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On Forgiveness and Healing: Narrative Therapy and the Gospel Story

LOIS MALCOLM and JANET RAMSEY

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water at Jacob's well. As she fills her jar, a strange man asks her for a drink. The woman is surprised. Why is a Jew, and a man, asking her, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink? Even more surprising is what he says—that she would be asking *him* for a drink if she knew that he had "living water" to offer (John 4:10). This water of his, he tells her, quenches all thirst and becomes "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" for all who drink it (John 4:14).

Naturally, the woman asks for a taste of this amazing water. But the man, Jesus, tells her to first run and get her husband. She denies having one, but Jesus points out that she has, in fact, had five husbands and that she is not married to the man she is now with.

Because Jesus has spoken what is true about her life, the Samaritan woman recognizes him as a prophet. So she asks him about something that has long divided Jews and Samaritans, that is, why Jews and Samaritans worship God in different places (Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim). Jesus responds that the time has come for "true worshipers" to worship, in "spirit and truth," the God who is "spirit" (John 4:23–24). The woman then observes that, when the Messiah comes,

Psychologists and theologians often talk past each other, particularly when discussing forgiveness. Comparing narrative therapy and the gospel story provides a way to engage the conversation meaningfully, both realities providing ways to transform human lives.

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he will "proclaim all things," to which Jesus says, "I am he, the one…speaking to you" (John 4:25–26).

The woman leaves her jar and starts telling people in a nearby city, "Come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"(John 4:29). Many believe the woman's testimony—not simply because of what she said, but because "we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). Something very unlikely happens in this story. A woman with a dubious past is transformed—in the course of her conversation with Jesus—and now rushes out to tell others that their lives can be changed as well.

In this essay, we deal with precisely this sort of transformation. In John's Gospel, transformation arises from listening to truth, namely, truth within a larger narrative. In this article we bring together two different types of discourse—narrative therapy and the gospel story—to explore the theme of human transformation through forgiving and healing stories.

We are mindful of an impasse that frequently arises when psychologists and theologians discuss forgiveness. Theologians criticize psychologists for using forgiveness as a therapeutic means simply to feel better about oneself (without taking into account *moral* and *communal* factors).[1] In turn, psychologists criticize theologians for turning forgiveness into an "ought" that keeps people (especially those who have less *agency* in their relationships) from claiming what is rightfully theirs.[2] As a way to move beyond this impasse, we explore how practices from narrative therapy provide insight into a fundamental theme in the gospel story—and, thus, how God's forgiveness of us is related to our forgiving others.

Forgiveness and Agency

Most psychological literature on forgiveness attempts to help victims change their attitude toward offenders (1) by reducing their motivation for revenge and indifference (for example, by attending to negative emotions like anger and resentment) and (2) by cultivating an attitude of goodwill, and even empathy, for the offender.[3] If, indeed, human beings have two major tendencies—a tendency toward *agency* (the striving for differentiation and personal autonomy) and a tendency toward *communion* (the striving for empathy, intimacy, and interdependence with others)[4]—then we could say that most psychological literature on forgiveness focuses on restoring the tendency for *communion*.

[1]See, among others, L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

[2]See, among others, Fraser Watts and Liz Gulliford, eds., *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004).

[3]See, among others, Robert D. Enright and Richard P. Fitzgibbons, eds., *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000).

[4]Dan P. McAdams, *Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993) 281–291. See also Paul Tillich's distinction between "individualization" and "participation" throughout *Systematic Theology,* 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

But something even more basic is needed in many situations of brokenness. As Kelly Oliver has observed, "when talking about oppressed people and the victims of unforgiveable crimes, forgiving is not a matter of forgiving the perpetrator, but rather of reestablishing the *capacity to forgive* within the victims." It is not "about the oppressors or perpetrators" but "about restoring what defines *subjectivity*—the capacity to forgive—to victims."[5]

In developing this idea, Oliver draws on the work of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who describes what takes place in psychoanalysis as a kind of "forgiveness"—a "gift of love" whereby the senselessness or "ill-being" experienced by the sufferer is not only "worked through" but given new interpretation, a new meaning.[6] In this process, forgiveness makes it possible for the sufferer to find a "third way" beyond either "dejection" (rejecting herself) or "murder" (rejecting the other).[7]

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In this essay, we approach forgiveness primarily from the standpoint of the need to cultivate agency—the *capacity* to forgive. We do so not because the other viewpoint is invalid, for, indeed, changing our feelings and behavior towards offenders remains a crucial part of forgiveness work. Rather, we do so because (1) an emphasis on agency addresses what enables us to forgive in the first place, (2) this emphasis has often been overlooked in both theological and psychological scholarship, and (3) highlighting agency can shed light on the important connection between God's forgiveness of us and our ability to forgive others.

Narrative Therapy

We have found narrative therapy especially helpful for creating the space and time people require to forgive. Narratives, the stories we tell about lives, are important because they enable us to order the events of our lives, making logical our past, present, and future experiences. In situations of unforgiveness, time has become problematized: the past is too grievous to remember, the present is filled with pain, and the future is unimaginable. But narratives not only organize time, they give meaning to our experiences of time.[8] Past memories are healed, patience for today is increased, and we begin to envision a new future.

[5]Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 191.

[6]Julia Kristeva, "Can Forgiveness Heal?" in *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[7]Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 199.

[8]Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 3.

Narratives also enable the creation and re-creation of the Self as a character in her own, ongoing story.[9] When relationships are torn apart, particularly after horrific experiences of harm, we question who we are, whose we are, what roles we can play, and what our lives could possibly mean. Narrative approaches permit us to examine and question the plots we have taken for granted and the various roles we have created for ourselves and others, leading to an "aha!" moment when we recognize that we have choices in these matters. Our sense of identity becomes more complex and coherent, and our understanding of why things happen as they do is enriched and matured.

Most significantly, narrative therapy helps people understand how reauthorizing their stories can provide them with alternative directions in life that more accurately reflect their deepest values, beliefs, commitments, and abilities.[10] These are precisely the values, beliefs, commitments, and abilities often revealed as inadequate (overly rigid and simplistic) following ruptures in human relationships.

Deep Listening

Before we even begin to reflect on the stories we tell about our lives, we need simply to listen and be heard, by ourselves and by others. As we listen and are heard—deeply, carefully, and attentively—something powerful happens. We become aware not only of what has happened to us but of how we are reacting—in our bodies, with our emotions and feelings, and in our images and thoughts. It is clear, for example, that the Samaritan woman felt that the truth about all that happened in her life had been seen and heard by Jesus in a powerful way.

Looking for Exceptions and Alternative Stories

In contrast to therapeutic approaches that focus on psychopathology, on what is wrong with a person, narrative therapy is comfortable with "positive psychology," with theories and practices that explicitly counter victims' "problem-saturated" stories.[11] People who have been oppressed or severely injured by others are often defined by their negative stories, stories they tell themselves and others, over and over again. These narratives lead to rumination (and the depression it creates) and reinforce victimhood as a self-definition. To counter this, narrative therapy looks for exceptions—"alternative stories"—that bring to the fore a person's initiative, creativity, and resourcefulness.[12] Narrative therapy focuses on what Erving Goffman has called "unique outcomes," those strands in a person's life that may be sources of hope and inspiration because they point to a different way of being.[13]

[9]Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993).

[10]Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

[11]Ibid., chap. 1.

[12]Ibid., chap. 5.

[13]Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays in the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Harper, 1961) 127. Quoted in White, *Maps*, 232.

It is interesting to note that in his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus addressed her difficult relationships with men in such a way that, after only a few exchanges, she soon was engaging him in a theological conversation about a central difference between Jewish and Samaritan worship practices. Not merely a "fallen" Samaritan woman, she now was revealed as someone who also worshiped God and was ready for a new, healthy, and more complex identity.

Externalizing the Problem

Many people who have been victimized believe that the problem in their lives reflects who they are, existentially. They have become so closely linked to their problem that their very identities (their nature and their character) are inseparable from that difficulty. A man with a drinking problem becomes "a drunk," and a woman who has been raped becomes, even in her own mind, "a slut." One of the central tasks of narrative therapy, then, is to "externalize" the problem that needs to be addressed—to disassociate the *person* from the *problem*. By externalizing the problems in their lives, victims are better able to define their issues and more effectively evaluate the impact of those issues on themselves and others. In this way, they begin to think more clearly about possible causes and solutions.

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Again, it is interesting to note that although Jesus addressed the Samaritan's difficulty with men—and thus identified and externalized her problem—this *truth* did not, for him, define her identity. By the very act of speaking with her and teaching her, he honored her as a human being who was more than the negative label she had been given by society.

Identifying One's Imago

Narrative therapy uses the word *imago* to describe the personas that dominate our life stories. These imagoes are the main characters (personal myths) we fashion, consciously or unconsciously, to provide a pattern for our identities and to explain how we respond to things that happen to us.[14] In situations where forgiveness is needed, we often tend to define imagoes for ourselves and for others in stark black and white. We are the *good victims*; they are the *bad villains.* The plots that accompany these imagoes are, in turn, simplistic, narrow, and uninteresting. I, the innocent and pathetically powerless victim, have been hurt by you, the guilty and dangerously powerful wrongdoer. By identifying our imagoes and redefining them, we can develop more complex plots for our lives and more nuanced understandings of the roles we and others play. Reimagining ourselves, we also begin to

[14]McAdams, *Stories*, chap. 5.

reimagine others and realize that they are not nearly as powerful as they appeared.

In the story of the Samaritan woman, something transpired in her encounter with Jesus that enabled her imago to stretch and change. No longer a powerless, fallen woman, she became an exuberant agent who had something important to say to others.

Reauthoring Our Stories

Literary critics have noted that great storytelling allows for enough ambiguity (enough "relative indeterminacy of meaning") to entice the reader's imagination to "play" with the story—to imagine different twists in the plot, a different outcome, and so on.[15] Similarly, narrative therapists suggest that we solidify our new identities with what narrative therapy calls "reauthorizing conversations" in which we, in the presence of others, begin to develop and tell alternative stories that cultivate new imagoes for ourselves. Instead of merely focusing on the loss, failure, incompetence, hopelessness, and futility we have experienced, we begin to focus on what inspires hope and confidence, and reinforces our capacity for agency.[16]

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Instead of being "stuck"—the past too painful to remember, the present too difficult to face, and the future almost impossible to imagine—we can begin to develop more of a sense of personal agency. We pursue what we value in life and go about the business of actively shaping our lives with intention and purpose. Instead of being defined by a single plot, storyline, or rigid set of imagoes, we can begin to imagine new plots, roles, and endings for our lives.

The story of the Samaritan woman, for example, ends with her developing very different plots and imagoes. No longer merely the passive woman at the well, she is now an ambassador for Christ, rushing off to tell everyone about the living water she has found. No longer is her plot defined by revolving sexual relationships; she now has work to do in building up the kingdom of God.

Enacting Our New Stories with Others

Finally, narrative therapists suggest that we solidify our stories through definitional ceremonies that acknowledge and regrade (as opposed to downgrade) our lives. In rituals and public performances, we tell and perform the stories of our lives before an audience of carefully chosen outsider witnesses. These witnesses respond to the stories we tell by engaging one another in conversations, in the pres-

[15]See Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 24. Quoted in White, *Maps*, 75–79.

[16]White, *Maps*, chap. 2.

ence of the storyteller. Witnesses speak of what they were most drawn to, the images the stories evoked, the personal experiences with which they most resonated, and their sense of how their lives have been touched.[17]

It is interesting to note that, after her transforming encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman did not simply sit and reflect personally on what she heard. Rather, her new narrative was reinforced as she rushed out to the nearby city to tell others. In ever-widening circles, her story would elicit from witnesses fresh possibilities for their own transformative responses.

The Gospel Story

We find interesting parallels between the practices of narrative therapy and the ways the gospel story addresses us with a new story for our lives. We point out these parallels not to reduce the gospel to a formula or a therapeutic practice, but rather to bring to the fore the profound connection made in the New Testament between God's forgiving us sinners and our ability to forgive others.

God Hears Our Cries

The Scriptures make clear that God *listens* to our stories. God hears the cries of Israelites as they are afflicted and oppressed as slaves in Egypt. God hears the laments of the psalmists who cry out, protesting their personal anguish and their communal turmoil.

In the Gospels, Jesus is deeply affected by the suffering of the people who come to him—the lame, the blind, the demon possessed. He attends with great care to the unique circumstances of each person's life. After his death, when his followers are grieving the loss of their leader, Jesus first listens to their despair before disclosing his identity. It is a listening and living Savior whom they recognize when he interprets Scripture and breaks the bread.

Judgment and Promise

But God does not simply listen to our stories. God provides us with a radically different future—an *alternative story*—that provides a *different outcome* for our lives. We are no longer merely victims of fate; we are now located within the much larger story of the Trinitarian God. This creating, forgiving, and renewing God loved the world so much that the Father sent his only Son, Jesus, to save the world and to usher in a radically new future through the power of the Spirit (John 3:16; Rom 8:32).

In the Christian story, God also *judges* sin. We sin when we fail to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as ourselves.[18] We sin when we commit injustice by violating any aspect of God's creation, which was created as good and, thus, has intrinsic worth. God vindicates the just cause of victims and those who

[17]Ibid., chap. 4.

[18]In both Old and New Testaments, the Decalogue defines the content of the love of neighbor: see Exod 20:13–17; Deut 5:17–21; Rom 2:21–22; Matt 19:18–19; Mark 10:19. See also Matt 5:43 (cf. Lev 19:18) and Gal 5:14.

are oppressed; God brings down the mighty and raises up the lowly (Luke 1:46–55). God condemns evil in all its forms.

But God also *promises* to forgive sin and restore what sin destroys. This is why God only can forgive sins. Only God can reverse sin's irreversible effects. Only God can *create* justice and mercy within and among us.

The Gospels proclaim that because it is God who creates this justice and mercy, these fruits are always available, for *all* people (regardless of their prior identities)—the "good and bad" (Matt 22:10), the righteous and "tax collectors and sinners,"[19] the poor and the rich, men and women, Jew and Gentile. Thus, the same divine love that forgives and heals what sin destroys *within* us also creates something new *among* us by giving us the power to forgive and to love others as God forgives and loves us (Matt 6:12, 14–15; cf. Luke 11:4).

The Wisdom and Power of the Cross

God forgives and restores what sin destroys in a very specific way. Through Christ's death on the cross, the problem both victims and perpetrators have to deal with—the problem of sin and the destruction it brings about—is *externalized* and dealt with, once and for all.

On the one hand, God's justice demands that we distinguish between a victim's innocence and a perpetrator's guilt. On the other hand, God's justice demands recognition, as Paul observed, that "all have sinned" (John 3:23)—that all are caught in ways that are both deeply personal and yet profoundly corporate. These webs of destruction violate life (and are, thus, what the Bible calls *sin*; see Rom 1–3).

In his crucifixion, Christ bears the sin and suffering of the entire world (Rom 3:21–26; 4:25; Phil 2:5–9; 1 Cor 1:18–25). He becomes sin's "curse" for us, bearing in his body its polluting effects (Gal 3:13). He bears the suffering of victims and the guilt of perpetrators.[20] And, in doing so, he exchanges our sin for his righteousness, our curse for his inheritance as Son of God (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13–14). This is the ultimate externalization of human pain, making it possible to forgive what seems impossible to forgive.

A New Creation in Christ's Image

But the story does not end here. The Spirit raises Jesus from the dead. This same Spirit not only raises us from the destructive power of sin, but also now lives within us (Rom 8:11). In our baptism, as Paul states, we have been "crucified with Christ." Christ now lives within us, and the life we now live we live "by faith in the Son of God" who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal 2:19–20).

We now have a brand new *imago*. Through the Spirit, we are being "transformed" into Christ's "image" within us (2 Cor 3:18). We are now a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). We no longer look at one another in the way we did. Old divisions no

[19] A phrase repeated throughout the Gospels.

[20] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation,* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) chap. 6.

longer count (victims versus perpetrators, men versus women, slaves versus free persons, Jews versus Gentiles, the powerful versus the weak, the wise versus the foolish, and so on—Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 1–3). All that counts now is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

A Call to Vocation for the World

Transforming us into Christ's image, the Spirit *reauthors the stories of our lives*, giving us the "experiential wisdom" (*experientialis sapientia*) to interpret our experience of lived time—our past, our present, our future—in terms of God's judgment and promise.[21]

Creation still groans under the weight of sin's futility (see Rom 8:22). We are not immune from suffering. But we are no longer victims. We are no longer stuck in despair. Our suffering now becomes an active suffering—like the suffering of a woman in childbirth—that participates in the reign of justice and mercy ushered into our midst by the Spirit (Rom 8:18–25). We are freed not only to lament—and even rage at—the sin and injustice that remain in the world, but also to do what is in our power to do—namely, to seek to restore the justice that God's good creation requires.

We do this not out of resentment or revenge, but out of hope in God's love. Defined by the wisdom and power of the cross, God's love forgives sinners. God's love is not only for God's friends, but for God's enemies as well.

A Community That Remembers and Expects Jesus

This new story for our life is reinforced as we gather with one another to remember and expect the crucified Jesus. We gather together to hear God's promise: "I forgive you"; "I absolve you of your sin." We gather together to eat and drink Jesus' body and blood—to bodily ingest what Jesus has done to release us from sin and restore new life within and among us (Mark 14:22–26; cf. Matt 26:26–30; Luke 22:14–23; 1 Cor 11:23–25). We gather together to interpret our lives in terms of biblical stories that describe, often in quite complex ways, how God creates a new future for us—both as individuals and as communities. In conversation with one another, we interpret our past and present in terms of God's very different future for us and for all people. By retelling the stories of our lives in light of God's future, we are transformed into ambassadors of God's forgiving and healing power in the world—agents of a reconciliation that empowers us to love our enemies and to forgive those who have hurt us.

Living in the Hiatus

But we still live in a very real world. Sin's irreversible effects remain. Perpetrators continue to violate victims. The strong continue to oppress the weak. As forgiven sinners, we live in the hiatus between judgment and promise—between the already and the not yet of God's reconciliation of the world. In this hiatus, we live

[21]See, for example, Oswald Bayer's discussion of this in *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 30ff.

by faith, clinging to the promise that God does, indeed, forgive and restore us, in spite of sin's egregious effects. By faith, we pray for power to fulfill Jesus' command to love others as we love ourselves, which always requires justice for them and for us. By faith, we pray for power to fulfill his command to love our enemies and to forgive those who have harmed us.

Is it possible to live this way? It is precisely when forgiving and loving others seem to be "impossible"[22]—given the irreversibility of sin's effects—that we can pray to the One for whom and through whom all things are possible (Mark 9:23; 14:36).

Along with the woman at Samaria, we are confronted by Jesus with a new, reauthored story for our lives. We, too, can have our mundane activities transformed by the truth, not only the truth about who we really are (and have been and can be), but the truth about reality itself, about a complex but hopeful reality ushered in by Christ. No longer diminished by our past, we can join the Samaritan woman in becoming agents of change, proclaimers of a story that gushes forth with a life of its own. Only this healing and forgiving narrative has the power to transform our lives and the lives of others.

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[22]See Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001) 26–60.