

Reflections on the interweavings of narrative ideas and the Christian faith

A review of the book *Interweavings: Conversations between narrative therapy and Christian faith* by R. Cook & I. Alexander (2009).

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It was with excitement that I held the book *Interweavings: Conversations between narrative therapy and Christian faith* (Cook & Alexander, 2009) – excitement, because I felt I was about to embark on a journey of discovering the thoughts of fellow practitioners who had gone on ahead of me in this journey of understanding narrative ideas in relation to their Christian faith. I suddenly felt I had stepped out of isolation towards identification and support.

My four years of learning and practicing narrative ideas as a therapist in a church context has been an experience of trying to find a manageable fit between my attraction to narrative practices and my Christian faith. It has been a time of struggle and wrestling for the best way of understanding narrative ideas from the perspective of my faith, and for a way of expressing them in my context, where postmodern philosophy is generally viewed with suspicion. Over time, I have resolved some of my concerns, but finding a community of believers of the same faith in Cook & Alexander (2009), expressing their own struggles, has invited me to revisit my thoughts and ideas. This engagement has been refreshing, firming up some of the ideas I had, while challenging me to view other possibilities in a different way. Please let me share with you some of the themes that stood out for me while reading this book.

Diversity

In tracing her own journey, Irene Alexander (2009) recounts:

I have always been fascinated with people's differences and the diversity of motivation and therefore patterns of perceiving the world and each other ... This analysis of past experiences resulted in a unique description of each individual's preferred way of operation. It was similar to what narrative approaches would call the alternative story. (pp. 4–5)

Diversity and differences were also my companions and they taught me a great deal when I first started working with people who were severely multiply disabled. This was some two decades ago and institutionalizing people with disabilities was commonplace. The dominant message to a social worker fresh out of school was, 'These people don't know anything. Just feed them, change them and keep their families informed that they are all right.'

But I was not satisfied with just 'feeding them and changing them'. As I got to know the names of all sixty of them, called them by name and smiled and talked to them, I saw over time that each of them had different ways of responding to me. Siok Tin¹ had a charming smile that lit up her face. Tan would bang his fists on the table to tell me that he was there – that he existed. Goh would gurgle loudly when I talked and massaged his hands and feet.

As I worked with them over six years, I learned that each person had a unique way of being, a preferred way of expressing themselves. Now, in hindsight, being familiar with narrative ideas, I can see how each of these friends, termed 'hopeless' by the society of that day, had moments of alternative identity experience where they were able to break free from the preconceived ideas that existed in their context. I am grateful that they shared these moments with me.

Freedom

Christ-followers today often come to counselling weighed down by expectations to be a certain way at home, at church, in society and within themselves. Narrative therapy is a way of exploring Christian spirituality because it can assist clients to identify social forces that are conforming them. It can aid the process of resisting these forces and coming to know personal and social liberation. (Cook, 2009, p. 49)

Most of the Christians that I have conversations with in the therapy room struggle with these '*social forces that are conforming them*'. As suggested in the above quote, some of these social forces may be identified as 'the Christian subculture'. These could include from the way we Christians are expected to dress when we come to church, ways we are expected to raise our children, and the marital relationships we are to have – in other words, a lifestyle that we are expected to conform to.

Let me tell you the story of Heng Geok, a forty-six year old woman, who was struggling with the effects of divorce – struggling as she was trying to make sense of the social norms of the Christian subculture. Heng Geok had been married for twenty-three years and became a homemaker soon after her son was born. She was trying to live the life of an ideal Christian wife, mother, and faithful church-goer. However, when she discovered her husband had had multiple affairs, she decided that 'enough was enough' (as she said to me). She contemplated divorce, but it was at that point that she faced a dilemma.

Her Christian friends were divided in their advice to her. Some supported her intentions to divorce. Some were against it as it was 'sin' to divorce. A man of authority in the Christian faith, with whom Heng Geok consulted, advised her not to initiate the divorce but to wait for her husband to do so – so the 'sin' would not be upon her. In our conversations in the therapy room, we deconstructed the dominant messages that Heng Geok was receiving.

I then asked her, 'What do you think Jesus would think or say to you?'

She replied that he would understand her years of suffering with her husband, and the agony of continuing in the marital relationship.

'What would Jesus tell you to do?'

She said she didn't know but thought that Jesus would want her to be happier than what she was experiencing now. This was a tiny flicker of light in an otherwise dark, problem-saturated story.

We spent many sessions together over two years, building upon an alternative story and her preferred way of being. Heng Geok struggled during this time to rediscover what was important to her, her hopes and dreams. She clearly wanted to move away from an identity of a wife and a home-maker and gradually began to see herself as a single parent with a dream of joining the workforce and becoming financially independent. Through Michael White's (2004) 'migration of identity map', she explored a different identity to the one that she had been so familiar with for more than two decades. Heng Geok worked towards managing the 'oppressive' and strong social forces that seemed to tell her not to divorce and would come again and again to her in different ways. Some would be as subtle as friends not inviting her to their homes after she separated from her husband – the invitation was only for couples. Working towards her freedom from the social norms and taking a strong position in what she believed God would want for her, Heng Geok finally went through the legal system to end her marriage. Five years passed, and now, when she occasionally comes to chat with me, I see her as a person who embarked on a journey to liberate herself from the dominant discourse about divorce. Narrative ideas helped me to walk alongside her, to collaborate with her in re-authoring her story.

Viewing the person: Self and identity

The idea of the 'self' was one that I wrestled with for a long time. My learnings from my undergraduate and postgraduate days in the field of social work and later in counselling as well as my Christian understandings, had invited me to hold a structuralist view of people – I understood that the 'self' resided within the person. However, when I came across narrative ideas and social constructionist philosophy, these proposed that the self is relational – that we know ourselves in the context of, and because of, relationships.

I pondered on the relational idea of selfhood and it made sense for me, coming from an Asian culture, where the self was seen within the community or in relation to the community. In many situations, the individual's voice would have been subordinated by the louder voices of the family or the community. However, I did wonder where was the self that I had learnt about – that had a personality, a gender, and so on. My puzzlement in this area was also reflected by Nicola Hoggard Creegan (2009) when she said:

Our circumstances and our cultural context and our significant family do deeply influence our sense of self and our story, but there is also significant biological and genetic input into who we are. (p. 60)

Reading this book has helped me clarify my thinking, and I now share Lex McMillan's (2009) view that people are both structural and relational (p. 30). I see that while the context may influence the person, a person may be able to make choices about their preferred identity.

Donald McMenamin (2009) talks about the difference between the 'self' and 'identity'. He sees the self as 'self-in-relationship-with-God'. Identity differs from the God-known-self in the idea that identity is the result of the everyday conclusions that a person arrives at. McMenamin sees it as life's purpose to align the everyday identity with the God-known-self (pp. 145–146). Following McMenamin's thinking, I see narrative therapy as providing the practices to explore and make choices about re-authoring identity, mindful about realigning it with this particular sense of the notion 'self'. How does this relate to my practice?

I can think of a time when I spoke with Rex, a nine-year-old boy. Rex and his Mum came to have a conversation about what was happening at his school. The teacher described Rex to Mum as a 'trouble-maker', picking fights with his classmates, disturbing the class (when the teacher didn't happen to be around), and more. In this situation, I realised that the school context had shaped an identity for Rex, but Mum was resisting this identity conclusion. She felt that Rex was not like that in other contexts. She could also think of other situations in school when other teachers never made a complaint about Rex, except this one teacher.

Mum eventually blurted out, 'Since Rex became a Christian, I cannot think he is all that bad.'

In revisiting the above story at this point, and using McMenamin's ideas of self and identity, I would have liked to ask Mum about the meaning of, 'Since Rex became a Christian, I cannot think he is all that bad'. I would also ask, 'If Rex is not all that bad, what would he be like?'

I wonder if Mum would like to explore the ideas of Rex's God-in-self and his identity from the context of his everyday life – in this case the identity conclusion that the teacher had given Rex – and perhaps work towards another identity which is more aligned with Rex's God-in-self.

Position of the counsellor in a church context

The linking of implicit power claims with spirituality has meant that many Christians have believed that pastors and other leaders speak with 'the voice of God' ... and not examining power practices leads to a culture of power-over which is not transparent and which all too easily can become abusive. (Alexander, 2009, p. 72)

The very fact that I am a staff member and working in a church privileges me with a position of authority, which, as Alexander describes, 'speaks with "the voice of God"'. I am aware of the positional power inherent in my role as a church worker, and also that I hold specialised knowledge which Alexander calls 'expert power' (2009, p. 71). Embracing narrative ideas, however, has made me mindful of taking a more collaborative position with the people consulting me. I see myself positioned alongside the person, and in partnership we work towards re-authoring their preferred story. In addition, my stance as a Christ-follower practicing narrative therapy is to listen out for the unique outcomes, moments of light and hope, to provide a safe space for the telling of more moments of an alternative identity experience which for me is in line with God's narrative, a narrative of hope and life-giving.

An audience

Since I started learning about narrative practices, I have been attracted by the ideas of outsider-witnessing. The idea of the participation of an audience in the therapy room excited me. I saw isolation being pushed away and replaced by connection. In the telling and the re-telling of the narrative, there was also a sense of the client having a different experience of self. This powerful experience of having an audience had me also see the similarities of what a community of believers could do in supporting one another in their journeys towards healing and transformation. Irene Alexander, in her interview with Silver, mentions:

In Christian circles, it's about being part of the body of Christ, the people who share your life and your story. So the spiritual gifts are to build up the body, to help people thicken the story and grow up into Christ. (Alexander, 2009, p. 206)

In my practice, I have tried as much as I could to incorporate having an audience, when appropriate. Let me share with you a story. Suni, an eighteen-year-old young woman, first came to consult me because of her struggles with the effects of anxiety. In our journey together over the months, Suni gradually came to recognise the tactics and strategies of anxiety. She took a position against anxiety and claimed that it robbed her of her dream of independence. She had hopes of travelling overseas by herself, having a boyfriend, and eventually going abroad to study. In order to thicken her alternative story, I invited Jenny, another eighteen-year-old who had gone through a similar experience with anxiety, to be an outsider witness. As Jenny was now embracing her preferred identity and was learning 'to depend more on God to push away anxiety when it visits me again', I felt that Jenny would be a helpful audience. After Suni gave permission to have Jenny present during the next session, Jenny readily agreed.

I followed the process of the outsider-witnessing/definitional ceremony map of narrative practice (White, 2007). Suni experienced a strong connection with Jenny's story. She felt she did not know there was another person 'out there' that had gone through the feelings and thoughts that she was experiencing. Suni ended her re-telling of the re-telling with the words, 'I feel so normal now'. Since the experience described above, I have been convinced to continue on several other occasions to encourage Christ-followers to contribute to each other's lives as outsider witnesses.

With Rani, I realised another effect of having an audience. Rani told me that she was surprised she could find the words to express her thoughts and feelings. When I asked her why she was surprised, she replied, 'I guess I have never said such things to anyone before. I say them in my head when I talk to myself but it is different when I tell you.'

I was curious to know the differences and what they meant to her.

Rani felt that when she spoke aloud it was as if the 'load rolled away'. What it meant for her was that she felt 'lighter' and 'more free' from the problem.

'I think I have recovered a bit more of myself. I think God's light is shining brighter in me.'

It was a powerful learning experience for me to be mindful of carving out a safe space for another to talk and, during those times, to listen and not to rush through the session. The therapist, in this case, is the audience.

Final reflections

My personal journey of bringing my Christian faith together with narrative ideas has passed the times of intense struggle when I tried to make sense of both of them coming together. I have reached a territory of some calmness, in which I comprehend that, undergirding my understandings of life, it is God who can restore and who gives hope. Narrative practices provide the platform and translate this hope into action. In moments of unique outcome (as narrative explains it), I see hope and God who shines His light through, bringing about points of alternative experience. Threading together these points of alternative experiences gradually thickens the alternative story – unearthing God’s narrative of hope into the lives of the persons.

Note

1. All names have been changed.

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