



Dawn Duncan & Micaela Gerhardt

The Power of Words to Build Bridges of Empathy

Words have the power to harm or to heal; they are never neutral. I am called to use healing words.

At a table in Belfast, Ireland, a slightly built 16-year-old boy with ebony skin sits silently beside a chubby 60-year-old woman with skin the color of light sand. What can these two strangers have to say to one another? How can they understand anything about the other's life in the townships of South Africa or on the northern plains of Minnesota? If each could pick up a book and read a story that encapsulates the other's life, each might gain entry to the other's heart, but most of us will never be a character in a book; we are, merely and completely, the central character in our own life story. Narrative 4, a global organization started by artists and teachers and committed to fostering radical empathy across this tension-fraught world by using a non-fiction, lived and shared story-telling process, provides a way that these two strangers can walk across a bridge of words and enter one another's story, even learn to tell the other's story as if it were their own.

Narrative 4 began with a shared vision under the co-leadership of award-winning author Colum McCann. I first met Colum in 2009 when he came to Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, where I teach. Colum had won the National Book Award for fiction that year for his stunning novel, *Let the Great World Spin* and he impressed me with the integrity of his artistic vision as I listened to his public interview on stage and his informal conversation with students and staff. While he was on campus, my proposal to chair an international symposium on "The Role of the Artist in Society" at Concordia in 2011 was accepted and I immediately asked Colum if he would come back to deliver the opening night plenary on

how writers can and should responsibly engage with the world. He did and we have remained in touch as both of us continued our individual work to use words for healing and good in our world.

Colum's books lend themselves to pedagogical explorations of empathy. He has a powerful, subtle manner of entering into the experience of someone quite other than himself. His novel *Zoli*, inspired by Bronislawa Wais, or Papusza, a Polish Romani poet, demonstrated these qualities so well that I chose it as the summer book read preceding the 2011 "Role of the Artist in Society" symposium and why I continue to use the novel in my course "Compassionate Imagination." In this course we study the philosophy of compassion as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas and Martha Nussbaum, applying their philosophies to literary works in which the author has imaginatively internalized the voice of one quite other, and dignified and humanized that other in a manner that creates empathy in the reader. Colum, in the writing of *Zoli*, spent a good deal of time with the Romani in order to dignify their culture as he attempted to inhabit and re-tell the story of this woman whose poems were her life-blood but also brought her great sorrow as others made use of them in ways not appropriate to her culture. The book is an exercise in empathic reach of storytelling.

At the same time, Colum began work with a core group of artists, activists and educators to set up Narrative 4 (N4), which in three short years has become global in reach. In 2012, Lisa Consiglio, Narrative 4's co-founder and the former director of the Aspen Writers' Foundation, convened Colum and other writers who believe that stories can—and do—change the world, that every story must be heard and that our survival as a society depends on this human connection. Over the course of five days, the group experienced their first story exchange and N4 was born. The vision of Narrative 4 is "fearless hope through radical empathy" fostered through a specific story exchange process.

One person in attendance, Lee Keylock, a high school teacher in Newtown, Connecticut, would eventually become the programs director who would guide teachers in how to implement the methodologies of N4. A few short months after N4 came into being, one of the most horrific shootings

in US history took place when schoolchildren and staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown were gunned down by a mentally ill young man. Lee used Colum's book *Let the Great World Spin* as a way to help his students and town heal and Colum joined him in Newtown, meeting with and talking to survivors and their family members, listening to their stories even as his book helped promote healing. Paths converged.

While it was clear that the early focus was to bring high school age students together across such divides as class in the Bronx or religion in Belfast, I began to wonder how my college students and I—on the Great Plains of western Minnesota—could become part of the movement. Colum immediately connected me with the other founders, supporting my desire to join their effort. In June 2016, Micaela Gerhardt, a student who had taken classes with me and became a researcher alongside me for the summer of 2016, accompanied me to the N4 summit in Ireland as we prepare to implement N4 on Concordia's campus this fall.

I am the daughter of two book-lovers, one who drinks coffee and one who drinks tea. My mom is a high school English teacher who read aloud to me nearly every night while I was a child, and my dad is a journalist and T.V. anchorman who began to read me poetry during my high school years. When we went on road trips to visit Yellowstone or the Black Hills or Devil's Tower, we listened to Frank McCourt's *Tis* or Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series on audiobook in the car. And we liked to talk about the stories we read and told and listened to. This is all to say that storytelling was an inextricable part of our lives, and that words mattered, and that we considered their many meanings and nuances often.

This is still true. Last weekend, my mom read the first chapter of Frederick Buechner's *The Sacred Journey* aloud and we discussed the concept of time and how it is different when people are young. Buechner refers to a childlike sense of time as "below a time," and writes, "It is by its content rather than

its duration that a child knows time, by its quality rather than its quantity—happy times and sad times, the time the rabbit bit your finger, the time you had your first taste of bananas and cream, the time you were crying yourself to sleep when somebody came and lay down beside you in the dark for comfort” (9). A few days earlier, my dad read me a poem because he needed some feedback, particularly regarding the last line. And so I suppose it is because my parents understood the significance of words and storytelling that I became a fervent reader and writer and, later, an English major.

At Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, I study English writing with concentrations in poetry and nonfiction. In the fall of my junior year, I elected to take Dr. Dawn Duncan’s “Irish Drama” course in order to fulfill requirements for my major. Because I had switched majors multiple times during my freshman and sophomore years, it was the first literature class I had taken in college and it was a 400 level course. I was terrified—nervous to speak up, afraid my classmates knew more about literary devices and critical approaches than I ever would. However, Dr. Duncan reassured me repeatedly. It was hard work—I pored over each text we were assigned multiple times, taking notes in the margins, sometimes calling my mom to talk about ideas I had for my papers. It felt good to be really, truly challenged, and so when Dr. Duncan announced that her course, “Compassionate Imagination,” which was usually reserved for students in the academic honor’s program, would be available to all students, I signed up for it without hesitation. Through this class, I learned how to articulate a philosophy that I had always inherently believed, “that we must see the Other as uniquely other rather than always looking for ourselves in someone else if we are to learn how to love those different from ourselves” (Duncan, *Compassionate Imagination Syllabus*). Feeling excited and empowered, I approached Dr. Duncan about possibilities for summer research and she introduced me to Narrative 4. I was immediately, earnestly hooked and applied for an undergraduate research grant (which I later received) from my college to implement the program both on campus and in my community in an effort to generate understanding between disparate demographics, promoting a community of citizens who take responsibility for each other. Currently racial

tension simmer in Fargo/Moorhead and the community would benefit from hearing and empathizing the stories of others.

At the heart of Narrative 4 is the story exchange process, the core methodology through which the organization achieves their mission, “fearless hope through radical empathy.” Participants are each randomly assigned a partner, with whom they share a significant story from their life. Each person must listen attentively, noting details and attempting to grasp the heart of the story, because later, the partners return to a small group of 5 to 6 pairings (10-12 individuals), plus a facilitator, and retell their partner’s story in the first person. The listener gains empathy while the storyteller gains resilience, and the group as a whole forms a profound bond of trust that cannot be broken. The organization has facilitated story exchanges throughout the great wide world—in Ireland, Mexico, Israel, Palestine, South Africa, and in ten U.S. states. In June 2016, representatives from these places gathered in Ireland and Northern Ireland for N4’s annual summit, which Dr. Duncan and I were invited to participate in.

In Belfast, during my second story exchange, the American naturalist Terry Tempest Williams told me a story about visiting the Arctic to see the great white polar bears that became my operating metaphor for the entire experience. On one of her outings to scout out the bears, she saw an Inupiat woman spinning in circles and falling down over and over again. The woman spoke to Terry, and said, “My name is Marie and my world is spinning.” This is an image that resonated—the spinning woman, the white sky, the frozen snow—I wondered what Terry thought of her, and what she thought of Terry, and why her world was spinning, and whether or not she ever got it straightened out. Terry did not provide the answers to these questions in her story. Perhaps she is still trying to figure it out. I share this story because on the last night of the summit, when I had returned to my room, I dropped something on my floor and bent to pick it up. As I reached down, I fell, and my eyesight momentarily blurred. Earlier that day, my mom had texted me to see how I was doing, and I replied, “I can feel my life changing.” And while there is likely a scientific explanation for the strange dizzy sensation I experienced, maybe hunger, or exhaustion, or both,

I prefer to believe that I had internalized Terry's story, and Marie's story, and that their stories had become my story. My other theory is that my world was simply spinning too, changing at a speed that could, quite literally, knock me off of my feet. I no longer felt I had the ability to remain stationary in regards to my beliefs—it was time for me to put them into action. Narrative 4 can have that sort of effect.

I felt, while attending N4's summit, as though stories put the world in that kind of motion. It seemed around every turn a new adventure awaited, a new story unfurled, a new person came to life—Colum McCann, with a thin scarf draped around his neck, reciting poems by Seamus Heaney or Patrick Kavanagh; Colm Mac Con Ionmaire, who played a five-string violin with something that can only be described as magic, his head bowed slightly, his blue eyes watching his hands and his bow; Terry Tempest Williams, with her white hair and silver jewelry, who squeezed my hand as I told her my story, communicating both power and peace.

The power of radical empathy was evident in the energy of so many who firmly believed in the power of storytelling and shared dialogue to effect change in the world. Hearing each unique participant's story and telling my own, of exploring the concepts of empathy and action together, was beyond my expectations. Perhaps I can best describe it using words by the Persian poet, Rumi, who writes, "Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about." Narrative 4 provided this field for me—a safe space, devoid of judgment, brimming with love, where I could tell my story—and when my soul laid down in its grass, I could hardly find the words to explain its magnificence. I knew the only thing to do would be to plant this field in my community, in an effort to welcome more tired people looking for peaceable ground.

As we begin to seed the fields we find in our own communities, we meet with local civic and government leaders, presenting the program and seeking their input as to where and how N4 might be useful to help build bridges of understanding. September 2016 will mark the kickoff of N4 at Concordia College during

its annual symposium, this year themed “America and the Middle East: Local and Global Dimensions.” The connection between the symposium topic and our intended use of Narrative 4 is one that resonates both locally and globally. Since the Fargo-Moorhead area is a relocation center for immigrants and refugees, particularly those assisted by Lutheran Social Services, such vitriolic media attention is particularly harmful to those struggling to make a new life. Locally, one of our television news stations has fed the fear of immigrants persistently over the past year, trying to stir up resistance to welcoming them here. While other local media outlets have defended our immigrants, the best way to change fear to understanding, unfounded hatred to empathy, is through personal encounters, particularly when that encounter includes a sustained narrative, as in the story exchange process.

During the week of the symposium events, Lee Keylock will lead a series of concurrent sessions titled “What’s Your Story? Using Narrative to Foster Empathy in Our World,” during which we will explain the program and demonstrate the story exchange. Neuroscientists have reported in the most prestigious science journals that such encounters actually increase the empathetic centers of the brain. If we can touch hearts and change minds, we can change the communities in which we live, and that can change the world. During the concurrent sessions, six of our local immigrants from the Middle East and six of our college students will share one another’s stories in first person in the way of N4’s story exchange. We will then discuss how the process changed them, how it can make change. Later that week, we will conduct a 4-hour evening certification training session for faculty and students, the first of many. We will begin to build a corps of Narrative 4 facilitators, ready to go wherever there is a need.

Our long-term approach to N4 at Concordia, from a curricular perspective, is a proposal for a scaffolding approach to implementing N4 on campus. We propose taking all first-year students through a story exchange around November of their first semester. This may be facilitated through a Student Affairs session such as their FYT (First-Year Transition) Lab or through one of their required courses in written or oral communication. Best practice indicates that sitting across the circle from your story partner

intensifies the re-telling experience as you look into the face of the person whose story you have internalized and share. Because first-year students increasingly show signs of struggling to feel secure and to exercise resilience, a community building process such as N4 promotes can help them find a sense of belonging, to recognize that others care for them, see them, and hear them.

After their own experience with the story exchange, some may then elect to take courses in our interdisciplinary approach to Narrative 4. In addition to the English department, History, Religion, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, and Neuroscience have all expressed interest in coursework that will support the initiative. Finally, those students who decide to go through the certification process will then become facilitators, ready to go where they are needed, whether that is locally or globally. Their work as facilitators will be a part of the experiential learning curriculum requirement (called Peak) of the college's mission to help students responsibly engage in the world. With this kind of scaffolding and the ongoing support and collaboration of various departments, the student government, and the administration, Narrative 4 will become a core method for enacting the power of words to make positive changes in lives and community beyond Concordia's campus.

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