

IN PARABLES: STORYTELLING AS GIRLS' POWER

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Abstract: This paper presents data from three years of qualitative research with groups of girls from diverse backgrounds who had experienced poverty, life disruption, abuse, or trauma. Using a participatory process, girls created and shared personal narratives and engaged with stories from literature and from Jewish and Christian scriptures. Girls' storytelling selves were interpreted as embodied performances of their power. Viewing the girls stories as parables provided a lens through which to see their creative, narrative selves at work. The research suggests that storytelling reveals girls power in the face of life's difficulty. Storytelling selves *are* girls' power—power to create, power to make meaning, power to enlarge spaces of possibility, power as embodiment of wisdom, power as survival.

Introduction

In Christian religious education, stories are engaged metaphorically as they are interpreted, questioned, and juxtaposed with one another (Groome, 1980). Through the telling of stories we come to understand our contemporary experience in relationship to the larger narrative of our faith heritage. Meaning, embedded in narrative, is encountered in the unruly engagement of stories with stories.

Bruner's (1990) influential work over some four decades on the narrative construction of consciousness asserts that the stories we tell mediate between two worlds—the world of the known and expected and the world of the unknown and the surprising. Stories help us to navigate the disruptions, puzzlements, or profound dislocations with which we are confronted throughout our lives. Through narrative practices, human beings make and shape meaning out of life's contingencies.

This research project explored how such narrative processes of meaning making are significant beyond the boundaries of traditional religious education. Through three years of research using narrative practices with adolescent girls who have faced extraordinary difficulty, I discovered how creative storytelling in small groups fostered meaning and power in girls' lives.

The Research Process

Participants were Canadian girls age 14 to 17 who had all had faced significant—overlapping intersections of social, familial, cultural, gender, and economic factors including addiction, immigration, violence, poverty, adoption, racism, sexual abuse, and trauma. They came from differing racialized, class, cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Their religious affiliations included Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

Participants (19 girls in all) included

Zoe had recently returned to her mother's care after a five-year court-ordered placement with her stepfather (during a period when her mother was a heavy drug user). She had been physically abused by her stepfather.

Amelia who was living in a low-income household (as defined by the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006) with her mother who had mental health problems (depression, anorexia) and father (alcoholic); she had recently been in a car accident that killed her sister and grandmother.

Maria was adopted and an immigrant from South America; she had suffered extreme poverty and abuse in her birth home.

Mikka was raised by a Caribbean immigrant mother in a low income urban community; her younger brother died by suicide when she was 15.

Beth lived in a single parent home, having experienced many disruptions in her family circumstances.

Sahira, a recent Caribbean immigrant had also experienced the violent death of a sibling, as well as addiction issues in her family.

I used a participatory research process (Gallagher, 2007; Greene, 1995; Patton, 2002) with four groups of six to eight girls each. Attention was given to creating a welcoming and trusting environment within the group. I used a variety of art-making and aesthetic practices (Greene, 1995) as well as writing prompts. Digital literacies, such as blogs and wikis, as well as more traditional storytelling and writing, helped girls tell stories of particular life experiences. These stories were the heart of the process. The use of thick description, attending to detail and texture within the narrative was crucial.

Using a literacy response process (Luce-Kapler, 2004), the girls reflected on the stories they created. We also read and talked about fictional narratives and stories from Jewish and Christian scriptures that had themes of girlhood, gender justice, or empowerment. Building on Baker's (2005) work, girls responded to one another's stories and reflected together on emergent themes in the narratives.

Hearing Girls' Stories as Parables of the Self

Tools of discourse analysis (Oliver, 1998; Silverman, 2003) led me to identify a close affinity between girls' stories and the genre New Testament parables. Drawing on the work of biblical scholars who understand Jesus' parables as poetic metaphor (Crossan, 1973; McFague, 1975; Scott, 2001), I identified eight characteristics common to Jesus' parables and to the girls' stories: participation, difficulty, metaphor, truth, performance, possibility, wisdom, and power.

Participation. Jesus' parables served to draw listeners worldview and vision of the storyteller (Crossan, 1973). Those who hear the story find that they are taken up by and taken into the world of the parable.

In creating self-narratives, girls used tools that are used in literary fiction, including metaphor and rich descriptive detail, to bring the reader into the world of their own consciousness—what Zunshine (2006) calls an invitation to the backstage of consciousness.

This group is safe. That's rare, I think. When I tell a story and people listen it's like we bond... I call you all (the group) my therapists because you hear me (Maria).

Difficulty. The parables of the Jesus tradition refuse to offer simple explanations (Crossan, 1973; Scott, 2001). Rather, they meet life in its essential difficulty. The parable does not give easy answers to the struggle to survive in the shadow of Empire (Brock & Parker, 2008). A theology that is grounded in Jesus' parables is necessarily inconclusive and indeterminate (McFague, 1975).

To hear girls' stories as parables is to be faced with the essential difficulty of girls' lives—suffering and abuse, dislocations and ruptures, broken promises and shattered truths. Experiencing the layers of meaning and metaphor in girls' self-narratives leads one away from simple answers to girls' problems and into the complexity of their lives.

The last thing I saw were tangy green hills and the cloudy grey sky spilling like secrets over the highway.

Then it happens and somehow I lost faith. I saw my mother crying every day, makeup running down her bony cheeks and she gripped a Bible in her tiny hands, but it wasn't for me because everything I believed in wasn't alive anymore, wasn't real except in my mind, in the obituaries, in the coffin.

All I could say, over and over again, was Where is my sister?

I was on a stretcher, the orange silhouette of the sun making my tears evaporate, overheating. Where is my sister? Where is my sister? I remember sirens, and a boy on his cell phone, he had bright blue eyes, burning me up, sirens and doctors. (Amelia)

Metaphor. The function of the parabolic metaphor, Crossan (1973) says, is to enable participation in the metaphor's referent. He says, "A true metaphor is one whose power creates the participation whereby its truth is experienced" (p. 18). In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same; there is no way around the metaphor. As with Jesus' parables, girls' stories can be heard as extended narrative metaphors. To hear a story as parable is to recognize it as a poetic metaphor that somehow bears meaning that requires the story itself (McFague, 1975). Mikka told a story she called "Broken Teeth" of a playground accident in which her brother lost his two front teeth. Without her intending it, the story mirrored the story of her brother's death by suicide.

Later that evening, as we sat across from each other in the living room, he made his vampire face. He asked, "Am I freaking you out?"

"Yes," I replied. He was satisfied. He would see the dentist in the morning, to be fixed up, but in the pit of my stomach was a sick, hollow space. As I looked at his damaged mouth, all I could think was that he had lost something that could never be replaced. (Mikka)

Truth. As Crossan (1973, 1976) observes, the gospels were not intended to be read as factual accounts. Parables in the gospels can be considered true if they are true to life; that is, their truth value lies not in their literal factuality but in the larger meanings to which they point. Girls' stories are not literal accounts—like parables, the metaphorical quality of the story moves into an enlarged space of meaning.

Some stories the girls told were not literally true. Some were elaboration, imaginative reconstruction, even outright fiction. However, the truth self-narrative lies not in its literality but in its "fit" (Kerby, 1991). A self-narrative is true if it coheres with the meaning of life as it is understood, experienced, and embodied by the storyteller. To discern the truth in girls' stories,

one must listen not for factual accuracy but for truth as coherence. The girls in my study understood this. For example, Zoe told a story about receiving a computer as a birthday gift. She later expanded the story to include a new set of clothes, and a pink Cadillac—all of which her stepfather took to a car wreckers to be crushed. Beth, reflected,

I think Zoe's had a really hard life. She could have had a pink Cadillac but then she lost it. I think that's sad. I don't think everything she says is true, but she's not lying. She is always getting a really nice pink Cadillac or whatever and someone wrecks it. (Beth)

Performance. A parable in the Jesus tradition is first and foremost an event; Jesus didn't just speak in parable, Jesus, as storyteller was becoming parable Crossan (1973, 1976). Parables are a performance art that requires an imaginative engagement of both the listener and the storyteller (Crossan, 1973; Scott, 2001). Like any fiction, parables recruit the reader's imagination to bring the story to life. The audience of the parable participates as co-author of the text (Iser, 1978).

For the girls in my research, the story was a performance of self. By telling and retelling their stories, they created more elaborate renditions that eventually evolved into possibilities the girls were willing to live with, leave behind, or integrate into plausible futures.

Girls Power as Storytelling

This research project was not intended as intervention to empower girls to overcome difficulties of their lives. The complexity of their lives does not lend to easy solutions. The disempowerment and even disintegration they have experienced is not quickly “fixed.” I am convinced, however, that the process revealed girls' intrinsic power *within* the difficulty of their lives.

Gee (1999) talks about the building tasks of language; language is an activity that *makes* something.

Girls actively create through narrative. Their storytelling selves enact power and efficacy—power of making something *through* difficulty.

Girls' stories reveal powerful acts of self-efficacy. Following are four ways to consider the power of their narrating selves: power to create, power to make meaning, power to enlarge spaces of possibility, power as embodiment.

Power to create a story

It is evident from cognitive studies that human consciousness—and the very sense we have of a discrete identity that is coherent through time and space—is formed through the telling of stories. That is, the self is formed through the ongoing creation of a coherent self-narrative (Donald, 2001; Kerby, 1991). Narrative experiences—the hearing and telling of stories—have an important role to play in enlarging and expanding possibilities for the self (Luce-Kapler, 1999; Sumara, 2002). The act of storytelling, in the larger parabolic sense, is the active creation and re-creation of consciousness and awareness. Live narratives are not static—they emerge and grow (McAdams, 2005). Girls telling stories are girls with power to create and re-create themselves.

Girls in my research told a story as a generative act, not merely a passive recounting of life's adversities. To make (of) herself a story, a girl must infuse personal experience with significance and meaning: She must discern the significant events and the significance within events; she must choose the salient details; she must find the words, images, metaphors, craft the narrative; she must arrange it all in the shape of a story; and she must perform that story. All of this is creative power.

Stories reveal difficulty, pain, and struggle in the lives of girls. For some, the challenges produced a kind of rupture, a breaking of self. For these girls the telling of story seemed like mosaic work—the way an artist uses fragments to produce a whole. The art of transforming fragmentary experience into a whole self is a powerfully creative movement.

There was a sense of artistic accomplishment, pride in their work. Girls were most pleased with stories that they thought were beautiful. Beauty is central to thinking of self as artistic practice; so much of what the girls created through narrative was an attempt to make something beautiful (of themselves).

Although an inclination toward beauty in selfhood is sometimes confused with normative discourses that define beauty for the girl as a product—something girls must put on to be attractive to men—girls knew the difference.

I watch my friends put their makeup on like, liquid layer, powder, liquid and then powder and then all this eye shadow stuff friggin' all over their face. They walk around like little Barbie dolls, their skirts swishing so you can see their frigging punani. It's so gross. (Zoe)

Girls are aiming for beauty that is both authentic and intrinsic; they desire to be beautiful as a creative and powerful intention in the world.

We're not only on show for boys; there's so many other reasons to show off your body, to beautify your own self for your own pleasure or just like, to just give beauty in the world. We have this kind of need, this thing, being beautiful. (Sahira)

Power to make meaning

For Heidegger, truth was not something that could be fixed or located after the fact; truth was the ongoing project of coming to an understanding of human existence in each present moment (Sumara, 1996). The girls in my research groups were engaged in an ongoing process of

making sense of their own life experiences—these truths were not fixed or final but were emergent understandings that changed each time a story was told. This process shows up in stories that the girls told more than once over the three years. As girls gained insight into their own experience, they changed their stories. They commonly used certain phrases that pointed to new meanings. Phrases such as “I’ve never thought about it this way before,” or “I haven’t said this before,” new insight in a story they had told before.

I’ve gone through periods of extreme confusion, where I’ve just prayed desperately, “Let one, let at least one thing be clear to me, please, one thing in my life.”

I look at the moon all the time now. I don’t have curtains yet, you know. And it was like it was the light that comes as a kind of inner glow like, much more like the moon sheds than the sun. So clarity is coming from a different place now. (Sahira)

Storytelling acts as a creative regeneration of meaning and possibility both for the girls and for their listeners. It is thus powerfully transformative not only of the external world but of selves and listeners in relation to the world.

Power to enlarge spaces of possibility

Imagination releases paralysis, according to Greene (1995). She writes that imagination restores the sense that something can be done to change or transform the givens of the present moment (or present self), likening imagination to the opening of a window to disclose new perspectives, to shed light, and ultimately to release us from what she calls “non being” (p. 36). When people cannot identify alternatives or imagine that things could be better or different, they are likely to remain stuck. However, if imagination helps disclose other possibilities, action becomes possible. Thus, imagination is the catalyst of change. Creativity is a process of empowering selfhood.

The subjunctive spaces created by the play of imagination enlarge the spaces of possibility for girls to become and to act. Creative practice is an experiment in the “*what if?*” of the subjunctive move—an experiment that allows girls to experiment with possible selves and possible responses to life situations. Storytelling is the girls’ power to change, adapt, in order to survive.

Power as embodiment

In the literature of the Hebrew Bible, Wisdom is personified. This embodied, feminized form of knowing is depicted as a very powerful force—she is the co-creative power at the beginning of all Creation. Like Wisdom, bodily and incarnate knowing is there at the beginning, co-creating worlds and selves. Selves are bodily wisdom, the understanding of one’s identity.

Feminist theologians speak of women’s bodies as sacred sites in which God is experienced and known (Miller-McLemore, 1992). Feminist theological epistemology thus recreated the site of knowledge—knowledge as embodied.

The stories of girls and women in my research revealed embodied, sexual knowing. Some stories referred explicitly to girls’ bodies with images that were intimate, sexual, and erotic: a bubble bath, dancing close, sexual encounters, touching, grooming, getting dressed, dressing up. These stories reclaimed girls’ sexuality and sensuality as a creative, generative, and powerful force.

I remember graduating from Grade 8. That year I wore a sweatshirt every day and refused to ask my mother to buy me a bra. And on graduation, I put Manic Panic Pink in my hair so it stuck out like a tulip when I spritzed it with blueberry hairspray, sparkling liberty spikes on the top of my head (Cloe)

Conclusion

Girls' stories are always about power—the power of narrative selves against the forces that threaten to destroy their selves. The power of self-narrating, the creative rearranging and reconfiguring of the givens of the self, is an act of resistance and resilience, the powerful act of survival through the difficulty of their lives. Through three years of research with groups of girls, I heard their stories as parables – parables that revealed their power to create selves, make meaning, transform, embody wisdom and ultimately, their power to survive the extraordinary difficulties of their lives.

When the wave came I was unprepared. My feet left the bottom and were swept out from underneath me. The water came like right up on top of me so I actually arched over and then I saw the colours changing because when the sun hits the water then it turns green. I was looking up, but then when I arched back, I could like see the water changing really fast. I saw first the yellow and then the green and then the blue and then the dark, dark blue, and then I came back up again and I was on the surface. I could have drowned, but, no. Not this time. (Beth)

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