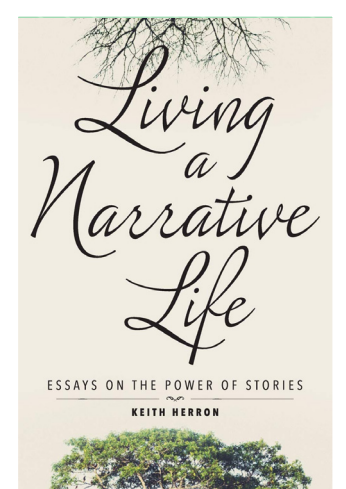




CBF Book Discussion Guide



Living a Narrative Life: Essays on the Power of Stories By Keith D. Herron

Overview

We hold our stories inside in the vault of our memories, and largely we've made what meaning we have in them on our own. We live storied lives and understand life itself as an unfolding of stories. We are brimming with stories stacked from toe to head, from the earliest to the most recent. While they are mostly mundane, often they are funny, tragic or pivotal.

There are too many stories held in the consciousness to be accessible and the overflow of them are then stashed in the stacks of memory's library. These memories can be mapped by connecting the dots that make meaning out of the whole of life. Some memories are so deeply filed that they defy our ability to retrieve them until some trigger is pulled that suddenly and without conscious effort breaks loose a sliver of a memory or a sense of déjà vu that was at one time alive with wonder.

In narrative thought, no one meaning is the only meaning and, likely, most of our stories are not our stories alone as they are shared by others. Typically, there are other characters in these memories and they have their own versions of these shared stories. There is a richness in exploring them with those who've experienced the same experiences we have. Almost surely, there are differing ways in which the same stories are remembered and any additional meanings derived by these shared memories only deepen them.

However, one's version of a shared story can be such that we might question whether we can claim them as "shared." To be consumed with memory's so-called facts is a limited way to relive them as our memories tend to be fuzzy as to what actually happened. Thickening the story with the perspectives

gleaned from others helps us gain new insights about ourselves and about the meaning of what we've experienced.

Collectively, our stories and how we tell them map life as we understand it. Each story can be dissected as a unique moment; but string them together and they add up to the telling of who we are, why we exist, what we think or believe, and also dress the stage for what might happen next.

There is the long life-story and there are the vignettes. We live from story to story episodically. We live our stories as if swinging on the monkey bars on the playground. This may or may not make sense until one steps outside the moment and sees the trail of stories that have delivered one to this point—story after story as part of a larger whole making up the arc of life. A single story or experience may or may not be a continuation of the story that preceded it and almost surely won't be suggestive of the next story. That's not how it works.

But when one's stories are seen as a whole, they become pointillistic vignettes in which even the pointless stories add something to the whole arc of our lives as stories pile on top of stories. Even the most common experiences make noble and purposeful what is agreeable: namely, that we live extraordinarily common lives. Many would suggest these common lives are then made holy by their very commonness.

I come to know myself when I know my stories and savor them as mine. A life of meaning is created when we re-experience our stories in order to mine them of deeper truth. Buried in each story is some treasure for us to discover. When one can accept that they are episodes of a larger story, the width and depth and sheer volume can be held more appreciably.



Developing a Narrative Group

A group of people who wish to explore their stories together can be an amazing experience of community. Persons can be gathered with purpose to share their stories; or, an existing group can adopt a narrative process for the group. Such groups might be a book club or any small group willing to explore their stories. Groups of four to five are optimal because of the nature of how group members share. The larger the group, the more limiting the time together or the possibility that all members can stay involved. Attendance is important as stories need active listeners who are present with the others in order for the stories to be experienced together. There is a cumulative value in each session of sharing, as the value of shared stories amass for depth and insight. Consider these suggestions for forming a narrative group:

- Commit to the process and to one another. Make a clear commitment to engage this with purpose. Clarify the commitment: When and where will we meet? Perhaps the group could commit to a series of conversations, three or four gatherings to give the process a chance to succeed.
- Develop a group covenant to create the right atmosphere to share your stories. Narrative groups should be meaningful and not constrictive or controlling; but the right structures and the group's agreement to identifiable conversation guidelines will strengthen the chance that the process will work.
- Adhere to the Parker Palmer Rules for group conversations: No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting anyone straight. The Parker Palmer rules refine the group's opportunity to create a safe haven in which to tell their most vulnerable stories.
- Practice asking "not knowing" questions. Quite simply, taking a not-knowing position means that we would ask questions for which we don't have preconceived ideas or theories about what outcome might be achieved.
- Draw upon "relentless optimism." Narrative therapy has adopted for its effect "relentless optimism" as a way in which to frame the narratives that are explored.

Erik Erikson and others have explored the arc of life, conceived as the stages of life that are a part of the gift of existence. This book explores a simplified map of life that focuses on five such stages: Childhood, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Middle Adulthood and Older Adulthood.

But the book also examines a group of stories called the "prologue stories" and the "epilogue stories." These essays consider the way in which our story is not limited to the time between our birth and our death, but how our stories reach before and after our lived experience to include how those stories, upstream and downstream of life, are experienced or remembered by others.

Each of these essays includes a series of topics that a narrative group could explore together. There are suggested topics that groups could select as the basis for their conversations. Refer to the end of each of the seven chapters for guidance on how your group might explore their stories.