
FIELD NOTES | FALL 2011

My Year in Narrative Medicine

By **Dana Gage**

People always ask me what Narrative Medicine is, what it does.

It isn't therapy, I say, but it is therapeutic. Not therapeutic, exactly, more configurative. Almost but not quite, magical.

How so, they ask.

It changes you. It changes your relationships: with your patients. With your kids. Even with ex-husbands.

But how, they persist.

By doing what we are told to do.

Like what?

We read. We write. We look at pictures.

Oh, like pre-school.

Do you mean pre-school in a good way? Because it is very nurturing. And it feels good to learn. And there are snacks.

But what do you do?

We listen. First to our professors. And to the writers they ask us to read. Read them closely, they say to us.

What does that mean?

Look at the words and then look behind the words. Don't be afraid to sink into the story and let it touch you. You know, how you sometimes really connect with a book. Or a patient. Or a friend or lover.

Then what?

Then we look deeper. To find out what's below the surface, what the real story is.

And then what?

Then we write from the heart. Someone suggests that we write something and we write from the heart. We learn skills of writing and talking and telling. No censors. We take the story apart. Then we put it back together in a new way. Our own way. We sign up. We sign in. To the story, our own story. And we let it teach us and we tell it again, like taking a history in a patient's own words.

Oh, like Esalon, or EST, you know, the 60's.

Well, sort of like the 60's but without the drugs. We have snacks. Healthy snacks.

So you let the story touch you?

The story, and the patient and the story that the patient wants to tell.

And then?

Then it happens.

What happens?

You are both different somehow.

And are you different now? After just one year?

Actually, just nine months.

Like a gestation?

Sort of a gestation.

Any stretch marks?

Not the kind you can see.

And how are you different?

Well for one thing, I don't argue as much.

That's good.

And I'm more patient. I listen better.

Yes.

I'm not hoarding as much, you know: books, things, ideas. And I'm more confident.

I see that.

And I've finally given up on my long lost love. Well, almost.

Really?

Yes, really. Almost.

And you say you are transfigured?

Yes.

Sort of like therapy?

Not therapy, but therapeutic.

Transfigurative, huh?

Yes.

How's that?

Well, I've lost my intern dash.

Your what?

You know: I eat slower, I talk slower. I even walk slower. No more scoping out the nearest bathroom, no more trying to store up sleep. I take more time for myself. And I'm not afraid to be myself.

Transformative, huh?

Yes, more time to smell the falafels.

Aren't you kind of old for that kind of stuff?

That's what I thought.

Dana Gage holds an M.S. in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University.

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