Sideshadowing: Perceiving Possibilities

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Abstract

'Sideshadowing' is a term coined by Gary S. Morson ([1994] derived from the more familiar concept of foreshadowing) to conceptualize ways of perceiving alternatives and of seeing possibilities other than or counter to dominant narratives – an essential skill in multicultural education. This essay employs that literary term in suggesting real-life narrative-skill applications in the context of peace education and post-traumatic growth, critical ethical thinking, and addictive thinking. Extended and deeper sideshadowing capacities offer a reconstructive potential and process for individuals and societies through enhanced narrative competence in understanding not only what could have been – sideshadowing in service of clearer hindsight – but most urgently, what could yet be.
Key words: peace education, post-traumatic growth, narrative competence, multicultural education, critical ethical thinking

Introduction

"It's possible", asserts the lone holdout juror as he begins a process that eventually changes an almost unanimous guilty verdict to the final "not guilty" ending of *Twelve Angry Men*. In Reginald Rose's dramatic portrait of jury deliberations in a murder trial, the contagion of expanded thinking generated by challenging narrative dominance is portrayed. Pursuing a point "where the stories offered by the boy and the State begin to diverge slightly" (1955, p. 22), one juror after another contributes to rethinking what they heard and saw during the trial whose verdict they are debating. This perception of possibility, essential to multicultural education, is my teaching aim in courses varying from peace education seminars to Shakespeare studies, where I teach sideshadowing as part of my applied-research approach to the humanities. Sideshadowing is a term coined by Gary S. Morson, derived from the more familiar concept of foreshadowing, to conceptualize ways of eliciting

> the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened. … Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. … [S]ideshadowing … casts a shadow 'from the side', that is, from other possibilities. Alone with an event, we see alternatives; with each present, another possible present. … A haze of possibilities surrounds each actuality. … [I]n permitting us to catch a glimpse of unrealized but realizable possibilities, sideshadowing demonstrates that our tendency to trace straight lines of causality … oversimplifies events… Sideshadowing

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therefore induces a kind of temporally based humility. Sideshadowing restores the possibility of possibility. (1994, pp. 118-119)

This essay outlines directions in developing sideshadowing as a methodology and life skill aimed at enhancing our peripheral vision, facilitating our view not only of what could have been but also what could yet be. By training the critical eye to perceive sideshadowing and the critical mind to initiate it, horizons are broadened, options made visible, and people empowered.

This empowerment can be extended from individuals to society as a whole. Within the real-life challenges of contemporary Israel, it is central to both peace education and post-traumatic growth. In this context, I view both Israeli and Palestinian societies as post-traumatic communities whose founding catastrophes continue to shape individual and national thinking. For Jewish Israelis, the founding trauma is the Holocaust, the systematic murder of six million Jews and the annihilation of Jewish life in Europe. For Palestinians, the founding trauma is the *Nakba* of 1948, the calamity of dispossession as a consequence of the creation of the Jewish State of Israel. Education in sideshadowing skills could promote post-traumatic growth and counter the self-perpetuating dominant victims' narratives. As Martin E. P. Seligman points out, the destructive potential of trauma is well known; however, its growth potential, while far more common than pathology, is much less familiar. In his work with students at the West Point United States Military Academy, he notes that "more than 90 percent of cadets had heard of post-traumatic stress disorder, which in reality is relatively uncommon, but less than 10 percent had heard of post-traumatic growth, which is not uncommon. This is medical illiteracy that matters. If all a soldier knows about is PTSD, and not about resilience and growth, it creates a self-fulfilling downward spiral" (2011, pp. 157-158). Symptoms within normal ranges of grief or stress are thus misread by the sufferer as pathological, and perspective-enhancing sideshadowing (bringing into view human resilience and normative post-traumatic guilt) as part of general education offers growth alternatives to pathology.

One vibrant example of this growth potential of sideshadowing for peace education is Julia Bacha's 2010 film, *Budrus*. This documentary traces the nonviolent resistance of the West Bank village of Budrus as it fought the construction of Israel's separation barrier cutting through its fields. The film both demonstrates agency and inspires it in its audience. Ayed Morrar leads his community in unarmed protests together with Israeli activists and, following her father's lead, his 15-year-old daughter organizes the village's women in joining and almost immediately leading the movement. In their essay on resilience and posttraumatic growth, Stephen J. Lepore and Tracey A. Revenson describe a process "through which environments may promote resilience … by mobilizing agency and effective coping through social connections and a synchronization of resources" (2009, p. 34), a process evident in the documented resistance of Budrus.

In a July 2011 TED talk, director Julia Bacha expresses her frustration at the question she is often asked about why Palestinians aren't using non-violent resistance, noting extensive non-violent resistance that goes unreported. She points out a gap between perceptions abroad and

activity on the ground, and stresses "the power of attention" that she hopes her film will harness. Demanding such attention from her audience, Bacha is essentially teaching sideshadowing as a way of bringing counter-narratives into view, challenging the dominant narrative of violence as the exclusive form of activism available in this region of conflict. Since this preconception shapes the tunnel vision that sees only the self-perpetuating hopelessness of endless cycles of violence, the documentary film *Budrus* is literally an eye-opener, rewarding audience attention with enhanced peripheral vision and even challenging the mapping of center and periphery in perceptions of the conflict in the Palestine of 2010.

Narrative analysis has become an interdisciplinary methodology in many fields; most recently, some of its tools are being used in various frameworks of applied positive psychology to delineate and augment strengths that can then be employed in daily life. In Australia, applied positive psychology skills are taught to grammar-school pupils with the goal of increasing "resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning" (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009, p. 293; see also Knight, 2007, pp. 543-555). Seligman has since extended this work he began with schools in the United States and Australia (2011, pp. 78-97) to adults, developing positive-psychology skills courses (training in identifying and applying individual character strengths) with and for the U.S. Army (ibid., pp. 126-151), and suggesting the potential of applied positive skills for well-being in health (ibid., pp. 182-220) and business (ibid., pp. 221-241).

Yet the skill taught is primarily thematic, leaving untapped the great potential of critical rhetorical analysis to transcend mere summary of content and theme. The thematic skills taught in these narrative-based interventions would be enormously amplified by broad-based instruction in the techniques of narrative analysis and the acquisition of skills currently the preserve of scholars and therapists. Teaching narrative skills within a methodology of sideshadowing would complement positive-psychology training, though it is not identical to it. Fundamental to sideshadowing is non-directed expanded peripheral vision, enhancing the capacity to apprehend narrative alternatives across diverse fields in ways that I suggest here. The ethical foundation of this approach is Jonathan Lear's sense of ethics as "any living attempt to raise the question of how to live" (2005, p. 62). The goal is skill acquisition and not its directed therapeutic or educational application. Peripheral vision thus broadened and deepened would then be available to individuals (and by extension, to communities) as life presents its inevitable challenges.

Dan Bar-On, a Jewish-Israeli psychologist and scholar who worked with Israelis and Palestinians individually and in groups over many years, noted that "a major impediment to creating a genuine dialogue between Jews and Palestinians is the difficulty of both sides in giving up their construction of themselves as the victim of the other side" (2004, p. 247). One path toward breaking through paralyzing dualistic thinking is the ongoing educational process initiated by Bar-On together with Sami Adwan in their PRIME (Peace Research in the Middle East) shared-history project. They worked with a group of Jewish-Israeli history

teachers and their Palestinian colleagues in the West Bank on creating textbooks representing parallel national narratives that invite student sideshadowing by the innovation of leaving a blank center of the page for students to add their own narrative (Bar-On, 2006, pp. 77-120; Bar-On & Adwan, 2006a, pp. 205-224; Bar-On & Adwan, 2006b, pp. 309-323; Schechet, 2009, pp. 20-24). Addition, not substitution, is the graphic invitation; multiplicity rather than dominance is its salient implication. Presenting the dominant Israeli and Palestinian narratives on the same page stimulates critical thinking about national master-narratives, while the centrally eloquent blank space challenges passive reception and insists on critical engagement. This is the greatest achievement of the PRIME project (yet to be applied in Israeli or Palestinian schools), frustrating dualistic thinking by highlighting the demands of agency within conflict and uncertainty.

Shlomi Eldar's documentary film *Precious Life* (2010) works similarly upon its viewer by means of a moment of narrative sideshadowing that activates the audience, together with the film's narrator, in a process of expanding vision. Following the struggle to save the life of a Palestinian baby born with the same immune-deficiency disease that killed two of his siblings, Eldar portrays the complex realities within which the staff of Tel Aviv's Tel Hashomer Hospital and the Abu-Mustafa family of Gaza work to save the child. Following a moment of despair in response to Raida Abu-Mustafa's expressed hope of her son's future self-sacrifice in the suicide-murder of Jews, Eldar's viewers accompany him as his perspective expands with the sudden realization of the acute pressures on the Abu-Mustafa family in their Gaza home against what is perceived by their community as traitorous collaboration with Israel. This moment of sideshadowing portrayed as the real-time perception of the narrator/director is thus shared by the audience, with an impact similar to that of the blank center of the page framed by each of the two dominant regional narratives of Israel and of Palestine in the PRIME Project. The passive reception of the cinema audience is thwarted and transformed by this moment in the process of viewing *Precious Life*, instigating critical reflection paralleling that of the narrator. The film suggests some of the counter-narratives ("stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" [Andrews, 2004, pp. 1-2; Schechet, 2009, pp. 22-23]) within the complex realities represented in the film, alerting the viewer both to misperceptions and partial perspectives revealed in the film, and to the shadows of those as yet unseen.

Narrative competence, thus augmented, enhances human capabilities. The Jewish humanist educator Leonard Grob formulates an approach of "educating-toward-rescue" in the development of moral agency within formal education. Exemplifying the application of this theory through Holocaust studies, Grob focuses on acts of rescue, suggesting reframing pedagogy through teaching these decisions and deeds as aspects of our human potential. Rescue is thus not heroic – and therefore limited to the few – but a manifestation of the decency in each of us – thereby obliging us all (Grob, 1997, pp. 98-107). This shift in narrative emphasis models alternative modes of moral agency through the teaching of history in a manner richly suggestive for educational and therapeutic application.

In therapeutic work, the untapped potential of narrative competence in reframing addictive thinking is vast. Until recently, work with addictions was modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous' emphasis on helplessness and dependency. The foundation of AA's 12-step program stresses a central helplessness, predicating an admission that one cannot control the addiction and must apply to a higher power to attain that lost control.

I believe that this emphasis on helplessness and lack of agency is self-defeating and self-perpetuating. A persuasive alternative therapeutic perspective introduced by Edward Khantzian and Mark J. Albanese is based on the profoundly different premise of addiction as self-medication. These authors offer a view of "human distress and psychological suffering … at the root of most addictive behavior" and of substance abuse as originating in self-medication, "an attempt to solve a problem, albeit misguided, rather than cause one, which it invariably does" (Khantzian & Albanese, 2008, pp. 9, 59). Their empowering approach to addiction as originating in self-help offers a sideshadowed alternative self-narrative that opens a treatment vista far wider and more flexible than the mantra of helplessness so fundamental to much traditional treatment. Expanding these authors' instinctive use of sideshadowing into a learned skill would be useful for both therapist and client. Moreover, education in sideshadowing perception is prophylactic, with a potential to counter addictive thinking before it manifests as addictive behavior. By stressing agency rather than helplessness in the self-medication approach, the "tendency to trace straight lines of causality" in a way that "oversimplifies events" (Morson, 1994, pp. 118-119) is challenged. This challenge opens sufferers' stories to additional perspectives that respect their efforts at self-healing while concomitantly offering alternative strategies. The peripheral vision thus enhanced undermines the naturalization process undergone within any dominant discourse (Fairclough, 1989, p. 107) which, in the case of addiction, includes both the disease model and AA's spiritual hierarchy of helplessness.

In the same way, understanding narrative 'backshadowing', a term coined by Michael Bernstein (1994), can expose the distorted suasion of narrative teleology in addictive thinking. Backshadowing creates a misleading causality by using "the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener … to judge the participants of those events". Bernstein exemplifies it by demonstrating the way "our knowledge of the Shoah is used to condemn the 'blindness' and self-deception of Austro-German Jewry for their unwillingness to save themselves from a doom that supposedly was clear to see" (p. 16). Because we know the end of the story, we rearrange earlier plot elements in light of the known ending. Apprehending this common rhetorical move as the limiting and conservative technique of backshadowing enables the reader/listener to view it critically and perceive its rhetorical manipulation.

Thus the aim of my work in teaching (ranging from peace-education seminars and narrative analysis to Shakespeare studies) and in writing (Schechet, 2005; Schechet, 2009) is to enhance human capabilities through narrative competence. Such narrative capacity serves what Arthur Frank (1995), working on applied narrative analysis in the social sciences, calls "the ethic of our times: an ethic of voice, affording each a right to speak her own truth, in her

own words" (p. xiii). Frank articulates the narrative contribution to dealing with illness as "keeping multiple selves available to themselves" (ibid., p. 66) while individuals cope with serious illness. His intended audience is "ethicists and practitioners", and his aim is to direct professionals to "thinking *with* stories: to help professionals to recognize ill persons' stories and all they represent" (ibid., p. 24, original italics). The complementary aim of my own work is more broadly educational though not goal-oriented. In relation to illness narratives, a challenge that all of us face at some point in our lives, the goal is an enhanced narrative capacity for all, with the professional and personal empowerment these skills imply within whatever real-life challenges emerge.

In his essay on fostering posttraumatic growth, Robert Neimeyer (2009) describes a process of "re-storying loss" deriving from an "understanding of posttraumatic growth as a form of *meaning reconstruction* in the wake of crisis and loss" (p. 69, original italics). He also contextualizes this reconstructive process and its potential "for posttraumatic growth not only for individuals living within a society, but also in some sense for the society as a whole" (ibid., p. 71). This is the potential of teaching and practicing sideshadowing, mapping a reconstructive potential and process for individuals and societies through enhanced narrative competence aimed at understanding not only what could have been – sideshadowing in service of clearer hindsight – but most urgently, what could yet be.

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