

On the Traveling and Turns of Being and Becoming a Narrative Inquirer

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Abstract

I am a narrative inquirer still in the making. My journey of being and becoming a narrative inquirer, so far, has involved a series of personal and professional turns. In this chapter I draw on two painful experiences of shortcoming and the apparent paradox that every time we perform a turn, we are looking backwards in order to move forward. Turning points are openings to learning and to surprise. For me, narrative inquiry involves a commitment to navigate unknown waters, and a willingness to inquire into the unknown and sometimes silenced in my own and others' lives. Dwelling with my own shortcomings, such as my experiences alongside Risten and Maria,¹ is crucial in my process of being and becoming a narrative inquirer.

Keywords

narrative inquiry – experience – turning points – pragmatism – perplexity

1 My Personal and Professional 'Narrative Turns'

Chase (2011) described narrative inquiry as “a field in the making”, and I am indeed a narrative inquirer still in the making. My journey of being and becoming a narrative inquirer so far has involved a series of turns. In his reflection on the metaphor of ‘turn’, Hyvärinen (2010, p. 71) noted that paradox that while a turn “denotes an advance moment every time one performs such a turn”, one is inevitably looking backwards when situated at the turning point. At turning points, we look both backwards and forwards, to continue to learn and move forward. Turning points are openings to learning and to surprise.

I grew up in a home with few books and many untold tales, but I always had a strong relationship with narratives. As a child, I entered the public library once a week with a pile of stories that had become part of my ever-growing

inner library and left with a pile of unexplored adventures. My mother's women's magazines filled my imagination with drama, romance, and glamour. And every now and then, when I managed to make myself invisible, I could secretly listen to the adults' less romantic and less glamorous half-told tales and let my vivid imagination fill the blanks.

I eventually grew up and was privileged to make a living from my fascination for narratives. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to write my PhD thesis about Indigenous Sami² older adults' life stories (Blix, 2013). At that point, I considered the older adults' stories as 'data', and I conscientiously sought to engage with the stories in ways that would safeguard the 'quality' of my research. As such, my work was part of the growing body of research following the 'narrative turn' in the human sciences described by Riessman (2008, p. 14) as "the practice of treating narrative as an object for careful study".

In the following years, I was indeed 'careful' in the sense of safeguarding the analytic rigor and transparency of my work as I carefully subjected people's stories to various 'narrative analyses'. I conducted dialogical narrative analysis (e.g., Blix et al., 2012, 2013; Frank, 2005, 2012) focusing on the reflexive interplay between people's narrative practices and their narrative environments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). I undertook narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997; Blix et al., 2015) focusing on narrative as social action and narration as the practice of constructing selves, identities, and realities (Chase, 2011). I engaged in thematic analysis (Blix & Hamran, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006) emphasizing what participants' stories 'were about' (Chase, 2011), i.e. participants' everyday experiences. And I conducted narrative context analysis to explore how both the research participants' and my own identities are framed and shaped by the broader stories and discourses that are available in a particular socio-historical context (Blix, 2015; Zilber et al., 2008), and to explore the link between narration as a local meaning-making activity and macro-social processes (Blix & Hamran, 2017; De Fina, 2008).

In other words, I tried out various ways of approaching and learning from narratives, and I did indeed learn a lot from the process preceding each single publication. Nonetheless, over the years, I started to feel unease in the position as a 'narrative researcher' involved in "the collection and analysis of personal narratives" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 325); 'treating narrative as an object for study' (cf. Riessman, 2008). At one point I expressed this discomfort as feeling like an "academic parasite subsisting on other people's stories" (Blix, 2017, p. 29). And I painfully mirrored my dis-ease in Josselson's words about narcissistic shame:

shame that I am using these people's lives to exhibit myself, my analytical prowess, my cleverness. I am using these people's lives to advance my

own career, as extensions of my own narcissism, and I fear to be caught, seen in this process. (Josselson, 2011, p. 45)

Moreover, the very conceptualization of the researcher as 'listener' (and 'collector' and 'analyst'), and the participant as 'teller' felt as an alienating construction based on the Western scientific ideal of the researcher as an 'objective' observer.

2 Turning from Narrative Research to Narrative Inquiry

In my ongoing process of being and becoming a narrative inquirer, I identify with Clandinin and Connelly's view of narrative inquiry as "a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). I do not consider narrative as a metaphor for or a representation of 'real life'. Rather, narrative is a way of living and making sense of the world, "a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). Narrative inquirers are relational inquirers (Clandinin, 2013), meaning that rather than standing outside observing the phenomenon, we are part of the phenomenon being studied. Consequently, "the stories lived and told in narrative inquiry relationships are always a co-composition" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24). In other words, narrative inquiry is not merely about facilitating storytelling and listening, and it is not about scrutinizing the other's narratives, subjecting them to rigorous analysis. Rather, it is about coming alongside, listening, observing, and inquiring into experience as a way to collaboratively make sense of the world.

Clandinin emphasized that narrative inquiry is "walking into the midst of stories" (2006, p. 47), as all those involved in the narrative inquiry process live in familial intergenerational stories, cultural temporal stories, institutional stories, and personal stories (Clandinin, 2013). Hence, narrative is not our 'data', but rather both the method and the phenomenon under study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Inherent in this understanding is the acknowledgement that the phenomenon under study, the participants, and the inquirer are all changing throughout the inquiry process, which is an ontological and epistemological position radically at odds with prevailing scientific ideals of objectivity and replicability. Moreover, this understanding implies that a narrative inquiry is concluded "still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

In this conceptualization of narrative inquiry lies the commitment to navigate unknown waters, to travel to places and times in others' and our own lives not yet visited, and to come alongside others to form new relationships.

In other words, narrative inquiry always involves 'uncertainty' and an 'openness to surprise' which acknowledges that we "are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves", but rather "are open to self-construction" (Lugones, 1987, p. 16). As a narrative inquirer, I must be willing to inquire into the unknown and sometimes silenced, both in my own life and in others' lives (Blix et al., 2021). I must be willing to compose new stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

3 Turning towards the World Traveling of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a turn towards experience. As narrative inquirers we are called to attend to the worlds in which people live their lives. But how is this possible when the worlds we inhabit are different? How can we attend to worlds we have never experienced, worlds we can hardly imagine, and worlds we wish did not exist? We engage in narrative co-composition and world traveling (Lugones, 1987). Through narrative co-composition and world traveling, we create an "imaginative space" (Frank, 2012) that has the capacity to change all those involved. We collaboratively expand an imaginative space in which we can find new ways of being and becoming. Lugones (1987) described world traveling as "a way of identifying with [the other] because by traveling to [the other's] 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (p. 17).

In the following, I will draw on two experiences from my journey towards being and becoming a narrative inquirer. For me, both experiences are painful turning points with openings for learning. The first experience is a meeting with an Indigenous Sami older woman during my PhD work more than ten years ago, and the second is a meeting with a South African colleague in 2019. Both experiences have shaped who I am and who I am still in the process of becoming.

3.1 *Risten*³

I met Risten during my PhD work back in 2010. Risten was an Indigenous Sami woman in her 80s. She lived in a remote community in Northern Norway. I visited her in her home, where she served coffee and waffles with cloudberries, and shared stories from different phases of her life. Towards the end of our conversation, I for some reason returned to the story Risten had told me earlier, about the loss of her son, who died in an accident at a very young age:

- R:* It was terrible. I was angry with God. I told God, when I was alone: “Dear God. Why did you take my son? We have older people. Father, grandfather, my husband’s father, he was ill. He was mentally ill as well. So, why didn’t you take him? Or my husband’s sister, the sick sister? Why didn’t you take one of them instead of my son, our son?” And I yelled at God. Can you imagine? That’s how life is when you are mourning.
- B:* Did you ever figure out... Did you find peace why God took your son?
- R:* [pause] After a while. I used to dream as well. At night, he came to me as a bird. We had some birches, outside. I saw him there, he was there, with white clothes. I used to dream like that.
- B:* So, you saw him?
- R:* Yes. I see him. He is there.
- B:* But you believe you believe in God?
- R:* I believe in God. My parents were Christians. I believe. No, I don’t know... There have been dark moments. They lasted for long. But I couldn’t talk about it either. I had to be quiet and try to dampen my thoughts, then, while mourning. When I had put the other boys to bed at night, I cried by myself. In the kitchen. And they wondered. They came out and said “Mother, please don’t cry”. They were eleven and twelve, the boys.
- B:* Why couldn’t you talk about it?
- R:* No, it was too heavy. Yes, it was heavy. And then I started to cry too. Yes. I was completely disturbed. I have started talking. But in the beginning, I had to be quiet.
- B:* Did you and your husband ever talk about this?
- R:* We talked, my husband. But it was heavy, you know. The sorrow. It lasts for long, you know. At least for five years. After that, it started to wear off. It was heavy when my husband passed away. That was also heavy. But when you lose a child, it’s much worse.
- B:* Yes. Children are not supposed to die.
- R:* No, they are not supposed to die. And it is as Why, why? Children are not supposed to die! Shouldn’t. Should not.

This conversation with Risten has been like a pebble in my shoe throughout all the years that have passed since our meeting. Not as something I have been constantly aware of, but rather as something that suddenly, every now and then, inflicts pain. Repeatedly, I have returned to this moment, wishing I had responded differently, that I had managed to dwell alongside Risten in possible ways of retelling and reliving her story (cf. Caine et al., 2013). I was deeply touched by Risten’s story about the loss of her son. And that was probably why I chose to return to this story towards the end of our conversation. Nonetheless, when Risten told me about her loss, I was unable to respond. I never followed

up on Risten's story about the bird. Rather, I chose to return to her faith in God. I also completely ignored Risten's shift in verb tense from *I saw him* to *I see him*. Over the years, I have repeatedly wondered what would have happened if I had taken up Risten's invitation to travel with her to the world in which she still saw her son. What would have happened if I had managed to co-compose and enter an imaginative space we could collaboratively explore? Perhaps that would have given her the opportunity to talk about how she was still living the loss of her son. But I did not. Rather, I talked about her loss as something belonging to the past. And rather than coming alongside, lingering, listening, and inquiring into Risten's personal story, I generalized her experience by stating *Children are not supposed to die*. But Risten was not speaking about *children* in general; she told me the story about one particular child, *her* child. I wish I had taken up Risten's loving invitation to world travel with her. But I did not. And rather than tormenting myself with my own failure, I have committed to learn from this painful experience.

3.2 *Maria*

In early June 2019, I came alongside a small group of fellow narrative scholars from around the world in a quiet German village. For one week, we collaboratively created a safe space for the sharing of meals, thoughts, readings, writings, and silences.

I vividly remember the first roundtable meeting when we all introduced ourselves. One of the participants, Maria, a woman from South Africa, dwelled on her feeling of being in a safe place. At that point, I had no idea how deepfelt that must have been for her.

My quiet room was furnished with a narrow bed, a nightstand, and a desk. The crucifix above my bed, the Bible on my nightstand, and the priest's robe hanging in the hallway didn't speak to me about safety. Rather, for me these items were reminders of how far away from my everyday life I was. Not only was I an atheist out of context, I was also physically and spiritually detached from all my everyday requirements.

At dinner, later that week, Maria mentioned the pepper spray in her office, and the gun she usually carries in her purse. Did she sense my disgust and my resistance? Did she think that I could not and would not understand because our worlds were too different? I don't know, but I do know she gave me the opportunity.

"Have you ever had fire drills with your children?" she asked. "Have you taught them how to behave to survive a fire?" Of course, I have. "We do that with our children, as well", she said. "And we also teach our daughters how to survive a rape by never fighting back". I had to look away to

breathe. “We teach our daughters to lie quietly and let the rapist finish, and never ever fight back, cause those who don’t fight back may not get killed”.

Like my experience with Risten, the meeting between Maria and myself was a meeting between two women who lived our lives under very different social, political, material, and cultural circumstances. Yet, through our narrative engagement, we co-composed a common world we could collaboratively explore. Perhaps based on previous experience, Maria realized that only by traveling to her world could I, a privileged white, middle-aged, scholar living on the safest and richest spot on the planet, be able to understand her life, her fears, and her appreciation of safety. Faced with my dis-ease and resistance, Maria could have presented statistics documenting the prevalence of violence in her home country, and she could have presented scientific facts on the situation for South African women. She could have provided ‘evidence’ that her fears and need for protection were ‘real’. But rather than using statistics as a weapon to disarm my resistance, she invited me into world traveling, to co-compose a common understanding of her life and her fears through narration. Maria helped me to attend up close, to “see big”, as opposed to “see small”, that is, see her world from “a detached point of view” (Greene, 1995, p. 10). As opposed to what I did in my conversation with Risten, Maria attended to the particular, rather than the general. To compose a common space for understanding, Maria was also willing to travel to my world by engaging with my everyday experiences (“Have you ever had fire drills with your children?”). World traveling is not so much a matter of one of the parties in a relationship metaphorically traveling to the other’s world, as it is about the two parties traveling back and forth between each other’s worlds. And importantly, through this back-and-forth traveling, new and common worlds are co-composed. In these worlds, the unimaginable may become imaginable (Blix et al., 2020).

4 Turning towards Embodied Experiences

Our experiences are embodied. They “reside in the actual ways the body moves, the voice or artefacts that are used” (Hydén, 2013, p. 235). Moreover, the sharing of stories is an embodied activity, “a bodily communicative event and activity that involves other – embodied – persons and the social and cultural situation” (Hydén, 2013, p. 235). Through the embodied act of narration, life becomes experience, and meaning is created. Our embodied stories shape our opportunities for world traveling between each other’s worlds. Sometimes

others' stories resonate with our own embodied experiences, and sometimes they don't. I am privileged to have no embodied experiences akin to those Maria and Risten described. I have never experienced fearing for my own or my children's lives or safety, and I have never experienced the devastating loss of a child. My experience of motherhood, however, is deeply embodied. Perhaps this was the reason for my strong physical response to Maria's story ('I had to look away to breathe')? And perhaps this was also a reason for my generalization of Risten's personal loss ('Children are not supposed to die')?

As narrative inquirers, we need to be wakeful to how our own embodied experiences open up and close down the sharing of others' embodied experiences. Sometimes we are consciously aware of our own responses. However, more often our responses are subtle and unconscious. Through facial expressions, gestures, and movements we unconsciously communicate to the other our openness towards or resistance to the other's narratives. I will never know if my embodied response silenced Risten's story. Other than the painful embodied memory of un-ease, the only physical remains of our conversation is an audiotape that reveals nothing about my facial expressions, gestures, or movements. Looking back on my experience alongside Maria, I realize that she must have 'sensed my disgust and my resistance'. I can only wonder why she chose to persist in her efforts to make me understand; why my response did not silence her narration. The opening to a world the two of us could collaboratively explore was perhaps our shared embodied experience of motherhood, and the mutual understanding that we would both be willing to do anything to protect our children. On the other hand, I wonder if perhaps my embodied experience of motherhood made it particularly difficult for me to dwell in Risten's pain?

5 Turning towards Silence and Silencing

Traveling to the other's world is never easy. Heilbrun wrote that it is "a hard thing to make up new stories to live by" (Heilbrun, 1989, p. 37). I am tempted to slightly paraphrase Heilbrun's words; it is hard to co-compose new stories to live by. Citing Frye, Lugones noted that "the loving eye is 'the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests and fears and imagination'" (Lugones, 1987, p. 8). To see something new, we must sometimes risk losing sight of something else. We must be willing to let go of the safety of the stories we know, the stories we have been told, and the stories we have been living and telling.

Our personal stories are made possible or impossible by the stories surrounding us. Our cultures make available a body of stories, framing and

shaping our individual stories. The plot lines made available by cultural narratives also shape listeners' comprehension of what counts as a story and what counts as significant parts of a story. Frank (2010, p. 55) noted that "Stories not readily locatable in the listener's inner library will be off the radar of comprehension, disregarded as noise". Citing Bruner, Clandinin noted that the stories we tell "reflect the prevailing theories about 'possible lives' that are part of one's culture" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 191). From my experiences alongside Maria and Risten, I have learned that the prevailing stories about possible lives that are part of my culture shape the way I respond to other's narrations and, consequently, which stories I allow others to tell about their lives and experiences and which stories I silence. Loseke used the term 'formula stories' to describe the "collective representations of disembodied types of actors [...] producing such categorical identities associated with families, gender, age, religion, and citizenship" (Loseke, 2007, p. 663). Formula stories see people "small" (cf. Greene, 1995), from a distance and a detached point of view, that impose limitations on imagination.

Did I silence Risten's story about the bird in the birch because the story did not resonate with the stories of my inner library? Did I disregard this story as less significant? Was I more comfortable talking about Risten's faith in God because this resonated with the stories I grew up with? Was my inquiring into whether Risten and her husband ever talked about the loss of their son informed by "the myth of healing" (Andrews, 2007), that is, the dominant cultural narrative that the verbalizing of trauma is significant for healing? I don't know. But I do know that every now and then, when the pebble in my shoe starts moving, I painfully regret that I did not accept Risten's invitation to travel with her to a world in which her son was still present.

Through traveling with Maria to her world, and trying to see the world through her eyes, I have come to realize that my instinctive reaction to her mentioning of the handgun and the pepper spray was based on the privileged experiences of a white, middle-aged, Norwegian woman. This does not necessarily imply that I have changed my opinion about hand weapons. However, I have learned that my own thoughts, feelings, and opinions about hand weapons are based on the narratives I have lived, told, and been told. I have learned that narrative encounters are always charged with narratives beyond the immediate situation. Moreover, I have come to acknowledge that my narratives, my experiences, and, thus, my opinions and values, could have been otherwise. I have come to realize that my imagination was shaped by formula stories composed around very specific plotlines about 'the kind of people who are likely to carry hand weapons', none of which resembled the kind, generous, and loving woman I was fortunate to meet in Germany. These formula stories,

however, were challenged through our narrative engagement because when attending to her storied life, I had to attend up close, and coming close opens an imaginative space with nuances that are impossible to see from a distance. Moreover, by metaphorically traveling to Maria's world, I came to realize that my firm identification as a person who would not under any circumstances be able to carry or use a weapon does not necessarily indicate that I have 'higher' moral standards than those who think and feel differently. When traveling to the other's world, we meet the other, and ourselves, with curiosity rather than judgement.

6 Turning Forward

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) noted that narrative inquiry represents a turn from the universal towards the specific. As a researcher, I'm occasionally faced with critical questions regarding the justification of narrative inquiry. These questions are perhaps akin to what Clandinin (2013) termed the "So What?" and "Who Cares?" questions of narrative inquiry. Apparently, the critique is based on the misunderstanding that narrative inquiry is the study of personal experience (other's and our own) without attention to wider social, political, material, and cultural contexts. The concept of world traveling is a powerful reminder that narrative inquiry is the study of experience "in the worlds the person inhabits and the worlds the person imagines and helps to create" (Caine et al., 2019, p. 5). Reflecting on my experience alongside Maria in the safe space of the German countryside, I am reminded that my own experiences are shaped by the context in which I live my life. And reflecting on my conversation with Risten, I am reminded that my experiences and the context in which I live my life impose limitations on my imagination, curiosity, and courage to engage in world traveling. With this, I have re-turned to the dis-ease with the Western scientific ideal of the researcher as an 'objective' observer that I described above. For me, the world traveling of narrative inquiry opens a safe, yet sometimes painful space 'the participants' and I can collaboratively explore with curiosity.

The American pragmatist John Dewey referred to feelings of perplexity as the critical initial stage of inquiry (Seigfried, 2002). Lingering with experiences of perplexity, as in the case of my experiences alongside Risten and Maria, are openings to learning. According to the American feminist pragmatist Jane Addams, a perplexity "refers to someone's personal involvement in a situation that baffles and confuses her, because her usual understandings and responses are inadequate to explain or transform a troubling situation" (Seigfried, 2002,

p. xxv). For Addams, avoiding perplexities by holding onto what one already knows are missed opportunities for growth. I started out my contribution to this book with a reference to the paradox of turning points – every time we perform a turn, we are inevitably looking backwards in order to move forward (Hyvärinen, 2010). I have shared my own experiences of perplexities, shortcomings, and failures, not to forefront pain and regret, but rather to gain new insights in order to grow. I firmly believe that by looking both backwards and forwards with curiosity, through the reliving and retelling of experience, we can understand ourselves and others in new ways. In that sense, dwelling with our own shortcomings and painful experiences is an important part of the *process of being and becoming narrative inquirers*.

Notes

- 1 Risten and Maria are pseudonyms.
- 2 The Sami are Indigenous people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The national states have made strong efforts to assimilate the Sami into the majority populations. The assimilation policies were based on a dominant narrative about Sami inferiority.
- 3 I have previously reflected on my meeting with Risten in the epilogue of the book *Fortelling og forskning: Narrativ teori og metode i tverrfaglig perspektiv* (Sørly & Blix, 2017) as part of a discussion of emotions in narrative research.

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