

Narrative Coaching

20+ years of experience



THE DEFINITIVE
GUIDE TO BRINGING
NEW STORIES TO LIFE

David Drake

dr. David Drake

What leaders in our field are saying

David lives, eats, and breathes narrative; it's what he does and who he is. It is like he can see into people's souls through their narratives and help them see all of who they are. When we taught together, it was evident how profound and powerful narratives are in revealing and healing our deepest shadows. Narrative Coaching illustrates this important work in a way that we can use in our work and lives. Brilliant!

Donna Karlin
The Shadow Coach, Canada

David is a global thought-leader in Narrative Coaching, and this book will stimulate, educate, and provide valuable insights and tools for all coaches. An essential read.

Anthony M. Grant, PhD
Director of the Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney, Australia

David is one of my favorite coaching thought leaders, shining bright as a coaching scholar. His star also radiates warmth and compassion, poured into narrative coaching, a coaching domain David founded. This book integrates the best of David's thinking over the past 15 years. It is a rich and evocative resource for everyone interested in coaching.

Margaret Moore,
Founder and CEO of Wellcoaches

This book is a powerful source of inspiration and resources for coaches who have outgrown the simplistic and mechanical models taught in many coaching programs and who are ready to take their skills to a new level.

Prof. Konstantin Korotov, PhD,
Director of the Center for Leadership Development Research, ESMT-Berlin

David Drake charts the waters for any coach or trainer willing to help a fellow soul change the stories that bind him or her. Wonderful examples and a healthy respect for the diverse and unpredictable variability of two humans talking (or sitting in silence) makes this book entertaining as well as useful.

Annette Simmons
Group Process Consulting, US

David has taken his doctoral research and created a globally recognized body of work. It has been a joy to watch narrative coaching evolve and David along with it. His systemic approach to developing people is on the leading edge of coaching. I highly recommend this book for both its scholarship and its profound insights on practice.

Judy Stevens-Long, PhD
PhD Faculty, Fielding Graduate University,
School of Human & Organizational Development, US

David Drake understands — truly and deeply understands — how *the stories we tell about ourselves* are the genesis of our identities, and from that deep awareness he has pioneered the field of narrative coaching. What an astonishing achievement, and what a potent contribution to the field of human development! If your vocation calls you now into this journey of learning, then this book is your map... and Dr. David Drake is your wise and compassionate guide.

David Hutchens
Author and organizational story consultant

There are very few coaching approaches that are fully theory-based and also serve as a sensitive guide to practice. Narrative coaching as developed by David Drake represents an outstanding example of such an approach. It includes a skillful synthesis of the best ideas in the field of human change, made richer by his years of thoughtful refinement and integration into coaching practice. This book truly extends the knowledge of the coaching field and beyond.

Tatiana Bachkirova, PhD
Co-director of the International Centre for
Coaching and Mentoring Studies, UK

Most coaches deal with the surface of life, focusing on arranging behaviors and tasks. David has a way of quickly getting to the deeper personal narrative that shapes how we perceive daily life. Once I understood the story I was living in, I had the power to change it. Behavioral changes that had been a challenge seem much less daunting now that they are tied to a deeper intention.

Brian Lanahan
Brand strategist, US

David's book is the most thorough and robust guide to Narrative coaching available. The tools and models are presented in easy to understand, simple and

clear language. This book will be useful to both beginning practitioners as well as the most experienced coaches and leadership development specialists. But beware . . . there is a depth here that offers a limitedness guide for our learning. The simplicity belies the sophistication of this model that will stand the test of time.

Loretta Brown

Director, New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre

David Drake brings a rare combination of rigour and humanity to this long-awaited book. Rooted in both academic research and ground-breaking practice, he has written the seminal work on Narrative Coaching. I'm delighted to see this new and expanded second edition. A well-thumbed copy should be on the desk of every professional coach and anyone interested in exploring and changing the story of their lives.

Geoff Mead, PhD

Director, Narrative Leadership Associates and
Associate Fellow, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

David gives us the inside story on Narrative Coaching and how it brings not only our stories to life but our practice as well. He shares his decades of research and coaching experience and kindly includes the reader in his own journey to better coaching. This is an inspiring and remarkably generous book. I'll be returning to it again and again. Relax, trust, and listen. Everything we need is in the stories.

Moya Sayer-Jones

Founder and story activist, Only Human, Australia

Wow—it is so good to read something about coaching with this degree of freshness and energy! It offers a genuine and helpful alternative by highlighting narrative as a key way to understand and appreciate one's patterns and life events. Whatever you are doing right now, just stop and read this book; you won't be disappointed!

Professor Bob Garvey

Faculty Head of Research, York St. John Business School, UK

This is a book for anyone who is seriously concerned with the business of personal and professional transformation. It is written with great authority—an authority grounded in many years of diligent scholarship and reflective practice.

Most importantly it tells the “story” of narrative coaching in an engaging way, and it is very accessible and practically useful. I can see our students benefiting enormously from it.

Gordon Spence, PhD
Director, Master of Business Coaching, Sydney
Business School/University of Wollongong, Australia

This book is a superb guide to narrative coaching and an important and innovative resource. It is a must-have for any coach wishing to develop new perspectives on their skills in helping clients reflect on their experience and test new stories for themselves. Narrative Coaching offers plenty of practical advice, underpinned by David’s unique and ground-breaking theory about how people develop through coaching.

Sunny Stout-Rostron, DProf
University of Stellenbosch, School of Business, South Africa

David has created a multifaceted book that offers a scholarly text on narrative coaching. . . . It is a lovely book, written as though we are walking with him on a long pilgrimage. The book encourages “listening” to familiar tales differently and being open and attentive to the moment when people seek new stories. This book will become a highly valued reference for people interested in narrative work.

Ann Whyte
Former Managing Director, Whyte & Co, Australia

Listen to the story behind the story . . . that is what I take away from David’s work. As coaches, we often get hung up on getting on with business and changing behavior. David is always reminding us to help each other learn how our stories affect us and can be realized to set free our potential.

Lew Stern, PhD
Senior Advisor to the Institute of Coaching,
Co-founder and Director, The Executive Coaching Forum

This is a deeply thoughtful yet highly practical account of narrative coaching. David Drake has made a significant contribution to the field of coaching, not just to narrative approaches. I highly recommend this book.

Professor David Lane
Professional Development Foundation and Middlesex University, UK

This book by David Drake represents a great contribution to the field. Narrative Coaching represents a powerful framework for helping clients find meaning and develop new perspectives effectively and efficiently. It integrates seamlessly with existing theoretical foundations while adding a deeper sense of humanity into the coaching conversation!

Wade Azmy
CEO, Pharos Institute (Asia Pacific)

David Drake's work with Narrative Coaching gives you a new mindset, useful frameworks and specific questions to ask yourself or your coachees in critical moments. Based on sound theory and practice, it is food for the brain and the soul. Absorb what is in this book and you will be a better leader and coach.

Carol Kauffman PhD
Founder, Institute of Coaching

David works as a scientist practitioner, and this is one of the greatest strengths of his work. His ability to navigate academic rigour and to work effectively with robust organisational cultures has produced a high impact coaching methodology that delivers change in thinking, feeling and decision making for those who experience it.

Terri Mandler
Former Group Head, Leadership & Learning
QBE Insurance Group. Pty. Ltd.

With a passion for narratives and stories that began early in life, David Drake offers an approach to coaching that integrates different theoretical positions—from psychodynamic to social constructionist—into a coherent and striking bouquet. Reflective practitioners will value this book as an inspiring and insightful source for their professional development.

Reinhart Stelter, PhD
Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Second Edition

NARRATIVE COACHING

The Definitive Guide to Bringing New Stories to Life

David B. Drake, PhD



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this second edition to my partner Bärbel, my daughter Hannah, and my dear friend, the late Ann Whyte.

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In writing the second edition of the book, I came to appreciate all over again the people who have made this journey possible. I acknowledge them here and add a few new people at the end who have played an important role in getting this edition done. I am grateful for all of them; I am a better writer, coach, and person as a result.

I learned the value of resilience and critical thinking from my late father, Bill Drake—both of which have held me in good stead. His untimely death in the middle of my doctoral studies was the impetus for creating narrative coaching. I learned that it is never too late for new stories in watching my mother, Sally (Drake) Murphy blossom later in life—and appreciated her support along the way. I learned that intelligence could be cool and that I could lead from Bob Scarola, my marvelous sixth-grade teacher. I am grateful to Caroline Tompkins for inviting my voice into the world. I learned the importance of defining one's own stories from Wayne Carpenter, a pastoral counselor at my church. I learned to see the world systemically from David Oliver, the chair of my undergraduate sociology department. My lifelong interest in the relationship between grief and growth started when Amy Coffman, a young woman with whom I worked closely in college, was killed in a car accident.

I am grateful to my uncle, James Laurie, for introducing me to Fielding and from whom I have learned about grace. I appreciate Ghost Ranch where I taught my first Shadow workshops and return to be nourished by its magical landscape. I am grateful for Fielding Graduate University—from which the second half of my life, a doctorate and narrative coaching were born. My dissertation chair, Judy Stevens-Long, was a masterful mentor from whom I learned the art of being done. My classmate Wendy Rowe is a kindred spirit and one of the most honestly astute people I know. I am grateful to Dianne Stober for rejecting my first academic paper and encouraging me to present my work in Sydney. The first challenged me to step up my game, and the second opened up the world for me. I am grateful to my core friends in Portland, Oregon—Bruce Hazen, Brian Lanahan, Carolyn McKnight, Alex

Merrin, and Niki Steckler—for their wonderful fellowship and support over the years. You are my home base.

Many of the important steps I took in developing narrative coaching were in Australia. It began at the coaching research conference at University of Sydney, where my work had its real debut. Terri Mandler helped me to see how much I had, was my first champion, and became a lifelong friend. Sandra Bannister was an early supporter who opened some marvelous doors for me. I appreciate the late Ann Whyte for our wine and cheese conversations, her advocacy, and our fierce and faithful friendship. I miss her. I will be forever grateful to the folks in my first Narrative Design Labs in Sydney—it was a raw and generative time without which narrative coaching would not be what it is now. In particular I want to acknowledge Sophie Francis for her keen insights, hard work, and persistent faith and Lucas Finch for his insatiable curiosity and invitations to play. Moya Sayer-Jones has been my muse, continually reminding me (along with Ross) of the importance of the simple things in making people feel welcome. Lastly, I bow to Leora Krowitz, my yoga angel, and to the waters of Clovelly Bay, my sanctuary, for the healing and wholeness they offered.

I am grateful for Bill Randall and the opportunities to present my first post-doctoral papers at the Narrative Matters research conferences in the Canadian Maritime Provinces. I appreciate Ian Wycherley for his friendship and our work on thresholds, Tatiana Bachkirova for our lively exchanges and both of them for providing forums for my work at Oxford-Brookes. People who aspire to great things often have friendly rivals who spur them on to be their best; Reinhard Stelter has played that role for me. I want to acknowledge him for his work on the philosophical foundations of narrative coaching and as a champion for its values-based and collaborative nature. The Four Gateways had its debut with the wonderful folks at the ANSE Summer School in Stavanger, Norway, and its spirit was captured best by the man who soulfully played his saxophone on Pulpit Rock from his heart not his head. I continue to be inspired by Donna Karlin ever since we met at an ICF conference many moons ago.

In closing, I want to acknowledge Ben Croft and the fabulous team at WBECS; I look forward to our new alliance. It has been wonderful to reconnect with Margaret Moore and Carol Kauffman as a Fellow and Thought Leader for the Institute of Coaching at Harvard—and for the utterly fabulous day at the 2016 conference. I am grateful for all that my clients, colleagues, and participants have given me and for the amazing opportunities to share my work all over the world. I am thankful for my marvelous publishing advisor and thinking partner, Janet Goldstein, and the team she assembled to bring this edition to the world. I have appreciated the faith and support of Samir Selmanovic in getting to the next stage of this work as well as the community of retreat hosts that is emerging to help take this work forward.

I offer a big hug to my daughter Hannah who finally got to see me work—and came to understand why I do what I do when she saw the difference it made for people. I continue to give my heart and soul to this work in hopes of making the world a better place for her future. I am grateful for my partner, Bärbel Weiligmann, who has brought such joy and love into my life—starting at the holy bike racks where we met—and from whom I learn daily about the power of choosing our stories. Lastly, I want to thank you for reading this book. May you have a rich and rewarding time as you soak it in, reflect on it, and put it to good use. The world needs you.

PREFACE

Have you ever had that experience of driving down the highway . . . and you suddenly realize you've not been fully conscious for the past few seconds? How is it that we can drive and yet have no recollection of how we got to where we are on the road? I think that our lives are often not too different: We find ourselves further down the road over time, but we are not quite sure how we got where we are. Narrative coaching offers people the opportunity to pause, become more aware of their stories, and make new choices. In the process they can let go of old stories that no longer serve them and develop new, more mature, stories that do. It is about awakening so that we do not fall asleep at the wheel.

My passion for stories began early in life through a love of reading. I still vividly recall the sense of anticipation I felt when the books we had ordered arrived in our elementary school classroom. The smell of fresh paper . . . the eagerness to lose myself in the plot . . . the dilemma about which one to read first. I found respite in the richness of these books and their stories—a love that would take me through thousands of books across the decades that followed. I was particularly intrigued and inspired by characters who “colored outside the lines.” In seeing the world through the lens of these characters, I became fascinated by the different ways in which people narrate their experience—and the worlds that form around those choices. Reading was central to the formation of a rich inner life that has served me to this day. I also found insights and a certain solace in these narrated worlds as I compared them with my own. This was an early introduction to the role of projection in learning and development.

My love for stories was enriched through epic tales at church and two teachers who introduced me to the marvelous world of classic literature. There were also influential mentors who helped me start to find my own voice in the process. I went on to get a degree in sociology, in which I was introduced to the novel idea (at the time) that reality and stories were socially constructed. This impressed upon me the importance of understanding the context for stories and the people in them. Next came a graduate degree in theology and

an introduction to the field of hermeneutics, the use of stories to witness and awaken, and the value of sacramental rituals. I came to appreciate the various ways in which people make sense and meaning of their lives through my study of different religions—sparking a spiritual journey that continues to this day. I was also involved in peace and justice issues, and I saw firsthand the challenges and opportunities in liberating ourselves and others from limiting social narratives.

Over the next twenty years, I supported people through transitions—as a grief educator and counselor, a rites of passage guide, a facilitator of dialogues on difficult issues, a change consultant and coach, and more. This rich background provided a strong foundation for what was to come with narrative coaching. This book traces the path it has taken since its inception in my doctoral studies in 2002. I developed it as an alternative to both narrative therapy and traditional coaching. While I draw from and greatly appreciate the work of the narrative therapy community (the late Michael White in particular), narrative coaching has evolved to the point where it is a distinct approach and a body of work in its own right.

Over the first decade, narrative coaching served as both my muse and my mantle. It challenged me to grow at many levels in order to keep up with and shape what it was becoming—for example, in opening myself up to work at deeper emotional and somatic levels. It challenged me to be more vulnerable, move more toward the unknown, and deepen my trust in my whole self. In revising the preface for this edition, I feel both grief and joy as that era comes to an end and another begins. I am proud to have established a solid place for narrative coaching (and all it stands for) in our field, grateful for what I have learned from the thousands I have worked with in this space, and keen to see how this work evolves in the years to come.

I know firsthand how powerful this work can be, as I've used it to help myself through a series of major transitions in my own life. Everything I have written here, taught to practitioners, and done with clients I have used for my own ongoing well-being and growth. Many of the most powerful applications of narrative coaching were developed in my living room overlooking Clovelly Bay near Sydney in the wake of a divorce. Out of this proverbial “dark

night of the soul,” I discovered what this work is really all about. I know firsthand that the thresholds we must cross are not for the faint of heart or the ill-prepared, but are essential for those who are serious about bringing their new story to life. Thresholds call *everything* into question, require us to walk through the doorway of unknowing, and open us in the end to more than we thought possible. I emerged from this time with a much deeper understanding of the power of this work and a commitment to develop its full potential as a resource for anyone seeking to make a significant change in themselves and/or their life.

Thresholds call *everything* into question, require us to walk through the doorway of unknowing, and open us in the end to more than we thought possible.

My journey with this book served as its own rite of passage and has done so again with this new edition. The first edition was personal, the completion of a long journey. This second edition is professional, as a resource for the next stage of this work and coaching itself. It goes deeper into attachment theory and its links to applied mindfulness, design thinking as a framework for adult development, integrative approaches to change, and transformational development theories to increase our ability to facilitate real change in real time using people’s own stories. It shows even more clearly how narrative coaching is a natural human process that is open source by design. In completing this edition, I was struck by how much I have changed even since the first edition and how much the work has matured.

Given that stories are at the core of what makes us human, I believe that narrative coaching clearly has a role to play as we lean into the challenges and opportunities of our time. It calls for more of us to provide leadership wherever it is most needed and support leadership wherever it is most present. It is about extending mindfulness beyond resources that just help us cope to develop new applications that also help people connect, create, and contribute at higher levels. For coaches it is about getting out in front more often instead of standing behind others, cheering them on. This means

that we have to do our own work so we can do the same for others. This will require simple things like diversifying our service portfolio and more demanding things like diving deeper into the development of ourselves and our skills to address the complexities of our time.

I wrote this book in the first place primarily for people who coach as their professional practice and who are ready to step more fully into themselves, the moment, and the work to be done. It was a call to reflect on your own stories and a guide on how to *be* with this work as well as *do* this work. What has shifted in the past two years is that more and more of the people in our programs are from related fields and want to incorporate what narrative coaching stands for and offers into their practice. Some have already started to use it to create new forms of practice in their field. They are part of an emerging breed of post-professional practitioners (Drake, 2011e, 2014c) who can work with people and issues in a more holistic fashion to bring about healing and resolution. In the end, there is value here for anyone who uses a narrative approach in their work. For some of you, it will affirm how you have instinctively worked for a long time and give you confidence in knowing why it works and how to take it further. For others of you, this book will be a provocative invitation to expand your beliefs about coaching and give you the confidence to let go of a lot of what you thought you needed to do as a coach.

Either way, I welcome you to this conversation and to the global community of those who are committed to helping people individually and collectively bring their new stories to life. It is an invitation to leave behind what distracts you, drains you, or no longer serves you so you can show up more fully as yourself in doing what matters most in your life and work. Sometimes this even means that “to reconstruct a self, an old self may have to be shattered. Sometimes the world-vessel must be pulverized. To discover who we are, we may have to divest ourselves of everything, go beyond the imagined limits of ourselves. We may have to leap out of the familiar, jump off a cliff, go to the very edge of the world where all the dragons live” (Metzger, 1992, p. 71). The good news is that you will find others out there in those narrative fields, and together you can engage your “dragons” in order to be

more courageous in how you live and work with people and their stories. While this book continues to offer an extraordinary and in-depth resource on developing people through coaching, this edition has been written to be more provocative in terms of its challenge to all of us to up our game for these times.

I developed narrative coaching because I believe we need more people who can go to these deeper and more difficult places within themselves and with others. We live in a time that calls each of us to do the real work of our quest and to join with others who are doing the same. This means creating more space for our full humanity; e.g., our pain *and* our suffering, our joy *and* our fulfillment. May this book spark your thinking about how you can help heal the broken narratives that divide us and create new narratives that enrich us. Listen deeply to the silence, the earth, and the hearts of others. Look unflinchingly into your own soul to see what is calling you. Engage the younger generations to see what they are trying to tell us as they prepare to take the mantle of leadership. Ask yourself what the events in your life right now are preparing you for. What do you sense is yours to do? What story do you most want to bring to life? I am heartened that you have chosen to read this book, and I look forward to hearing where it takes you.

A Guide to Reading This Book

This book is not written in a linear or mechanistic fashion as if it were an instruction manual. Instead, it is written as a layered immersion in the foundations and fundamentals of narrative coaching. It is intended to serve as the definitive text for this body of work and approach to coaching. As such, it has more academic elements than many other coaching books. This makes it valuable as a go-to resource on how people change—and it may be a bit daunting for some readers. My suggestion is to focus first on what you find most familiar and useful, and build out from there. The book is richly dense, yet speaks to a simple way of working. See if you can absorb the spirit of this work; the specifics will sink in with practice. I've added more cases and examples in this edition in order to make it easier to see how you could apply these principles and practices in your work.

You may find that reading the book feels slow at times, especially at the start. Take heart in the fact that it was designed this way as an invitation to slow down in order to have a richer experience, be in a more natural flow and gain more sustainable benefits. Give yourself plenty of time to let the material sink in and find opportunities to experiment with it. The power in narrative coaching is in how you show up to your clients more than the techniques you use when you get there. For many coaches this requires shifts in how they see themselves and their role in coaching. That is why the foundations for working this way are in the first half of the book and the tools and resources come later. The aim, as with the work itself, is to help you become more astute in *observing what is true right now* before trying to change anything.

An example of the simple power in working this way.

It will take you less than five minutes:

1. Find a place where you can be still and silent for a few minutes.
2. Name something that is bothering or concerning you.
3. Close your eyes, relax into your seat, take three deep breaths.
4. Be silent for 2 minutes, noticing your breath as it goes in and out. Observe what happens to your issue.
5. Open your eyes and reflect on what has changed about your issue.

You will notice a number of models throughout the book that look much the same. This is because each of the Narrative Coaching models is based in the same underlying applied Narrative Design framework. It is based in natural human processes of transitioning through change, learning and developing, and telling stories. Most of the models reflect the same fundamental pattern, as seen through the lens of their respective domain. Focus less on how each one works on its own, and focus more on how you can use the four phases in coaching. It is analogous to learning to dance as a couple in that it is less about memorizing steps and more about connecting with the other person and the rhythm of the music. I developed Narrative Coaching over fifteen years ago; this book contains

the foundations for this work in its original form. The field has grown over the years to include other approaches to working with stories in coaching.

Learn from what I have discovered along the way, and trust that you will bring to this path your own unique knowledge and experience. Trust yourself and your path as you read this book so that you can find your own way through the material and the practices. As you read these pages: What is stirring inside you? What is it calling you to think, feel and do? Where would you like to apply this work, and how would you like to extend and expand it? If you would like to experience this work and learn more about how to use it, visit us at www.momentinstitute.org. Until then, enjoy the book!

A Parable about a Narrative Coach

One of our Canadian colleagues, Heather Plett, wrote the following to describe her experience with narrative coaching after participating in one of my labs in Toronto. I include it here with her permission because it so beautifully captures the spirit of narrative coaching and the sense of “coming home” this work offers people. Enjoy the parable and the rest of the book.

Imagine you are a pilgrim on a long journey, gathering stories as they appear and stashing them like gems in your backpack.

Sometimes you pull the stories out, dust them off, and share them with fellow travelers. Sometimes you keep them to yourself, afraid that other travelers will find them ugly or unsavory and you will feel shame. Sometimes you roll them around in your hands, reshaping them to better fit with the other stories they share space with.

The stories in your backpack don't look like those in any other traveler's backpack. They have been shaped by the journey through which they've been carried, by the way you've used them to define yourself, and by your assumptions of how other people are judging them.

Now imagine you've been invited by a kind and supportive fellow traveler to sit down on a comfortable park bench along that journey. Your new

companion invites you to open your backpack, promising that he will be gentle with the stories inside.

You're a little reluctant at first, but the stories are getting heavy and you'd really like to be free of the weight for awhile. Your backpack hasn't been fitting very well on your back during the last few miles, and you wonder whether it might be a good idea to take some time to rearrange the things that are poking you.

Your companion is very good at making you feel comfortable and safe, and it doesn't take long for you to recognize that you trust him. Finally you sit down and take a few deep breaths. Your companion waits patiently.



Slowly you pull out a story and hold it tenderly in your hand, glancing up to see what response it will elicit. Surprisingly your companion holds no judgment in his eyes as he gazes down at the story. He simply asks you kind and energizing questions about it, helping you to define it and see it through new eyes.

Before long you're pulling more stories out of the bag and lining them up on the bench. Your companion doesn't say much, but asks just the right questions for you to know which stories are important right now. He helps

you see the patterns arising as you line up the stories. Sometimes when you shift the story and line it up with another story, it takes on a whole new shape. Sometimes a story shrinks in importance once you pull it out and expose it to the sunlight.

Through your companion's questions, you begin to see brand new things in your stories that you never saw before. There are new colors and beautiful patterns emerging. The light touches them differently, and some that looked like lumps of coal now begin to reveal the diamonds underneath. You see how they fit together, and sometimes you could even swear that you see them dance. The new shapes offer new possibilities for how you will continue on your journey. They're even helping you define yourself in a new way that feels deeply right and true.

When the conversation draws to a close, you pack your newly shaped stories back into your backpack. You brace yourself for the weight as you put it on, but now it feels lighter and fits the groove of your back in a much more natural way. It no longer feels like the heavy burden you placed on the bench when you sat down. You look at the path ahead of you, and though the rough spots aren't gone, you can see a clearer trail through it with a backpack that will offer you tools rather than burdens. You have the distinct sense that your path will be much clearer and your strides much bolder. And so you set off . . .

That companion on your journey is your narrative coach. So, have a seat on the bench, and let me tell you a story . . .

Welcome.

David

OVERVIEW

Narrative coaching is based in millennia of ancient wisdom, a century of social science research, and breakthroughs in new areas such as the neurosciences and design thinking. As a result, it offers an approach to accelerated and transformative development that is fitting for our times. Narrative coaching is unique in that its foundation is systemic, not just psychological, and it can be used and applied in a variety of contexts. To be able to work at multiple levels, narrative coaches draw on: (1) *narrative psychologies* to work with people as narrators in support of their development and performance; (2) *narrative processes* to work with the material that is narrated in support of its reconfiguration; and (3) *narrative practices* to work with the dynamics in the field and guide people across thresholds to new narratives. This is in part why my colleague Reinhard Stelter (2014a) positions narrative coaching as a “third-generation practice” in which “the coach and the coachee (or group of coachees) are dialogue partners and have a mutual relationship as reflective fellow human beings in a relationship that is characterized by varying degrees of symmetry over time” (pp. 118–119).

This book is the definitive text on narrative coaching, and it provides both the academic foundations for this work and its core elements, principles, and practices. It offers a summary of nearly twenty years of my work in founding, championing, and contributing to the growth of this methodology and the philosophy and pedagogy it represents. It has been deeply satisfying, personally and professionally, to weave together critical elements from my studies in sociology, theology, psychology, and systems theory in developing a truly integrative practice. The result is part history, part autobiography, and part professional resource. This second edition feels like the start of a new chapter, in part because it coincides with the launch of Moment Institute and our alliance with WBECS. It celebrates all that narrative coaching has been and all that it will become in the hands of the thousands of people around the world who use this work and will help it flourish even more.

This work is based in a deep respect for people more than rules for how to coach; it honors the human change process that is underway more than

imposes a structure to make something happen; and it attends to the “field” more than the formulas in coaching. In the end, narrative coaching is a mindful, experiential, and integrative approach that helps people make real change in real time using their own stories. It enables them to get to the crux of the matter, cross the next threshold in their development, and live their lives more fully as a result. It does this by inviting them to be more present to their reality and more aware of and accountable for their narrative choices. This Overview offers a definition of narrative coaching, the key theoretical influences that have shaped its formation, a comparison of narrative coaching to approaches with a similar philosophical stance, and two basic models we use in this work.

Narrative coaching is a mindful, experiential, and integrative approach that helps people make real change in real time using their own stories.

The following is an experience from my first career that serves as an example of where narrative coaching came from and what it is designed to do. The story I reference may or may not be familiar to you or speak to you, depending on your background. I myself have traveled far on my own journey since this episode took place over thirty years ago, but I am using it now for its narrative implications. My invitation to you is the same I offered to the women that day: Focus on the characters’ experience *in* the story more than the content *of* the story.

I was talking one day with a group of older, upper-middle-class women in a study group at a church about the Old Testament saga of the Israelites escaping slavery in Egypt. I was having a hard time getting the conversation going, so I asked why. They responded that, although they had heard the story many times before, they had always felt disconnected from it because they could not relate to the life of a slave as it was so far from their own. Fair enough. . . . In response, I reframed the question I was going to ask next to enable us to explore the topic from

a different perspective. Little did I know at the time that this decision that day was to become a cornerstone of both my doctoral work and narrative coaching.

I invited the women to shift their focus from the content *of* the story to the characters' experience *in* the story. Instead of talking about slaves, I asked them, "Have you ever felt *enslaved*?" With that question the group came alive. Some told stories about following their husband's career path and feeling enslaved by the assigned role of "wife." Some talked about being the only woman in their fields at university or when they started their careers—and feeling enslaved by the limitations of working in male-dominated professions (or being shut out of professions altogether). Some talked about feeling enslaved to money given the costs associated with living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Others talked about feeling enslaved within the church, their theological insights not taken seriously, since they were *just* a "women's Bible study"—and older women at that.

Through this lens, an all too familiar story came alive for them in a new way. That conversation led to a broader dialogue about their place in the church. It illustrates what can happen for people when they are invited to voice, explore, and transform their stories in a supportive environment.

Narrative coaching is grounded in this same pedagogical stance and offers a practical structure to work this way with people. It draws on Paulo Friere's notion of praxis as a dialectical process of bringing out people's story *and then* the teaching story in a liberating dialogue that fosters a new level of consciousness and action. In narrative coaching, we work in much the same way by using the coachee's own narrative material as the primary resource and catalyst for change. It transcends and includes the individualistic and psychological orientation in most coaching approaches to incorporate collective and sociological considerations. As a result, coachees develop themselves and their own stories *and* their ability to engage with their environments and larger narratives in new ways. We are stewards of a process

that offers people a safe and structured space in which they are witnessed in telling their stories, invited to experiment with new ones, and supported to embody and enact them. As the poet David Whyte observed, “Sometimes the best thing to do is to hold a kind of silent vigil beside the part of [us] that is going through the depth of a difficult transformation”. Narrative coaches focus on the human interaction and deepen the human process that is already underway. We recognize that stories do not exist as intact objects in coachees’ minds, but rather emerge in a co-creative process between a coachee and his coach (see M. M. Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Kraus, 2006) and within coachees themselves.

Getting Started

In this section, you will learn the six core principles that are at the heart of narrative coaching, one of the tools we use to illustrate how this work is done, and a basic version of the narrative coaching model you can use as a reference point before we dive into the foundations of this work. The book is intentionally designed to provide the platform first, then take you on the journey through the process and practices. While there are plenty of examples along the way, I believe it is important to know where this model came from, what it stands for in terms of people and change, and why it works before we look at how to apply it in your practice. Narrative coaching enables people to make profound changes using simple processes, but it is able to do so because of its deep roots in both ancient wisdom and academic literature. As such, the six principles are a good place to begin as they are the lifeblood of this work. They are analogous to the breath in meditation in that you can keep coming back to them again and again no matter what is unfolding in the moment as you work.

Six Core Principles

I developed six core principles that guide this work and allow practitioners to stay focused on what is happening in front of them rather than worrying about whether or not they are doing it “correctly.” Principles provide

both structure and flexibility; they allow us to stay focused on what is happening in the session, to adapt to the needs at hand, and make faster course corrections. The beauty of working from principles is that they are immediately recognizable and usable for the beginner, and also continue to add value as practitioners gain experience and deepen their understanding of the nuances of this work. They act as memorable reminders to keep us in the flow of the coaching process and the field that is constellated. These six principles emerged from an analysis of the literature upon which the work is based and deep reflection on what I and other narrative coaching practitioners were doing when we were at our best.

The six narrative coaching principles:

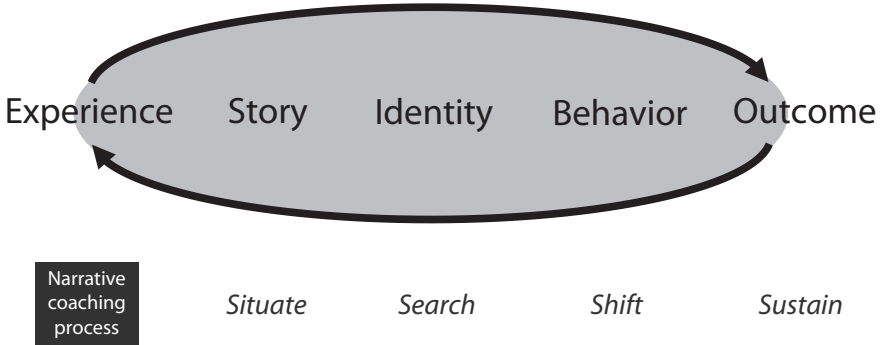
- Trust that everything you need is right in front of you.
- Be fully present to what IS without judgment.
- Speak only when you can improve on silence.
- Focus on generating experiences not explanations.
- Work directly with the narrative elements in the field.
- Stand at the threshold when a new story is emerging.

For example, I coached a practitioner who noticed that she is often lost in her head, baffled by the coachee's story, and trying to figure out what she should do. We focused on how she could use the first principle above to shift her mindset and bring herself back into the room and the moment whenever she noticed she was lost in her own thoughts. Working from principles will help you stay focused on what is happening inside you and in front of you as people are telling their stories in coaching. It gives you more freedom to be present rather than multitasking about what to do next. These principles are very much like *simple rules* (Sull & Eisenhardt, 2012) that serve as a clear guide for practice. For example, you can see it in the following practice we use to give clients and students a taste for what it is like and how it works. In both cases, they can then use it with people they coach. It provides both a basic understanding of the largely tacit internal narration process

and connects the dots that lead to the outcomes we get as a result. It also demonstrates how we can narrate any experience in new ways, contributing to our ability to make real change in real time.

TOOL

FIGURE I: REWINDING YOUR NARRATION



For both practitioners and coachees, we invite them to first reflect on a recent experience that is emblematic of the issue they are working on. We use the reflective questions in the following list to guide them, and we do so as if we are slowing a movie down so we can see it a few frames at a time. Once they have a clearer sense of what is true now, we use the rewinding questions to support them in constructing a new option for how they frame their experience, what story they tell, who they see themselves to be, what they do as a result—and what outcomes they want to attain as a result. This gives them a visceral experience of how the narrative coaching model and process work such that we can start to work at deeper levels on the issue at hand. People emerge from the process with three benefits: tangible gains in terms of the issue they originally found challenging, a new tool they can use for themselves and others, and an increased sense of agency and efficacy in being able to shift their stories. The instructions for the process are below; take some time to try it for yourself.

Reflecting on a challenging conversation or situation:

1. What did you observe? (*describe it as a reporter would*)
2. What were you telling yourself at the time? (*story*)
3. What does this say about how you see yourself? (*identity*)
4. What did you do as a result? (*behavior*)
5. What happened in the end? (*outcome*)

Rewinding the story to achieve a different outcome:

1. What would you like to have had happened? (*outcome*)
2. What could you have done differently as a result? (*behavior*)
3. What would need to shift in how you see yourself? (*identity*)
4. What could you tell yourself next time this happens? (*story*)
5. What would you observe if “this” were the case? (*experience*)

Narrative Coaching Model

The Narrative Coaching model is not like others that are designed to structure the conversation through a series of steps. In our model, the external process used by the coach mirrors the internal process of the coachee, and the process is centered around the latter, not the former. In addition, in narrative coaching we use the coachee’s own stories as the primary resource and catalyst for change—not our methodology or terminology. As a result, you can guide people through the parallel evolution of their story, the transition it is calling for, and the development it will require. Each informs and enables the other. The beauty is that any of the them can lead the way at any point, and each strengthens the others along the way.

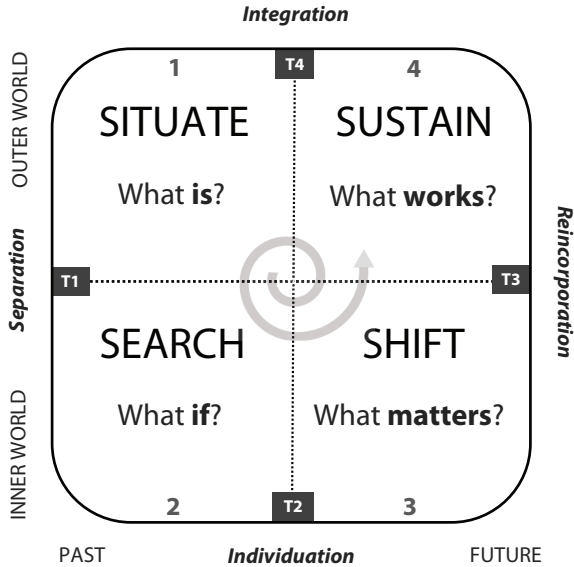
In recent years, I have incorporated more from non-dualist paradigms such as Buddhism to balance the Western frames that are dominant in coaching. This supports a parallel effort in the neurosciences to better understand the interplay between how we engage with reality and how we formulate

stories. As we shall see, this also plays out in terms of how we define and develop ourselves; e.g., in the distinction between the growth of the self (the focus often in Western approaches) and maturity of the non-self (the focus often in Eastern approaches). One result has been that suffering can now be seen as the result of our attachment to certain stories and, at the same time, they represent the ever-present doorway to our liberation. Given the complexity of the issues people face, narrative coaching is well placed with its multidisciplinary background and holistic approach. It is a layered, spiraling process that is simple *and* powerful, subtle *and* direct.

Guide people through the parallel evolution of their story, the transition it is calling for, and the development it will require.

Below is a basic version of the Narrative Coaching model you can use as a starting point as you read further. It is based in a rites of passage structure (which we will explore in depth in Chapter 6), and it incorporates the four phases (e.g., Situate), the core question for each phase as adapted from design thinking (e.g., *What is?*), the four developmental thresholds that are crossed as people move through the phases, and the spiral that indicates the circling movement through the process at whatever level is necessary to achieve the desired results. The model reflects one of the paradoxes of this work: it is based in a deep theoretical and evidential foundation yet enables practitioners to work simply and nimbly with people. In part this is because the focus is on their growth and maturation not the material or methodology as the key to success. Let's turn now to some of the theoretical influences that shaped the formation of narrative coaching and how they have enriched this work.

FIGURE 2: NARRATIVE COACHING MODEL (BASIC)



Theoretical Influences

Stories are at the core of what it means to be human, and they touch every aspect of our lives. It is no surprise then that narrative coaching has a more diverse foundation than most approaches to coaching, which enables coaches to think more systemically and holistically about what is occurring in sessions and with coachees. Some practitioners have simply adapted narrative therapy practices for a coaching context, while others like myself have developed new methods built specifically for coaching. I developed narrative coaching as its own methodology from a diverse set of sources and with its own set of practices. It also has become clear to me that narrative coaching is more than anything else a way of being, a mindset, an attitude. It is grounded theoretically and evidentially in the current literature on human learning, development, and performance—and it takes coaching in some exciting new directions. As one example, our training programs have increasingly attracted practitioners who are not coaches but work in adjacent professions and want to incorporate this work into their practice.

I hope that you draw on the bodies of work in which you have expertise (like I do with the list of five influences that follow) so that you can customize this work to meet your clients' needs and contribute to the evolution of our understanding of how to use these principles for personal and social transformation. To see how narrative coaching came to be such a rich resource, let's take a brief look at its history. The groundwork for narrative coaching can be found in my dissertation (2003) and early papers on narrative liminality (Drake, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005a) and narrative coaching as a psycho-social method (Drake, 2005b, 2007). Two others who contributed to the field early on were Reinhard Stelter (2007, 2009) in Denmark and Ho Law (2007) in the United Kingdom. As the field of coaching has evolved, so too has the depth and breadth of this approach. The result is an interdisciplinary body of work and a holistic methodology. To secure a place for it in the coaching canon, I have written a number of introductory chapters (Drake, 2008b, 2009c, 2011c, 2014b, 2016; Drake & Stelter, 2014).

I have also made the case for a narrative perspective on:

- Coaching as a post-professional practice (Drake, 2011e; Drake & Stober, 2005).
- Coaching as an evidence-based practice (Drake, 2008a, 2009a).
- Coaching across cultures (Drake, 2009b).
- Attachment theory in coaching (Drake, 2009d).
- Formulation in coaching (Drake, 2010).
- Goals and strengths in coaching (Drake, 2011b, 2012).
- Coaching supervision (Drake, 2014c).

While a narrative frame is relatively new in the fields of psychotherapy and coaching, stories have been an essential component of cultures and communities since the dawn of time. People use stories to structure their experience as events and actions in space and as memories and visions across time—in keeping with their brain's primary coordinates (see Schank, 1990) and in forming plausible plotlines that help them make sense and meaning.

Narrative coaching taps into this ancient vein and builds on the postmodern shift in our thinking from “stories as objects” to “stories in context” (Boje, 1998). This is reflected in Barbara Czarniawska’s (2004) work in which she makes the case that literary theory, the humanities, and psychology fed into what became narrative studies as part of the broader “narrative turn” in the social sciences over the past fifty years. It shifted our understanding of stories as static, isolated commodities that are *performed* to seeing stories as a dynamic, relational process that is *performed*. As a result, people can increase their capacity for intimacy (making connections) and agency (making contributions) by telling their stories in new ways (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, 1985). In so doing, they can live more authentic and fulfilling lives.

Five domains that were important in developing narrative coaching:

- *Anthropology*: Stories are embedded in the fabric of our communities and cultures and in ritualized processes—as seen in the work of pioneers such as Gregory Bateson, Joseph Campbell, Victor Turner, and Arthur van Gennep. The four phases of a rite of passage became the backbone for the Narrative Coaching model.
- *Learning and development*: Stories play a critical role in how we see ourselves and how we grow—as seen in the work of pioneers such as Paulo Freire, Tim Gallwey, William James, Roger Schank, and Lev Vygotsky. Their call to the transformative potential for learning and development is mirrored in each phase of narrative coaching.
- *Jungian psychology*: Stories have unconscious and archetypal aspects and their reconfiguration is essential for individuation—as seen in the work of pioneers such as James Hillman, James Hollis, Carl Jung, Ginette Paris, and Murray Stein. Working in third and projective spaces and with the Shadow are key to narrative coaching.
- *Mind and body*: Stories can be more fully accessed through mindful states, somatic work, and mutual regulating relationships—as seen in the work of pioneers such as John Bowlby, Louis Cozolino, Moshe Feldenkrais, Gregory Kramer, and Dan Siegel. Their call to work with the whole person had deeply informed narrative coaching.

- *Narrative studies*: Stories have structures as well as personal and collective functions—as seen in the work of pioneers such as Jerome Bruner, Dan McAdams, Robert McKee, Donald Polkinghorne, and Paul Ricoeur. The alignment of narration, transition, and individuation started here and is at the core of narrative coaching.

One of the questions I was often asked, particularly in the beginning, was, “How is this different than therapy?” As coaching psychology has taken hold and more psychotherapists include elements of coaching in their practice, this question has faded somewhat. Still, it is an important distinction as both therapeutic and coaching processes have their place and their requirements. When asked, my answer remains the same: “Done well, narrative coaching is inherently therapeutic for people. Otherwise, why bother?” Narrative coaching uses some of the same techniques as psychotherapy—such as cathartic insight, emotional healing, and issue resolution—to create a foundation for new actions. However, there is more emphasis in coaching on taking new actions toward the future than you would find in most therapeutic methodologies. It is less about analysis of the past and more about awareness of the present and activation for the future. The bottom line: work at the deepest level for which you are qualified and invited and at the appropriate level for the coachee’s readiness to learn and the issue at hand. Beyond that, I am less interested in dogmas and labels and more interested in the rigor of our own development and the vigor of the outcomes for those with whom we work.

The bottom line: work at the deepest level for which you are qualified and invited and at the appropriate level for the coachee’s readiness and the issue at hand.

Related Approaches

Narrative coaching has elements in common with other coaching and therapeutic approaches that are mindful, systemic, and “field”-focused. In this section, I will look at narrative therapy as well as two experiential approaches (family constellations and psychodrama) and two psychotherapeutic approaches (Gestalt and ACT). The purpose for doing so is to position narrative coaching, to distinguish it from other transformative development practices, and to identify unique features and grounded base.

Narrative Therapy

Michael White (see M. White, 1988, 1989, 2007; M. White & Epston, 1990) and others in the family systems therapy space led the way by advocating for the externalization of problems, the deconstruction of dominant narratives, the decentering of experts, and the contribution of “unique outcomes” to the resolution of people’s issues. They helped us see that a story is just “a story,” and the teller, sitting in the protagonist’s seat, has more options as a result (Barry, 1997). What was once a totalizing truth could now be seen as simply one of several options to choose from. This involved deconstructing and critically examining people’s up-until-then taken-for-granted understanding of life and identity by “exoticizing the familiar” and “familiarizing the exotic” (Turner, 1978) so that a new plot could be formed (M. White, 2004). As a result, people could better understand “dominant narratives” and their impact, explore new territories and possibilities, and renegotiate the relationships between identities and stories as well as between experiences and narratives. The narrative therapists lifted up individual stories as a legitimate and substantive resource in psychotherapy and championed the notion that any given narrative was just one of many potential constructions from which to choose.

I appreciated Michael White’s strong philosophical grounding and thoughtful yet playful approach to his work. We were drawn to many of the same sources in formulating our respective bodies of work, and we share a similar contextual view of identity, development, and behavior. Some key terms and insights from the narrative therapy community have been incorporated in

this book in recognition of their contributions to our understanding of how to work with people's stories in coaching. They have deeply enriched our capacity to help people liberate themselves from oppressive narratives and have been influential in developing ways to reframe the dominant narratives themselves. You can see their influence in the formation of narrative medicine with its call for a more inclusive approach to our stories about health. At the same time, I see narrative coaching as more than just narrative therapy adapted for a coaching context. It is a more integrative practice that differs in some important ways in both its underlying assumptions and its approach. For example, it shifts the focus from the implications of the past on the present *to* the implications of the present on the future (and the future on the present).

Narrative coaching is distinct from narrative therapy in that it:

- Uses mindfulness and somatic practices to address preverbal issues.
- Draws more from multiple disciplines in social sciences and beyond.
- Uses transpersonal means to access personal and collective unconscious.
- Attends to nuances of and openings for change in narrative structure.
- Focuses more on desired narratives and less on dominant narratives.
- Relies more on silence, presence, and the “field” to support change.
- Sees issues of power through a lens of emergence more than justice.
- Uses directive energies judiciously in support of outcomes.

Experiential Approaches

Narrative coaching relates well with experimental and experiential approaches such as systemic constellations and psychodrama because they are philosophies that stimulate deep change, not psychotherapies (Carnabucci & Anderson, 2012). As with narrative coaching, neither Bert Hellinger (founder of family constellation work) nor Jacob Moreno (founder of psychodrama) were concerned with matters of diagnosis. Instead, they too based their work in the primacy of the embodied here-and-now rather than the verbal abstractions of analysis and in the belief that sustained healing and

transformation need to be grounded in experience as well as insight. Lastly, all three modalities take a systemic approach to development in keeping with Moreno's observation that

the psyche is an open system, constantly influenced and shaped—or misshaped—by the interactional environment in which the human being develops. He knew that to reach this level, words were not enough, that it required action and interaction, that it is in the area “in between” people that demands our attention. (Dayton, 2005, p. xiii)

The Narrative Coaching process is similar to these and other experimental approaches, though it focuses more on the present and future and it takes a naturopathic approach more than an allopathic one. By that I mean that we are systemically working *with* our coachees not *on* them; we are increasing their ability to access their own inner resources. The process consists of the following five phases, cited here with the addition of their respective phase in narrative coaching:

- *Attunement*, which involves resonating internally with the person and accepting the person's here-and-now experience [as seen in the *Situate* phase in narrative coaching].
- *Assessment*, which involves seeking the specific issue or pattern relating to the person's distress and where it originated in past experience [and appears in present experience] [as seen in the *Search* phase].
- *Observation*, which involves offering a safe and careful replication of the . . . dysfunctional adaptation [to understand its dynamics] [as seen in the *Search* phase].
- *Intervention*, which involves a new experience that estimates a shift, release, or other expression of what has never been easy or possible to feel or express previously [as seen in the *Shift* phase].
- *Integration*, which involves incorporating new experience into the person's being and positively impacts the person's life [as seen in the *Sustain* phase] (Carnabucci & Anderson, 2012, p. 20).

Narrative coaching uses the “empty vessel” approach as does constellations in working with what is present in the field¹, and it may use assigned roles as does psychodrama, depending on the needs of the coachee. However, narrative coaching is far less produced or directed than psychodrama or constellation work and is not dependent on expert facilitation in order for it to be effective. This is evident in the fact that I have taught these principles and many of the basic practices to thousands of professionals, managers, and leaders in organizations. A large part of what makes this possible is narrative coaching’s emphasis on developing the “field” in support of transformative experiences, not on directing the process in search of transactional explanations. While there is more space for an experiential approach and a greater appetite for the theoretical foundations when I teach practitioners, one of the values of this approach is that it can be used in a variety of contexts because it is based in the natural human process of change.

Family and Systemic Constellations

Virginia Satir (1991/2006) and her ground-breaking role-playing work on “family reconstruction” and “family sculpting” can be seen as a pioneer in this space. Later, with the help of German psychiatrist Gunthard Weber, Bert Hellinger (1998) brought together existential phenomenology, family systems therapy, and elements of indigenous mysticism from his time in Africa to create family constellation work. He emphasized the role of perceptive intuition, the release of our desire to control the unknown, and the importance of moment-to-moment systemic information as the process unfolds in the “field”—all three of which are central to narrative coaching. In constellations work, representatives are investigated and moved around in relation to others who are integral to the issue in order to discern the current constellation, what needs to be resolved, and what new constellation would bring about healing and resolution. At the end, the person whose process is being done replaces her representative to sense how it feels to be part of a new constellation. I know from personal experience how powerful this can be. As with narrative coaching, this involves skills in “reading” the field and knowing what to do with what you notice.

In narrative coaching, characters are literally and figuratively repositioned in people's stories as needed, but the person being coached is active in (and the focus of) the process. In some of our practices—like with our Three Chair work—they are actually guiding the process themselves with peer and facilitator support. The emphasis is on keeping their felt experience and their narration intimately connected in the moment so that both are available for transformation. This parallel process enables people to see a situation in a new way, develop a new story about it, find a new place in it from which to act, and enhance their sense of agency and connection as they try it out. In narrative coaching we work with characters in people's stories as projections, meaning that the resolution of external issues largely involves internal processes. While there are principles that guide its core practices, narrative coaching is not guided by a sense of how things are “supposed to be” in order to achieve resolution, as is the case in Hellinger's orders of love, for example.

Psychodrama

Jacob Moreno, in partnership with his wife Zerka, felt that in giving people the stage, their life stories could emerge in a space where their memories could be reworked and transformed, and their body, mind, and relational ability could heal as a result. They saw it as a safe place and structure where people might freely test out the fears and fantasies that were close to their heart and pressed upon their inner and/or outer worlds. It was a “therapeutic space where we might meet ourselves, including the parts of ourselves that might be held out of consciousness in daily life, even though they powerfully impact and inform who we are” (Dayton, 2005, p. xxix) through their often invisible scripts and illusory logic. Moreno (2008) believed that since we learn and develop in action as we move through life, we must also unlearn and relearn in action. Narrative coaching is based in the same perspective, which is why we work intensively in the moment with what is happening and what people are experiencing. In so doing, you can bring the whole person into the process and coachees can develop more lasting anchors for their new insights and commitments.

To be able to work this way, narrative coaches tend to focus on one thing at a time—usually what is at the heart of the story and its dilemma—and on shifting narrative dynamics rather than on relieving circumstantial symptoms. Narrative coaching has other features in common with psychodrama, such as “spatial mapping,” inducing mild trance states, working at emotional and somatic levels, and putting people in touch with their own internal healer. However, there are also differences between the two approaches that are important to note. In narrative coaching, we: (1) invite peers when possible to help one another rather than rely on the expert as the orchestrator; (2) help people connect their body, emotions, and words, but generally do so in the present moment rather than searching for their origins in the past; and (3) work with key elements in coachees’ stories as they emerge rather than use pre-assigned roles. Even so, psychodrama was a forerunner to narrative coaching with its use of enacted narration.

Therapeutic Approaches

Coaches owe an enormous debt to the psychotherapists who came before them for the building blocks they developed through their writing and their practices. Narrative coaching draws from many of these early pioneers, particularly those who approached their work using systemic, holistic, and narrative frames. We identify most with those in the psychological community who focus on personal agency and accountability and who are less interested in normative labels. The following are two therapeutic approaches with which we have a special affinity in terms of their philosophical stance and methodologies.

Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy and narrative coaching are both based in a paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) in which change is seen to occur through fully contacting “what is”—the truth of one’s experience—rather than through trying to be different. As with narrative coaching, it focuses on the individual’s experience in the present moment, the environmental context in which this takes place, and the self-regulating adjustments people make as

they navigate between the two (Bluckert, 2010). It is defined by three core principles (Yontef, 1980):

- *Change Principle*: It is phenomenological in nature and focused on what is happening now rather than what happened “then”; its only goal is relational, present-centered “awareness.”
- *Process Principle*: It is based in a constructivist, existentialist position and a process of contact and withdrawal in which change happens in the crucible of the relational dialogue.
- *Holism Principle*: It locates the dyadic encounter in a field of communicative interaction that is shaped by conscious behaviors as well as unconscious projections and expectations.

People need to name the truth before they can change it.

Narrative coaching aligns well with these three principles, though it focuses more on the field and the coachee’s experience than on the coach and the coaching methodology. Both approaches focus on working existentially in the present moment with what IS—at both conscious and unconscious levels—so that people can experience and deconstruct their current patterns and be supported as they begin forming new ones. People generally need to name the truth before they can change it. Threshold moments in narrative coaching serve a similar function as Gestalt’s “safe emergencies” in which powerful affect emerges or is triggered so it can be worked through toward a new resolution rather than blindly reenacted (see Fritz S. Perls, 1992/1969; Fritz S. Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1994/1951). Unlike most other psychotherapeutic modalities, Gestalt coaches observe and share their subjective experience of their inner and outer world as part of an authentic dialogue in sessions (Bluckert, 2010). While narrative coaches actively participate in the dialogue, they are more likely to keep the attention on the narrative material and the field. If they are engaged in the reconfiguration work, it is as a mirror of the dialogue or a character in the person’s narration on behalf of their purpose.

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy(ACT)

The aim of this more recent approach is to increase a person's psychological flexibility by increasing her ability to be present, open up to the reality at hand, and do what matters. These aims align well with narrative coaching's movement from phase 1 (*Situate*) to phases 2/3 (*Search/Shift*) to phase 4 (*Sustain*). Both approaches emphasize contextual and experiential change strategies, the development of more effective repertoires more than singular solutions (Hayes, 2004), and the futility of focusing on symptom reduction. Both approaches help people recognize that "I am not my story," and realign their identity, story, and actions to achieve more of their desired results. This requires what ACT calls "the observing self," clarity about one's core values, and a commitment to act on those values. They both begin with what ACT calls "contacting the present moment," but they differ in some ways in terms of what happens thereafter. In part this is because ACT is expert-driven as a therapeutic modality, whereas narrative coaching is more collaborative and facilitative by nature.

The biggest difference stems from the "glass-is-half-empty" orientation that still lingers in much of psychotherapy as seen in Harris's (2006) article on using ACT to "embrace your demons" and the assumption that "psychological processes [and language] of a normal mind are often destructive, and create psychological suffering for us all" (p. 3). It is true that we are the source of our suffering at a number of levels and we can be destructive of ourselves and/or others. It is called being human. Narrative coaching is no stranger to dealing with challenges from our Shadow and insecure working models. However, I find it more productive to help people release their normative labels, embrace their whole self, tell the whole story, and be more accountable for and constructive with their narrative choices. We help people make room for and be present to *all* of their experience. It is less about measuring how much water is in the glass and more about inviting people to notice and drink what is there—and trust that there is more.

Other Approaches

Gregory Bateson (1972, 1982) was influential in bringing a systemic perspective to psychotherapy and inviting practitioners to think in circles rather than in lines as they approached people's issues. He recognized that problems and patterns were inseparable such that, as Eron and Lund (1996) noted, "serious symptoms could only be alleviated by changing the patterns of interactional behavior that sustained them" (p. 10). The truth in these symptoms—and the problems they are signaling—can often be discerned in the patterns in a person's stories and their relational structure (Mahony, 2003). For example: "Which elements are in the foreground or background? How are the elements in relation to each other? Where is the power situated, how is it being used, and for what purpose?" You can see these systemic principles at work in narrative coaching—e.g., in circling the tree and spiraling through the model; in cycling between the person, the stories and its characters; and in focusing on pattern recognition and sensing the field.

Help people see the connections between their somatic experience, their stories, and the systems in which they operate—and reconfigure any or all of them as need be.

The systemic orientation in narrative coaching is also reflected at the somatic level in that the four phases of the model mirror the four phases of many body-based learning and healing modalities²: (1) listening intently and following the person's somatic patterns as the storyteller until they are understood—and deep trust is gained (*Situate*); (2) allowing the body and the story to unravel the past and unveil the truth in the present (*Search*); (3) supporting emergence toward functional integration by reconfiguring the narrative material (*Shift*); and (4) nudging, redirecting, repositioning, or disrupting the system to speed change in the story and how it is lived (*Sustain*). Narrative coaching helps people see the connections between their somatic experience, their stories, and the systems in which they operate—

and reconfigure any or all of them as need be. As a result, people end up with more touch points to support their growth and more anchors for new stories in their life.

I often invite people when I am working with them to visualize the scene we are exploring as if it is in the room—and at key moments to stand beside me to look at it, and notice what is happening for them as the protagonist and in the broader story. It is often both moving and revealing for people to watch these scenes unfold as they witness themselves in action. This is made even more powerful when we also help them become more aware of what they are experiencing in their stories as the author. Narrative coaching is a spiraling process in which we invite people to (1) move between outside narrator and inside protagonist to deepen their insight into what is going on and what wants to happen; and (2) step inside their experiences to get a deeper felt-sense of their patterns *and* step outside their experiences to gain a larger perspective and experiment with new patterns.

In particular, look for any patterns that impede their inner knowing, outer sensing, or authentic expression. Coachees can more fully embody their existential sense of themselves and achieve more of what is important to them if these patterns are addressed systemically. When they do this well in narrative coaching, their “stories allow the clarity achieved in one small area to be extended to and imposed on an adjacent area that is less orderly” (Weick, 1995, p. 129). Narrative coaching enables you to work with these patterns because the methodology itself incorporates the means to develop people, new stories and resolutions to their issues. The rest of the book offers you a richness of resources you can use to put this work into practice at all three levels.

Implications for Your Practice

What I hope you will gain from reading this book:

- The philosophy and practices that underpin this work, which enables you to see the world and your work in new ways and apply it straightaway wherever you are.
- The embodied sense of what this work feels like and both cognitive and somatic resources to ground you and guide you as you work.
- The permission to let go of much of what you thought coaching was “supposed to be” so you can more easily have transformative human conversations.
- The understanding of narrative function and structure so you can listen for the subtleties of stories in terms of what is being said, not said, and wants to be said.
- The ability and language to address collective narratives, not just personal stories, in helping people make significant changes at whatever level they want to work.
- The freedom to work fluidly with people’s stories in the moment in support of their awakening and new actions.

What are your key insights?

What will you experiment with first?

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