

# 9

## Learning to Tell the Next Chapter

*Story Archetypes and the Negotiation and  
Mediation of New Meanings in Conflicts*



*Mediators are interested in employing strategies that will  
take some of the intensity out of the conflict and destabilize  
it to the point where alternative stories can be considered.*

—Winslade and Monk (2001, p. 6)

A student of mine, Eddie, shared his family conflict with me recently and asked me what he should do about it from where it now stands. As requested, he began to tell me the background. He had grown up in a very strict, very conservative “Christian” home in which the Republican Party was regarded as the only true Christian party. He felt that he had grown up going along with his parents’ ideals but that during college had begun to think for himself more, challenge the tenets of his family beliefs, and develop his own perspectives. The current conflict came to a head when he went home to vote during the

presidential election. He was driving to the local fire station with his dad to cast their votes when they began talking about their intentions to vote. It was at this point that his dad began to argue that Kerry wasn't a true Christian because he was Catholic, pro-choice, and for equal rights for gays and lesbians. Eddie told his dad that he thought he was a bigot and a hypocrite—and threw Bible verses at him about judging people. Things escalated to yelling, pointing, and screaming. His dad told him that his liberal professors had brainwashed him. Eddie felt chastised and ridiculed and could not understand his dad's refusal to accept his differences. The conflict made him not want to come home. He remains angry and the conflict with his dad is unresolved.

This brief sketch of their conflict suggests to me that there are several possible paths ahead for them. They can simply put the conflict on hold and avoid it. They can become estranged and allow the things that divide them to take deeper root in their respective stories of their family experience. They can agree to differ and not discuss this difficult subject but focus on the things they do have in common. They can hash it out and try to get to the bottom of their differences and see where that takes their relationships. They can try to explore what each of them most wants as a resolution to the conflict.

My guess is that Dad wants to be recognized for the good parenting he provided—something that Eddie might be willing to do. My guess is that Eddie also wants to be recognized for being a grown-up who is on his own journey into developing his identity and beliefs—something his dad might be willing to do. Would sharing these desires be a possible starting point for productive dialogue between them? Could they also ignore these common interests and focus their energies on building a story of estrangement that creates years of space between them? It happens this way quite often. Of course, both forks in the road are possible. There are many possibilities for the next chapter of their relationship, depending on what they want, what they are willing to give, and how well they communicate about and coordinate those interests. The communicative choices that each of them makes at this point will dictate the next chapter that they experience together.

This process of uncovering possibilities and developing the dialogic negotiations that make the most desirable version of the next chapter into reality is what we explore in this chapter.

*Main topics and learning goals in this chapter:*

- Archetypes as opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and mediation

- Learning to tell the next chapter through narrative mediation
- Lessons from the field of practice

❖ ARCHETYPES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
DIALOGUE, NEGOTIATION, AND MEDIATION

Managing conflict using a narrative approach is a lot like learning how to tell the next chapter of the story that you find yourself in. The main story in this chapter illustrates a moment of truth where the couple—John and April—seems to desire to move forward and create a happy relational story, but something is holding back the moment that will push their story forward.

Perhaps you've experienced a similar situation, where a relationship is stuck at a particular chapter and because of conflict, the story is stalled. Perhaps you do not know what you want the next chapter to be. Perhaps the story is poised at the point of transformation or ending—the archetypal crossroads—and you are too afraid to face the responsibility for directing the story along to the next point. Perhaps moving forward would cause you or the other person to question and perhaps change the archetypes that you have come to rely on and that have brought you this far in the story. Perhaps also the story is stalled through relational inertia, and you need a good energizing conflict to move it forward to a new understanding and mutual definition.

All of these are moments in relational conflicts when effective communication becomes crucial. One of the big challenges is in not knowing the ending of the story, which would make it easier to figure out how to get there from where you are now. Rather, most relational conflicts call for extrapolation skills: knowing how to move beyond the current configuration to create the next step in a largely unknown sequence of relational phases. To do this, insight into archetypes of character, plot, and narrative dynamics can help develop an understanding of how to move forward together to create a new chapter through the current conflict.

As you engage in your first reading of the following story, think about opportunities for creating dialogic negotiation between the conflicted couple so that they can emerge through the conflict into a new relational chapter. As you start to look into the relational world of John and April through her story, what would it take for him to become a more complete hero? Where could the story go next? How might they actively choose to get there by initiating changes to the archetypes and

characters they are playing? What does each of them most desire from the other, and what would it take for them to exchange that concession for something they desire? As you will see, April has expectations for creating a fairy-tale relationship. As their helpers in moving their story forward, think about how you would do this difficult narrative work—helping them to recognize the limitations that such an idealized archetype might involve. Follow the guidelines and related questions that follow to discover how to use narrative mediation techniques and story archetypes as the bases for understanding and managing conflicts dialogically (Winslade & Monk, 2001). I chose this story because it is eminently possible to discover a solution-based narrative to this conflict. It is full of hope and full of possibilities to be discovered by them and by you.

Having analyzed the construction of a conflict through narrative archetypes, we move on to focus on a relationship that is significantly more rescueable. The relational story you are about to examine ends well—the two are happily married, although at the time the story tells about, they faced a difficult conflict in their relationship. Between where they are in the story and the happy ending, your challenge is to interpolate—to think about—how you might help them to complete the intervening steps that connect the two states. Your challenge is, more specifically, to use narrative archetype principles and devices to imagine a communicative path between the story they want to tell at the end and the conflict they are in at the moment of conflict. As you read April's story, imagine what the two need to exchange or negotiate in order to connect the present to the future they want.

*"Still a Little Hung Over" (April)*

John and I (April) have been dating for almost 2 years. What began as a summer flirtation, sparked by more than a few drinks, has turned into a serious long-term-commitment. At first I thought that our relationship would be just physical because, although John was handsome, I wrote him off as a brainless ex-high-school football star. We had fun together and I enjoyed kissing him, but I never expected to enjoy having a conversation with him. As we evolved into a couple, I began to be attracted to John on an emotional as well as physical level. He was kind, to people and animals, and had impeccable manners. He treated me like I wanted to be treated. Instead of always mumbling that I was pretty, John told me that I was intelligent, a good writer, and a good friend. He appreciated the subtle aspects of my personality that not many others had even noticed. We had more in common than I realized at first, and I had to admit to an error in judgment. John was not the jock I had at first thought he was. He was a unique person who I loved very much.

## 230 USING STORY DYNAMICS

However, as in every fairy tale, there was an evil force working against the happiness we had created together. Although I did not notice his erratic behavior at first, after a few months of being with John, I started to see several upsetting patterns. He would bring a pint of Crown Royal with us to the movies and sip it. He would promise to meet me somewhere and then never show. I would later find him passed out in either his car or bed. He showed up at my room one morning at 8 o'clock demanding to be let in. He woke up half the girls on my hall yelling at me. When I finally let John in, he fell on my bed and passed out for 16 hours straight. One night, at a barbeque, John became enraged that I was showing his friends some pictures he found inappropriate. He yelled at me in front of a large group of our friends while denying that he had anything to drink. I found out later that he had chugged a half gallon of fire water that afternoon.

I should have broken up with John at that point, but I have always been attracted to wounded birds. I wanted to help him. I thought that if I loved him enough to make up for his Mom dying when he was 8, he would stop drinking. So I would hold him when he closed down the bar and then started to cry because he did not know where he was. I would talk to him at 4 in the morning, so drunk that his voice seemed to be struggling to be heard from underneath water. I took care of him and waited for him to realize that he was hurting both of us, only he didn't.

On Christmas Eve, John was arrested for driving while impaired. His blood alcohol was almost four times the legal limit in Virginia. This gentle guy assaulted a police officer and used his urine to paint the walls of the holding cell. He decided to enter a treatment facility and went dry a year and a half ago.

Although he is now sober, our relationship is still struggling to overcome the damage done to it while John was drinking. Although I attended counseling sessions with him, I never said what I really felt; I didn't want to make him feel guilt for hurting me. I didn't want him to know that I didn't trust him. I thought it was more important to help him get better than to heal myself.

Today, instead of the evil being the alcoholism, what has infected our relationship is more complicated. I cannot be angry with him for drinking anymore, and I can't protect him, but I don't know how to treat him. I am trying to trust him but if he is 20 minutes late, I start to worry. I envision him passed out at the wheel or salivating in front of a liquor store. This is irrational because John has an amazing will. Once he decides to do something, it gets done. I don't really think he will ever drink again, but in some sick way, a small part of me wishes he would. As miserable as our relationship was while he was drinking, I knew my role, and I had the confidence of knowing that I was a superior person.

I am fairly certain that John and I will get married. He has worked really hard to have his own self-respect. He has developed a sense of self-pride. He goes to class and makes good grades. He supported himself for a long time and has concrete goals for the future. I love the person that he is today, but I am still getting to know him. This John is not at all the person I started dating, and I am still adjusting to life with him.

### **Some Initial Questions for Understanding Plot, Character, and Motive in the Story So Far**

The following questions will help you to dig deeper into the story that we have so far for April and John. From this point, we will explore and apply the technique of narrative mediation as a way to move their story forward.

#### *Character and Motive Questions*

- What are the qualities that characterize John as a hero figure in April's story?
- The relationship evolves from a "flirtation" to a "long-term commitment." How do these archetypes carry assumptions and expectations that are important to the conflict?
- What archetypal role has April come to rely on playing in the relationship?
- How is her attraction to "wounded birds" suggestive of her archetypal role in the relationship?
- What is John's main flaw—his Achilles' heel—as the "hero" of the story, and how does his flaw connect to April's archetypal role as his lover-nurturer who does not know what to do next?
- How does this archetypal role and plot twists hold back the story from progressing?
- How does the seeming double-bound plot archetypes of loving him but not knowing how to treat or protect him offer a moment of insight into April's assumptions of her role in the relationship?
- Is there a victim in the story?

#### *Plot Questions*

- How is "filling the gap that his mother left" an important plot archetype?
- How is his "hitting rock bottom" an important plot device in terms of a turning point in the story?
- The "unspoken truth that haunts her" seems to be an important theme that April is wrestling with. How is this unspoken truth an important plot archetype in her conflict and in conflicts more generally?
- The driving force of the conflict seems to be a transition between the relationship archetypes of "magical beginning" and "the challenge of learning to live with each other." How is this learning

period positioned as an important plot device between the magical beginning and the hope to live happily ever after? How does this archetypal transition give you hope for the couple? How might it be the basis for helping them move forward in their story? What does this transition between archetypes tell you about the moral of this story? Are relationships, for April, a combination of magic and the work of learning to make it work?

- What positive attributes of John as the hero offer hope to the story?
- What details of his life and his behavior point to the possibility that they will get married and quite possibly live happily ever after?
- What controlling or even dark (“evil”) forces have led the story to the tangled point where we find it?
- We find the story poised in a complicated moment, suffused with dramatic tension and all sorts of possibilities. How does the plot get to this complicated period, and what are the possibilities that leave the story poised and full of possibility? For clues to these possibilities, think about their hopes and fears and the dangers to the relationship at this threshold to the next chapter.
- How would you summarize the main moments in the plot so far, using an archetypal “boy meets girl” storyline as your guide? The story begins with “girl meets boy”; what are the main plot moves from there until the end of the story? How does this plot structure rely on specific qualities and forces inside and outside the characters to move the story through this storyline?

#### *Questions for Moving the Plot Forward*

- What would have to happen to those forces, whether to replace them or defeat them, so that both of the main characters and the plot can move forward?
- What is the moral of the story so far, and how might the protagonists question or change that moral or central theme that the story is organized around?
- What are some alternative ways that this couple might talk about and think about the characters and plot structure of their relational story?
- What redemptive turn can you imagine that might move them, and their story, forward? Look closely at April’s description of what is and what was the source of “evil” in their story that brought them to this turning point.

- What would it take to reach this redemptive turn or even a much smaller plot development that might help them to achieve their next chapter?

Use the insights gained through the foregoing questions to imagine how you might help this couple move their relationship forward. To do this, follow Winslade and Monk's (2001) technique of narrative mediation. To guide you in your mediation work with this couple, remember that they did get married and are doing very well together, so they did discover a way forward with their story. You now have to imagine how they might have done that through strategic and ethical communication.

#### ❖ LEARNING TO TELL THE NEXT CHAPTER THROUGH NARRATIVE MEDIATION

It is important to recognize some of the main assumptions about the narrative paradigm and specifically about narrative approaches to mediation as we begin to outline such an approach to moving April and John's story along. First, stories ought to be regarded as constitutive of the reality of a conflict (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 3). We have to believe that *the story shapes and is partly shaped by the conflict experience* rather than simply functioning to report a given reality or truth. This is a key assumption because we are about to develop a process by which April and John can reshape their story. We have to believe that the reshaping of the story will be reflected in the lived reality of their relationship. Looked at another way, there is little point in working at developing the story if the reality of the relationship does not parallel the narrative changes.

Second, and linked to the first, is the idea that *stories generated to mediate conflicts do not necessarily have to be completely true*. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that stories often blur the lines between fact and fiction, between literary texts and lived social and conversational discourse. As Langellier (1989) aptly puts it, stories are boundary phenomena—they blur the lines between fact and fiction. If we accept this, we are free to think creatively about stories. We can think of stories as powerful devices that we can use to evoke possibilities for people in conflicts and that might help generate better stories of the future because they energize and create direction and flow in a conflict.



Third, it is important to begin the process of mediating a conflict using a narrative approach with the understanding that you should *work from the stories that represent the lived experience of the people in the conflict*. In order for people to buy into a narrative process in which they are rebuilding or redirecting the story of their relationship, they would naturally want to start with their current story as a representation of their viewpoints and places in the conflict. Recognize also that as the mediator, you are helping create a third narrative—a three-cornered narrative, as was discussed earlier. Given the first two assumptions, there are responsibilities associated with helping to create a new story that then becomes reality for the participants in some senses. The quality of your advice and leadership in the process will have a direct impact on the formation of the next chapter of their story and, therefore, perhaps the next chapter of their relationship.

The main task for you as mediator of this conflict is to help the couple open up room in their story for alternatives and for a new direction for the story as a result. Within the story so far, and the characterization of the people in it, are judgments and accusations and depictions of people that create “totalizing descriptions” (Langellier, 1989, p. 5). *Totalizing descriptions* occur when the archetypes used to tell the story limit or close down opportunities to expand or change it. Totalizing descriptions are often seen in connection to the moral of the story when the conflict is portrayed as an overly simple or obvious case of something. They are also seen in connection to the way that characters are depicted, particularly in terms of double binds and enemy relationships, when people are seen as simplistic archetypes. Think back to Matt’s story of his relationship with his uncle, and you will see very clear totalizing descriptions of his uncle and their relationship. The totalizing descriptions in John and April’s story are perhaps more subtle and less obviously judgmental and accusatory. Their relationship is much more full of hope than Matt’s, I think. However, if you dig into the plot, moral, and archetypes of character, you may find some opportunities to help John and April question the underlying judgments, assumptions, depictions of characters and forces, and even perhaps accusations. Use the following questions to help you to develop your own approach to opening up space in their relatively tightly woven story so far.

- How would you try to create narrative space in their conflict stories—particularly hers, as that is the one that we have? What questions and topics would you prepare for them, to achieve this opening of dialogic space?

- What assumptions, judgments, accusations, and depictions would you help them to question together, and how might this discussion help them exchange important demands and concessions as they negotiate?
- Would you characterize any of April's account as containing totalizing descriptions, and if so, how would you get them to see that these limit the story?
- How might questioning these narrative archetypes lead to an opening of the story to build on the "learning to live together" plot archetype?

### *Strategies for Opening Up Discursive Space*

To help you open up discursive space within their story, Winslade and Monk (2001) offer several important mediation strategies. First, they illustrate the importance of *building trust* in the mediation process and in the mediator. Your job as mediators is partly to destabilize and question the story so far through helping April and John to see the limitations of their representational archetypes. This can be a threatening process unless you and the process you are managing are trusted. You will have to make sure the participants clearly see that you understand where they are in their relationship and in their conflict without appearing to take sides. Fairness and impartiality are important connectors to trust. As soon as you start to get people to question their stories at a deep thematic level, they will often become defensive and will, initially at least, prefer to find ways to reinforce their senses of injustice, betrayal, victimization, or mistreatment. Respectful listening is a key communication skill. You must convey to the participants that you take their story of the conflict seriously and that you are simply trying to help them discover additional or alternative story lines that will benefit them.

- It seems that the archetypes of "magical meeting" and "living happily ever after" have already broken down for this couple. How might you help them more fully destabilize the story—separately or together—in such a way that they trust you?
- Are there ways that either or both April and John might become defensive as you encourage them to question their archetypes in the story?
- I don't sense much in the way of betrayal or injustice in April's story, but do you think John might experience some of this when he finds out she does not fully trust him?

- How would you make sure you listen to each side respectfully and fairly as you move into these somewhat difficult conversations about secret fears and unspoken truths?

Second, Winslade and Monk (2001) show you how to *develop externalizing conversations*. This powerful technique involves getting the participants to talk about the conflict less as something that comes from within themselves and more from the context of their relational domain. Simply, you need to get the couple to talk about the conflict as a story that exists outside of them that can be told, talked about, and questioned as if they were not part of it, as something that is external to them. Have them imagine that their conflict is a movie that they are watching together or as something that they are observing as third parties to the story. This will tend to neutralize the intense energy of the conflict and will help them to step outside of their story and look back on the archetypes they have relied on to construct their conflict story so far. These archetypes are particularly useful to analyze, as differences in telling the story can help to focus the talk and ideas for change in that story. Changing characterization, plot, and so on is one way to do this. You might have the couple play with changing archetypes in the story and imagining how the story would change as a result of those choices. This gets them in the mode of focusing on the story and how it might be changed and away from any blame or other totalizing and personalizing or internalizing aspects of the story so far. Of course, you must also be sensitive to the fact that this *is* their story, and they will also need to talk about it as something deeply personal and true for them.

- How would you briefly paraphrase the story for them so that they can see it as an externalized account that they can step away from and look at as a story?
- In what key ways might you expect their stories to be similar and different if they were told as if about someone else or from a movie script?
- What central archetypes in April's story would you have them both play imaginatively to help them see more possibilities?
- Might there be any issues of blame that you would have to work with in this conflict? Think of self-blame as a possible issue for John. April is careful to blame an external evil force. Is he likely to do the same? Might he blame her for not communicating her fears to him more freely?

Third, Winslade and Monk (2001) show you how to help the couple *map the effects of the conflict*. This process involves getting the participants to enrich the archetypes of the story by expanding their description of the historical context and evolution of the conflict they are storying for you. This generates a richer description of the understandings that are the backdrop to the meaning of the conflict for each of them and also provides you all with insight into the archetypes they have drawn on to construct their story. An important aspect of filling in the meaningful backdrop has to do with exploring the patterns and rhythms of the conflict as they manifest in their current account. Going back into archetypes used and abused in previous relationships or in their parental marriage relationships might offer insight into the current crossroads moment they face, for example. Also, exploring patterns of escalation, avoidance, build up, displacement into other aspects of their relationship, and so on can be valuable for the mediator and can lead to deep *aha* moments for the couple.

It is crucial to get the couple to talk about the effects of the conflict, how it affects them and their emotions and sense of belonging in the relationship. It is also important to get them to discuss the effects of the conflict on others—family members, for example. Knowing where the conflict comes from and how the backdrop plays a role in shaping the current conflict can be an important step in externalizing the conflict and talking about it as part of an ongoing set of patterns or cycles that can be questioned and possibly changed.

- How would you get April and John to talk about this conflict in terms of more historically grounded experiences and conflicts in their families and prior relationships?
- How would you get them to talk about their own relationship as the context in which this particular backdrop makes fuller sense? Their relationship is portrayed through an “evolutionary” archetype by her. What aspects of their relationship would you question them about to see how this conflict relates to any relevant patterns or cycles in their relationship?
- How would you think they would describe the effects of this conflict on themselves and their relationship? How do you think that each other’s stories would be a surprise for the other person?
- How might they describe the effects of the conflict on other people around them? Would their close friends be surprised that they have this conflict?

Fourth is the *deconstruction of the dominant story lines and archetypes* and their effects on the constitution and maintenance of the conflict. Winslade and Monk (2001) state that “cultural norms invoke particular patterns or styles of relating that are enacted in particular ways” (p. 14). It is important to help the conflict participants deconstruct the cultural norms and expectations of roles, identities, and choices that are implied by the archetypes they use to construct their stories. The patterns or styles of relating have ideological and cultural foundations that can be revealing for the participants to examine. These ideological dimensions of conflict stories are particularly salient in terms of understanding culturally based prescriptions of gender roles, family roles, relationship expectations, double-bound relationships, and so on that form the foundation for how the story is constructed. Dialogue can focus on explicating the constraints and limits that such expectations imply.

Dialogue can also be focused toward imagining directions that the story might take if certain expectations were lifted or suspended. In dialogue, there is the magical possibility of imagining options that are somehow never dreamed up in the conflict itself and yet might provide the direction and energy that the conflict needs to move to the next—hopefully coauthored—chapter. Linked to the practice of explicating the cultural context is the key dialogic skill of being able to name and problematize the dominant themes and discourses that underpin the story. For example, if the story is one of a “flawed hero and a nurturing princess who needs the flaw but wants the hero” as we might characterize John and April’s story, then the naming provides a point at which they can explore those themes and how they structure the meaning of the conflict, especially if the themes are agreed upon by the participants. Perhaps they might discover a double-bound relationship between the two characters. Last, this deconstructive approach to archetypes ought to lead to *deconstructive conversations* (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 16). These can take place separately and then jointly, and the material generated in separate caucus meetings can be used as the basis for a joint deconstructive dialogue. The purpose of the deconstructive conversation is a deeper questioning of the implications and effects of the dominant themes and related archetypes of the conflict story. You might ask how the dominant themes make each of the participants feel, what obligations and entitlements the themes set in place, how the themes might burden and limit them and their relationship, and so on. You are likely to delve deep enough to stimulate reflective insight by the participants into themselves as well as the basis of their relational conflict with this type of dialogue. This can be the basis of real insight, understanding, and progress.

- Looking back on your answers to the initial questions about archetypes, how might you carefully challenge April, and perhaps John, to think about the cultural norms and expectations that are embodied in the archetypes of their story?
- What ideological issues of roles and expectations would you want them to explore through dialogue together?
- What limits and constraints do you think you might be able to get them to discuss if you approached this issue carefully?
- What possibilities for the future would you have them imagine, if you could?
- How do you think they would name the central archetypes of the story, and how might this help them to deconstruct the double-bound relationship of April wanting happiness together but desiring John to remain flawed?

Fifth, deconstruction ought to lead to reconstruction of the conflict, and most important in terms of moving the story forward, you should be able to help the couple to *develop shared meanings* about the conflict and its possible solutions and to generate possible future directions in their story-relationship. One way to start this momentum is to begin discussing what they would like for their relationship as an ideal. They may share a lot of this ideal, and this may form a good basis for negotiation between them. This shifts the dialogue toward questions of how to achieve that forward direction. The mediator can also explore moments in the relationship when the conflict was not dominant or aspects of the relationship that are not marked by conflict. This also shifts the frame to the positive aspects of the relationship and to areas that might stimulate “we-centered” talk.

Another way to develop shared meaning is to expand the number of voices in the dialogue. For John and April, this might not be particularly important, but in cases of more family-centered conflicts, other people may be able to enrich the dialogue and help deconstruct the archetypes in the story. It is important to start moving toward consensus, if this is a realistic outcome of the dialogue. This involves creating both a new direction in the story and a new set of corresponding agreements over the things that need to change in tangible behavior to make the lived reality match the story. Moments when the tone of the talk turns lighter often indicate this emerging consensus as well as when you can get the participants to tell each other what they appreciate and what they are willing to do to move the story forward. Shifts in the dominant themes of the story and mutual characterizations as archetypes also can indicate a move toward a new and preferred story. Once

a preferred story emerges, it is important to thicken the plot and acknowledge that the archetypes have changed. Thickening the plot occurs when you get the participants to articulate changes they are willing to make to keep the conflict resolved and to imagine the future of the relationship with the conflict managed. You can also ask “unique account questions” (p. 26), which are designed to get the couple to reflect on how they were able to agree and create their new, more closely shared account of the possibilities for the future. Unique possibility questions also help to get the couple to reflect on good habits of communication and conflict that they are agreeing to put in place as well as the opportunities that such good habits might encourage in their life.

- Do you think April and John are both likely to work consistently toward the goal that they have for their relationship—to learn to live happily ever after?
- What questions would you get them to consider in terms of how they might start building the next chapter of their relationship story?
- They are likely to talk freely in terms of “we,” but are there moments and times in their relationship outside of this conflict that you would get them to talk about so that they generate we-centered talk?
- As you tease apart the assumptions and effects of the archetypes that have to do with wanting to live happily ever after and also secretly fearing and needing his flaw, what additional or preferred story line would you expect to emerge from the dialogue?
- What new agreements in terms of communication and conflict would you like to see them develop?

There are a lot of questions posed for you to work with and a lot of variables to consider in any mediation process. If you carefully consider the possibilities, it is almost magical to imagine how narrative archetypes can be used to find new meanings.

❖ LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF PRACTICE:  
AN EXERCISE IN CREATIVE SCRIPTING

The family story that follows might be considerably more difficult to figure out in terms of what the next chapter should or even could be. In complex conflicts with long histories, multiple issues, and several



participants, it sometimes helps to play with ideas about what the next chapter *could* be. The key to effective mediation and negotiation is to work from the viewpoint of *possibility*. Imagine you are helping them to write a movie script, and you are trying to work with several possible endings so that the story finishes on a note that you are trying to achieve. To brainstorm these possibilities, carefully read through the story as it has evolved so far for clues about what each person most wants from the conflict, what each seems not to want, what each might be willing to concede or give to make the conflict move forward, and how each person's emotional connection to the conflict and personality might impact his or her behavior in the next phase. Follow the creative scripting questions and directions that follow. Annie provides some useful background; then she captures the essence of the conflict in a poem. Your job is to play with possibilities so that you imagine a next chapter in which the story evolves into one where the best possible solution is achieved for the most number of people. Not necessarily a happy-ever-after ending, but as good an ending as might be possible given the complexity of the relationships of the people.

*"A Happy Family Torn Apart" (Annie)*

(Background to the story)

My parents got married in 1980. My dad played on a traveling softball team that competed in tournaments all over the South. My mom also loved to play softball, so this was a common interest that they could share. In the long run, it would be a huge issue that would ultimately play a part in my mom's "baggage" with my dad. My mom had a miscarriage in 1982, and I was born in 1983. I grew up thinking I was the luckiest kid on earth. My parents were still married (unlike the parents of most of my friends), we went to church, did stuff together, and were always going on family vacations. I thought that they had the perfect relationship. I never saw or heard them argue. It wasn't until I was a senior in high school that I learned that their relationship wasn't so picture perfect. By 2002, I had seen a significant change in my parents' relationship, and things slowly got worse.

No child wants to believe that their parents are having problems, especially after 22 years of marriage. By the end of 2003, my mom couldn't handle or hide her unhappiness anymore. From January 2004 to April 2004, I don't think my parents ever had a real conversation. They never showed affection to each other, and the words, "I love you" became automatic reactions rather than a true feeling.

Everything came to a head one weekend when my dad went away and didn't call. It was at this time that my mom made the decision to leave. She stayed for a couple more weeks—just long enough to find a place to stay and discuss what was going on with my brother and me. I was so mad at her. She was destroying my family and hurting my father. I was so ashamed of what people were going to think



## 242 USING STORY DYNAMICS

of my family. People were always complimenting me on how happy my parents looked, and it had to be a show that whole time. The anger I felt toward her slowly changed to understanding when I learned her reasoning. A lot of things had gone on in their relationship that I didn't know about. My parents never truly talked about what was happening to their relationship. My mom moved out, and it has been a year now. They still don't communicate effectively, and I can see those patterns in myself and my brother. The following poem is a journey through my parents' relationship and the conflict which led to their separation and to where we are now. Currently I live with my mom, and my brother lives with my dad. My ideas on what "family" means have definitely changed. My relationship with my mom is very strong, but I struggle daily to have a good relationship with my dad.

### A Happy Family Torn Apart

A man and a woman with two separate lives  
 Come together in marriage, she made the perfect wife  
 After toil and strife their first miracle arrived  
 A bundle of joy at the perfect time—  
 was what they needed to make everything alright  
 Four years passed and they were blessed again  
 With a bouncing boy with blue eyes and a perfect grin  
 Everything was great, a happy family of four—  
 Surrounded by love, but was there more?  
 The kids grew up, the couple grew apart  
 And with the blink of an eye they had a change of heart  
 The girl went to college and moved away  
 The boy went to high school—  
 Did this add to their dismay?  
 Mom and dad started arguing over the smallest of things  
 Who was to blame? Who brought the shame?  
 Dad went away, the whole time he didn't call  
 She needed answers but there were no promises at all  
 What would happen to this family of four—  
 that was surrounded by love but needed more?  
 Mom and dad had problems that they could not resolve  
 But what about the children, they were very much involved?  
 What would happen next was anyone's guess  
 Mom moved out; she thought it was best  
 Dad begged her to stay—  
 She knew in her heart that she had to get away  
 She had so much hurt that had built up for years  
 It was buried inside of her bursting to appear  
 Who would live with mom and who would live with dad?  
 No matter what was done, someone would be mad  
 The girl was daddy's princess, the boy the apple of mom's eye

A decision had to be made—  
But who would comply?  
And here is where we are now a year has passed  
Still a family torn apart—So many questions to be asked  
Holidays and birthdays are filled with confusion  
Will it get easier or is it just an illusion?  
We went from everything being great—a happy family of four  
That was surrounded by love—to searching for something much more

### Exercise 1: Imagining the Possibilities for the Next Chapter

- a. Best-case scenario:
- (i) Go through the poem and list all of the issues that seem to be part of making this conflict as divisive and complex as it is. These issues can become elements of the story that you can play with in creative ways, and they can become the very things that can be negotiated. For example, in the next-to-last stanza, the family is a year into their separation, and they still have so many questions to be asked. So the issue of “unasked and unanswered questions” is one that you can imagine progress on. What if they actually sat together and asked those questions; what direction might the conflict go in? Another example might be the issue of “built up hurt” that has accumulated over many years. Imagine that Annie’s parents were able to work on this issue; where might that take them? Another issue might be that of “repeating patterns” in that Annie sees elements of her mother and father’s approach to conflict in herself and her brother. How might her parents’ negotiations have an impact on Annie’s and her brother’s side of the story in terms of their approach to conflict in their own intimate relationships? Of course, these ideas may not be real, but the point is to get in the habit of seeing conflicts as evolving stories that can be partly, at least, shaped by our choices and our negotiations.
  - (ii) On each of the issues you explicate from the story, try to imagine positive progress on that issue. What would it take to achieve that progress, and how might it impact the plot of the story and the relationship of the characters?
  - (iii) Develop a short outline of the next chapter of their family relationship—say, a year into the future—based on them achieving significant progress on the key issues that currently divide them.

## 244 USING STORY DYNAMICS

- b. Worst-case scenario:
- (i) For each of the issues you have explicated for the first part of the exercise, imagine what would make the conflict stay this divisive and even perhaps get worse.
  - (ii) What impact on the next chapter would such a worsening create in terms of each family member's experience of the conflict?
  - (iii) Develop a summary of the next chapter as it might look if you imagined the worst-case scenario for each issue playing out in their story.

**Exercise 2: Negotiating to Make That Next Chapter a Reality**

Realistically, if this family went to mediation, they might achieve a set of agreements and resolutions to the different issues in the conflict that would be partly based on concessions made on issues that are important to one or more of the others. A solution would likely also be based on desired demands—things that another has conceded. The probability is that the final solution would be somewhere between the best case and worst case for each of the people in the conflict as you have just imagined them. Your final task is to think about ways that you might help them negotiate a solution that maximizes the desired goals and needs of everyone in the conflict. Annie says at the end of the poem that they are searching for something more. Our interest is in helping them look for something that actually helps make them happy. The following steps will help you work on this difficult but challenging task:

- Examine the conflict story for those demands and concessions that each party would value highly.
- Map out a series of dialogue questions around these possible concessions and demands that might move the conflict in the most productive direction possible.
- Carefully consider the principles and guidelines of narrative mediation and outline for yourself how these would guide you if you were actually mediating this conflict.

**❖ CONCLUSION**

Becoming conscious of the narrative form of our experiences can be a very empowering moment. Of course, we cannot always simply decide what the future will be. There are variables or forces out of our control,

some of which are not even conscious. However, taking the time to explore one's own story of a conflict, allowing it to be open to the existence of other perhaps competing stories, and working with others to negotiate new directions for the stories of their relationships is at the heart of our goals in this chapter. Hopefully you have become more aware of how to listen to your stories and those of others for ways that both limit and offer new possibilities. Hopefully, also, you will become more aware of the choices you make and those that you allow others to make as you share the co-construction of the next chapters in your relational stories. Even if the plot line for the next chapter might be difficult to develop, as it might be in Annie's family, approaching its construction with the spirit of dialogic negotiation will likely help you find the story that works for all involved.