to which they speak is worrisome only if one sees narrative interpretation as a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one's life, to recover already constituted meanings (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). But it is not the "facts" themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings. Rather, it is an articulation of the significance and meaning of one's experiences. It is within the frame of a story that facts gain their importance. Life stories may be based on facts, but they are not determined by them. The facts achieve significance and intelligibility by being articulated within a temporal frame that considers what came before and

what comes after. Stories that address the meanings of a life always seek a way of extending them into the future (Rosenwald, 1992). Thus, to reduce and restrict narrative inquiry to studies of how narratives are constructed and to treat narratives exclusively as social facts is to neglect the profound and significant virtues of narrative in the project of self-understanding, an endeavor that may be unreachable but, for most of us, appears to be inescapable. We are not scientists seeking laws that govern our behavior; we are storytellers seeking meanings that help us cope with our circumstances. Personal narratives are not so much academic as they are existential, reflecting our desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning, which is what gives life its imaginative and poetic qualities (Freeman, 1998b).

What can it mean, then, to say that narrative is true to experience? I think we can do no better than to recognize that narrative truth is pragmatic truth. The question is not whether narratives convey the way things actually were but rather what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put. As adults, we have lost any semblance of narrative innocence by being socialized into a narrative realm of consciousness. We use language narratively, and we have seen, heard, read, and interpreted stories from childhood on; we are already embedded in a story and committed to a life imbued with meaning. The call of stories thus inspires us to find language that is adequate to the darkness and obscurity of experience. We narrate to make sense of ourselves and our experiences over the course of time. Thus, narrative is our means of recollecting the meanings of past experiences, turning life into language, and disclosing to us the truth in our experiences. Narrative is true to experience in the sense that experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality saturated with the possibilities of meaning, however perishable, momentary, and contingent (Freeman, 1998a).

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Binger or Ludwik: Who should we emulate? Scientist or poet? Social analyst or ethicist? Theory builder or instrument of agency? Critic or activist? Doubting skeptic or empathic listener? Coles (1989) never rejects or condemns what he learned from Binger, although he makes it clear that Ludwik made the more lasting impression and influence on his life as a teacher, as a scholar, and as a human being engaged in the project of self-understanding.

It is good to have options from which to choose. We each must decide what calls us to stories. For some of us—I know it's true for me—finding a good way to live our lives, to do the right things, to give voice to experiences that have been shrouded in silence, to bring our intellect and emotionality together, to merge the personal and the academic, and to give something back to others draws us to the poetic, moral, and political side of narrative work. But making a choice does not mean turning those who make a different choice into our enemies or rivals. Our goal should not be to dominate those who choose a different path but to figure out how to live and work in harmony with each other, regardless of our diverse desires.

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