

## The Mist and the Sunflower: Expanding Narrative Horizons in the Face of the Traumatic Loss of a Child

Ana Luiza de Faro Novis

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The great writer Eduardo Galeano used to say that we are made of stories. This has always invited me to think that, right after conception, a unique pregnancy awaited each of us. I imagine, throughout pregnancy, genetic threads being mixed with narrative threads from the histories of families, societies and cultures of which we are a part. When we are born, we are not only given a name, but also a narrator's place. The first cry is just the beginning of a promising career as a storyteller.

Narratives have always fascinated me. As a child, I loved listening to them – whether at home, at school, in books, movies or on a television show. But it was at the age of seven that I discovered the transforming power of a story (Novis, 2019):

When I was about seven years old, I loved to dance and act out the stories I created about princes and princesses. I lived immersed in my magical fantasy world, and from time to time my mother had to call me back to earth, to pay attention. My brother, a little younger, was recognized for his wit and intelligence. He always got good grades, and was praised for the comments he made. The family was very cultured, and intelligence was a highly valued and appreciated ability. My performance at school was like 'leaps and bounds', which made me start to consider myself less intelligent. I kept thinking how I could handle that situation. My parents loved to read and there were books everywhere in the house. I looked at that mountain of books and felt unable to read them. It made me very sad, for I believed that intelligence was contained in those infinite pages. While that anguish accompanied me, my school performance sank. During the first grades of elementary school, at the end of the year, I had to attend extra classes, while my brother was always approved and could enjoy the holidays earlier. A few years later, I was watching a program on TV and Dina Sfat, a famous Brazilian actress of that time, was being interviewed by a group of people. With ease and assurance, she spoke in an articulate manner about

the many topics that were presented to her. Suddenly they asked this question: 'Dina, you are so intelligent; what do you do'? At that moment, I anticipated her answer: 'She certainly reads a lot'. Imagine my surprise when she replied: 'I listen a lot'. Since that day, my performance at school improved significantly, and over the years I've heard and been inspired by many stories. (p. 29)

That experience became unforgettable; I simply experienced something extraordinary that, at the time, I could not translate into words. When I came across a different interpretation for the concept of intelligence, a dialogical key opened the door of understanding before me, unlocking a new possibility (Novis, 2019). Attentive and accurate listening provided me with new lenses to see the dominant story that imprisoned me. This new perspective brought hope back and inspired me to find a new way to develop as a person. This life reference was so meaningful that it ended up influencing my professional choice.

Throughout my trajectory as a therapist, I have sought to improve my listening capacity and exercise my ability to dialogue with some inspiring references. The first encounter with narrative therapy was transformative: during my course at the Family Therapy Institute in Rio de Janeiro, professor Eloísa Vidal introduced me to Michael White and David Epston (1990). Since then, stories would undoubtedly occupy a new place in my office. It was time to stop seeing them as mere reports and realize how they transcend a descriptive role, sculpting the meaning we give to life. It is the stories that shape our network of relationships and determine how we recognize ourselves in our own trajectory (Morgan, 2000). The simple choice of events that we want to narrate influences and is influenced by our beliefs and personal, family, social, and cultural values.

In short, we are all active authors. Our narratives bear the marks of our interpretations; after all, we tell stories based on the experiences we go through. Life situations invite us to construct meanings – a process that, in turn, emerges from the explicit and implicit connections that temper and inspire each one's narrative. The fabric of our stories is constituted by a tangle of narrative threads from the past, present, and future – and this is what lends the narrative a sense of continuity (Rasera & Japur, 2004). Over time, we build countless meanings and create several stories simultaneously. When choosing what to tell, we indicate the

plots that we consider dominant, and the selection of these or those "cuts" can generate positive or negative effects in our lives (Morgan, 2000).

My own biographical fragment, in the light of this new philosophical stance, gained unprecedented contours: actress Dina Sfat's speech awakened memories and led me to recognize other stories that already existed in my life; alternative stories that remained invisible to me until that day. That speech reconnected me with the pleasure of listening to stories, as well as reminded me how listening to them always activated my creativity and helped me develop my own versions. Thanks to the interview, an understanding emerged that was capable of contradicting the dominant plot in relation to the concept of intelligence: the girl who could create from what she heard reverberated at her maximum power and finally released her text, giving birth to new paragraphs that had been waiting for so long to be born.

According to Richard Kearney (2012), "life is full of stories. Life is a nascent storyline in search of a midwife. Because inside every human being there are countless small narratives trying to escape" (p. 413). From this perspective, the therapist is invited to keep a more sensitive, curious, and open presence for new or old stories that are willing to arise. We walked with no predetermined destination.

In our day-to-day clinical practice, clients come to us with stories saturated by the problem that compromise their quality of life and their family relationships. The therapist's decentered posture allows one to hear the story from a new point of view; we started to follow the narrative from a new place: positioned next to the client, we listened with attention and sensitivity, looking for possibilities in his report to explore other stories – those that can rescue hope and freedom. We are genuinely interested listeners, aware of the client's ability to make meaning, to be the expert of his life. We are no longer specialists in some kind of supposed knowledge capable of offering answers to all the dilemmas that afflict and limit the client's quality of life.

The conversation is driven by permanent curiosity and interest with the aim of favoring creativity and the development of possibilities that did not seem to exist before. As therapists, we are presented every day with the richness and potential of our clients; at the same time, we are touched and transformed by each

relationship. I often say that therapists are smart because they chose a profession where they are paid to learn. Humberto Maturana, as referenced by Grandesso (2000), emphasizes the importance of a quality conversation. According to him:

Talking is turning around together, in the turns we take in the stories of the lives of those who choose us and welcome us as witnesses of their stories, we have to be, really together, even to feel together. (p. 276)

The philosophical foundations of narrative therapy enhance ethics and respect for what is narrated, understanding that people not only live their lives, but imagine the lives they are willing to live. The stories synthesize these unique imaginations that must be valued and taken advantage of by clinical practice (Frank, 2014).

At some point, we come across facts that abruptly change the course of the conversation. An unexpected fact of life that imposes a dominant plot that paralyzes or divides the history line. A traumatic situation that invades life and promotes such a level of disorganization that the thread is lost. A knot is tied in order to prevent the free flow of narratives.

The trauma of losing a child generates a wound that shatters the hope and freezes us in that scene; we are stuck in time, lost, with no exit, no route. The landscape of life fades, we are dragged into a void, without references – we are completely lost.

The impact of this loss on our culture and society is so significant that it doesn't even have a name. There is a specific nomenclature for those who lose parents (orphan) and spouse (widow); but there is no name for one who loses a son or daughter. To a certain extent, the suffering is amplified by the sociocultural expectation that this loss must have in the life of a father or mother. According to White (2005), this expectation ends up naturalizing an almost inseparable link between trauma and psychological pain accompanied by emotional suffering, which tends to compromise understanding in therapeutic conversations. Narrow views on how to act in this context contribute to the construction of a fragile sense of identity, undermining the recognition of competences and wasting precious resources on how to act in life – even in the face of such adversity (White, 2005).

Despite the current media addressing the issue more openly, many families prefer not to talk about it. The challenge for us, as therapists, is to avoid a mechanically and uncritically reproduction of known and familiar practices, and to try to remain open to the unexpected. For this, it is essential to establish conversations without becoming hostages of previously defined objectives; it is having curiosity as a strategic ally, without ignoring the fact that such a tragic loss also impacts our own stories.

I went through an experience in my professional life that marked me deeply and opened the possibility of taking an unexpected course, revealing new perspectives for the quality of the therapeutic relationship. I've been working with Maria for a few years now. She was going through a special moment in her life: she had just travelled through the stunning landscapes of the Northeast and started a new life project with her husband, Jorge. They had been married for 35 years and, since they had their three children, they always travelled with them. The middle son, Joaquim, married at the beginning of the year and the two daughters, Amanda and Alice, graduated, and started to work. Seeing them grown up and become masters of their own stories, Jorge and Maria decided to try this new adventure: it was a precious moment for the couple's life; married for three decades, they felt like being sweethearts again, now in maturity.

It was December and Maria was radiant with the trip she had made. The experience had exceeded all her expectations. After all, they hadn't travelled alone for a long time and she was delighted with the pleasure they felt in being together. Maria was already looking forward to the next opportunity.

The end of the year was approaching, and she was organizing Christmas and New Year's celebrations. The plan was to keep the tradition and take a trip with the whole family. In such an inspiring atmosphere, we said goodbye and scheduled our meeting for after the festivities.

A few days later, an unpredictable fact invaded our history and hit us like a straight shot. I, who had just witnessed a poetic moment in Maria's life, filled with hope and new possibilities, watched in fractions of seconds this touching narrative being shattered and filled with a tearing disharmony.

### "We Can't Lose Anything Else"

I was at home that night when I received a call from one of Maria's children. They were on their way to the hospital. Alice, the youngest sister, had just suffered a serious accident. Immediately, I was invaded by a strong emotion. I knew how much Maria had a special concern for this daughter. At the age of two, Alice had been diagnosed with vitiligo. A small white spot on the elbow betrayed the unexpected intruder. Since then, she has always taken care of her daughter with great care, without overprotecting her; however, despite all the care, her mother was always haunted by the fear that one day the disease would get worse. Alice was 26 years old, and her illness had been stabilized for some years. She was experiencing a very special moment, filled with new work and her recent discoveries. The blossoming of her daughter filled Maria's heart with pride and happiness. I went to the hospital, hoping that Alice would overcome this challenge.

Upon arriving, I found Maria, stunned, in despair, still with her bloody blouse. The accident had happened near her house. The situation was very serious and the neurologist, a friend of the family for many years, had just confirmed the evaluation of his colleagues in the emergency room: there was not much to do. As predicted, Alice passed away that morning.

In the evening, I went to meet Maria at her house. She was lying in bed, cuddling her other daughter, both covered from head to toe with the duvet. The room was stuffy, with little light. There were a few people present: family, friends, and acquaintances. I walked over and knelt beside the bed. The pristine white sheet revealed the shrunken outline of her body. Gently, I called her name. She felt her soul was wounded, torn apart. As soon as she saw me, Maria held out her hand and said in the faint voice she had left: "I lost my girl, Ana, my life is over". I took Maria in a deep embrace.

For a month I went to their house every day. The pain was almost palpable in that grieving home, and each member of the family sought ways to save and care for one another. Maria asked me to look after the children and her husband; Jorge asked me to look after her and the boys; the children asked me to take care of their parents. Crossed orders indicated a movement that caught my attention:

everyone intended to care, but there was no space for them to meet and cry together. That ceremonious care compromised intimacy.

On a given day, Maria shared an outburst that signalled a new route: “we can't lose anything else! We have to preserve what we have.” Gradually, her heart was inspired by a new purpose and it was time to call on the family to join this movement in memory of Alice. The traumatic loss of her daughter began to invite that mother to take care of what she still had in her hands, to find a way to live with what she could no longer fix.

At each meeting I could witness Maria's strength, her struggle to stand firm for her family. Motherhood was something atavistic for her, who has always been a fighter. By defining a life purpose, she courageously embraced it and sought a path. That's how she got married, moved to another city and had children. She designed her dreams in favor of love and a deep desire to have a family.

In fact, I observed her deep effort to keep the house alive: she resumed her routine, keeping the home impeccable and fragrant. Her children and husband went back to work. However, despite all the efforts, there was still a great deal of difficulty between them in talking about the loss of Alice and the longing she left behind. Maria was walled in by pain and suffering. She feared that any false move could amplify the loss, wondering what would happen if she talked about Alice's death with her husband and children: “What could come out of these conversations? More pain? More suffering?” Fear haunted her again. She felt everyone's pain and was especially concerned about her husband's immense sadness. She didn't know how to build a safe bridge to talk with him and their children. Silence reigned in the four corners of the house.

Over time, isolation and loneliness gained space, as they lost each other. Maria was distressed, afraid of not being able to approach the family as before. With Mother's Day looming on the calendar, she knew she needed to act, but she felt trapped, trapped by a wall of self-doubt and grief.

As I waited for the next client in my office, Maria came to mind. Her pain touched me deeply. I also felt contained by the web of suffering. I started revisiting our conversations, looking for a gap, a path that would free the narratives and restore the hope that there is always a possible path, even when we are facing a great wall. Suddenly, a single ray of sunlight penetrated through the gap in the curtain. I

was overwhelmed by the golden glow that left a trail of light on the end of the sofa, where Maria used to sit during our sessions. At that moment, I was invaded by an image, a beautiful sunflower, Alice's favorite flower. The image became an invitation. I accepted readily, without question, and a story began to take shape on the blank sheet of paper before me. A row of words escaped, giving birth to the short story "The Fog and the Sunflower". Within a few minutes, it was ready. It was a brief moment of "birth" that brought to life a narrative that touched me deeply.

The small town was in a very distant land, so far away that you couldn't even see it on the map. Its inhabitants lived locked in their own houses and almost never communicated or interacted with each other. Legend has it that, in other times, that was a community full of joy, where many parties were held and everyone lived in perfect harmony. Everything was going well, until there was a big war in those parts, and everyone went through very difficult times. That time of suffering left such deep marks that residents were staying longer and longer inside their homes, isolated by sadness. They left only to fulfill the essential tasks for their sustenance. A lot of time passed, and everything continued the same way, each family closed inside its cocoon. Most of them no longer even remembered the difficulties that had led to that situation. It had simply become a habit rooted in their customs. One morning, the town was covered by a dense fog, so thick that you couldn't see a hand's breadth in front of your nose. Strangely, not even the hermetically closed doors and windows could stop that haze. Somehow, it managed to infiltrate and invade the interior of the houses, filling all the spaces. Frightened and at the same time intrigued by this mystery, residents were now forced to grope around inside their homes, in broad daylight! Suddenly something unexpected happens! The doors open and people start to go out into the street, facing the fog. They're all blinded by the fog, but the situation was not much different at home. After some time of silence, the air fills with voices, long unheard. Amidst the intense din, the voice of a child stands out: – "Look, how beautiful"! Attention turns to a delicate beam of light coming straight from the sky, which cuts through the dense fog to illuminate a beautiful garden of large yellow flowers. There was something magical about that scene, with all the flowers facing the beam of golden light! Everyone walked

slowly towards that place, which looked enchanted. And in a spontaneous way they held hands, one taking care of the other, so as not to stumble on the way. Once there, the fog began to fade. As everything became clearer, people realized that they had formed a large circle around that garden. The whole village gathered in a big circle! Suddenly that child's voice is heard again: – “Look at the flowers! They are looking at us!” Each of the yellow flowers was facing a person in the circle. As if by a miracle, there was a flower for everyone! But where did that light come from, which seduced them? Once again, the explanation comes from the sweet voice of the child: – “They are looking into our heart”! Everyone then understood that there is no force greater than UNION, capable of overcoming the most persistent sadness or the densest fog, in the same way that beautiful yellow flower always finds the sunlight! (Novis, 2017, p. 49-51)

When I finished writing, I realized that the new-born tale highlighted the importance of something that Maria had always valued: unity. The narrative also contained the recognition of a skill that she had always carried in her essence: the child's gaze capable of seeing and intuiting possible paths to a better place, dodging the difficulties that arise along the way. Sensitivity and determination have always been some of her most outstanding traits.

The story drew my attention to its power in the face of life's adversities. The text prompted in me a *katharsis*, in the Greek sense of the word, as described by Michael White in his workshop on trauma in New York in 2007. At that time, he recognized that stories had the cathartic power to move us to another place in our minds. The *katharsis* that I experienced through imagination put me in the child's place and skin. The experience polished my hope, sharpened both my empathy and my creativity, transporting me to other chapters in Maria's story, taking me to places where it was possible to compose a narrative inspired by a new perspective. I found the determined girl who adapted to different contexts and faced difficult changes in her family of origin. She formed a new home where everyone was very united, despite the problems. Maria always kept herself safe by respecting her own way of being: sweet, fun, creative and firm in her purposes. Her imagination made room for me to recognize her values and abilities that had always existed and were waiting to be found again.

At the end of the story, a question arose: what to do with this unexpected therapeutic documentation? Could it be shared with Maria?

I found in David Epston (2015) a validation of this idea, while reading about the case of a ten-year-old girl who was terrified by rain – even though she lived in a region of Australia where rains were very frequent. As soon as he arrived, David noticed a beautiful garden at the entrance, and he knew that she loved to take care of the plants with her grandmother. As he wandered through that part of the story, he thought of proposing a new look at rain, inspired by a story that presented it as an ally of the health and happiness of the plants that the girl loved so much. With the creation of this tale, David promoted the recognition of a fundamental perspective, which freed the girl from the dominant understanding that compromised her quality of life (Epston, 2015).

Excited about the result of this creative experience, I left the story at Maria's house accompanied by a beautiful sunflower. At the next session, she reported that she read the story to everyone and was very moved by the story. Maria couldn't say what exactly – but something inside her had lit up.

The tale had aroused Maria's curiosity, triggering a powerful resource capable of unfreezing the dominant story. The unpredictable destination to which the dialogue with this narrative would lead her lent a stimulating expectation to the moment: by identifying with the story, she was able to walk through her own life experience hand in hand with creativity.

Days later, she came to the office together with a new idea. An extraordinary moment was manifested, promoting a way to explore new routes and possibilities. Maria asked me to help her write a letter to her husband. She believed that in order to be truly united, they needed to overcome the fog barrier and share their feelings. As she revisited her story, she remembered that Jorge was able to express his feelings more easily when he wrote. She had rescued a box full of the beautiful letters and cards he had written her over the years. Courageous and determined as she was, she expressed herself without shame in the first letter – she broke ties, climbed barriers and composed a strong letter, full of courage and love, as shown in the following excerpts:

“We've been together for 35 years, we've lived a lot... we had a unique partnership that had a very special harmony for me. We were like guava and cheese, different but complementary (...)”

“Today, we live trampled by the facts, mired in sorrows, in the pain of what cannot be fixed (...) by hopelessness, by the lack of interest in life”.

“Questioning why we lost our daughter, I realized, is not helpful; it just tortures us. Sometimes I think maybe you're beating yourself up for this, because of that terrible unanswered question. And worse: you keep believing that something could have, who knows, avoided the tragedy. I feel that you put yourself in a grounded situation, with no right to anything else.

“And at every moment, at every distress, I feel ourselves more distant, I despair, I feel insecure far from your arms, from my friend, from my husband... Over time, I was dragged down by grief, by longing. I started to feel lost, insecure about which way to go, almost convincing myself that nothing else could be done.

“But there's something so strong in me that made me and still makes me face a lot in life: 'I rebel! Protest! I can't give up talking, or fighting! I am emotion!’”.

"We are both amputees, but we have to remember that we have each other to back us up."

“Let's get everything we need to help us! Hear what is beyond reason; listen to your heart, (...) just as I hope you listen to mine again!”

"I love you!"

After that letter, others came - they were delivered to the husband, to the children...

And gradually, over time, the narratives migrated from letters to conversations, betting on the power of “eye to eye” and inaugurating a space of greater intimacy. The determined and daring girl was back.

They fought every day, took care of each other, faced the fog with lots of love, courage and perseverance. The family grew: today Maria is the grandmother of two beautiful granddaughters, who brighten her days and warm her heart with the certainty of continuity.

### Resonances

This experience was extremely memorable for me. Through the literary therapeutic documentation that I wrote, I experienced an original perspective in my work. The story that was born relighted my hope and freed me from the possibility of remaining trapped in psychological pain with my listening. The attunement promoted by the tale allowed me to feel and perceive Maria's values, purposes – what nourished her and kept her firm to give continuity to her family.

When writing the short story, I revisited and illuminated understandings about Maria's intentional states, reconnecting with a series of positive and resilient nuances of her identity. The unexpected inspiration brought to light a therapeutic resource that Richard Kearney (2012) named “cathartic narrator”, something that emphasizes the importance of having the ability to listen to receive tragic and repressed stories and return them to their own narrators in a way that favored curative outcomes (p. 419).

Maria, while visiting the tale, was able to revisit her own story and light up her imagination. By identifying with the character, she was able to experience herself from a new perspective. This relationship revolutionized the way she sees herself and rescued powerful values and resources for the context she was dealing with. She can experience her feelings without anguish, in a light way, making room for new meanings and new ideas.

According to Kim Billington (2015), people's tales and stories of trauma often resonate with the three phases identified as Van Genep's (1960) rite of passage: separation, liminality, and reincorporation (White & Epston, 1990).

It is possible to recognize the resonances of the three phases both in the tale and in Maria's story. Like the small village, she and her family were trapped by suffering, living in separation from what was known to her. The discomfort generated by the fog promoted a movement in history, a disturbance that aroused the search for a new course of action. Similarly, her growing distance

from her family provoked the same search in Maria. The threshold was experienced both by the child in the tale and by her who, armed with curiosity and courage, rescued a new status quo. Thanks to Maria's initiative, the letters paved the way for her family to get closer, freeing her mother from the feeling of impotence that imprisoned her. Both Maria and the village in the story were able to reincorporate the authorial movement into the dynamics of their lives. Its original initiative started a self-transforming and healing process, opening space to accommodate new narratives in her life history.

### Final considerations

*"We are what we do, but we are mainly what we do to change".*

Eduardo Galeano

Maria's story invites us to recognize that, even in the face of traumatic adversity, we can find a way to untie the knot that paralyzes us. By keeping our eyes open and listening to the multi-stories that are part of our lives, we can rescue and discover precious resources that, like vigorous winds, lead us through a sea of new possibilities.

Walking alongside Maria through the dense fog of tragedy also inspired me to develop personal reflective writing. A therapeutic document that takes care of me and favors a precious revisit to the lived experience. Poetic narrative has been a powerful resource to keep the flame of the art of encounter always burning.

I recently attended a reflective writing workshop where we were asked to write about the most memorable hug we could remember. Immediately, I revisited that night when I went to see Maria and a new narrative fragment was born, legitimizing the idea that a story never dies – it is always lurking, generously available to guide us along new routes and help us produce new meanings. Recording that unforgettable hug made me recognize that what we lived with intensity is always present in a special space of our memory over time:

The hug was what I could offer. An offering that contained all the immensity of comfort she wanted to bestow.

The room was ablaze with the pain of that day's abrupt amputation.

She was huddled, enveloped by tears already dehydrated by the dry and arid heat of the tragic fate.

I approached and we welcomed each other on the island of our arms.

We became oasis.

The heat of pain was softened by the freshness of the story we had.

We transmit certainties.

We would go on together, rebuilding what was broken.

Maria and I proceeded together. Every day we fill our story with new lines, verses, paragraphs, and even footnotes. We walked side by side, in a permanent flow of narratives filled with hope and courage, despite the immense longing that remained.

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