

## Preface

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Special Issue: A Narrative Works Monograph. Listening to Stories of Courage and Moral Choice: Creating Conversations about Inclusive Care in our Schools and Communities

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The Courage and Moral Choice Project (CMPC) is introduced, as is the associated research. Stories of helping under duress were brought to various settings, most extensively to high school students with integrated teacher and curriculum support. Listening to these stories appeared to elicit increased memories of helping experiences, as well as increased sharing of personal stories by participants, if engaged in a safe and/or nurturing environment. For a number of students, the stories inspired questions of moral choice and a view of oneself as part of a community “that helps.”

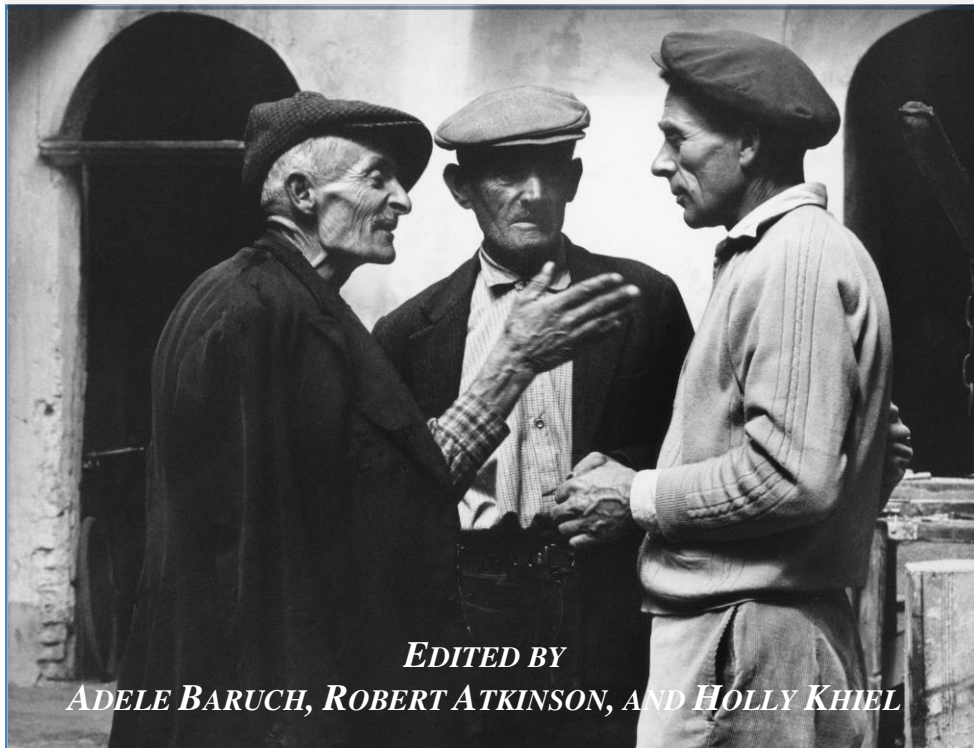


**NARRATIVE WORKS**  
*Issues, Investigations, & Interventions*

**SPECIAL ISSUE: A *NARRATIVE WORKS* MONOGRAPH**

**LISTENING TO  
STORIES OF COURAGE  
AND  
MORAL CHOICE**

**CREATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INCLUSIVE CARE  
IN OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**



*Photo:* © Clemens Kalischer.

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## Preface

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The Courage and Moral Choice Project (CMPC) is introduced, as is the associated research. Stories of helping under duress were brought to various settings, most extensively to high school students with integrated teacher and curriculum support. Listening to these stories appeared to elicit increased memories of helping experiences, as well as increased sharing of personal stories by participants, if engaged in a safe and/or nurturing environment. For a number of students, the stories inspired questions of moral choice and a view of oneself as part of a community “that helps.”

*Keywords:* identity, development, altruism, stories of helping, inclusive care

*Imaginary evil is romantic, fanciful, varied;  
real evil is dreary, monotonous, barren and tedious.  
Imaginary good is tedious; real good is always fresh, marvelous, intoxicating.*  
(Weil, 2004, pp. 143–144)

This book tells the story of a project that explores the impact of stories about moral choices on identity development and altruistic responses to suffering. The project was developed in three distinct phases over a 10-year period. Initially, it began as a relatively straightforward qualitative research project, collecting interviews from individuals who had heard firsthand stories of helping in the face of catastrophic events. In order to generate interview opportunities, the researchers organized a series of events that featured guest speakers and films that told firsthand stories of helping during the Holocaust. Many of the people who voluntarily gave interviews after those events referred the researchers to family, friends, and acquaintances who had heard stories from their friends and family about stories of rescue during the Nazi Occupation. Researchers gathered interviews from New England, Denmark, Greece, and Macedonia.

After one of the film and speaker events, an alumna from our graduate program, who was working at a mental health clinic at a public high school in a small city in Maine, came to my office. She had been struck by the engaged responses from the audience. “Our school needs these stories,” she stated emphatically. I asked whether other faculty in

her school (which we'll call the Edmunton School) would be interested in these stories and associated interviews, and she was sure that at least four or five colleagues from her school and community would be interested, and the Courage and Moral Choice Project (CMCP) was born.<sup>1</sup>

The first phase of the CMCP grew organically from my meetings with three teachers, an administrator, a local librarian, and our alumna. Through these meetings, and with the support of some small grants from the university, we brought to the high school guest speakers and films about rescue during the Holocaust, as well as speakers involved with rescue efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Our planning meetings involved lots of discussion and led to the development of a curriculum involving essay writing, art projects, and informal service projects that the teachers designed, informed both by interviews and by their substantial experience in the classroom. After the first two years of this phase of the CMCP, students, teachers, and administrators created and participated in the Life Stories Conference, a regional conference meant to bring people together to share and hear stories about moral choice. Students brought their art, essays, and experiences to several presentations at the conference.

Interviews were conducted with students, staff, and community members, and based on the highly positive responses (discussed in more detail in Chapter 1), the second phase of the CMCP was created, this time with a more pronounced structure and purpose. This second phase of the CMCP was developed in collaboration with the faculty of an alternative school, which we'll call the Forest School. This school was a good fit for our qualitative research project, because it took a flexible and responsive approach to curriculum development. I was able to secure another small grant to provide compensation to both the guest speakers and the artist-educators we hired to implement the CMCP curriculum. The teachers and I, along with substantial help from graduate assistants Lillian Harris and Maria Rios Brache and some local artist-educators, developed a three-month project for students at the Forest School. The project was kicked off by a series of guest speakers who shared stories of helping and persevering during experiences of high stress. The students who participated in the CMCP at the Forest School volunteered to participate

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<sup>1</sup> In the early stages of research, it was known as the "Moral Courage Project." It became clear as the project progressed, however, that the word "Choice" was more appropriate, as it emphasizes not merely one general character trait, but the freedom of an individual to exercise personal agency in assessing a specific challenging situation. We kept the descriptor "courage" to highlight the bravery it often takes to make the right choices.

in the project. After hearing from the guest speakers, watching the films, and engaging in activities to help them process and reflect, the students then took these stories out into their community. Additionally, they sought stories of moral choice from their local community, this time having the opportunity to conduct interviews themselves.

During this second phase of the CMCP, students were encouraged to begin articulating their own, more personal stories of helping, identifying moral choices that they had accomplished or witnessed. Artist-educators developed workshops that supported students as they transformed their experiences with these stories into songs, essays, poetry, and art. The culmination of the second phase of the CMCP was a presentation of the students' work to the school board. For our qualitative research, interviews were once again conducted with participating students and faculty after the culminating presentation. The qualitative methodology we used for our research is described in Chapter 1.

Eight months after the formal interviews, an interested community participant asked the two teachers involved, "Does this project have legs? Do you see the effects a year after it is over?" This is how the teachers responded:

There was a different kind of welcome this year. When the new students came on the first day, the students from the CMCP who were still here were all about "Welcome to our community." Some students, such as Avery,<sup>2</sup> didn't want any part of the [school] community before the project, and now she is a part of all kinds of things. And there is more comfort with expression. On the first day, we were telling stories, we put on a skit, there was singing—that never happened before. Now, it's hard to say how much of it was the CMCP, but that was definitely a part of it.

We begin this book by sharing the story of the CMCP. In Chapters 1 and 2, we describe the context out of which the CMCP emerged and our approach as we worked collaboratively to develop its two phases. We spend substantial time highlighting the content of the interviews we conducted at the Forest School, offering descriptions of the culture in the city where the school is located and the cultural context within the school itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Names of schools, students, and teachers have been changed throughout to protect confidentiality.

Chapters 3 and 4 take a deep dive into the stories that first inspired the CMCP. We examine these stories as well as the responses to the stories of adult learners. Some of the adult learners engaged with the stories through their participation in a formal lifelong learning program, and some of them participated informally by attending an evening presentation of stories and later agreeing to an interview. A third group of learners are those who experienced the sharing of stories through friends and relatives who had lived through the catastrophic events featured in their family stories. The stories shared came out of two very different historical epochs, the Holocaust and Hurricane Katrina. These two catastrophes are incomparable in scope and devastation, but comparable as historical events that engendered a very wide range of human responses, from complicity in destruction to courageous efforts to help. Because they share that quality, we felt it was worthwhile to include stories from both events.

We include summaries of the stories that were shared with participants throughout Chapters 3 and 4 in order to give context to the participants' experiences of those stories. We then summarize the themes that emerged from the participant interviews. We used a grounded theory approach, watching as themes were generated in real time as the interviews were conducted. To analyze the data, we used a hermeneutical process of comparing our understanding of the meaning of thematic material with the participants' experiences and understanding through ongoing dialogue with participants and, when possible, through followup interviews.

In Chapter 3, we share stories about community responses to helping during and after the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. The devastation of Katrina was born out of both man-made and climate-based problems, the effects of which we have witnessed in a variety of geographical contexts over the past decade. One poignant aspect of contemporary catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina is the impact that modern media and communication have on shaping the narrative of these disasters. We have almost immediate access to both stories of violence and stories of active care when disasters occur today, and we suspect that the media's narrative has some impact on our decision to join helping efforts.

Chapter 4 focuses on stories shared about active helping during the Holocaust, and also examines the interviews we conducted with survivors of the Holocaust and with individuals who grew up hearing these firsthand stories of rescue. The Holocaust was a catastrophe without

measure and the stories are meaningful reflections of our human capacities. There are stories of monstrous cruelty rooted in many of the same geographical and political regions we explore here, and we found that those circumstances appeared to give rise to stories of extraordinary, continuous, and selfless moral choices.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on personal essays written by individuals who listened to firsthand stories of helping that occurred during periods of high stress or catastrophe, each essay offering a unique perspective on the way narratives about moral choice shaped the writers. Chapter 5 consists of personal essays from individuals impacted by the Holocaust and by Hurricane Katrina. Three essays by two teachers and a student who participated in the CMCP comprise Chapter 6. The context of the helping in these stories varies widely across the geographical regions discussed in the first part of the book. There is diversity, too, in the developmental and cultural background of the essayists, ranging from a woman raised by Holocaust survivors whose parents came from very different parts of Greece, to a central Maine high school student. All of the essays in these chapters speak about the ongoing influence of stories of moral choice; we hear about both the subtle and profound ways that stories of inclusive helping have influenced learning, identity, and life choices.

In Chapter 7, Robert Atkinson, Lillian Harris, and I discuss the implications of the research detailed in the preceding chapters: the power of stories of moral choice to change lives. In the context of the CMCP, stories of helping appeared to function as a cognitive bridge that encouraged listeners to envision possibilities for compassionate action and they engendered conversations around moral choice. Additionally, we note that sharing stories of courageous helping appeared to facilitate the sharing of personal stories of helping under challenging circumstances. Shared within caring environments, stories of connection, courage, and gratitude encourage the question, “What can I do?” in the face of difficult events, a foundational question in the development of a helping identity.

Finally, Appendix A more fully describes the methodology (outlined in Chapter 1) for our analysis of the qualitative interviews; Appendix B provides out interview questions; and Appendix C presents an outline of one possible curricular approach to the development of a Courage and Moral Choice Project in other communities. To those who may try to engage elements of the curriculum, we invite and welcome your feedback. Ideally, the structures that support learning through the

use of narratives of inclusive care are a part of a living and changing process, mirroring the stories themselves.



The moral choices made by individuals often result in active care. On a conceptual level, we use the term *active care* in a manner suggested by Staub (2003), as it contrasts to passive bystanding in the face of violence. Staub (2003, 2008) observes that much that is involved in the choice to express good or evil is learned behavior. The practice of a little bit of good makes it easier to do more good, and vice versa. Furthermore, he asserts that once individuals come to know others in a substantial way it is more difficult to perpetrate or ignore evil done to those you know. Many stories of active care include elements of altruism. Some individuals in the stories we encountered who actively risked life and livelihood to help others, such as the Danish fisherman who ferried Jews to neutral Sweden during the Holocaust, were compensated. Most stories include acts of courage. While the individuals featured in these stories may not have intentionally considered morality when they made their decision to act, it is clear these are people who “chose to do the right thing” in the face of enormous stress. Regardless of motive, active caring represents effort and active help on behalf of others who are victimized by violence and/or neglect. We use *inclusive helping* as a phrase to describe active care both inside and outside of one’s identity group.

Kristen Monroe (2004, 2011) has noted that those who help under extreme stress appear to have a coherent sense of themselves as helpers. They also appear to have an inclusive sense of connection to others. As a result of her studies, Monroe has wondered about those socializing elements which appear to encourage this inclusive connection. Staub (2008) suggests that active caring on behalf of persecuted people is, by its very nature, inclusive caring. Active caring, once it is sustained (and even if it was originally initiated as an emotional and personal choice), will eventually require courage. That is especially applicable if one acts on behalf of a persecuted or denigrated population. Staub (2008) describes the contributory effects of support from like-minded others: “Inclusive caring, the extension of caring to the ‘other,’ ideally to all human beings, develops through words and images that humanize all people, through the example of models who show caring for people regardless of their group membership” (p. 534).



Analysis of our interviews suggested to us that stories of active caring reaffirm the listener's connection to "those who help." More importantly, the stories appear to engender the question, "What would I have done?" Asking this question may provide the beginning of a mental rehearsal for helping in the face of a catastrophe. There is ample evidence that mental rehearsals promote readiness (Behncke, 2004). Our interviews and essays demonstrate beyond a doubt that stories, especially as told by significant others (repeatedly), provide imaginal focus and reflection on the question of what one would do to help others in a situation of dire distress.

Stories of helping appear to frequently engender the sharing of other stories of helping. However, our research suggests that not all who hear stories of helping connect to themes in a way that compels them to helpful action. Based on our findings, those who are moved to respond appear to be moved in the following ways:

1. To greater expression. Stories of helping appear to provide a compassionate holding environment both for other stories of helping *and* stories of trauma. We speculate that stories of helping may provide enough hope to create conditions for the full expression of hurt and devastation.
2. To remember past experiences of helping and the worth of those experiences, both of which help individuals build a cognitive bridge to effective action. The possibility of an active response is concretized.
3. Toward questions about moral choice. Listeners are frequently moved to ask, "What would I have done?"
4. Toward a coherent view of oneself and others in a network of "those who help." Hearing stories of moral choice help people identify with altruistic others.

Why are some moved in these ways and some not moved? Our research only hinted at the differences. The distinction appears to revolve around whether the listener has heard the story many times from significant others. Also influential is whether the listener has developed even nascent connections to others who help. These connections—however strong or tenuous—appear to support the questions and values that emerge from the experience of inclusive helping.

Staub (2003) maintains that active caring is acquired through attention to modeling and doing. If stories inspire action, then action may

affirm a sense of identity as “one who helps others.” Monroe (2004) has noted that “identity constrains action, but acts, in turn, shape and chisel at one’s identity as we construct a life” (p. 262). Stories, inspiring action through mental rehearsal and imaginal engagement with the values and emotions associated with helping, may perform an important intermediary role toward building an identity of one who effectively and consistently helps.



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We also want to express heartfelt thanks to all of the participants who shared their experiences with stories of helping from Zakanthos, South and Central Greece, Denmark, New Orleans, and Southern Mississippi. The recounted experiences made these stories of helping under extreme duress come alive.

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This book is dedicated to my daughter Shoshana and the stories of her Rescue Rangers, who helped others in need of help, near and far.

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