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Narrative Ethics

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Final Defining Moments Paper

**Introduction**

As defined by Arthur Frank, narrative ethics “takes place in telling and listening…ultimately narrative ethics is about recognizing how much we as fellow-humans have to do with each other” (Frank, 163). Through this project and this course, I have found that narrative ethics is exactly what Frank defines it as: a way in which we learn about each other and try to relate to one another. It is about acknowledging our differences – different backgrounds, perspectives, interests, faiths – and accepting them as a component and influence of a person’s narrative. I have also learned that another key aspect of narrative ethics is human interaction. Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, allow for evolution and learning about others and, equally, about ourselves. By engaging with narratives through storytelling and storylistening, we enable ourselves to be vulnerable and thus, willing to grow and evolve.

**Empathic Methodology**

For the Defining Moments project, I have chosen to focus on my experience on the Camino de Santiago. I wrote a reflection on this experience, in which I explored the immediate and also long-term affects this experience has had on me. Beyond just the opportunity to see and explore northern Spain, the Camino de Santiago also provided me with an opportunity to explore and learn about myself.

As I continue with this project, I must consider the various roles I will take on: a storyteller, storylistener and narrative inquirer. It is likely that I have held these roles at some point previously, however, it is unlikely that I have been fully engaged and cognizant of my responsibilities and capabilities within these roles. Therefore, in this methodology, I will attempt to establish responsibilities and guidelines for each of these roles as I move forward with this project.

As a storyteller, I will strive to be as honest and open as possible, leaving no room for doubts or regrets as I “speak” about my experience on the Camino de Santiago. Harter (2009) explains the value of being open, when she describes the process as a, “conversion of disruption into sensemaking about selves and social orders that make a well-wrought story so powerful, comforting, dangerous and culturally essential” (Harter, 674). From this explanation, we can discern the value of sharing Defining Moments, as a process to sensemaking, enlightenment and acceptance. By presenting my raw, true emotions and thoughts regarding my experience on the Camino, I hope to enable others to connect to my story and alternatively, to allow them to encourage me to continue fulfilling my duties as a storyteller. Furthermore, I will attempt to stay true to my experience and not alter my story to downplay or undermine any of the experiences I have had; they are uniquely mine and, therefore, they have significance. I anticipate this will be my greatest challenge and I will likely need reassurance and support to maintain the naturalness and trueness of my Defining Moment.

As a storylistener, I will create a safe, welcoming environment, in which the storyteller feels comfortable to share their Defining Moment. This environment will likely be based on what type of space they feel most at ease in, whether it is Slayter, River Road or the Bandersnatch. Additionally, I will reassure the storyteller throughout the sharing of their story so they know I am engaged and supportive throughout the process. I will listen for moments in the narrative where they seem to still struggle or, alternately, express extreme clarity. From these moments, I will ask them questions to understand how they experienced, and continue to experience, these moments within their larger Defining Moment. I will also attempt to ask questions that will challenge the storyteller to consider their Defining Moment from a perspective they may have not previously considered.

In her introduction to Defining Moments, Harter provides questions that demonstrate the potential and usefulness of asking questions. She muses, “Storytelling matters – it reflects and contributes to idioms, shaping people’s thoughts and actions. What might any given story awaken or evoke in the onlooker? What can it teach, incite, inspire, or provoke?” (Harter, 675). Thus, as referenced by Harter, I will strive to make myself open to the growth and enlightenment possibilities I may experience by listening to my partner’s Defining Moment, while also creating a comfortable, nurturing environment in the role of storylistener. Therefore, it will be made clear from the start that all questions are being asked from a perspective of kindness and understanding, with the storyteller understanding that the questions are only intended for their benefit. Although I anticipate feeling more comfortable in the role of storylistener than storyteller, it is possible that I will struggle to respond with the same empathy and sensitivity that is most constructive for this process. To combat this, I will attempt to continue holding the mindset I have while fulfilling the role of storyteller, one of vulnerability, acceptance and understanding.

Finally, as a narrative inquirer, I hope to gain a greater understanding and appreciation for others’ Defining Moments. I cherish the unique stories and experiences that make us who we are, and this project enables and encourages us to embrace our experiences by giving us the power to present them however we would like. The potential this project allows can be connected to Frank’s discussion of self-stories, especially self-stories as a way out of narrative wreckage. Although the stories shared through this project may not represent ‘wrecked narratives,’ the implementation and acknowledgement of self-stories will further facilitate this process. Frank explains this concept, saying, “The self-story is told both to others and to one’s self; each telling is enfolding within the other. The act of telling is a dual reaffirmation. Relationships with others are reaffirmed, and the self is reaffirmed” (Frank, 56). Therefore, through this process, I hope to learn new ways of experiencing and interpreting various situations and moments; perhaps new perspectives to look at the world. Finally, I will strive to communicate acceptance, kindness, honesty, openness and integrity in all of the roles, which I believe will enable the greatest, most beneficial experience for all of those involved in this process.

**Meta-Narrative Analysis**

The process of storytelling is one that appears simple. It would seem that there are essentially two roles: the storyteller and the storylistener. And it would also seem that the responsibilities of these roles are just as they sound: to tell and to listen. But what if this process and these roles weren’t as simple as they seem. This is, in fact, the case.

The act of storytelling requires so much more than simply telling and listening to a story. Storytelling involves and cultivates an interaction and relationship between the storyteller and the storylistener. The storyteller and the storylistener are mutually reinforcing roles that open channels of communication, with each role providing feedback and input into that system of communication. This interaction is unique and dynamic; every component and response, whether verbal or non-verbal, contributes to the process of storytelling. It is important to note that there aren’t just the roles of storyteller and storylistener; there is the additional role of narrative inquirer. This role, while not outwardly apparent, helps to reveal and emphasize the benefits and gains available through the process of storytelling. Imparting wisdom, acknowledging struggles and accepting gratitude are all results that can go unacknowledged without the role of narrative inquirer.

As I explained in my methodology, there are numerous responsibilities related to each role, such as being responsive, engaging and positive when telling and listening to a story. Additionally, I outlined the importance of being open and honest as both a storyteller and a storylistener. When I engaged in my interpersonal dialogue with Clary, I was cognizant of the implementation and commitment of my methodology; however, I focused primarily on being engaged with the story and present in the moment.

Clary and I decided to meet at River Road, which gave us the opportunity to get off campus into a different setting and also allowed us to take some time for ourselves. I think by having our dialogue off-campus we were able to truly immerse and commit ourselves to the conversation. Both of us were conscious of turning off our phones and putting away anything that could distract us during our conversation. Additionally, there weren’t many people at River Road at this time, which further limited distractions. For me, this fact enabled me to be open and honest when I told my story because I wasn’t concerned with or aware of other people.

I assumed the role of storyteller and narrated my Defining Moment first. At the beginning, I found myself slipping into my natural tendency to downplay and shy away from being completely open, especially when trying to narrate the emotional and sentimental components of my Defining Moment. However, as I continued telling my story, I felt more comfortable and willing to reveal these aspects of the story, most likely because I had determined that Clary was a worthy and safe storylistener. When I say “worthy,” I don’t mean to say that my Defining Moment is so sacred and special that it can’t be shared with everyone – given the opportunity, I would likely talk endlessly about my incredible, influential experience on the Camino de Santiago. With that said, there are aspects and emotions in my Defining Moment that I struggle to share with just anyone, thus my need to determine whether someone is worthy and willing to observe these components of my story.

One aspect of this process that was difficult was finding a way to begin and end the telling of my Defining Moment. Before we even began sharing our Defining Moments, Clary and I decided to provide each other with some background information on ourselves to make each other feel more comfortable and informed through the process. During this exchange, Clary and I discovered that we had both studied abroad in the same Spanish city. Although she studied abroad there in the summer and I was there during the fall semester, we nonetheless had many abroad memories and experiences in common. This connection actually worked perfectly to lead into my Defining Moment, in addition to Clary having prior knowledge of the Camino. By interacting with an engaged and knowledgeable storylistener, I found myself excited and open to share my experience on the Camino with her.

When I assumed the role of storylistener, I tried to provide a comfortable, safe environment for Clary to share her Defining Moment. I focused on exhibiting signs of engagement, so she knew I was interested and supportive as she told her story. Additionally, as Clary shared her story, I believe I assumed the role of narrative inquirer by mentally extracting parts of her story and finding applications to my life and other possible situations.

For example, Clary spoke about her Christian faith and her realization that everyone deserves to be loved. As a person who identifies with the Jewish faith, I have never really had a conversation like this before. Therefore, it provided a new experience, perspective and knowledge to consider and be aware of. I was inspired by how dedicated and involved Clary is to her faith, which made me reflect on my commitment to Judaism and what role it plays in my life. What I found particularly unique about Clary’s Defining Moment was that it wasn’t a specific moment, but rather a subtle evolution that one day, she realized had been going on for quite some time. I can relate to this type of evolution, where you don’t realize you believe in something or act a certain way until it is questioned or highlighted. Clary’s acknowledgment and awareness of this evolution revealed the power and presence of our everyday habits and how subtle or obsolete something may seem, but how, over time, that minute aspect can make all the difference.

**Conclusion: Findings and Implications**

As I reflect through the multiple components of this project, I am able to discern distinct movement and progress towards a greater understanding of what constitutes and encompasses narrative ethics. As I assumed the various roles required for this project (storyteller, storylistener and narrative inquirer), I learned not only about my partner’s story and experience with her Defining Moment, but I also learned how I experience the sharing of my own Defining Moment, in addition to receiving someone else’s Defining Moment.

Beyond the natural, expected roles of storyteller and storylistener, the role of narrative inquirer provided an additional lens through which to interpret and interact with Defining Moment narratives. As a narrative inquirer, there were a few moments when I was unsure how to handle the new information I encountered, for example when Clary was discussing her faith. Due to the fact that I’ve never truly had a serious faith-based conversation with someone, this was the first time in which I was being called upon to be open, inviting and understanding to someone else’s faith. I consider myself an open-minded, accepting person, therefore, I didn’t anticipate this task to be too difficult; however, questions arose during this experience that made me reflect and learn about how I understand and perceive others’ fundamental views.

As Clary was sharing her Defining Moment, I found myself wondering, as a narrative inquirer, how my faith would respond to some of the messages she was sharing. As per the fundamentals of the religion, I realize that Judaism would not acknowledge the holiday of Easter, however, how would Judaism respond to Clary’s belief that everyone should be loved? This seems like more of a human, rather than religious, issue. Yet as Clary explained her Defining Moment and how the theme of loving unconditionally was wound throughout it, I found myself feeling apprehensive. I don’t know why I was apprehensive to accept this theme; perhaps I have been around people through the years that have tried to convey religious messages under the guise of simple “human” messages, or perhaps I am just a doubtful person who likes questions broad beliefs. Both of these explanations may be true. Regardless, by assuming the role of narrative inquirer, I was able to recognize my apprehension with this theme, and therefore, learn how I can understand and interact in similar situations and conversations I may encounter in the future.

In addition to learning about how I respond and think about faith-based conversations, I also gained insight into my ability to reveal and share my emotions. As I mentioned in my meta-analysis, I experienced some difficulties with being open and vulnerable through the process of sharing my Defining Moment. I also noted that I felt more comfortable and willing to share my narrative with Clary once I deemed her a “worthy and safe storylistener.” As I reflect and try to make sense of my need to perceive a storylistener as a worthy receiver, I find Frank’s insight particularly helpful. Frank discusses the role of communicative bodies and empathy, explaining that, “if people could believe that each of us lacks something that only an other can fill – if we could be communicative bodies – then empathy would no longer be spoken of as something one person “has for” another. Instead, empathy is what a person “is with” another: a relationship in which each understands herself as requiring completion by the other” (Frank, 150). I believe the sentiments expressed in this excerpt reveal the interactive, intimate nature of narrative ethics. Empathy, while a separate topic entirely, reveals an aspect of narrative ethics that requires the acknowledgement that we can find completion and understanding through the sharing of our narratives. I feel that this point directly connects to my notion of the worthiness of a storylistener; once I determine someone will show empathy towards me, and my narrative, I am more comfortable and forthcoming when sharing my story.

As I discussed in my introduction, Frank explicates that narrative ethics “is about recognizing how much we as fellow-humans have to do with each other” (Frank, 163). Through exchanges, both verbal and nonverbal, we establish relationships and bonds with each other, which (hopefully) enable the sharing of stories and narratives. It is through these moments of dialogue that we are able to grow and expand our understanding of others and ourselves. We are able to find peculiarities and commonalities, such as how Clary and I both studied abroad in the same city. Learning to embrace each other’s quirks engages our acceptance, while also encouraging uniqueness among others and for ourselves. I feel that finding a common ground, especially when engaging in an exchange of Defining Moments, allows for greater understanding and growth beyond just the exchange of narrative.

Therefore, through this project, I have learned that the study and application of narrative ethics requires vulnerability, empathy and dedication. Vulnerability: to acknowledge your own Defining Moment narrative and also the vulnerability to share this narrative with others. Empathy: to accept and support others when they share their Defining Moment narrative. And finally, dedication: to trust the process and stay confident in yourself and your narrative. As I continue to uncover my ethical views, my understanding of communication and personal beliefs are constantly maturing. Through my exploration of narrative ethics, I have been provided with new roles and lenses through which to approach exchanges, which allows me to understand and empathize with others in ways I have never done so before. Finally, my engagement with narrative ethics has enabled me to submerse myself in my Defining Moment and truly see the benefits the Camino and my reflection of this defining moment has had on me as a person.

References

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