

Book Review

Baldwin, C. (2013). *Narrative social work: Theory and application*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.

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Judging from his dust jacket biography, Clive Baldwin is clearly no stranger to narrative theory. In *Narrative Social Work: Theory and Application*, he not only lays out a sophisticated yet simple description of narrative theory, but also broadens its generally accepted value as a psychotherapeutic approach to include useful commentary on human rights, social justice, ethics and social welfare policy.

What seems to puzzle Baldwin is that the social work profession, while embracing narrative theory as an empowering, non-pathological explanatory scheme for therapeutic work with individuals and families, has appeared to have neglected its utility in facilitating understanding and change on a larger systems level. To wit, if narrative theory and practice can provide a rich avenue of exploration for healing on the micro level of social work practice, might it also serve a similar purpose in fostering changes in organizations and communities? Judging from the present state of social work scholarly inquiry, we simply don't know. That alone makes *Narrative Social Work: Theory and Application*, a worthwhile read.

Baldwin begins his own examination with a primer on narrative theory, in which he deconstructs effective storytelling. Engaging stories, particularly those with appeal to social workers, are about people or, more specifically, a person. Yet a person does not exist in isolation, but in a context of other people, a setting and a society. To one degree or another, stories describe the interaction of a person in and with a social milieu.

What moves a story is plot, or a sequence of actions that link one set of events with ensuing events, culminating in a conclusion. However, a good story requires intriguing characters, characters who come alive in the course of telling the story: characters about whom we care.

The social milieu, or setting of the story, Baldwin refers to as the genre. By this, he means adherence to the devices and actions that particular types of stories require. For instance, a mystery needs clues, a romance needs compelling human interaction, and a horror story needs fear and awful surprises.

As any English composition student knows, a story also needs authorship and point of view. Authorship is the creator of the story, and point of view is concerned with the teller of the story. These two elements may initially seem quite similar, but are in fact not. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is the author of the story, but it is left to Nick to provide the telling. Few readers of *The Great Gatsby* would suggest that the two angles of view are the same.

The next component of storytelling, according to Baldwin, is rhetoric, not the bombast of cable TV commentators or the blathering of politicians, but the art of persuasion. It is the language and set of concepts that are used in the narrative to move the reader from one position to another, and that leads us to the last of Baldwin's ingredients for engaging and effective storytelling: readership. For does a story not require the attention of an engaged reader to have meaning?

Thus, Baldwin holds that narrative has these seven facets:

- Plot
- Characterization
- Genre
- Authorship
- Point of view
- Rhetoric
- Readership

Baldwin's deconstruction, if he will permit me, boils down to three vital elements: the story, the storyteller, and how the story is told. Thus, a narrative is not only what is said, but who says it and how it is said. The application of retelling stories in such personal therapeutic interactions as individual and family therapies, casework and other forms of micropractice is fairly obvious and usually achieves at least two objectives: altering the foundational premises of the story, and in so doing, bringing unseen alternatives for action to the forefront of the narrative.

Baldwin's original contribution to the literature on the uses of narrative in social work practice, in my view, is his expansion of the technique to understanding and facilitating change in larger entities and for larger causes. For instance, it is not a great leap for social workers to identify the dominant discourse (narrative) defining problems in living that people frequently bring to social workers practicing in mental health: the medical model of illness and healing. Sweetening the pot for honoring the definitions of mental illness promulgated in DSM is insurance payment for service, an allurements hard to ignore.

But could not a narrative approach be taken to issues of human rights and social justice? In the American dominant discourses of social justice, some people, like some pigs in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, are more deserving of social justice than others. Likewise, some people are seen as more deserving of so-called "entitlements" than others, such that a broad narrative exists in American society differentiating the deserving from the

undeserving poor. As the story often goes, if you are poor through "no fault of your own," there are goods and services available to help you reestablish your life. If, on the other hand, a particularly entrenched episode of poverty captures you, such goods and services are less available, and become even less so with the passage of one's time in the cage of poverty. Predictably, a narrative of ethical fairness accompanies and legitimizes such classifications of people in poverty, and over time, in mind numbing repetition spoken by authoritative voices, such a narrative begins to carry the ring of truth.

It is Baldwin's contention that retelling this story is a considerable step toward remedying such social problems as human rights violations and social injustice, and that the essential "realities" that are the foundation posts of the worldview, values and ethics which legitimize the widespread acceptance of these social problems are not immutably real at all.

Baldwin's point of view is starkly constructivist. It is not, however, ungrounded in facts. Because of that, his application of narrative theory to macropractice issues is neither pie-in-the-sky nor unattainable. What is required is a retelling of the story of social injustice, but most especially a re-engineering of the principles that underpin the tolerance of its existence. Baldwin does not deeply venture, in this relatively thin book, into the detailed pragmatics of social change using narrative methods, but he sure does offer us a workable start. Read it.