

## Ernie Kurtz, Recovery, and the Power of Story

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant

Chestnut Health Systems

(May 2020)

Harvard-trained historian Ernest Kurtz loved stories. The power of story and the role of storytelling in personal identity and addiction recovery filled his [writings on Alcoholics Anonymous \(A.A.\)](#), and they were central themes in the books he co-authored with Katherine Ketcham: [The Spirituality of Imperfection](#) and [Experiencing Spirituality](#). I apprenticed under Ernie's guidance for more than two decades in hopes of mastering the art and science of historical research. Sitting across from him in his basement office, I must have asked Ernie a thousand questions. His most frequent response was to lean forward in his chair, eyes twinkling, arms and hands in motion, to share a story in a voice that would have done Moses justice. Ernie was at heart and above all a spellbinding storyteller.

Ernie was fascinated with how life stories were, by necessity, reconstructed as part of one's recovery from alcoholism. He often commented on how the A.A. story style helped newcomers construct a new life story from the fragments of their brokenness. The new story helped make sense of experiences that were otherwise inextricable, helped fire hope, salvaged self-esteem, and bolstered the commitment to sobriety. One of the many themes within Ernie's historical research was the role of memory in storytelling—writ small (personal identity) and large (collective history). Aware that much of my recounting of the modern history of addiction treatment and recovery flowed from interviews with key players within that history, Ernie cautioned me to think of memory as more construction site than storage drawer. He often discussed the potential loss of objective history due to the filtering of memory through efforts of self-enhancement, institutional interests, and contemporary political and cultural wars. His admonition? Verify everything!

Ernie was equally intrigued by the role of memory as scaffolding for addiction and recovery. He suggested that how we select and attach meaning to events in our life exerts a profound effect on our future. The selection and deselection of life events to form a coherent narrative in his view could support either addiction or recovery. An essential feature of the journey between the former and the latter was thus a process of story reconstruction and storytelling. Ernie suggested: change the story, change the life—a process aided by both skilled clinical intervention and participation in a community of recovering people with whom one could identify.

Ernie also explored how recovery stories changed over time, marking a prolonged process of healing and reconstruction of personal character and values. In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, he identified six experiences/traits expressed in these evolving stories—all keys to this long-term reconstruction of self: release, gratitude, humility, tolerance, forgiveness, and being-at-home. As is evident, Ernie understood

addiction recovery as a process involving far more than the deletion of drugs from an otherwise unchanged life.

During my last visit with Ernie before his passing, he shared with me a number of private documents. Included was 145 pages of raw notes on story and storytelling. This elaborately coded document contained quotations and summaries from all his related readings as well as many of his own reflections, only some of which appeared in his published work. I have cherished these notes for the past five years and have decided, with permission from Ernie's wife, Linda Ferris Kurtz, to share some excerpts from these notes. Below are just a few of Ernie's prized discoveries and reflections on story, memory, and storytelling. I share these as a way of continuing to honor what Ernie meant to so many of us.

### **Excerpts from the Research Notes of Ernest Kurtz on Story, Memory, and Storytelling**

"A story told to progeny or peers is, of course, more than a text. It is an event. When it is done properly, presentationally, its effect on the listener is profound, and the latter is more than a mere passive receiver or validator. The listener is changed." (Myerhoff)

In each construction of memory, people reshape, omit, distort, combine, and reorganize details from the past in an active and subjective way. "If we change the way we think about the world," explained Piaget and Inhelder in 1973, "we automatically update memories to reflect our new understanding."

Stories have a way of emerging out of nowhere. Rather than making them up, we seem, instead, to find them; it may even be more accurate to say they find us.

The primitive chronicle of memory is always present, but in telling the story, recollection recalls many other events, persons, feelings, insights, knowledge, and so forth, which may have happened before or since the original story, and which now have an impact on the telling of the story.

History [stories] provides the laboratory in which human experience is analyzed, distilled and bottled for use. (Elton)

"People often are powerless, alone, afraid. This is because someone else is telling their story for them: 'You are stupid. You are ugly. You are undesirable. You are useless.' Through storytelling, you can recognize your real story....And by embracing and respecting this story, you can develop a sense of identity, self-worth, and empowerment." (Bruhac)

Stories may be commonplace, but they are also powerful. They shape individuals: as people tell their stories, they become these stories. As the group encourages certain stories to be told, it shapes the identities of its members. . . . As a place where stories are told, support groups provide an occasion for rounding off the rough edges of our individuality, transforming us into communal beings. Yet it is the nature of stories to

preserve our individuality, for each story is ours alone and is subject to our own interpretation.

Arthur Koestler: There are three kinds of stories: "Ha ha" stories, to amuse and entertain, "Ah ha" stories, for discovery of ideas and education, and "Ahhh" stories, where the tales are sublime and connect the teller and listener with a golden thread.

The difference between the language of the social scientist and the language of the storyteller is not in their "objectivity" or in the access to truth they respectively provide or fail to provide. They serve different purposes: the former is appropriate for manipulating human lives, the latter for making them intelligible: = an understanding rather than prediction and control.

The basic function of all storytelling, whether written or spoken, is to induce the listener/reader to identify with the story, to see herself/ himself in the story. All other functions flow from this foundational one.

There are things about ourselves that we discover only in the mirror of another: our incongruity . . . OUR tragedy and OUR comedy -- and therefore our very HUMAN-ness - - are perhaps the most important. One can see one's own incongruity in perspective, in context, only BY seeing it first in the mirror, the story, of another. Stories provide a mirror, enabling us to see what we ordinarily cannot see precisely because it is too close to us -- the core of our very self: [BAAL SHEM TOV DISCIPLE]

Never forget that nothing ruins a story faster than following it up with an explanation. If you respect your listeners enough to tell the story, respect them enough to let them draw their own conclusions.

One needs the past -- one's story -- for recovery, for healing.

We are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the storyteller's position with respect to our own actions. Yet to do so -- because story, after all, in the words of writer John Gardner, "is that which details the gap between intentions and results" -- to do so is to run smack dab up against the reality of the limitation of our freedom and our control, the reality that we have, at best, limited control.

"Community narratives" are those that are derived from the community's historical sense of itself. (Julian Rappaport)

"Finding oneself means, among other things, finding the story or narrative in terms of which one's life makes sense." (Bellah HH)

STORY is an art-form: useful because it is not straightforward: "Lovemaking, artistic creation, and play do not provide 'straightforward' satisfaction. Instead, they become most deeply satisfying when they remind us of the tension that precedes release, the

separation that precedes reconciliation, the loss underlying restoration, the unavoidable otherness of the other." (Lasch MS 247)

That is why, as the Baal Shem Tov put it in a surprising answer to the question, "Why do you tell stories?": "Salvation lies in Remembrance. In the process of reminiscence, we regain the present."

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, in the "Sacred Story" anthology, quotes with approval "an old Hebrew saying from the great Rabbi Israel: 'Any fool can write. It takes a visionary to erase.' An integral and cyclical life," she points out, "requires that some aspects always be let to die, some breathed into life."

"Sacred stories get us thinking about what's important; they communicate through symbol and metaphor deep truths about the mysteries of life. Upon hearing a sacred story, even if we don't understand the message intellectually, we are aware that some profound lesson has been imparted." (Simpkinson, Sacred Stories)

"Every story has a 'sacred dimension,' not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because a person's sense of self and world is created through them." (Carol Christ quoting Stephen Crites):

Story is a tool that helps us -- the tool that best helps us -- to live with ambiguity, with uncertainty, with the inconsistency that flows from our own brokenness: True healing does not imply a wholeness that does not know brokenness, but the wholeness that repairs a recognized brokenness.

No story is ever "possessed," nor is the truth of any story ever "captured": partially because of the interplay of storyteller and the story itself with this listening audience, every telling of every story is different, unique. And so attempts to "recapture" some aura, some ambiance, some effect, are doomed to failure. The storyteller must be OPEN to the OPENNESS of story and the storytelling setting.

AND: This reflects another side of the reality that story touches all of each hearer and teller -- that one truly hears a story only if one is truly open to being not only touched by it, but touched "all over" by it.

Recall Gersie & King: "Any tale told is like a journey remembered. In the act of telling we allow another human being access to our experience of life, our inner world, the journey on which we have been. Once the words are spoken, the teller knows that the tale will have a new life of its own, one which is independent from the teller. From then on the tale is as much the listener's as it is the teller's. This is why no matter how often and how faithfully a teller tells a tale, it can never be told exactly the same way twice. The audience, situation, time, personal history, and above all, the moment, effect the communication and determine the bond which needs to grow. Each tale is told only once; once and for all. Thus although a tale may be old beyond memory, it is always new; the same, yet permanently different."

Story is insidious, able to sneak in around the corners, under many of our defenses. But also true that the most effective way to cut ourselves off from the benefits of story not so much by "resisting" it or defending against it, but by being only partially open to it: participating in story in a healing way requires an openness to wholeness.

"Salvation lies in remembrance": because in "remembrance" of one's story, one "rewrites the past." One reorganizes -- or even organizes for the first time -- material for which one had previously surrendered responsibility. One does this by "taking the story of a life which was experienced as shaped by circumstances . . . and retelling it in terms of choice and responsibility. (Baal Shem Tov: "Salvation lies in Remembrance.")

Dominic Maruca: "Each of us is blessed and burdened by the memory of our past. Whether that memory weighs us down body and soul or enables us to soar upward depends on how we re-member, how we piece together, the different parts of that past."

"The memory of things past is indeed a worm that does not die. Whether it continues to grow by gnawing away at our hearts or is metamorphised into a brightly colored winged creature depends . . . on whether we can find a forgiveness we cannot bestow on ourselves."

Our first story is our family story: Family serves as first shield protecting newborn vulnerability, but it is -- therefore -- also within family that we suffer our first wounds. Perhaps that is why both psychology and literature present the ultimate testimony to a person's maturity as the forgiveness of one's forebears.

As William James pointed out, how we feel can influence what we see, but it is even truer that what we look at, what we choose to see, profoundly influences and indeed largely determines how and what we feel.

Nowhere is this more true than in family, in how we remember and interpret our family story. Here, perhaps more than in any other that we tell or hear, what we choose to see shapes how we continue to feel. We attain healing by forgiveness and gratitude, and one function of family is as the arena within which to practice this vision, these virtues; there is healing and hurt in every relationship -- the point is to what do we choose to attend?

Community is not created: it is discovered. And that is, of course, one aspect of the profound connection between the telling of stories and the experience of community. "So when the storyteller by the hearth starts out, "Once upon a time, a long way from here, lived a king who had three sons," that story will be telling us that things change; that events have consequences; that choices are to be made; that the king does not live forever. (Ursula LeGuin)

If it is healing when someone comes to us and tells us our story, it completes the gift of wholeness when we discover that telling our story has brought healing to someone else.

In dealing with experiences in one way or another related to "shame," the language of narcissism, ego-ideals, undesired self, etc. is a vocabulary of observation, distancing. One benefit of the language of storytelling is that it invites looking to aspects of identification and participation.