

Course 7, Module 5, Lesson 4: Storytelling in Mediation: The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey'

By Tom Stigner

Conflict stories comprise the heart and soul of mediation. Beneath their surface-level depictions of events, they reveal the underlying assumptions of the disputing parties, their expectations of each other, and the roles they cast for themselves. Understanding the ways in which conflict stories function is crucial for mediators who, wishing to go beyond the mere settlement of superficial conflicts, search for opportunities for real change in the lives of the parties. As described by Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith in "Resolving Personal and Organizational Conflict," a profound understanding of storytelling provides mediators with a useful perspective on the ways in which disputing parties demonize their adversaries in stories, defend their own egos, and ultimately reveal their authentic selves when they take responsibility for their conflicts.

Narrative mediation, which is based on the nature and use of conflict stories, has grown out of a psychotherapeutic approach known as narrative therapy. In this approach, the therapist explores a client's stories of the past and assists in reconstructing a new story to solve the issues that brought the client into therapy. In narrative mediation, a similar, if less thorough, exploration is made into the underlying assumptions of both parties' stories, with a focus on the ways in which the stories create and maintain conflicts rather than on how they may or may not present an accurate representation of

reality. The mediator emphasizes the core truths of the stories, rather than their surface-level depictions of victims and demons, in an effort to assist the parties to move beyond impasses and reach profound resolutions that can transform their lives.

This is an inspiring idea for those of us who like to dream, but a few questions come to mind for the practical mediator. How can I use this approach in my daily practice? Can the mediator of an insurance dispute, a business conflict, or a litigated civil case really elicit underlying core versions of conflict stories as a means of assisting the parties in transforming their lives? Would this approach be appropriate in every mediation? Are there certain sectors of mediation practice that lend themselves to a narrative approach while other sectors are more resistant? This article, in addressing these questions, contends that narrative mediation, or at least an understanding and use of conflict stories, can serve as an essential arrow in the quiver of any mediator, but particularly for those who handle disputes among parties with on-going relationships.

Since stories and their underlying metaphors are the subject of this article, along with the notion that narrative mediation can be useful to the mediator in his career from start to finish, it may be instructive to consider the mediator's journey into narrative mediation as a story in itself, with the mediator as the hero embarking on a mythic adventure. Borrowing from Joseph Campbell's "The Hero With A Thousand Faces," the second half of this article begins with the hero's call to adventure (to the world of narrative mediation), follows him on the road of trials (his attempts to use this approach in his mediation practice), the meeting with the Goddess (Read on!), the atonement with the father (acquiring

mastery in the field), and concludes with the crossing of the return threshold with a magical elixir for restoring society.

The essence of a story, according to Cloke and Goldsmith, is not only to bring people together to jointly experience events, but also to process reality and to discover and create who we are. In this way, stories wield tremendous power. In their telling and re-telling, they can keep us angry, fearful and locked in combat, or on the contrary, with some guidance, lead us to forgiveness and transformation, to a lessening of our pain and suffering.

In the typical conflict story, the storyteller portrays himself as an innocent, powerless victim and his opponent as an insensitive, powerful evildoer. The objective of this type of casting is to elicit sympathy for the storyteller, while the telling of the story serves to defend his position, to rationalize what he may have said or done. Although conflict stories are fictional in many ways, with the facts contained in them skewed beyond recognition, they are also designed to reveal larger truths. They provide accurate expressions of how the parties felt at the time, their needs and desires and interests.

Every conflict story, according to Cloke and Goldsmith, contains three separate versions: internal, external and core stories. The external story describes the events that took place, typically focusing on the other party's evil deeds. The internal story addresses the storyteller's position, usually a defense of his own actions or inaction. The core story involves an acceptance of responsibility for the conflict, revealing a deeper level of self-awareness than was evident at the first telling of the story.

Using the narrative approach, the mediator's role is to re-frame and reduce the negative characterizations in the external story, question

the self-justifications in the internal story, and encourage the discovery of the core story and the sharing of it with the other party. While external stories erect barricades between parties in a dispute, and internal stories isolate the parties from their own vulnerability, the sharing of core stories elicits compassion and understanding for each other. Deep connections occur when the protective stories have been cast aside in favor of the sharing of authentic selves. From this state, various possibilities and options occur to the parties as they reach a real resolution of their underlying conflict.

In the story-based approach delineated by Cloke and Goldsmith, the mediator's first step in helping disputing parties reach their deeper concerns is to ask questions that encourage introspection and vulnerability: What have you learned as a result of the conflict? What price has it exacted in your life? How would you like to relate to each other in the future?

The mediator elicits each of the parties' stories, validates them, re-frames the issues, and helps the parties reveal their stories' deeper meanings. He then facilitates an alteration of the stories by asking a series of questions: Would the other party agree with your version of the story? How would the other party tell the story? What are the differences between the stories? What pre-conceived ideas may be distorting the meaning of the stories?

Next, the mediator may ask each party to re-tell his story, while combining it with the other story, without any accusations of wrongdoing or claims of victimhood. This encourages the parties to move beyond demonizing each other and towards recognizing their common concerns. This can be done in a variety of ways. The mediator can ask the parties to analyze whether their basic assumptions are true. He can ask them to tell a story about a time

when their relationship worked well. He can contrast the parties' stories to find significant differences or contrast them with the parties' future plans for the relationship.

During this process, the mediator casts an eye towards synthesizing the parties' different stories into a third story that includes the most important components of both. In leading the parties to their third story, the mediator uses classic mediation techniques such as active listening, summarizing, questioning, and re-framing, as well as plumbing the stories for symbols and metaphors that may inform the parties of their deeper intentions. As the mediator encourages the introspection and empathy that naturally occurs in storytelling, a unified version of the story emerges, a version that tells a deeper truth, thus moving the parties towards resolution and transformation.

Another narrative process, suggested by John Winslade and Gerald Monk in "Narrative Mediation," includes three non-linear phases: engagement, deconstructing the conflict-saturated story, and constructing the alternative story. The "engagement" phase involves the establishment of a relationship between the mediator and the parties, with the mediator attending to the non-verbal behavior of the parties as well as encouraging attitudes of understanding and cooperation. In the second phase, "deconstructing the conflict-saturated story," the mediator, by asking questions and externalizing the problem issues, attempts to re-direct the parties away from the certainties that feed the conflict and towards seeing the issues from a different perspective. In the third phase, "constructing the alternative story," the mediator helps the parties craft a new, revised story line in which the conflict is resolved.

The work of Cloke and Goldsmith compares with that of Winslade and Monk in its concentration on storytelling's function in conflicts and their resolution. This article focuses on the story-related issues in each of their approaches rather than presenting a thorough comparison of the two. For the sake of editorial simplicity, this article refers to all story-based mediation as "narrative mediation," even though Cloke and Goldsmith do not use that phrase in referring to their own efforts.

I. The Call to Adventure

In the language of mythology, the literature of storytelling in mediation provides a "call to adventure" for the mediator: Dig for the core stories! Why let yourself be diverted by discrepancies in the external stories? Why focus on settling superficial differences when a resolution of deeper issues is possible, particularly among parties with ongoing relationships? The call is also made for the mediator to dig into his own conflict stories and recognize the ways in which he may fall into the same patterns as typical disputants: constructing well-defended positions against demonized adversaries, deflecting personal responsibility in his own conflicts, and basically avoiding change.

The mediator may need to extend the call to the parties themselves, who may not be willing to explore personal issues or core stories. Winslade and Monk provide an example of a resistant party in a narrative mediation of a child custody dispute. The mediator needed to build trust with the father through careful listening and validation of his story. By externalizing the problem through an identification of the dominant themes of the conflict, the mediator managed to nudge the father into looking beneath the surface

differences he had with his estranged spouse and to focus instead on the effect his demands for custody were having on his children.

II. Refusal of the Call

Some of us, according to Joseph Campbell in “The Hero With A Thousand Faces,” may hear the special call to adventure, but trapped in boredom, hard work, or the constraints of our culture, we refuse to answer the call. The adventure involves making our way “through difficulties not commonly encountered,” and to refuse such a call may seem necessary to protect our self-interest. In the mediation field, there are many simpler, more clear-cut paths to making a living than through a narrative practice or one that plumbs the depths of people’s personal stories. For this reason, many mediators may resist the call, and on the basis of impracticality or simple economics, decide to keep their practices, and self-knowledge, as superficial as possible. In the process, they may forgo the possibility of substantial rewards, such as the “attainment of a higher spiritual dimension” earned by the mythic hero, or just a newfound sense of freedom.

III. Supernatural Aid

The first figure encountered on the hero’s journey is typically a little old man or gnome who provides some kind of amulet that helps guide the hero. For the hero-mediator embarking on his journey into narrative mediation, this figure could be an inspiring teacher, trainer or author. Randolph Lowry, in his article, “How to Get Busy and Get Paid,” provides a good example of a magical helper. He offers numerous pointers to mediators about establishing a viable practice, starting with the importance of defining your business. The true business of a mediator, he says, is resolution. He also stresses the importance of knowing your market, which includes offering

services that are needed by a particular market segment. This advice serves the narrative mediator in two ways. If the mediator is successful in producing results through a narrative approach, and gains a reputation for it, his business could flourish. Secondly, knowing which market segments would benefit from a narrative approach will help focus the mediator's promotional efforts. He may, for example, position himself for mediating conflicts among parties with on-going relationships, as in family, workplace, or community disputes, rather than for cases such as insurance or construction defects in which parties don't intend to have future associations.

IV. The Crossing of the First Threshold

As the mythic journey continues, the hero arrives at the limits of his known world and is met by a guardian at the entrance to a zone of great power. The guardian is dangerous to all but the competent and courageous. In our mediation analogy, the passing of this threshold serves as a metaphor for the mediator's need to be thoroughly educated and competent before stepping into the sophisticated field of narrative practice. There are dangers inherent in digging into people's private stories without having the skills to follow through with a coherent process. One such danger would be inadvertently leading people into more anger and frustration as they lock themselves into their original stories more than they already were.

V. The Belly of the Whale

As the mythic hero passes the magical threshold, he is "swallowed into the unknown," experiencing a metaphorical self-annihilation. A metamorphosis takes place in which the hero renews himself, leaving his previous life behind as he enters the "World Womb." This image calls to mind the level of commitment encouraged by the

purveyors of “transformative mediation,” which is similar to narrative mediation in its emphasis on relational issues and the power of mediation to affect transformation in peoples’ lives. In “The Promise of Mediation,” Joseph Folger and Robert Baruch Bush suggest that a mediator should not integrate different types of practices, but rather he should choose a single one based on his primary values and world view. In this same vein, the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation, which promotes the practice of transformative mediation, has invited mediators to apply for their panel of certified mediators, but only if the mediators agree to practice only transformative mediation. Veteran practitioners like Leonard Riskin, on the other hand, profess to wield an array of mediation techniques which they can use as necessary, depending on their clients’ needs.

For the mediator at the start of his career, a commitment to a certain type of practice, like narrative or transformative mediation, may prove beneficial if only for the rewards that come with complete absorption in a body of knowledge and practice techniques. In the long run, however, Riskin’s view of the value of possessing an array of techniques may be the wiser approach, particularly as it relates to the mediator’s own development as well as the varying needs of clients.

VI. The Road of Trials

Following the hero’s entry into the magical realm, he encounters a succession of tests and ordeals. He must slay the dragons and ogres and overcome various barriers. In our metaphor of the mediator’s journey, this phase applies to the various types of cases that confront the narrative mediator, some of which may be resistant to narrative techniques. Winslade and Monk suggest that disputing parties who

do not have an on-going relationship may resist the exploration of personal issues and stories. This would apply to many insurance disputes and business conflicts, as well as various commercial litigated cases that revolve mainly around financial settlements. In cases involving attorney-advocates or insurance representatives, who expect mediations to consist primarily of negotiations over money, discussions of underlying interests or core stories are frequently unwelcome.

Cases that lend themselves to narrative or story-based mediation include divorce and child custody, employment, organizational, and community conflicts. Winslade and Monk describe a divorce and child custody conflict in which a narrative approach proved useful. The mediator's efforts included de-constructing the victim-demon narratives, as told by both spouses, and helping them devise an alternative story in which the husband and wife looked beyond their claims of betrayal and negligence in their marital relationship and towards a newfound sense of cooperation and understanding as parents.

Cloke and Goldsmith cite an employment dispute that was resolved in a story-based mediation. In this case, a young saleswoman at a phone company resigned after receiving a written warning of frequent lateness and absences, but later wished to retract her resignation. When the company would not agree to the retraction, a union representative became involved and the case went to mediation. In the mediation, after considerable discussion of the workplace issues, the employee and manager realized that because of their own personal family experiences, they had become engaged in a mother-daughter conflict at work, with the employee acting out like a rebellious adolescent. The discussion of the core story led to a

thorough resolution of the conflict, in which the employee ultimately chose to receive a cash buy-out rather than to be re-instated. Both parties left the mediation pleased with the results and free of animosity.

Organizational disputes can also be effectively resolved through the telling of stories. Cloke and Goldsmith interview a wide selection of employees when dealing with conflicts in organizations as a means of eliciting a broad range of stories that may be linked in certain relevant ways. In a dispute involving a board of directors and the staff of a non-profit community organization, for example, the mediators encouraged the participants, after they had expressed their individual views and told their stories about the various problems, to discuss the real causes of a particular incident. Rather than placing blame, the mediators emphasized externalizing the problem and the sharing of communal responsibility. Core stories exist at the heart of organizational conflicts as well as in two-party disputes, and in this example, a new story was constructed in which the board members and employees re-focused on their shared mission in the community and made a new commitment to open dialogue and solving disputes together in the future.

Above and beyond the many challenges presented by different types of cases, one of the mightiest ogres on the road of trials is the one called, Making a Living. The first strategy for slaying that beast, according to Randolph Lowry in “How to Get Busy and Get Paid,” is to define your business, followed by various marketing efforts that connect your services with the market segment you’re targeting. Mediators who wish to use the narrative techniques discussed in this article should target sectors that involve ongoing relationships, such

as family, child custody, employment, organizations, or community groups.

VII. The Meeting with the Goddess

Having passed the tests and ordeals of his road of trials, the mythic hero meets the Queen Goddess of the World, who represents “the totality of what can be known.” She requires that the hero should be endowed with a gentle heart, and the marriage with the goddess reflects the hero’s mastery of life. In our mediation analogy, the meeting and marriage correspond to the time in a mediator’s career when he searches among the methods and processes of various mediation approaches, tries them out in his own practice, and now comes to each case with curiosity, compassion, understanding, and assurance.

VIII. Atonement with the Father

After marrying the Goddess, the mythic hero yearns for freedom from the limitations of the body, and turns to the “world of specialized action” or the “sphere of the father.” At this stage in the mythic journey, the hero competes with the father for mastery of the universe. In our mediation analogy, since there is no one particular father of ADR, the authors, teachers and trainers in the field will have to suffice. Against these figures, the mediator measures himself, trying their lessons on for size, and challenging their views as he finds his own way. Since the path of the mythic hero is also an inward journey, rife with internal resistance to overcome, the father figure in our mediation metaphor can also be seen as an internal source of struggle for the mediator in his efforts to develop as a practitioner of narrative mediation.

IX. Apotheosis

With the gaining of knowledge, the hero reaches a divine state and vows to bring others to enlightenment. Likewise, the narrative mediator, in overcoming internal resistance to explore his own core stories, can become more adept at helping others discover their own. His career, like the journey of the mythic hero, can be one of adventure and personal transformation, of expanding consciousness, in which his communication skills and powers of empathy on the job advance in relation to his own deepening self-awareness.

X. The Return

The remaining stages of the hero's journey consist mainly of his return to humanity, in which he brings a magical elixir for the renewal of society. The return involves crossing the threshold from the dark mystical realm back into the land of the commonplace, where his message often meets with bafflement in the light world. In much the same way, the hero-mediator, flush with knowledge of the benefits of deep explorations of core stories, returns, in case after case, to parties or colleagues for whom his message may seem implausible. But like the mythical hero, the mediator whose practice focuses on opportunities for transformation sees himself as changing the world. One idea alone, as highlighted by Cloke and Goldsmith, may inspire him to continue: Every change in a person's life has reverberations in the lives of others.

Returning full circle, this article concludes at the beginning of the hero's cycle, this time serving as a herald of the call to adventure, to myself if no one else: Go deep. Take the journey, and dig for the core stories.

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