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The Limits, Dangers, and Absolute Indispensability of Stories

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Article abstract

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Dr. Frank has kindly agreed to have the video and transcript of his lecture published in *Narrative Works*. In his lecture, he presented stories from Bob Dylan's memoir, a biography of Henry VIII, Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, and Sophocles play *Philoctetes*, to demonstrate "not just how we make up stories, but how stories make up us."

NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

The Limits, Dangers, and Absolute Indispensability of Stories

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The Limits, Dangers, and Absolute Indispensability of Stories -- Arthur W. Frank (via YouTube)

I wish to call upon four specific storytellers whose different problems and assumptions show us how stories affect our lives—not just how we humans make up stories, but how stories make up us. But first, I want to preface these four storytellers with a brief epigraph. This epigraph is taken from Bob Dylan's remarkable memoir *Chronicles* (2004). Dylan, like me, grew up listening to the radio before there was television in most people's houses. But he is a few years older than I am, so he listened to the radio longer than I did. He writes about radio shows:

> I was raised on that stuff, used to quiver with excitement listening to these shows. They gave me clues about how the world worked and they fueled my day-dreams, made my imagination work overtime. Radio shows were a strange craft. (p. 50)

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That quotation introduces not all of what I'm going to say about how stories figure in our lives, but a good deal of what I think matters most and what too many academic narrative studies overlook. First, Dylan tells us he "was raised on that stuff." The novelist Maxine Hong Kingston (1989), in her memoir, writes about what she calls *stories to grow up on*. Some of these stories are told about our families, some may be fairytales or folk tales, and others are mass media stories. A lot of the stories I grew up on were plots of 1950s Broadway musicals—those songs were the soundtrack of my early childhood. Working out an appropriate adult relationship to stories we grew up on strikes me as one of our central developmental tasks, one we probably never finish. Bob Dylan grew up on radio stories.

Dylan then tells us that these radio stories were *exciting* stories. I think academic narrative studies often forget that people expect and find varying excitement in stories—excitement is one of the main reasons we're drawn to stories. My colleague Cheryl Mattingly (1998) emphasizes the importance of *suspense* in stories. Suspense builds excitement. The question here is not just what people find exciting in stories. The issue is how stories teach people what is worth getting excited about. That takes me to Dylan's most crucial lesson about stories.

These radio dramas, he writes, gave him "clues about how the world worked." And those clues took root and expanded in his daydreams. These two ideas of clues and daydreams seem inseparable. Any child has to learn how the world works, and she or he gets clues from multiple sources: observation, overheard talk, talk directed at the child, mass media, and eventually, reading. Each source of clues has its particular potency—these clues stick with us, continuing to influence us even when subsequent experience suggests they are poor guides to action.

Mass media stories—whether radio shows, Broadway musicals, YouTube, or video games—become potent forces in our lives because they insinuate themselves in us as daydreams. These daydreams take a story we hear and create spinoffs. Sometimes we cast ourselves in the role of an established character and vary that part to reflect other fantasies. In other daydreams, we create a new role in the story for ourselves as a character. The point is, and we'll see this in the stories I'll soon tell, we don't simply hear stories; we enter stories and in that space we engage in *play*. The play I'm talking about has as its central feature what the social psychologist G.H. Mead (1934/1970) called *role-taking*. In the space created by stories, we play at taking roles of people we might be or never will be. Mead saw this role-taking as fundamental to child development.

On his account, role-taking seems to be an unqualified good thing. I'm not quite so sanguine about it; for me, there's a dark side that we'll see in these stories. I agree with Mead that this play of role-taking is indispensable. It also happens to be dangerous.

Bob Dylan has another important reminder for social scientists when he says that radio stories made his *imagination work overtime*. After a career in sociology, I believe that social scientists overemphasize so-called rational action and under-appreciate imaginative action, by which I mean acting out an imagined scenario. Many people's imaginations work overtime much of the time. Again, that's indispensable but also dangerous.

Finally, I like Dylan describing storytelling as a *strange craft*, because that phrase evokes the mixtures of realism and fantasy, of indispensability and danger that stories are for me. A central problem of doing academic work on narrative, I believe, is how to avoid domesticating the strangeness of stories by subordinating them to some mechanism called *method*—but tonight I'll stay away from that issue. I titled my most recent book *Letting Stories Breathe* (2010). Maybe I should have titled it *Keeping Stories Strange*, because then I would have had to do a better job living up to that title. It's difficult to say things about stories and at the same time keep those stories strange.

Enough of Bob Dylan. Here is my first story, taken from the historian David Starkey's (2003) biography of Henry VIII. Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, has died after childbirth, and his chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, has arranged for Henry to marry a German princess, Anne of Cleves. As our story begins, Anne has been brought to England for the wedding, but she has not yet met the King. It's New Year's Day, and she is at a country house in Rochester, amusing herself by looking out the window at a bull-baiting that's being put on for her in the courtyard below. The official plan is that she will meet the King on January 3 at Blackheath.

Suddenly, six gentlemen burst into the room unannounced, each dressed in identical cloaks and hoods. One steps forward, kisses her, and presents her with a gift from the King. He then continues to "commune" with her, as one witness describes it; that is, he professes his love for her. She is embarrassed by his inappropriate behaviour and pays as little attention to him as possible, continuing to watch the bull-baiting. He becomes impatient and leaves the room, but returns a few moments later dressed as the King. All bow. Anne is twice embarrassed. Henry, Starkey tells us, feels humiliated (pp. 626-28).

Here we have a story about the failure of attempted storytelling, in this case, story enactment. Our interest is what went wrong; why the scene does not come off, as Erving Goffman (1967) would have said, but rather ends in mutual embarrassment. Starkey informs us that Henry was re-enacting a stock scene from chivalric romances in which a lover appears in disguise. The storytelling convention is that a lover's beloved has the second sight to recognize him through any disguise—true love gives people that second sight, which becomes a test of whether love is true. Henry may or may not have believed in such second sight. What he definitely expected is that Anne would know the storyline, recognize what was being re-enacted, and play the appropriate part. The problem was that Anne had been brought up in cloisters where such stories were not told. Starkey puts it succinctly: "she had behaved naturally, like a peasant, rather than artificially, like a lady" (p. 628).

Like all stories, this one can be heard in multiple ways; for example, as a story in which power is the expectation of one party that others will recognize and conform to whatever narrative line is proposed. That interest would follow the argument well stated by Bourdieu (1993): "A dominant agent is one who has the means to force the dominated agent to see him as he wants to be seen" (p. 58). But the story also illustrates Foucault's point that power is always a relationship. Henry depends upon Anne's participation in the story, and lacking that participation, he feels diminished.

At present, however, I'm more interested in what this story shows about the self and the terms on which selves collect into affiliations. Henry has grown up on chivalric romances that have given him clues about how the world works. Stories have informed his sense of what kind of character he can be—they set his parameters of selfhood and self/other relationships. Stories inform what kind of responses Henry expects from others, because he expects others have grown up on stories that may not be exactly the same but that offer the same clues. Anne is hardly clueless about the world. She will be remarkably adroit negotiating the end of her marriage and attaining a respected, continuing role at court. But on this New Year's Day, what counts is that Anne's clues come from having grown up on different stories, so in response to Henry's assumptions about the world, she is consequentially clueless. One consequence will be her subsequent separation from Henry; another will be the beheading of Cromwell. Stories have consequences.

Storytelling also has its limits. Anne's subsequent negotiations of her position seem to have little to do with stories. But the failed first

encounter between Henry and Anne is a dramatic example of how important stories are in people's capacities for affiliation. Contemporary witnesses were Henry courtiers, not Anne's women, so we can only speculate on her reactions and whether she viewed Henry as unsuitable for her. We can say with greater confidence that Henry's sense of who can be a viable partner in his project of selfhood depended on sharing particular stories—and that is my crucial point about selves and relationships. Again, let me emphasize, the issue is not whether Henry believes the chivalric stories are true in what they tell. The truth of the stories is the expectation that others will be able to collaborate re-enacting the story.

Stories, of course, change. Chivalric romances become radio dramas become TV sit-coms become video games and viral YouTube clips. But I believe that human terms of membership—who affiliates with whom—remain much as they were in this story happening at the juncture of the late Renaissance and early modern periods, reflecting both sensibilities. We humans affiliate with people who immediately pick up on what stories we are re-enacting and who play their appropriate parts in those stories. And we distance ourselves from people who miss those clues because they have not grown up on the same stories.

Henry VIII had what we can call power to enforce a certain conformity between the stories he knew and the reality around him. My next storyteller is like Henry in her dedication to a story, but she acts from a position of comparative powerlessness. That vulnerability makes her dedication to a story dangerous to herself, whereas Henry is dangerous to others. To the powerless, vulnerability often compounds itself. This storyteller is Mme. Bourienne, a minor character from Tolstoy's (1868-1869/2005) *War and Peace*. I write about her in *Letting Stories Breathe* (Frank 2010, pp. 8-10), so I'll tell her story briefly tonight. She exemplifies what's dangerous in Bob Dylan's point about how stories can make a person's imagination work overtime. Stories can significantly distort a person's sense of reality.

To make the story as short as I can, Mme. Bourienne is a well-educated but penniless Frenchwoman who works as the companion of the rich Russian Princess Marya. Princess Marya is not immediately attractive to men; Mme. Bourienne is. The poor but noble Prince Anatole comes to court Princess Marya and decides to seduce Mme. Bourienne with the intention of making her his mistress. She goes along with the seduction, Princess Marya discovers them kissing, Anatole is dismissed, and Mme. Bourienne is forgiven. It is worth noting that as a character in a

fictional story, Mme. Bourienne is also vulnerable to Tolstoy, who uses her as a foil to exemplify the virtues of Princess Marya, who represents a certain ideal.

But as a narrator, Tolstoy has to keep his characters' actions credible, so he gives us a very specific answer to why Mme. Bourienne could be so naive as to participate in the seduction. That answer also shows us how seriously Tolstoy, as a master psychologist, took the influence of stories in human lives. Mme. Bourienne has grown up on a story once told to her by her aunt, in which a young woman is seduced, and just when her seducer is about to abandon her, her dead mother appears and that shocks the man into marrying her. That story becomes Mme. Bourienne's clue to how the world works. Or, the story she tells herself is a spin-off of the original story, because Tolstoy tells us that Mme. Bourienne has, over the years, adapted the story, retelling it in her imaginative daydreams. When Anatole arrives, life seems to be imitating a story that Mme. Bourienne has forgotten was once an artful fiction.

As types of storytellers, Henry VIII and Mme. Bourienne differ in the following respect. Henry is in a position to use stories to test people; kings can do that. Those who know the story and pick up cues about which story is being re-enacted become his in-group; others are expelled. By contrast, Mme. Bourienne uses people to test stories, and those stories represent her best hope for getting out of a situation she deeply resents. Her implicit faith in a story causes her to experience Anatole as she does and to respond as she does, ignoring the risks of that response. But despite these differences in the positions from which Henry and Mme. Bourienne use stories, both are deeply committed to the truth of a story as a model for reality.

It would be easy to dismiss Mme. Bourienne as either a reflection of Tolstoy's willingness to indulge in a silly-woman story and/or as a plot device to underscore the Christian goodness of the Princess. But what disturbs me about Mme. Bourienne's naiveté is that it transcends her plot functions in *War and Peace* and is representative of many people, including me, at some moments that I recall with embarrassment. We all do things to which the obvious question is: How could you possibly believe that would go well? As often as not, the answer is that we have taken our clues about the world either from a story that misrepresents the world or else we have misapplied the story. By "misrepresentation," I do not mean that stories get wrong certain facts about reality. Myths, fairy tales, and folk tales are full of impossibilities presented as facts, and yet these stories do not misrepresent the world. Neither do allegories, science

fiction, or magical realism, even though they relate events that could never happen. Part of what makes storytelling such a strange craft is that misrepresentation is not a matter of the factual plausibility of what happens.

Within the limited scope of this essay, let us understand misrepresentation to be as common-sensical as it seems in Tolstoy's story, and let us understand Mme. Bourienne as someone—and Henry is another example—who has become absorbed not wisely but too well in a story that psychiatrists would call a *narcissistic fantasy*. That is, a story told by the self, affirming a fantasy of the self, and unmoored from the reality checks of the storyteller's making other people's reactions crucial to what clues about reality are taken from the story. Instead of reality testing, Mme. Bourienne simply gazes into the mirror of the story she has adapted and sees an idealized version of her life reflected there. Then she embraces the reflection. I am afraid I see her as broadly representative of not only individuals, but groups, up to and including whole nations. Stories, with their capacities to insinuate themselves in our imaginations (that work overtime), are very good at being such narcissistic fantasies.

My third storyteller, Audre Lorde, has been my companion the longest, and I feel closest to her. I had already written my own memoir of having cancer before I read her extraordinary collection of speeches published as *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde, 1980). Again, I will truncate the telling of what has been one of my touchstone stories about how it often is not disease but health care that is the occasion for ill people's most difficult struggles to sustain personal identity.

Lorde tells a story about how, ten days after her mastectomy, she goes to see her surgeon to have her stitches removed. She approaches the appointment with confidence that she is regaining what she calls "my own flair, my own style" (p. 59). That confidence is shattered when the surgeon's nurse, whom Lorde has found to be supportive in the past, takes her to task for not wearing a prosthesis. "You will feel so much better with it on," the nurse tells her. "And besides, we really like you to wear something, at least when you come in. Otherwise, it's bad for the morale of the office" (p. 59). Lorde ends the story writing that she was "too outraged to speak then, but this was to be only the first such assault on my right to define and to claim my own body" (p. 59).

Lorde's storytelling differs from the previous storytellers in several respects. She positions herself as what Michel Foucault (2011), in his last writings, called a truth teller or, in ancient Greek, a *parrhesiast*. A parrhesiast, at least in that word's original usage, tells a truth at some risk

to himself or herself; a parrhesiast speaks truth to power. But as I have argued at greater length in previous writing (Frank, 2009), Lorde puts a trickster twist on parrhesia. Tricksters are good at getting out of traps, and that's what Lorde does. The nurse traps her, and if we read the story carefully, we see the trap apparently holds for the duration of the office visit. Lorde tells us she was "too outraged to speak then." She tells the story later, freeing herself from the trap only retroactively, but that's good enough.

Both Henry VIII and Mme. Bourienne go into situations with stories guiding their sense of reality; indeed, stories control their sense of reality and judgments about how to act. Like them, Audre Lorde goes into her appointment expecting a particular narrative to be enacted, but the nurse has different narrative expectations and a qualified capacity to enforce these. Lorde then tells a story as an act of repair, to figure out what went wrong and gain clarity retrospectively. This narrative repair draws upon other stories that prefigure Lorde's present story, including stories of having to reclaim her identity as a lesbian and as an African-American.

Crucially, the prosthesis story offers Audre Lorde a means of *holding her own*, by which I mean: after an experience that undermines her sense of identity and shows her embodied vulnerability, the story is a means of reasserting the self she has claimed to be. Her temporary vulnerability becomes a source of long-term strength, or, following Nietzsche, what doesn't destroy her makes her stronger. Storytelling is the means by which she transforms vulnerability into strength. The master narrative of her life is a series of vulnerabilities being transformed into increasing strength.

My final storyteller is, like Audre Lorde, wounded. This is Philoctetes, the hero of Sophocles's (2011) late tragedy of the same name. Philoctetes is a Greek prince who sails with the Greeks when they go to war against Troy. Again, I truncate the story mercilessly. On the way to Troy, Philoctetes is bitten on the foot by a snake. The wound festers, creating an unbearable stench. It also causes Philoctetes agonizing pain, and his screams distract the Greeks from their rituals. Odysseus abandons him on the island of Lesbos, tricking him with a story that they will wait while he sleeps. Ten years pass, the Greeks unsuccessfully lay siege to Troy, and finally there is a prophecy that the Greeks will never be victorious until Philoctetes joins their forces. Philoctetes's singular warrior capacity comes with his bow, which was given to him by Hercules. The bow never misses.

Sophocles's play begins when Odysseus lands secretly on Lesbos accompanied by the son of Achilles, Neoptolemos. The younger man is crucial to the plan, because Philoctetes knows and hates Odysseus. Neoptolemos is to convince Philoctetes to return with them to Troy by telling him the prophecy that he can achieve greatness conquering the Trojans, and, as an added inducement, the Greek physicians can cure his foot. The problem is that Philoctetes has spent a decade telling himself a story that demonizes the Greeks and ends with his revenge against them. So at the climax of the play—and again, I am leaving out a good deal—he has a choice. He can either go to Troy, be healed, and win glory in battle, or accept Neoptolemos' promise to take him back to the kingdom of his very old father, where his wound will still fester, but he will have the satisfaction of not helping the Greeks who abandoned him.

What happens is less important for our purposes, but I will tell you. Philoctetes chooses to live out his revenge story. He decides to go home, without glory or healing. At that point there is a *deus ex machina* with Hercules appearing. He tells Philoctetes to go to Troy and be glorious. The play ends with his doing that, although, again, it is a bit more complicated how things actually will turn out.

The narratological importance of Philoctetes, at least within this essay, is how he represents those situations when two or more incompatible stories both seem to have legitimate claims on us. My first three storytellers never have to choose among stories, and if having to choose is a problem, not seeing choices is worse. Their shared limitation is an inability to imagine alternative stories, thus Audre Lorde is surprised by the nurse's reaction to her appearance and its implied narrative.

Philoctetes's story is all about his choice between stories that each make compelling calls upon him. Even though it is the oldest story, it may be the most sophisticated in terms of the dilemma it poses. A genuine dilemma is when we have two or more stories, each of which has claims that seem undeniable. For Philoctetes to go home is to deny both healing and the warrior glory any Greek aspires to. For him to go to Troy is to deny the treachery of his abandonment for ten years. Most of us, when faced with a similar dilemma, do not have the benefit of a god who suddenly appears to tell us which to choose. We have to live with the limitations and dangers of our choices about which version of the past we allow to define our present, and which version of the future we allow to define our past.

As the briefest of conclusions, where does this leave us with respect to three crucial terms: the self, the collectivities that selves enter

into, and the dialogue of selves within these collectivities? The *self* as I've been imagining it has three dimensions. The self begins as a collection of stories that provide clues about the world. Over time, selves become a revisable narration of one's own past with implications for future action. And crucially, the self is a predisposition to understand new stories—to take new stories more or less seriously—in terms of how they fit with stories already known and interpretations of those stories that are, in varying degrees, shared in groups (Henry's community of peers) and developed in an interior monologue (Mme. Bourienne's imaginative adaptation of the original story told to her).

Collectives, or membership groups, comprise people who share both a knowledge of particular stories and also an interpretive bias that leads them to make sense of stories in the same way—they find the same jokes funny, the same tragedies sad. As an example of my own interpretive bias, in the Henry VIII story, I find Anne of Cleves a less sympathetic character when I hear she was watching a bull-baiting. Her engagement in something that cruel distracts me from her oppression as a political pawn in a marriage game. But a 16th-century listener would not share either my interpretation of bull-baiting or of arranged royal marriages, both being understood as normal. Groups—from families and workplaces up to faith communities and nations—are defined by the interpretations that members share and the interpretive flexibility that the group allows or does not allow. The latter variant of groups that effect narrative closure as the condition of membership seems a critical issue in contemporary political realities.

Third, both selves and collectivities are held together through *dialogue*, which can either affirm or question the narrative predispositions that collect people into groups. Henry VIII can order the affirmation of his preferred story, and those around Henry would have shared his interpretive predispositions, not just chivalric romances but the master narrative that life requires kings; the alternative is too terrifying even to narrate imaginatively. Critical dialogue becomes possible, and necessary, as narrative presupposition weakens. At the level of selves, Mme. Bourienne's singularly bad judgment is to betray the one person, Princess Marya, who might have engaged her in critical dialogue about whether she was being guided well by an appropriate story. The sadness of Audre Lorde's story, as a paradigm of medical encounters, is that she and the nurse can't stop and talk about why each needs the narrative she asserts—where each of their stories comes from and what stakes depend on it. Dialogue, as the questioning of narrative presuppositions, has the

potential to mediate the effects of stories in our lives. But in too many situations, people find dialogue impossible.

Because stories are so powerful in shaping how we humans live—the selves we believe we can be and the terms on which we collect with others into groups—they are necessarily dangerous, especially to those outside the group. Dialogue seems our best means of protecting ourselves against the limitations and dangers of our indisputably necessary stories. But as I hope to have shown in these stories, too often what passes for dialogue is simply an affirmation of clues about a world that some group has already agreed is the only and necessary possibility.

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