



# Healing and Meaning Making Through Storytelling and Poetry

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## Abstract

The article highlights the way storytelling and poetry can heal a worried mind and make sense of life events. Three main focuses will be presented and discussed. First is the nature and quality of storytelling and how it relates to meaning making and life events. Second is the healing power and freedom of the words used in poetry. Third is storytelling and poetry as imagination and everyday experiences. The relationship between meaning making and storytelling is something neither determined by innate biological drives nor solely created in the individual mind. To speak of meaning making in first-person narratives, one must include the concepts of culture, politics, history, and living in the world with others. By weaving concepts from the field of art, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, the manuscript shows how storytelling and poetry deal with experiences and emotions that affect our understanding of life events. First-person narratives guide us back to people's everyday experiences and let us understand human experiences and meaning making in the way that they are seamlessly lived. Meaning making and storytelling are universal cultural activities that we need to understand to communicate and understand oneself and others.

**Keywords** Meaning making · Words · Storytelling · Freedom · Experiences · Culture · Ethics

Through storytelling and poetry, we make sense of life events. In greater extent than medical concepts, words connected to a person's story or poetry can tell us something important about this specific person's life events and how we should understand and deal with it. For mental healthcare providers working with people who have lost the meaning of life, storytelling and poetry can be an important source of healing. Three main focuses will be presented and discussed. First is the nature and quality of storytelling and how it relates to meaning making and life events. Second is the healing power and freedom of the words used in poetry. Third is storytelling and poetry as imagination and everyday experiences.

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Living a meaningful life depends on understanding oneself and others and the world around us. The concepts “meaning” and “meaningful” refer to the existential understanding of meaning and are often expressed as hope or longing, forming motivation forces that connect individuals to overall meaning in life (Knizek et al., 2021; Mattingly, 1998). When the understanding of others and the understanding of our environment suddenly disappear and become meaningless and full of misunderstandings, our life becomes unsecure and hard to deal with. When individuals experience limit situations, such as illness, loss, or some health-related condition, having meaning and hope is crucial, as this makes it possible to cope, adapt, or manage severe and dramatic situations and changes (Knizek et al., 2021; Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2021; Park, 2010). When one in today’s mental healthcare services treats people who have lost sight of the meaning of life, it is normally not through a person’s language and subjective experience, but through medical concepts, scientific tests, and evidence-based knowledge (Engebretsen & Baker, 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2023; Joranger, 2015; Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013; Smedslund, 1988), that is, concepts and knowledge generated by standardized tests and treatment methods. Inversely, proportional to evidence-based knowledge and scientific tests of the human mind, it seems that the mental healthcare providers’ ability to explaining human experiences and meaning making as it is lived and felt has been weakened. Results suggest that theory on meaning and meaning making has developed apace, but empirical research has failed to keep up with these developments, creating a significant gap between the rich but abstract theories and empirical tests of them (Park, 2010). When the mental healthcare providers lack words and approaches that can explain human life as it is lived and experienced, they become alienated and external to the patient’s inner world of experience and meaning making. The feeling of living a meaningful life relates to mental health and our ability to make meaning out of life events (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2021). Meaning making and mental health are crucial for wellbeing and our ability to cope with stress of life and to function in a broader society. According to WHO (2022),

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development.

To improve people’s mental well-being, one must understand the way people make meaning out of life event and how they deal with stress and illness. A way into a person’s inner world of meaning making and experiences is through a person’s language and words, such as they are expressed in, e.g., storytelling and poetry. The way people express themselves through stories and poetry conveys a great deal of information about their state of mind, their culture, their audience, and their situation (Losada & Crestani, 2016; Pennebaker et al., 2003). We sense if the speaker or writer is emotionally close or distant, thoughtful, or shallow and possibly extraverted, neurotic, or open to new experience. Several studies of first-person narratives show that the words people use to make sense of themselves, others, and the world are indicative of their psychological state of mind and their efforts to make meaning out of life events (Bernard et al., 2016; Fineberg et al., 2016). Depressive emotions and the experience of meaninglessness are found to be associated with distinctive linguistic patterns (Bernard et al., 2016; Fineberg et al., 2016; Runco, 1998).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud ([1900]2010) highlighted the connection between meaning making and first-person narratives. He believed among other things that words which unexpected and unintended dropped out of the mouth were connected to deeper motives, feelings, and drives. Freud called this phenomenon “slip of the tongue.” Later on, he connected this first-person phenomenon to culture, norms, and sanctions (Freud, 1972). To Freud, the reciprocal and often frictional connection between a person’s first-person narrative and its culture could lead to deep depression or anxiety if it were a clash between the desire for individuality and the expectations of society and family.

As humans, in order to make sense of life events, we always pursue a story or a first-person narrative logic (Fisher, 1987). We interpret and evaluate new stories against older stories acquired through experience. We search new accounts for their faithfulness to what we know, or think we know, and for their internal and external coherence. Later, according to Fisher (1987), we learn more sophisticated criteria and standard for assessing a story’s fidelity and coherence, but constructing, interpreting, and evaluating discourse as story remains our primary, innate, species-specific logic.

Because telling stories is the way humans make sense of oneself and life, storytelling in everyday speech is as much around us as the air we breathe, although we often take its casual forms so much for granted that we are scarcely aware of them. It represents the principle of intentional worlds that nothing real “just is.” Instead, realities in storytelling and poetry are the product of the way things get re-presented, embedded, implemented, and reacted to in various everyday life contexts. To say what something is, by telling a story or writing poetry, is to describe its origination, “once upon a time,” and its density; its aim, purpose, or function, and to comprehend its status, in the here and now, as part of a longer story of strivings, achievements, obstacles, growth, adaptations, failures, dormancy, or never-ending cyclical return.

## The Nature and Quality of Storytelling

To understand the quality of storytelling and the meaning that lies behind it, one must understand the nature of a personal story, that is, a first-person narration, what it is, how it differs from other forms of discourse and other modes or organizing experience, what function it may serve, and why it has such a grip on the human imagination. A personal story can perhaps best be understood through its inherent *order or structure* (Bruner, 1990). It is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human being as characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not have a life of meaning of their own. Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence, its plot or fabula.

According to Bruner (1990, pp. 43–44), the act of grasping the meaning of a first-person narration is a dual one. The interpreter, be it the therapist or another person, must grasp the narrative’s configuring plot to make sense of its constituents, which he must relate to that plot. But the plot configuration must itself be extracted from the succession of events. Second, it can be “real” or “imaginary” without loss of its power as a meaningful story. The sense and the reference of story bear an anomalous relationship to each other. The sequence of its sentences rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences is what determines its overall configuration or plot. A personal story is specialized in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary. In this sense, it has the power to negotiate

meaning. It is an important tool for people experiencing exceptional things or things that cannot be explained by beforehand defined concepts.

### The Impossible Logic

To Bruner (1990) then, first-person stories achieve their meanings *by explication deviations* from the ordinary in a comprehensible form, by providing the “impossible logic.” When you encounter something you do not understand, that is, an exception to the ordinary, and ask somebody what is happening, the person you ask will virtually always tell a story that contains reason or some other specification of an intentional state. The story will almost invariably be an account of a possible world in which the encountered exception is somehow made to make sense or to have “meaning.” As such, stories seem to be designed to give the exceptional first-person narrative meaning in manner that implicates both an intentional state in the central character, a belief or desire, and some canonical element in the culture, such as being a good and sacrifice mother, being a clever and smart child, being a strong and popular man. Events and actions in a putative “real world” occur concurrently with mental events in the consciousness of the central character in the story. A discordant linkage between the two provides motive force to narrative, as with Romeo and Juliet, Oedipus and his wife/mother Jocasta. Stories have to do with how the first-person characters interpret things, what things mean to them. This is built into the circumstances of a story. It involves both a cultural convention and a deviation form that is explicable in terms of and individual intentional state. This gives stories not only a moral status but an epistemic one.

In its very nature, the logic of a story weaves together scattered meaningless bits of life events into a coherent sense, to make a meaningful history out of life events, to make sense of life, and meaningfulness makes life whole—and to make whole is to heal (Frankl, 1963). As such a human being is always a teller of stories, whether they make sense to others or not. In *Nausea*, Sartre ([1938]2007) states that we watch everything which happens to us through stories; and we try to live our life as if it were a story we were telling. While we live, nothing happens. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that is all. There are no beginnings, an interminable and monotonous addition. But when we talk about a life, everything changes. Events take place in one direction, and we talk about them in the opposite direction. We want the moments of our life to follow each other and order themselves like those of a life remembered.

### To Read and Write in a Foreign Land

To Dilthey (1997), meaning making through storytelling and poetry can be compared with a great philosopher or a poetic genius. A philosophic or poetic genius is like a traveler in a foreign land. With great enjoyment and complete freedom, (s)he abandons her/himself, without any utilitarian motives, to the surrounding impressions because of their vitality and the gratitude or lack thereof they might inspire. This childlike naiveté, evident in artists such as Mozart or Goethe among many others, is very much compatible with an accompanying system of meaning structuration. The relations established in the poetic landscape between meaning and appearance, subjectivity and culture, are ingredients for making sense out of life events. However, meaning making cannot be separated from the memory of external perceptions, or intensity of memory images, that stems from nature, political structures, history, and society. Meaning making and subjective narratives are twisted

together with real life, as Charles Dickens once clearly described when approaching writing the end of his story in *The Chimes*.

Since I conceived, at the beginning of the second part, what must happen in the third, I have undergone as much sorrow and agitation as if the thing were real; and have wakened up with it at night. I was obliged to lock myself in when I finished it yesterday, for my face was swollen for the time to twice its proper size, and was hugely ridiculous (in Forster, 1873, p. 132).

Dickens expresses here how imaginations and storytelling affect each other and bring forth real sensorimotor reactions of worries, which in this case lead to a swollen face. Worries and depression undoubtedly influence the way individuals feel, think, and communicate (Association, 2013).

### **To Gain Meaning the Soul Needs to Breathe**

To Heidegger (2001b), the world apparently needs us and in some strange way keeps calling to us. Things around us need us so that they can be named in narratives that gives meaning to us. In this act, we must return from our experience of things and beforehand defined concepts and wonder open-mindedly. We must not set upon the earth, or each other, with ambitions of conquest and mastery. What separates first-person narratives from other arts and determine its function in society is not the medium of speech, but rather a peculiar core content which is the narrator's own. The narrator's creative and imaginative thinking could be compared to the deep mental healing process, always depending on the intensity of lived experience. Through the healing process, which maintains a strong resonance with the moods of lived life, words can be transformed into meaningful lived experience. Just as our body needs to breathe, our soul requires the fulfilment and expansion of its existence in the echoes of emotional and intellectual life. Our feelings of life desire to resound in tone, word, and image.

“We need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be ‘poetized’ rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be ‘rationalized’ or ‘scientized’”, Rorty says (1989, p. 53). That is, we need to substitute the hope that changes for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace *passion* or fantasy without *reason*. This new hope, he hopes, will be kept alive by keeping the conversation of humankind going (Rorty, 1979, p. 393; 1989, p. 52). It is not Gadamer's concepts of conversation he has in mind. It is simply a talk or a storytelling that recognizes contingency, irony, and solidarity. We could not deny people's intelligence, the capacity for authenticity, the ability to argue or the desire for understanding. It is a view that provides a construct that subsumes *homo narrans* (Niles, 1999).

### **The Healing Power and Freedom of Words Used in Poetry and Imagination**

There are, according to Foucault (1954/2001), three specific forms of poetry or first-person narratives that employ a type of language that reflects the meaning of inner worries and existential dichotomies: the *epic*, the *lyric*, and *tragic* poetry (Joranger, 2013, 2018). These forms of poetic narratives manage to express how meanings and feelings are constituted. In the epic narrative, he argues, we encounter our existential odyssey in the vertical trajectory

from near and close spatiality through what he describes as those “great cloths woven of the dreamed and the real” (Foucault, 1954/2001, p. 133). In contrast, lyric narratives are possible only in the alternation of light and darkness, through which existence plays itself out:

If the lyrical can survey all the changes of the world, all its motions, if it can, itself immobile, search out in every direction, this is because it seizes everything in a play of light and shadow. In the pulsations of day and night, which tell, upon the shifting surface of things, the unchangeable truth (Foucault, 1954/2001, p. 134).

Finally, the axis of tragic narratives is located on the vertical axis of mental *ascent* and *descent*. It emphasizes that privileged moment in which your state of mind completes its *rise* and balances there, wavering imperceptibly, before the descent begins (Joranger, 2013, 2018). To explain what he means, Foucault (1954/2001, p. 134) refers to a text by German poet and dramatist Friedrich Christian Hebbels (1813–63), entitled *A Strange Dream*, which describes a nightmarish dream in which Hebbels moves vertically along a rope that God has fastened between heaven and earth. Each time he has solid earth under his feet, Hebbels is thrown into the sky again and forced to grasp the rope tightly to avoid descending into the abyss. In this way, tragic expression has the task of manifesting lived experience of fall and growth.

Hardly anything poses the tragic narrative more acutely than the turbulent and wildly creative inner landscape expressed through the poetry of Sylvia Plath (1932–1963). After her death, Aurelia Plath, the poet’s mother, edited a selection of Sylvia’s letters to her family, published as *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963* (Plath, 1975). In the introduction, Aurelia Plath shares young Sylvia’s first poem marked by tragic narratives and undertones. In the poem *I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt* (Plath, 1975, pp. 33–34), we can read between the lines the enormity of emotion of ascent and descent that animated the poet’s restless spirit.

I thought that I could not be hurt;  
 I thought that I must surely be  
 impervious to suffering—  
 immune to mental pain  
 or agony.  
 My world was warm with April sun  
 my thoughts were spangled green and gold;  
 my soul filled up with joy, yet felt  
 the sharp, sweet pain that only joy  
 can hold.  
 My spirit soared above the gulls  
 that, swooping breathlessly so high  
 o’rhead, now seem to brush their whirring  
 wings against the blue roof of the sky.  
 (...)  
 Then, suddenly my world turned gray,  
 and darkness wiped aside my joy.  
 A dull and aching void was left  
 where careless hands had reached out to destroy  
 my silver web of happiness.  
 The hands then stopped in wonderment,

for, loving me, they wept to see  
the tattered ruins of my firma-  
meant.  
(...)

The tragic narrative that expressed Plath's emotions of ascent and descent continued at the age of seventeen. In her diary (Plath, 1975, pp. 39–40), we can read:

Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. Now, now is the perfect time of my life. In reflecting back upon these last sixteen years, I can see tragedies and happiness, all relative — all unimportant now — fit only to smile upon a bit mistily. I still do not know myself. Perhaps I never will. But I feel free — unbound by responsibility.

In the same *diary entry*, she adds that “a writer is a professional observer”:

At the present moment I am very happy, sitting at my desk, looking out at the bare trees around the house across the street... Always I want to be an observer. I want to be affected by life deeply, but never so blinded that I cannot see my share of existence in a wry, humorous light and mock myself as I mock others.

[...]

I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day — spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote.

Plath did get married and did have kids. Her tragedies expressed in poetry and storytelling illustrate the complexity of human life in ascent and descent. At seventeen, Plath is tussling with precisely those complexities that make a person, feeling out the boundaries of the self, that resident-alien of body and mind (40):

I want to be free — free to know people and their backgrounds — free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient... I think I would like to call myself “The girl who wanted to be God.” Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be — perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I — I am powerful — but to what extent? I am I.

Plath's tragic narratives of descent and ascent expressed in her poems are not isolated utterances or gestures but symbolic actions, words, and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. They have relevance to real as well as to fictive experiences. Regardless of form, discursive or non-discursive narratives are meant to give order to life by inducing others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation for the story that constitutes one's and others life. Plath's poetic reflections and memories weave past, present, and future into a consistent and meaningful life story. The story is no other than her and it involves us and our common need to retreat from the stress of life to think freely. To the German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers, poetry and poetic reflections are important sources to express the unique and ambivalent human mind. According to Jaspers (1971, p. 74),

In absolute consciousness I am sure of being, but not of a calmly perfect being that might last in time. Rather, I always find myself in the possibility of coming to myself — either scattered in diversity or concentrated in the essence, either distracted in fear

and sorrows and self-oblivious in pleasure, or else in the presence of myself. I know the desolate nonbeing of my intrinsic self, and I know the ascent from the existing nonbeing.

In the third volume of his three-volume work *Philosophy* (Philosophie), Jaspers (1971) outlines an ideographic understanding of first-person narratives in poetry by using what he believes to be the nonreferential and nonreductive narrative of poetry. Jasper expresses the notion that poetry, like the human mind, is not obligated to imitate the external empirical world, such as in medicine and neurology (Joranger, 2013). Comparing to other esthetic expressions, such as architecture and sculpture depending upon the real presence of their empirical elements to provide meaning, poetry moves in visions of possibilities freely drafted in the direction of undefined and infinite worlds (Jaspers, 1971, p. 174). As poetry has the power to manifest the real wealth of the world, that is, such as it appears for a healthy human mind, it allows us not only to read the different meanings in time and space, but also to read them considering other potential realities and possibilities, including other forms of potential expression.

However, one can never isolate the psychic life from lived life and the historical and sociocultural context. Representation of life and history are always the soil from which the human mind draws its experience and understanding. Through poetic narratives the elements of meaning and action, identity, and characters are transformations of representations of lived life in time and space (Dilthey, 1997). The relationship between meaning and storytelling is something neither determined by innate biological drives nor solely created in the individual mind. Rather, to speak of meaning in storytelling and poetry, one must include the concepts of culture, politics, history, and living in the world with others. No matter how we feel and act, our environment affects our ability to act and express our subjective feelings, through narratives.

### The Art of Thinking Through Words

According to Heidegger, to express oneself freely, and to get an overview of oneself, others, and the world, you must turn away from established concepts that are closed for negotiations and interpretations, to words, that is, to the everyday language. In the work *Poetry, language, thought*, Heidegger (2001a) states that it is when we turn away from established concepts to words that we begin to think and to open for new perspectives. We think and heal through narratives that use words that represent unique experiences. To understand and express your state of wellbeing is always connected to a linguistic attempt to tell a story. To Heidegger, finding the right story is closely connected to meaning and wellbeing. When we find the right and best word, it expresses a movement of truth and understanding. In contrast to concepts, words have an understanding related to impression, perception, and the bodily. Words that become narratives in a first-person story are something that moves us and clarifies something. Heidegger sees the words as the narrative's bearing mood and reality. Words set something in motion, and finally, through words we interpret things through an immediate contact. (S)he who thinks freely goes back to move forward. To consider the already handed down, one must reformulate it (Heidegger, 2001b).

When Heidegger (1968, p. 8), almost as a time diagnosis, in the work *What is called thinking*, states that *we still not think*, he not only refers to the time typical positivism, but to specialized disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, and pedagogy, which have been assigned the truth about the human psyche and experiences. Disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, and pedagogy, according to Heidegger, are captured by the visible and



recognized representations of frozen (beforehand defined) concepts that leaves no room for subjective interpretations and meaning making. They have generalized everything into facts, objects, and evidence. In contrast, subjective narratives that ask what the respective disciplines in a culture, basically are, open for new meaning and new possibilities. If this is true, Heidegger says, people of today can only find meaning and understanding of themselves and others if they de-learn a certain way of thinking and change it with subjective narratives, such as we find in poetry and storytelling. When our existing language is in constant danger of solidifying, we do not longer learn anything new. We are in constant danger of losing grip of the world and who we are. In a frozen language, we cannot see if we express ourselves through the discipline's eyes, that is, through institutionalized labels and representations. We just take things for granted, something we talk through. Currently, our narratives have ended up as pure communication, a transport of meaning where there is no place for (re)thinking.

To Heidegger, narratives that represent an authentic self begin with de-learning because we return to the use of a personal language and not institutionalized and beforehand defined concepts. De-learning brings us into a special kind of narratives where thinking begins and thereby that which sets the experience in motion. For Heidegger (2001b), these kinds of narratives belong to poetry and storytelling. First-person narratives in poetry rediscover the experience as it is and what normally is hidden in a variety of methods and objective considerations. Through poetic narratives, we get the eyes on our own stupidity and frozen way of thinking. The most dangerous and difficult in this case is to relinquish the justification to one's own secure position. This is where poetry and storytelling show its strength because the initial thing about their praxis is not to stand for a reason, but to go back over the abyss (Heidegger, 2001b). What preoccupies the poet is what experience does to reflection on our own practice, ourselves and our impressions, our stupidity, and the incomprehensibility of the world.

## Storytelling and Poetry as Imagination and Everyday Experiences

Given that poetry and storytelling are fictional or “unreal,” it is interesting to see how the readers or listeners become so involved in them and react to them so strongly (Wei et al., 2023). In *The imaginary: a phenomenological psychology of the imagination*, Sartre ([1940]2004) claims that the source of this emotional investment is in the imagination. While reading, imagination facilitates the creation of a fictional world in which characters live and act. This fictional world acquires “an objective sphere of signification” (Sartre, [1940]2004, p. 64). In other words, it has concrete and real meaning, even though it is wholly imaginary. “To read,” says Sartre ([1940]2004, p. 64),

is to realize contact with the irreal world on the signs. In this world there are plants, animals, fields, towns, people: initially those mentioned in the book and then a host of others that are not named but are in the background and give this world its depth.

Sartre suggests that imaginary worlds too have depth, insofar as they accommodate characters, whose lives and actions fascinate us as readers. To use Sartre's own words, these worlds enjoy real existence in the irreal. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1956) writes about the present of the absent as a reality, to explain how a person's imagination is part of the meaning making process. To illustrate the phenomena, “the present of nothingness,” Sartre makes a story about himself going to a café for an appointment

with his friend Pierre. Sartre is running late, and when he steps into the café, he is struck by the smoke and its “fullness of being:”

I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I arrive at the café a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, 'He is not here.' Is there an intuition of Pierre's absence, or does negation indeed enter in only with judgment? At first sight it seems absurd to speak here of an intuition since to be exact there could not be an intuition of nothing and since the absence of Pierre is this nothing. Popular consciousness, however, bears witness to this intuition. Do we not say, for example, “I suddenly saw that he was not there”? (Sartre, 1956, pp. 40-41)

Sartre “sees” that Pierre is absent although he is there, sitting and waiting for Sartre. The “absent” of Pierre does not exist for everyone in the café but only for one looking for Pierre. Pierre's absence, his nothingness, as Sartre calls it, becomes the focus of attention. The absence takes on a kind of being a reality since there is nothing in the place where Sartre expected to find something. Sartre demonstrates how and imaginative absence has its own meaning and presence in the world, as real and substantial as its opposite. It is not the absence of presence that we are seeing. An absence is present. We see the presence of absence. To see nothingness, Sartre shows, we must be conscious. We must grasp its opposite—that “fullness of being” and presence that create meaning out of life events.

Of course, fictional characters are not really the source of their actions, and the plot of the story progresses not because of the characters but because of decisions the author has made. Readers or listeners are naturally aware of this fact, but when they are taken by the novel and become immersed in its unreal reality, this awareness shifts to the background. In *What is Literature*, Sartre (1947) suggests that the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; the author also requires that they return this confidence which (s)he has given them, that they recognize the author's creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more the other demands of us, the more we demand of them.

When we are enchanted with a landscape, we know very well that it is not we who create it, but we also know that without us the relations which are established before our eyes among the trees, the foliage, the earth, and the grass would not exist at all. We know that we can give no reason for the appearance of finality which we discover in the assortment of colors and in the harmony of the forms and movements created by the wind. Yet, it exists; there it is before our eyes, and we can make there be being only if being already is. For a reader wholly absorbed in a poet's or novel's plot, the characters seem to be the engine behind events and actions. And yet, the reader knows that the fictional world is inert and static, wholly determined by the author's decisions. This tension between what readers implicitly know and how they explicitly experience the novel grounds the feeling of fascination that accompanies their reading, the feeling that they are experiencing or are involved in something magical. It is not accidental, perhaps, that Sartre uses the terms *magical*, *poetic*, and *unintelligible* when he describes the relationship between the ego and its states, actions, and qualities. Imagination endows fictional literary worlds with reality and allows readers to consider the characters that inhabit them as the source of their own activities. Similarly, imagination also bestows reality and productivity upon the fictional ego, allowing us to conceive of the ego as the source of inner life.

## Final Reflections

From what is written, so far, I think we can conclude that meaning making and storytelling are universal cultural activities that we need to understand to communicate and understand oneself and others. In Bauman's (1986) writings on the importance of the social context of meaning making, he argues persuasively that narratives, such as storytelling and poetry, are constitutive of social life itself. When one looks to the social practices by which meaning making and social life is accomplished, one finds, with surprising frequency, people telling stories to each other, as a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience, constructing and negotiating social identity; investing the experiential landscape with moral significance in a way that can be brought to bear on human behavior; generating, interpreting, and transforming the work experience; and a host of other reasons. Narratives or storytelling here is not merely the reflection of culture, or the external charter of social institutions, or the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes but is constitutive of social life in the act of storytelling. In exploring the social nexus of storytelling, we explore one of the most fundamental and potent foundations of our existence as social beings (Bauman, 1986, pp. 113–114).

The process of making meaning through poetry and storytelling can be understood as the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfils a psychological or rhetorical need of gaining meaning of ourselves and others. The events are woven together and become composite dramas or *rhetorical visions* (Bormann, 1972). From the narrative view, these visions translate into dramatic stories constituting the fabric of social reality for those who compose them. They are *rhetorical fictions*, constructions of fact and faith having persuasive force, rather than fantasies (Fisher, 1980). Storytelling does not require a given form of society. Where the rational institutionalized world paradigm is an ever-present part of our consciousness because we have been educated into it, the impulse to tell a story is part of our very being because we acquire stories of narratives in the natural process of socializations.

Poetry and first-person stories, whether written or oral, are a feature of human nature; they cross time and culture. Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, they represent a meta code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the shared reality can be transmitted. The absence of such utterance or a refusal of such narratives may indicate an absence or refusal of meaning itself (White, 1980).

In schools, workplaces, and in political regimes, where freedom to speech and to use personal narratives is restricted and controlled because they go beyond what is allowed to say and write, we find absence or refusal of meaning. In such regimes or organizations, people often fall into depression and resignation or stand up and fight for a meaningful life in freedom and humanity. An example of the last case was rewarded by The Norwegian Nobel Committee, who decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2023 to Narges Mohammadi for her fight against the oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights and freedom for all. In her tale, the leader of the Peace Prize Committee said that “her brave struggle has come with tremendous personal costs. Altogether, the regime has arrested her 13 times, convicted her five times, and sentenced her to a total of 31 years in prison and 154 lashes. Ms Mohammadi is still in prison as I speak” (Institute, 2023).

In the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize 2023, several stories were told to exemplify and make sense of how humans in suppressed regimes stand up and fight for themselves and others:

In September 2022 a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini, was killed while in the custody of the Iranian morality police. Her killing triggered the largest political demonstrations against Iran's theocratic regime since it came to power in 1979. Under the slogan "Woman – Life – Freedom", hundreds of thousands of Iranians took part in peaceful protests against the authorities' brutality and oppression of women. The regime cracked down hard on the protests: more than 500 demonstrators were killed. Thousands were injured, including many who were blinded by rubber bullets fired by the police. At least 20 000 people were arrested and held in regime custody (Institute, 2023).

If we regard meaning making and narratives in storytelling and poetry ethically, as the supreme instrument for building *values* and *goals*, which motivate human conduct into situational structures of meaning and freedom, then we must concede them to be a universal cultural activity, embedded in the very center of the social drama, itself another cross-cultural and transtemporal unit in social process (Turner, 1980). First-person narratives and the logic of poetry and storytelling reinforce each other in the ability to make meaning to life events. They support our need to weave together scattered meaningless bits of life events into a coherent sense. To make a meaningful history out of life events makes life whole, and to make whole is to heal (Frankl, 1963).

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