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Learning Altruism through Stories and Action

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Chapter 7

Learning Altruism through Stories and Action

Robert Atkinson, Adele Baruch and Lillian Harris

Special Issue: A Narrative Works Monograph. Listening to Stories of Courage and Moral Choice: Creating Conversations about Inclusive Care in our Schools and Communities

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Article abstract

In the course of our study on listening to stories of courage and moral choice, we noticed many examples of the way in which the stories appeared to function as a cognitive bridge, providing a vision of possibilities for caring action. We also observed that in order for these stories to promote identification with altruistic action for listeners, facilitative conditions are needed. The two facilitative conditions identified repeatedly by students and teachers were the sharing of the stories in a nurturing environment, where students felt emotionally safe, as well as an opportunity to practice helping behaviors, either inside or outside of school. These stories of connection, courage, and gratitude often elicited the question of “What can I do when faced with destruction and despair?” That question frequently revealed a wish to be a part of the connection, courage, and action inherent in these stories.



NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

SPECIAL ISSUE: A *NARRATIVE WORKS* MONOGRAPH

**LISTENING TO
STORIES OF COURAGE
AND
MORAL CHOICE**

**CREATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INCLUSIVE CARE
IN OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

EDITED BY
ADELE BARUCH, ROBERT ATKINSON, AND HOLLY KHIEL

Chapter 7
Learning Altruism through Stories and Action

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In the course of our study on listening to stories of courage and moral choice, we noticed many examples of the way in which the stories appeared to function as a cognitive bridge, providing a vision of possibilities for caring action. We also observed that in order for these stories to promote identification with altruistic action for listeners, facilitative conditions are needed. The two facilitative conditions identified repeatedly by students and teachers were the sharing of the stories in a nurturing environment, where students felt emotionally safe, as well as an opportunity to practice helping behaviors, either inside or outside of school. These stories of connection, courage, and gratitude often elicited the question of “What can I do when faced with destruction and despair?” That question frequently revealed a wish to be a part of the connection, courage, and action inherent in these stories.

Keywords: facilitative conditions, gratitude, altruism, reciprocity, action

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Wanting to determine the best place to hide a special gift for the human people, so they wouldn't receive it until they were ready for it, the Creator called a meeting of all the people: the people who fly through the air, the people who swim under the water, the people who walk upon the earth with four legs—you get the picture, all creatures were invited—except the human people. Then, all the creatures spoke, one by one, offering their special places where the gift should be hidden, and the reasons why . . . from the bottom of the ocean to deep inside the earth to the top of the highest mountain . . .

because, they said, no human being would ever find it in those faraway places. The Creator thanked them for all their offers and then explained that the gift would not be safe in any of those places because one day the explorations of human beings will reach every part of the world and even beyond. Then there was a long silence. All the people present wondered if there was any safe place in the universe. Then, Grandmother Mole, the shyest of all, thought she had an answer that just might work. She tugged at the Creator's clothing, He bent down, and she whispered into His ear. When she had finished, the Creator's face burst into a smile of delight, and all the Animal people felt the warmth of His smile. The Creator said, "That is the answer. We will put the gift for the humans within their own hearts. They will never think to look there!"

And that is what they did.

(Adapted from Zukav, 1997, p. 52; 2000, pp. 46–47; and Atkinson, 2019)

All the major world religions teach that inside of us is an inherent capacity for neighborly love, and with attention and nurturance, this capacity becomes realized. Our experiences with the Courage and Moral Choice Project suggest that this inherent capacity to express care and compassionate empathy can be cultivated under the right conditions.

One facilitative condition appears to be an ethos of mutual respect within a community. From the stories of helping during the Holocaust, the neighbors who helped on the island of Zakynthos did so within a general context of mutual respect for each other's religion. This ethos was reciprocated when the Jewish survivors purchased new stained glass windows for the church of St. Dionysus. One survivor described it as accepting "the existence of each other." Helping behavior appears to be contagious in helping networks (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). As Susan Santiago puts it in her essay in Chapter 5, these "multilayered relationships" appeared to augment the human connection between those involved in efforts to help.

When people live more directly as neighbors on a day-to-day basis, their moral, spiritual, and religious beliefs are broadened in an inclusive way. Staub (2008) has pointed out that familiarity appears to mitigate interpersonal violence. Schnall, Roper, and Fessler (2010) point out that exposure to other peoples' good deeds appears to facilitate altruistic behavior. On the island of Zakynthos, there was evidence of a "different set of values" and a "broader sense of identity," which also includes a stronger sense of "mutual respect" than may be expressed in

many parts of a more secular and segregated mainland. A recurring theme throughout this book is the parallel principle of reciprocity; as Iona put it, “I went back to find the old woman [who sheltered us] and I helped her. I sewed clothes for her” (Ch. 5). In cases where it was not possible to reciprocate, those who were helped gave the gift of service to others.

Hearing Stories of Compassionate Action

How do the stories build a bridge between the latent compassion in our hearts and the direct expressions of care? One of the themes that emerged for students and teachers in the CMCP was that stories of helping functioned as a sort of cognitive bridge that encourages listeners to envision possibilities for caring action in difficult situations.

We have seen in our investigations how altruism tends to spread in social networks, and how “the benefits tend to be magnified” (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 298) the more the stories are shared. Hearing narratives of events that include a helping aspect not only changes how people interpret events themselves (Wilson, 2011), but also, given facilitative conditions, makes it easier for them to act in beneficial ways in the future. Helping behaviors practiced over and over again cohere into a helping identity. While hearing stories “inspires helping behaviors,” it is only through acts that “in turn, shape and chisel at one’s identity as we construct a life” (Monroe, 2004, p. 262).

During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many participants described helping as a natural outcome of “the way we were raised” (Ch. 3). Their stories, in very concrete terms, offer a vehicle for the transmission of values that Monroe (2002, 2004, 2011) says is so often an outgrowth of altruistic identity. For those who do not have the opportunity of being surrounded by altruistic action during their formative years, stories of courage when faced with moral choices foster this capacity in their imagination. In the context of the facilitative conditions (that is, a reasonably nurturing environment), this imaginative experience appears to inspire altruistic action. It provides support for a developing helping identity and it provides a “holding context” for the exploration of personal agency in the face of traumatic events. A sense of personal agency and a learned altruistic identity mitigates against a flight or fight response and promotes continued action in the face of challenges (Monroe, 2002).

On a practical, educational level, we have seen very clearly that hearing stories of helping have changed the perspective, and even

transformed the lives, of students. As teacher Kim¹ voiced for so many of the other students (Ch. 1), “When you hear them, you think, ‘I hope someday I have the courage to react in the same way.’” Or as student Katelyn put it, “It makes me want to continue the chain of helping others.”

Examples of compassionate action appear to predispose witnesses to further action. Our conclusion is that a caring school environment provided the foundation, or fertile ground, for the stories to take hold and become meaningful. The sharing of personal stories of courageous helping during the second phase of the CMCP appeared to build community and more interpersonal sharing among students. Stories of helping in the context of larger political or natural catastrophes emphasized during the first phase of the CMCP appeared to facilitate investigation of moral issues or choices. Ideally, in facilitative educational environments, there are opportunities for both the building of community through personal stories and for wrestling with questions of moral choice inspired by stories within a more global context.

Stories of Elevation and Revitalized Prosocial Behaviors

Some scientists say we have been hardwired to connect, cooperate, and to be empathic. Scientific evidence, largely from the field of neuroscience, has shown that our brains are designed to develop so that attachment to other people is a basic need or “essential to health and to human flourishing” (Seligman, 2011).

Stories of compassionate helping have the potential to elicit a positive emotion described in the literature as *elevation*. Schnall, Roper, and Fessler (2010) adopt the term from Keltner and Haidt (2003) to “describe a positive emotion experienced upon witnessing another person perform a virtuous act; principally one that improves the welfare of other people” (p. 315). These authors tested the results of viewing altruistic behavior and found that there was a correlation between that experience and subsequent helping behaviors. They conclude that “by eliciting elevation, even brief exposure to other individual’s prosocial behavior motivates altruism, thus potentially providing an avenue for increasing the level of pro-sociality in society” (p. 319). This may explain why exhausted helping individuals continue to help despite their exhaustion. As one story from Katrina (cited by Rose, 2007) illustrated, this elevating

¹ Names of schools, students, and teachers have been changed throughout to protect confidentiality.

effect transformed an exhausted and weeping man into a man who is revitalized (see Ch. 3).

It is the nature of cooperation to enable transcendence from self to community, or from any singularity to any plurality. As we witness the overwhelming outpouring of universal compassion and charity with each devastating disaster to some part of the planet, it may not be as surprising to hear now that, at our deepest nature, we are *homo empathicus*, as Jeremy Rifkin (2009) labels us in *The Empathic Civilization*. He reports that researchers have discovered “empathy neurons” that allow us to feel and experience another’s situation as if it were our own, and that empathic consciousness has been steadily evolving over our history.

We are all born with the capacity to connect with others, but it takes time and the right circumstances for altruism to emerge. As Staub (2003) has demonstrated, doing a little bit of good readies us to do more good. And when we do, we seem to know intuitively that caring for and assisting others in times of need not only feels right, but also contributes to our own sense of wellbeing and happiness.

Beyond Despair

In a pragmatic sense, networks of helping appear to have the potential to move both actors and listeners beyond despair. Two men in a truck, in a crime-ridden neighborhood of New Orleans, were able to ask, “What do you need?” and suspicious interaction turned into caring and courageous action. We recognize the transformational potential of helping in a devastating situation when we see it. As Roger stated, “You want to be a part of that . . . to take a bad situation and turn it into something of value” (Ch. 3).

The purposefulness and connection inherent in a helping network transform some of the morass inherent in catastrophic situations into the gold of authentic connection and gratitude. The connections, the courage witnessed, and the gratitude expressed foster reciprocal action during devastating events. Stories of connection, courage, and gratitude appear to engender the question of “What can I do?” In a sense, that question reveals a wish to be a part of the connection, courage, and action described. Opportunities to express this wish through action appear to encourage the development of a helping identity: a person with a developing helping identity seeks out other opportunities to help. Recent studies suggest that the consistent expression of altruism promotes stability and resiliency (Isaacs, et al., 2017). This supports Vaillant’s

(1977, 1993, 2002) description of altruism as a mature defense, one that promotes connection and the channeling of difficult feelings.

If we want our children to be prepared to be a part of a well-connected, courageous, resilient, and caring response in the face of near-routine catastrophic events that appear in this stage of the 21st century, don't we owe them these stories? As Staub (2003, 2008), Bandura (1977), and many others have demonstrated, our children will enact what they see and hear around them.

As a Jew, why did I (Adele) have to wait until I was 58 years old to learn about the Bielski brothers (Jews hounded into the forests around Nazi-occupied Poland) who built a non-violent community to shelter eventually over a thousand persecuted Jews? Why do the young people of Zakynthos appear to know so little of their proud heritage, only one generation back? How many of the good people of New Orleans are aware of the quietly compassionate work of the mostly elderly Southern Baptists who were among the first to set up tents in the devastation after Katrina?

It is as if, up to this point, our culture has nurtured an immature fascination with stories of aggression and exploitation. Seeing the effects of these stories may encourage us to "age out" of these hormone-driven, action- and violence-based stories. As Vaillant (1977, 1993, 2002) has repeatedly demonstrated, the internalization of mature defenses such as sublimation and altruism requires the internalization of consistent examples of maturity in action.

We have the stories. Becoming immersed in this scholarship, we've realized that with a little searching beneath the surface, every cultural context reveals examples of altruistic and caring behavior. It is now a matter of valuing these stories in our learning and arts environments, and a matter of being less seduced by the excitement and money generated by stories that cater to the less mature aspects of individual and cultural development.

The evolutionary psychologist Wright (1995) believes that such impulses as generosity, gratitude, a sense of obligation, and empathy are feelings and behaviors found in all cultures. In the past decade, each natural disaster has seen a great outpouring of compassion, altruism, and humanitarian aid—from New Orleans to New Zealand to Haiti and Japan—as have terrorist acts in New York, Paris, and Boston. Our capacities to help have encouraged us to see ourselves as more interconnected. This was captured at a press conference immediately following the earthquake in Japan when President Obama noted, "For all

our differences in culture or language or religion, ultimately, humanity is one" (Obama, 2011).

"Give evolution long enough," Robert Wright (2000) says, "and reciprocal altruism will arise yet again—and again and again and again" (p. 294). Even Charles Darwin (1879/2004), in *The Descent of Man*, took the law of cooperation to its fullest possible extent: "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him" (p. 147).

We may finally say that all the people in our study, from Holocaust survivors to disaster helpers, and from teachers to students, and maybe especially the students who illustrate this in their own stories, have all expressed and experienced what developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1966/1987) calls the "wider identity." His concept is built on the idea that we all start out life with a "narrower" identity that focuses on the self and personal needs or desires. As we mature and progress toward our potential, broader identity begins to emerge little by little. Ultimately, Erikson believed we all have the potential to realize our "wider," "more inclusive," identity (p. 492) through which we identify with and relate to all human beings as members of one human family. He says further that this has been a long evolutionary process and that we are now at a point in our collective history when this "wider identity" is critical to our survival.

Stories, especially those told to us by people close to us, provide a valuable and potent tool for the transmission of both positive emotions and models for helping behaviors. Ultimately, one may argue that the sharing of stories of helping, especially under stressful conditions, is a moral imperative for adults, caregivers, and educators tasked with the nurturance of mature and resilient individuals.

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