**Finding Growth in Stories of Trauma**

*Why Storytelling?*

As human beings, we have always related to one another by telling and listening to stories about ourselves and others. We have, in turn, always understood who and what we are — as well as what we might become — from the stories we tell each other.

*Narrative Identity Theory*

Those who buy in to the theory of **Narrative Identity**argue that identity is not a single, fixed core self that we can “reveal if we peel away the layers.” Instead, each and every one of us constructs our own identities — conceptions of who we believe ourselves to be — primarily through the integration of life experiences into an internalized, evolving, and communicable story.

According to Donald Polkinghorne, “We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be.”

These stories — life stories, if you will — provide us with both a sense of unity and purpose if we tell them the right way.

*Finding Redemption in Stories of Trauma*

Indeed, those who are able, the theorists continue, to incorporate negative or traumatic life events into their life stories as instances of **redemption** tend to be happier than those who do not. In a redemptive story, the narrator transitions from a generally bad or negative state to a generally good or positive state. Such a transition is characterized as:

* *sacrifice*(enduring the bad to get to the good),
* *recovery*(attaining a positive state after losing it temporarily)
* *growth*(bad experiences actually bettering the self), or
* *learning*(gaining or mastering skills, knowledge, and/or wisdom in the face of the bad).

Incorporating your experiences into a redemptive life story allows you to organize memories and more abstract knowledge into a coherent biographical narrative. In other words, turning your disparate experiences into a coherent story helps you to construct, organize, and attribute meaning to your experiences, as well as to form, inform, and re-form your sources of knowledge and your view of reality.

“When we’re faced with a really traumatic memory, our brain has to make a decision,” says Ron Capps, who runs a nonprofit organization called the Veterans Writing Project. “What do I do with this memory, where does it go, where do I put it?”

Oftentimes, “It gets pushed aside because your mind doesn’t know how to deal with it. By accessing that memory using a creative art, you distance yourself. You’re able to create something tangible and you can take it and shape it in a different way.”

The point, Capps stresses, is not to try and erase traumatic memories, but to control them. He describes what is accomplished as the “concretization” of the memory. You create something tangible that you can crumple up, burn, revise, or publish. “You are building a framework around the memory and placing it under your control,” Capps says, “rather than vice versa.”

In this sense, crafting a life story that makes sense of our lack of coherence with both ourselves and the chaos of life is a tremendous source of growth and transformation.