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There's power in the patient narrative

Doctors have always listened to patient stories to help them diagnose. In 2000, Dr Rita Charon took this to another level when she embarked on a literature degree to learn how to pay exquisite attention to patient stories, using them to fortify her clinical practice. She developed a discipline known as [narrative medicine](#) [2], in which doctors, in her words, recognise, receive, absorb and interpret the patient story – told even in the silences, the pauses and the body language – and are thus moved to better understand the illness and the patient's experience of it.

The late [Dr Oliver Sacks](#) [3] shared the stories that his patients told, in curious collections of case studies, including the man who mistook his wife for a hat and another patient with visual agnosia, who patted water hydrants as if they were children and addressed carved furniture knobs, being surprised at their silence. It was though when he shared his own story of illness, in *A Leg To Sand On*, that something shifted for Sacks.

Twisting his leg and tearing a muscle during a hiking accident, Sacks first describes the paralysis and strange alienation of his leg from him, it becoming an object seemingly unrelated to him - "a corpse's leg, a counterfeit leg". Recovering slowly from his injury, and telling his story, Sacks was surprised to find that there was another, deeper, story to tell, for there had been, in his words, not just a lesion in a muscle, but a lesion in himself. "What was disconnected was not merely nerve and muscle.....the spirit was ruptured, precisely as the body", he writes. Something had broken in his soul; he had entered what he called a strange limbo, a nothingness, where all his cognitive, intellectual and imaginative powers no longer afforded a foothold. Picturing his body as a living ship, his once stout timbers seemed now rotten, his good sailors were deaf, disobedient or missing – and he was no longer captain.

Relinquishing his "body image and body-ego", he turned to art and religion for comfort, finding that the Bible stories made sense in a way that they had not before, telling of affliction and redemption, darkness and light, death and rebirth. His own journey, he felt, was one of a return, mysteriously, to light and life once again, and he found this theme repeated often in the Psalms, dwelling especially on one verse:

Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from

the depths of the earth.

"Secretly, half-sceptically, hesitatingly and yearningly", Sacks addresses himself to what he can only call this "unimaginable 'Thou'".

The World Health Organization uses storytelling to inform and to empower people to make choices that improve their health and wellbeing. "Stories are at the heart of human existence and people are hardwired to respond to them," they write. "Stories provide meaning to facts and allow individuals to connect with the information being conveyed, both intellectually and emotionally." In their video series '[People of the Western Pacific](#)' [4], health issues are humanised as people living with different diseases tell their stories. Particularly powerful is [Glenda's story](#) [5] of living through breast cancer, as she opens up about her insecurities, her fears and the lesser-known side effects of treatment, including mouth sores, night sweats – and loneliness. According to Glenda, there's a place for retreat and raw emotion, and for reaching out to support groups who help you 'hang in there'.

In Hawaii, "talking story" is increasingly recognized as medicine in its own right. Knowing that Hawaiians have long treasured this cultural 'chit chat' as a powerful and vibrant way to pass down knowledge, doctors devised a '[talk story intervention](#)' [6] for heart failure management. Native Hawaiians made videos describing how they managed the disease, detailing fluids, medicines, stress, diet and 'thanking God'. When viewers were asked what they liked best about the videos, the most common response was that the storytellers are "like me" – that they could see themselves in the story. It's when this happens that the 'wounded storyteller' becomes the 'wounded healer'. Sociologist Arthur Frank coined these terms and described how the patient-storyteller "helps repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life and where she may be going". Readers are led to "redraw maps and find new destinations", with the author acting as both guide and companion.

Jesus himself is the ultimate wounded storyteller-healer. Bearing still the scars of his crucifixion in his now resurrected body, his eternally beautiful [epic Story](#) [7] told today helps hearers, lost in life, find forgiveness, hope and a way back to God, through him. Our story is actually a fleeting chapter in his Story. We don't, and can't, write our own, as pastor [Paul David Tripp](#) [8] explains:

"Thankfully I am not the author of my own personal story. Your story isn't an autobiography either. Your story is a biography of wisdom and grace written by Another. Every turn he writes into your story is right. Every twist of the plot is for the best. Every new character or unexpected event is a tool of his grace".

The Bible says that we spend our years as a tale that is told. And with God directing the script, there's a guaranteed happy ending for his people - which is actually a glorious start to a better story that never ends.



Source URL: <https://helencowan.co.uk/wounded-storytellers>

Links

[1] <https://www.seenandunseen.com/theres-power-patient-narrative> [2] <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/health-and-medicine/narrative-medicine> [3] <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2190246/> [4] <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/newsroom/feature-stories/item/the-power-of-storytelling-for-health-impact> [5] <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/people/glenda-philippines> [6] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32821801/> [7] https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/187026.I_Am_Not_But_I_Know_I_Am [8] <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/you-are-not-the-author-of-your-story>