

Holding One's Own as an Art of Living: Reflections on Companion Stories and Narrative Analysis

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I want to speak today about a particular approach to narrative analysis that focuses on what I call *companion stories*. I'll say more about this term, later on. My talk proceeds in three parts. First, I want to introduce five presuppositions of my version of narrative analysis. Second, I will suggest how a research interview could proceed, based on these presuppositions. Third, I will discuss some issues in the analysis of stories. My concluding comments offer observations on what social scientific research can contribute to *ars vivendi*, or the art of living.

As a preface, let me read a quotation about two parallel lives. This quotation introduces a phrase I find most useful in guiding my thinking.

The quotation is from the literary historian Sarah Bakewell's (2010) life of Montaigne, entitled *How to Live*. Bakewell writes not only about Montaigne himself, but also about his various translators and biographers. Among the biographers, she is especially interested in Stefan Zweig, who was born in 1881 in Austria. As a Jew, Zweig fled from Europe in the 1930s and lived in exile in Brazil, until he committed suicide in 1942, in despair over the state of the world. When Zweig was young, he took little interest in Montaigne. As he grew older, he perceived parallels between Montaigne's times and his own. You may recall that Montaigne, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare, lived through a series of horribly violent religious wars in France, including the St. Bartholomew's massacre. Zweig's last book was a biography of Montaigne.

Here is what Sarah Bakewell writes about Zweig's imagined relationship with Montaigne.

"In a time such as that of the Second World War, or in [16th century] civil war France, Zweig writes, ordinary people's lives are sacrificed to the obsessions of fanatics, so the question for any person of integrity becomes not so much 'How do I survive?' as 'How do I remain fully human?' The question comes in many variants: How do I preserve my true self?"

How do I ensure that I go no further in my speech or actions than I think is right? How do I avoid losing my soul?

“Above all, How do I remain free? Montaigne was no freedom fighter in the usual sense, Zweig admits. ... His constant assertions that he is lazy, feckless, and irresponsible make him sound a poor hero, yet these are not really failings at all. They are essential to his battle to preserve his particular self as it is.” (Bakewell, 2010, p. 219)

In the form of narrative analysis that I do, I am especially concerned with what Bakewell describes as the battle that Zweig and Montaigne each fought “to preserve his particular self as it is.” In simplest terms, Zweig and Montaigne each seek not to succumb to the brutalities of their respective times. Each seeks to preserve the integrity of his moral self.

The colloquial English phrase that best expresses this human work of preserving one’s particular self is *holding your own*. This phrase has proven resistant to cross-cultural understanding, and I hope my example clarifies what it means. Montaigne, trying to live with integrity in the midst of the religious wars of 16th century France, and Stefan Zweig, living through the horrors of Nazism, each had to hold their own. Each has to sustain the self he believed was good, and ethical, and right to be, against forces that threatened that self. Perhaps we could push Bakewell’s descriptive phrase further, and say that holding one’s own is *to preserve a person’s particular self as she or he wants to believe it can be, against forces that threaten to diminish the self*.

With this background, let me move fairly quickly through five statements that set in place what it is that I want narrative analysis to be able to study. These are my presuppositions of narrative analysis.

First, humans are vulnerable, in our bodies, our psyches, and our souls. Human life is a struggle between *dignity* and *vulnerability*. I understand *dignity* an ideal of the self we would like to be--how we would like to conduct ourselves, complemented by how we would like others to treat us. *Vulnerability* is the constant threat of the self’s dignity being undermined.

Second, I call this fundamental struggle *holding one’s own*. It involves constantly asking the questions that Montaigne inspired Zweig to ask: How do I avoid losing my soul? How do I remain free?

Third, in order to hold their own, people need resources and allies. Stories are crucial resources and allies. In storytelling relations, humans can recapitulate what has happened and

share with others their evaluation of what was done, what should have been done, and what might still be done. Here we reach the idea of stories as companions. Donna Haraway (2003, 2008), the noted scholar of science, writes about certain animals being *companion species* to humans; these include all domestic animals, both pets and working animals. What is most important about companion species is that they each physically affect each other. Humans breed animals for selective traits, and animals have shaped humans in particular ways, including making possible engagement in particular forms of agriculture, as well as forms of warfare.

By *companion stories* I mean the collection of stories that accompanies a person through his or her life, guiding decisions of how to act and, perhaps most important, guiding what the person finds it worthwhile to pay attention to. As I've written (Frank, 2010), stories guide people to *select* which aspects of reality they pay attention to, and they guide in how to *evaluate* those realities. Narrative analysis depends on the idea that humans know the world through the medium of stories about possible worlds. Reality as we experience it, phenomenological reality, is always already a storied reality, shaped according to the stories we already know, as we encounter the world.

But companion stories do more than select and evaluate. They also promise and they console. Here I must delay my fourth and fifth presuppositions and tell another story. It's a story I have told before, because like most people, I have a limited number of companion stories that are closest to me--that console me when I need consolation and that promise me that life can be better. This collection of companion stories changes very little, but every so often, a new story joins the circle.

A new companion story came to me one day about 25 years ago, when I was undergoing treatment for cancer, and I had reached an especially low point, when the side-effects of treatment were at their most debilitating. I was sitting in our living room, not feeling able to move or even think, and I found myself staring at a poster I had been given years before, by a friend who lived in Paris while there was an exhibition of the stained glass windows created by Marc Chagall, showing biblical scenes. The poster showed the moment when Jacob is blessed by the angel with which he has wrestled. Jacob has been wounded in the wrestling, but he holds his own, and at the end, he is transformed. He is given a new name and a promise of future prosperity. This story about a promise also is, in itself, a promise. In my connection to that image--seeing Jacob's long night as my own ordeal, and feeling his blessing as my own

promise--I gained a companion story. You will notice that it is actually a story about another story; many stories are layered this way, as stories within stories.

My companion story helps me to select what to pay attention to; for example, knowing the Jacob story is one reason why I pay such careful attention to Sarah Bakewell's story of Montaigne and Zweig. My story guides me in selecting how to evaluate what people are doing with certain stories, and what certain stories are doing with people. Just as I was holding my own through identifying with the story of Jacob and the angel, so I look for other people holding their own. And as my companion story guides me, it consoles me and offers me a promise.

Fourth, if stories offer themselves as resources and allies, stories can also be dangerous, and people are vulnerable to stories. The years in which I have been working self-consciously on narrative analysis have also been the years during which terrorism has become prominent in political thinking and in diverse forms of political action, including both the actions of terrorists and those who oppose them. Both sides have their respective stories, and for me as a narratologist, the major problem is that groups are divided by their stories. People know different stories, and their stories lead them in different directions. Stories are entirely too good at keeping alive old grievances, mutual fears and suspicions. Stories about being wronged are forms of violence waiting to happen. Stories are also entirely too good at making certain characters' fate seem unchangeable. You remember that Stefan Zweig committed suicide, even though he was living safely in Brazil. The story of what was happening elsewhere seems to have overpowered him. It set in place a fate he could not resist.

Thus, my fifth point is that humans need an *ethics* of stories--that ethics is crucial to their *ars vivendi*. Stories are crucially important to doing our human work of holding our own, but we humans have a problem of *discerning how well stories are doing that work*. For me, that lack of discernment about stories is expressed in the Christian metaphor of humanity being "fallen". Whether we are guided by the wrong story, or whether we take the wrong guidance from a story that could be right, our human dilemma is falling because we became caught up in the wrong story.

Which stories we allow to be our companions is an ethical problem insofar as it involves what Michel Foucault (2001) called the "conduct of conduct". Stories conduct us, they guide us, in how we conduct ourselves. To offer a story, and to receive a story, is always an ethical act, or more precisely, a meta-ethical act, as the story will affect our subsequent ethical decision making. Without the guidance of stories, we could not make ethical decisions at all; my

judgment is that without stories, humans could not even perceive their action as having ethical import. And yet, stories are dangerous and readily lead people into the worst acts. Going back to the lifetime of Montaigne and recalling the St. Bartholomew's massacre, it was stories--specifically Catholic stories about Protestants--that precipitated the slaughter, and it was stories about that slaughter that precipitated violence lasting for decades.

How, then, do we study stories? I now reach the second section of my lecture, on narrative research and what it does best and does not do so well. Here I want to make three points.

First, hearing people tell stories about their lives is questionable as a substitute for observing people live their lives. What can be learned from the stories people tell about their lives is how they want the listener to understand that life; especially, what people single out as important and how they justify that importance. In life stories, people make a particular kind of sense of what they have done. They retrospectively reevaluate actions, and based on this selected past, they emplot future possible actions. The point of stories is to make action understandable in one way, and tacitly exclude other possible understandings that would fit if different stories were told. There are some interesting questions of priority here: which comes first, the understanding of the action or the story about the action? I believe they co-emerge, but let me set that discussion aside for today.

Second, to know a person, or to know a group of people, requires knowing what stories are their companions. This statement may be the most important thing I say today, at least in terms of research method. People shape stories, including their own life stories, to be the companions they need in order to hold their own, but equally, people's companion stories affect how they hold their own. For example, do they hold their own through acts of generosity or through violence?

Third, my most practical research advice is that while the question, "Tell me your story," is a perfectly good and interesting question, I want to ask something a bit different. My presuppositions about holding one's own and companion stories lead me to ask: "Tell me what stories you tell yourself, or what stories you share with people close to you." I want to ask whose stories a person listens to, and I try to notice whose stories people do not listen to. For example, in hospitals, my observation is that physicians, nurses, and patients exist in storytelling groups that are usually self-enclosed. They do not tell their stories outside their respective groups, and when they hear stories from a different group, they do not attend carefully to those stories--they deselect them from attention.

An important follow-up question, for me, after a respondent has told a story, is to ask whom they would share that story with; who, hearing that story, would immediately understand it? The complementary question is whom the storyteller would not want to hear their story, or, who would simply not understand it. At the extreme, which stories does a person keep from whom, with what fears if that person or group heard the story?

We now reach the third section of my lecture, which involves what a researcher does with stories once they have been heard. In narrative analysis, collecting stories is relatively easy. Writing about stories is more difficult.

First, in narrative analysis, unlike some methodologies, the objective is not to produce one single, definitive “finding” from the data. Just as a person can tell a number of stories about any event, so also a collection of stories can lead to multiple analyses. Each analysis will be driven by the interests that the narrative analyst brings to the stories, which is why I have spent so much time earlier in this lecture on my own interest in how people both tell stories about holding their own, and also hold their own by telling stories. You could see me holding my own, while I tell a story about holding my own, as I told you my companion story of Jacob and the angel. Narrative analysis, I believe, always has something of that reflexive quality.

A second negative word of advice is that I find less useful for researchers to imagine themselves to be privileged interpreter or decoder of stories. The idea of narrative analysis as interpretive decoding derives from the seminal work of Freud, complemented by ideas of false consciousness deriving from Marx, and continues through structuralism and post-structuralism. Freud and Marx share the presupposition that people fail to understand those stories that are most important in what they reveal about lives. A more contemporary view is that people understand their own stories quite well. What people understand less well is, first, how stories that circulate within their group affect people outside their group. Another problem of stories, the groups in which they are told, and the boundaries of those groups is that many people overestimate the uniqueness of their own stories. They don't realize how much of their stories are borrowed, and how alike their stories are to other people's. Narrative analysis can be useful as it helps people to recognize how much their stories share in common with others' stories, and also to realize which stories are not shared, and what that lack of mutual comprehension leads to.

The positive role I suggest for narrative researchers is one of *connector*, helping people to connect with others by knowing not only what these others' stories are, but also realizing why such stories are useful companions for those others. I return to my essential research question:

How are these particular stories useful to people, given the problems they confront of holding their own?

As narrative analysis conducts stories between groups, in my view it needs to be both critical and appreciative. Earlier in this lecture, I characterized human life as a tension between dignity and vulnerability. This lived tension is reflected at the analytic level by a tension between being critical of people's stories and appreciating those stories.

Narrative analysis needs to be critical by making explicit the ways in which stories can be bad companions to people, leading them into behavior that is sometimes self-defeating and other times injurious to others--sometimes both at once, as in stories that precipitate violence. I spoke earlier about when stories can be dangerous. People can half-recognize the danger in a story yet still keep it as a companion. There's an expression in English, "That's my story and I'm sticking to it," that expresses this uncritical companionship. From the perspective of narratology, I would prefer that the expression said: "That's the story that is sticking to me." That rephrasing underscores the difficulty of *making critical choices about which stories a person wants accompanying him or her*, because stories do stick to you, and choosing which stories will be your companions is not easy. Stories can be worse than musical melodies in their capacity to stick in people's thinking long after conscious efforts have been made to unstick them. The critical role of narrative analysis is to begin this unsticking process by showing people what is dangerous in the stories they keep as companions. And complementary to that, showing what is dangerous in not knowing others' stories and in not understanding why those others keep those stories as companions.

This critical role of narrative analysis's is complemented by its cultivation of appreciation for people's stories. Even dangerous stories can be appreciated, because they represent the real issues people face as they try to hold their own in worlds that threaten them. Appreciation begins by the analyst recognizing how the story helps the person hold his or her own, given the particular threats that person faces. Please note that here, as in the critical work of narrative analysis, I separate the story from the storyteller. When narrative analysis is critical, it can be critical of stories, and limit the responsibility that people have for being stuck to those stories. In appreciation, the same distinction applies between the story and the storyteller, but it is possible to appreciate what a person is trying to do with stories, even if the stories are doing that badly, or dangerously, for the person.

As a sort of conclusion, let me suggest that narrative analysis, as I have been imagining it, exemplifies four tasks that I believe social science can perform effectively. That is, the tasks through which social science can enhance people's *ars vivendi*.

First, social science can *witness* people's lives, especially their struggles and suffering. When people suffer, nothing compounds the suffering as much as the isolation of believing that others neither know nor care about that suffering. Conversely, people often feel relief when their suffering is recognized, even if recognition is all that others can offer. Making people's stories heard--witnessing them--is a vital work of social science.

Second, social science can *name* types of stories and the conditions that give rise to those narrative forms. People know the story they are telling, but they are often possessed by the story--unable to think outside it. To be able to name the type of story they are telling is the beginning of acting freely, either to keep that story as a companion, to modify it, or to decide that the cost of the story's companionship outweighs the benefits of that companionship. Social science has had many of its finest moments in developing typologies, from Durkheim's types of suicide and Weber's types of leadership, though Robert Merton's version of anomie personality types. My own narrative analyses focus on naming different types of stories that ill people tell, and many people have written to me saying that they found it liberating to be able to name the type of story in which they felt stuck.

Third, social science seems most useful when it *connects* people, taking stories from one group to another. As I said earlier, this work of connection goes beyond telling other people's stories. Telling is supported by showing why people believe such a story is necessary, given their problems of holding their own.

Finally, social science is most useful when it enables people to *reflect*, in the simplest sense of enabling people to imagine how other people see them. In the writings of Montaigne, the line for which he is probably best known is when he describes how, playing with his cat, he realizes that his cat imagines herself playing with him. "Montaigne," writes Sarah Bakewell, "cannot look at his cat without seeing her looking back at him and imagining himself as he looks to her" (2010, p. 138; cf. p. 301). An ethical life begins with the self imagining how other people see him or herself, acting toward them. That awareness can begin by telling a story about one's self, but told from the other's perspective, as she or he holds his or her own.

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