

BOOK REVIEWS

Narrative Means to Sober Ends: Treating Addiction and Its Aftermath

Jonathan Diamond

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When I asked Jonathan Diamond to guest edit this issue, I was inspired by one of those strange moments of synchronicity. My co-editor at the time, Victor Barbetti, had begun work at The Institute for Research, Education and Training in Addictions (IRETA). He would soon be stepping down from his co-editor role to focus on his new job, but he wanted to do one last issue on the topic of addiction. At the same time, I'd just joined an on-line community hosted by Lois Shawver, called the Postmodern Therapies (PMTH) group. Among an e-mail list brimming with colorful characters, Jonathan's voice managed to stand out above the fray, at first because he made me laugh. Jonathan's often self-deprecating humor, however, is one that I found to be infused with a deep wisdom and sensibility. When I discovered Jonathan had written a book on addiction, my curiosity was piqued, and it just so happened that PMTH had begun a group reading of the book. So, I read it. The rest I suppose is history. Obviously, I was impressed with his work. After all, it was upon reading *Narrative Means to Sober Ends* that I *knew* Jonathan was the one to guest edit this issue on addiction. To my delight, he agreed.

One of Jonathan's central influences is betrayed in the title of the book. *Narrative Means to Sober Ends* is, of course, an homage to White and Epston's (1990) groundbreaking text, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. Like White and Epston, Jonathan gives primacy to the concrete experiences of those people in his care who arrive on his doorstep hoping for a miracle. At the same time, Jonathan elevates these simple lives to the grand story that they are: the heroic struggle to face death. Death, in this context, however, is not so much the actual death of the person him- or herself, which would be comparably easy to confront. Rather, the recovering alcoholic is faced with the death of his past life and, with the recognition of this death, an acknowledgment of a deep sense of loss: the loss of all the opportunities and relationships never to be recovered again.

In its many guises, the recovery process is a story, and it is hard to imagine a story of recovery that is not also a story of mourning.

From the perspective of narrative therapy—a perspective inspired by a long tradition of hermeneutics in the social sciences and continental philosophy—people are interpretive beings. Our lives are shot through with meaning, and these meanings are gathered together by the threads of narrative. We do not first have meaning and *then* tell a story, rather we *discover* meaning *through* the stories we live out in our daily lives. The *telling* of these stories is only a secondary, explicit articulation of our lived meanings already underway, as told in our actions, foretold in our intentions, and retained in our recollections of the past. But the telling is important, too.

In a remarkable series of studies by James Pennebaker and colleagues (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), research participants were asked to write stories about painful, traumatic events of their respective pasts. Initially, the participants felt an increased feeling of distress, but over a period of time, they demonstrated improved immune functioning and, generally, better health outcomes. These studies have been replicated in a number of ways across various cultures. What these studies have done, in essence, is codify in empirical research what postmodern, narrative psychotherapists have been saying for many years, based on their experiences with clients. The implication, as Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) note, is that constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves. This process allows one to organize and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives. Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience become more manageable. Constructing stories facilitates a sense of resolution, which results in less rumination and eventually allows disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought (p. 1243).

Additional research has suggested that it is particularly helpful when a person first accesses a traumatic or negative experience and then reappraises this experience in a more positive light, i.e. from a position of hope. Naive optimism doesn't seem to be very helpful, nor does it appear to be helpful for people to get caught up ruminating about their negative experience. Generally, two things seem to be important for therapeutic

narratives: a coherent narrative that attempts to make sense of the experience and a shift from a negative to positive appraisal process in the construction of the narrative.

Diamond understands these principles quite well. The process of therapy, he claims, is a process of narrating the unconscious. But this is not enough: the narration for the client who is suffering with an addiction should be a process of “externalizing” the addiction. Jonathan finds letter writing to be particularly helpful in this respect, as he notes: “letter writing seems to create some distance between clients and their dilemmas. Encouraging people to define their values and sense of self, separate from problems, often leads to a shift in perspective from ‘I am the problem’ to ‘I am up against a problem’” (p. xix). When a client’s problems are related to from a distance—as external to the ego, that is—a little space is opened up for hope, and with that hope, she might find the courage to face her grief. The addict who hopes, in a sense, hopes for a life beyond the self who will be left behind, and a goodbye letter to her drug of choice is a like a goodbye letter to all those networks of significance—of relations—gathered by that drug, with parents, friends, lovers and so on. Jonathan understands this process of mourning and conveys this message so well and with such a gentle touch because he knows what it means to grieve. Loss is not something to be hurried pass, like a bad car accident, but must be slowly endured and assimilated in small, piercing moments of condensed time.

In a sense, Jonathan’s description of the experience of addiction quite beautifully transcends the experience of the stereotypic recovering alcoholic. If we listen closer, beyond the narrative of addiction, *Narrative Means to Sober Ends* is a story about what it means to be human. It is not necessary to be a recovering addict, nor even to know a recovering addict, in order to grasp Jonathan’s message. Ultimately, the description of the addict so deeply reveals the ontic condition of addiction and recovery from it that it discloses something quite ontological about the human condition: that after all, we are at every moment of our lives faced with the nothingness that is our existence, with the gaping hole of our futures waiting to be fulfilled. We are in this sense, all of us, each day, confronted with our death. We must, that is, face the paradox that we are at once an open-expanse of possibilities—extending in all directions beyond the horizon—and also finite creatures who cannot have *all* these possibilities. Nor can we predict where our destiny will lead us. As the fragile beings

that we are, we seek a foundation upon that abyss; that is, we seek to control. In this sense, we are all addicts, for all addictions are but one singular addiction: “the addiction to control” (p. 10). To submit to one’s death, on the other hand, is to relinquish that control and, ironically, at the same time to really live for the first time. As Bataille (1988) wrote:

. . . if the consciousness of death—of the marvelous magic of death—does not touch [man] before he dies, during his life it will seem that death is not destined to reach him, and so the death awaiting him will not give him a *human* character. *Thus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying.* (p. 336-337).

It is from such a place that Jonathan finds his gift for laughter, gratitude for life, and therapeutic touch. For this reason alone, *Narrative Means to Sober Ends* is not only a book for recovering alcoholics, nor is it merely a book for therapists who work with addicts; it is a book for those who understand what it means to be driven by desire. It is a book for the human in all of us.

References

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