Romance and irony, personal and academic

How mothers of children with autism defend goodness and express hope

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This article tells about stories with stories alongside a theoretically based analysis. The author's personal story is combined with the story of this research project to tell and analyze the stories of two mothers whose children have autism. The mothers' narratives are interpreted in this study as a defense of the narrators' goodness as mothers and a defense of their children's goodness. The narratives do this is in part through their structure, which holds many qualities in common with two traditional Western literary structures: romance and irony.

Keywords: autism, counter-narrative, motherhood, narrative structure

My son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder eleven years ago. I was surprised at how little I knew about autism, and I responded as many mothers of children newly diagnosed with autism respond: I searched for information; I found networks of other parents whose children had autism; and I read all I could about autism, hoping to see my son in those stories, especially the stories with happy endings. As my time became more and more consumed with my personal research, trips to doctors and therapists, and the continued intense hands-on time with my son through homework and daily living activities, my time, energy, and motivation for professional research diminished. Eventually I realized that I could fashion my personal interest into a professional project, and I planned a study on the experiences of children who have autism, their parents, and their teachers. The work represented by this article differs significantly from the work that was initially planned, and its development is a story in itself.

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This article tells about stories with stories (Frank, 1995, p. 23) alongside a theoretically based analysis. My personal story, which initiated, drove, and guided the work, is combined with the story of this research project to tell and analyze the stories of two mothers whose children have autism. From a methodological perspective, this approach may appear as a problematic jumble of narrative approaches. However, when I explain to friends what I am doing with this research, I find myself telling these same stories and embedding the analysis within the stories. Doing so communicates to my friends not only what I have concluded, but how I came to conclude this and why this is important to me. The communication is based in our relationship and accomplishes two purposes: connecting with my friends by disclosing my personal interest in our conversation and providing a degree of believability for my explanations. Likewise, doing so in this article acknowledges a relationship between author and reader that does not overlook the fact that both of us have personal lives and personal interests woven into the fabric of our academic work. It also supports the trustworthiness of my conclusions by communicating the line of reasoning I took to reach my conclusions. For Bochner (1997), the wall between personal and academic was breached when the sudden death of his father reinterpreted the previous academic work he had completed on death and loss. For me, my son's diagnosis led me to pull my academic work into my personal life and, with a little more effort, push my personal life into my recognized academic work. For both of us, allowing our personal contexts to show in our academic work challenges the apparent division between the personal and the academic self as well as that between story and theory. The result is what Bochner (1997) calls *social theory*: "when theorizing is conceived as a social and communicative activity" (p. 435).

The subject matter of this article is a narrative analysis of focused conversations held with two women who are mothers of children with autism. The mothers' narratives are interpreted in this study as a defense of the narrators' goodness as mothers and a defense of their children's goodness. The narratives do this is in part through their structure, which holds many qualities in common with two traditional Western literary structures: romance and irony.

I could have included my own stories with the stories of these two mothers — their stories certainly resonate with my own — but I have chosen not to include them. When I was collecting stories from mothers, I did not put my own stories in writing; I intended to study the stories of others with a measure of standoffish objectivity. When I made the decision to incorporate my personal interest into this study, it was too late. The stories of my son's childhood were too temporally removed to be comparable to the stories I am analyzing here, and the public revelation of a young adult's childhood stories without the cushion of anonymity is not agreeable to him or to me.

Both narrators in this study were initially contacted through a non-profit organization that promotes autism awareness and provides support for children with autism and their families. Meredith is the mother of Diana, a then-fifth grader attending a suburban public school. At the time of the interview, Meredith had a younger daughter and was pregnant with a son. She is married and lives in a middle class neighborhood; she had not attended college. Julia is the mother of twins Miguel and Alex, who were then nine years old, both with autism, and an older daughter with significant physical impairments and developmental delays. Julia is married and lives in a working class neighborhood; she had attended some college.

Theoretical framework for the analysis

When studying life experiences, narrative analysis is one of the most sensible approaches to take. It is understood among narrative researchers that "telling stories is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences" (Mishler, 1986, p. 75). Moreover, narratives can provide "a 'window' into how an individual understands what has occurred in their experience" (Court, 2004, p. 592). Although narrative analysis is a relative newcomer in educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), and the significance of narrative analysis is being vigorously discussed (see *Narrative Inquiry*, 2006, Number 1), narrative researchers agree that narratives contain layers upon layers of meaning and are rich in the potential to understand life experiences from an insider's perspective. "That stories appear so often supports the view of some theorists that narratives are one of the natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to order, organize, and express meaning" (Mishler, 1986, p. 106).

Narrative analysis is an especially good match for the content of these particular focused conversations (Tannen, 2008). Because of the complexities that narrative can contain, it is good for explaining a variation from the expected, the norm, or the desired (Czarniawska, 2004). Certainly, the narrators in this study did not expect their children to be autistic. Julia commented, "Hell no, nothing really in my life turned out like I wanted or expected or dreamed. It's all been different. And I guess most people have that experience too. I just had it much more dramatically." MacIntyre (1990) writes that lived narratives are unpredictable and teleological in nature: "Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives; like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future" (p. 101).

Furthermore, structuring events into a narrative form imposes order and meaning onto events that may seem incongruous and chaotic (Reissman, 1990).

When parents of children with autism are confronted with complex and confusing experiences with medical and educational authorities and institutions, narratives, which can be complex yet ordered, help to frame seemingly incongruent perspectives regarding how best to address their children's needs. Because of the temporal nature of narrative, past, present, and future can be integrated into a coherent structure. Interpretations of past events, such as the birth of the child and receiving the diagnosis of autism; interpretations of current experiences in the midst of caring for a child with autism; and the uncertainties of life in the future are richly linked in narrative structure (Fleischmann, 2004). Significantly for this paper, both narrators structure their narratives in a way that points to positive and hopeful futures for their children, a direction that both narrators actively hold and defend.

Being a parent of a child with autism is an experience that lends itself to reflective, explicit, and frequent narrative-making. Parents of children with autism are often placed in the situation of having to make sense out of events that appear random and disordered to outsiders. For instance, the actions of children with autism are often difficult for outsiders to understand (and vice versa), placing caregivers in the role of meaning-maker and interpreter between their children and others. This role is accomplished effectively through stories, and parents of children with autism are frequently armed with a repertoire of well-rehearsed stories that speak more significantly about their children than an explanation can. Conversely, carefully crafted narrative exemplars of common experiences have been shown to help children and adults with autism develop a stronger understanding of the social world and learn everyday social skills (Gray, 2010). Reflectively and purposefully expressing lived experience in narrative form is a normal activity for parents of children with autism.

The analysis and interpretation of these focused conversations are grounded in the concept of cultural narrative (Austin & Carpenter, 2008), similar to the concept of metanarrative, grand narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and Master Narrative (Tannen, 2008). This paper will use *cultural narrative* to label this set of closely related concepts. A cultural narrative is a widely held cultural belief about a certain phenomenon. It expresses cultural beliefs of both how things are and how things should be (Austin & Carpenter, 2008, p. 381). Often, cultural narratives are unexamined by those of us holding them, yet they "shape what speakers decide to say" (Tannen, 2008, p. 226).

Cultural narratives are too powerful to be ignored or evaded (May, 2004, p. 187), even by individuals or groups whose experiences do not align with them. Narrators can forge a different path by creating a counter-narrative that expresses their own experiences as they digress from the cultural narrative. For example, Reynolds and Taylor (2004) examine how single women construct narratives that counter the cultural narrative of coupledom. Austin and Carpenter (2008) explore the narratives of mothers whose children have attention deficits and found ways in which these narrators told counter-narratives that troubled the cultural narrative of motherhood. Tannen (2008) describes how the narratives of sisters almost always address the cultural narrative that sisters are similar to one another and emotionally close, even when the sisters are different and distant.

Parents of children with autism need to construct counter-narratives because their experiences are marked by many kinds of difference from the cultural narrative of parenting. Children with autism are different from neurotypical children in their developmental patterns, in their activities, and in the care that they require. Avdi, Griffin, and Brough (2000) found that parents receiving a diagnosis of autism for a child adopted a discourse of disability: the child's behaviors became symptoms, and parents became concerned with "impression management" as they attempted to make the child appear normal and reduce the stigma of the autism diagnosis. O'Brien and Dagget (2006) list emotional responses that parents of children with autism often experience: feeling isolated from family members and other parents, blaming themselves for their child's condition, feeling shame about their own emotions, having difficulty making important decisions, questioning their values and belief systems, as well as chronic sorrow, simultaneous grief and hopefulness, confusion, frustration, and exhaustion. Gray (2003) found that the emotional well-being of mothers of children with autism was significantly affected by their children's autism, some needing psychotherapy and medication, others experiencing strokes or other illnesses attributed to stress. One mother in Gray's study admitted, "If I'm not angry and frustrated, which is sort of eighty percent of the time, I'm grieving" (p. 636). In addition, having a child with autism forces a relationship between parents and various medical, therapeutic, and educational professionals, "similar to an arranged marriage with no possibility of divorce" (Stoner & Angell, 2006, p. 177). Negative experiences with professionals lead parents to distrust professionals and rely more on their own knowledge and instincts (Stoner et al., 2005). Parents of children with autism are keenly aware of the range of differences between their experiences and what the cultural narrative led them to expect parenting to be; the narrative of a parent of a child with autism is marked by differences from the cultural narrative of parenting, even as it draws on that cultural narrative.

In the narratives considered in this paper, the narrators are mothers of children with autism who are included in general education classrooms. Their children's situation of being the only student with autism in a classroom of non-autistic students automatically puts these narrators outside many of the boundaries of the cultural narrative of motherhood. Because the children of the narrators in this study are so different from what is culturally considered normal, and because

their own experiences are so different from what is considered a normal experience of motherhood, the cultural narrative of the good mother is not congruent with many of the experiences of the narrators in this study. The narrators mark their narratives as counter-narratives to the cultural narrative by explicitly framing some of their experiences as different from the experiences of other mothers. For example, Julia explains,

> Play dates? Hello? It takes actively planning what is going to happen, and actively participating. And that is not what most moms think of when they have a play date. They think they can kick back and watch the kids play. But no, you have to be down there in the dirt with them. And I did try to go to the moms' group in the park, but I felt so dogged, so dogged out by those women that I didn't do it again.

These narratives, carefully crafted combinations of elements of the cultural narrative and counter-narrative, can be seen as counter-narratives that not only create and express the narrators' unique identities as mothers but also build a defense against the implicit accusations of the cultural narrative.

Although parents of children with autism frequently construct and draw on stories to mediate between their children and others, speaking as a narrator in a research interview is not a typical experience for these narrators. It is marked by a call to reflection and self-awareness that is often absent in the small stories (Grothskopoulou, 2006) of casual interactions with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers. When narrators are asked to consider experiences reflectively in a research interview, they tend to order and organize their thoughts into a form that is more finished and coherent than may appear in informal small stories. Bamberg (2004) warns that this organizing obscures the meanings of primary lived experiences for a narrative that "tends to stylize a particular notion of self and identity" (p. 355). The research approach I took in this project may indeed obscure the raw experiences of the narrators in favor of the more reflective structuring and managing of a collection of stories into a coherence, but the structuring itself is interesting as it reflects the work done by narrators to portray themselves through a careful combination of cultural narrative characterizations and themes along with counter-narrative characterizations and themes within a culturally accepted form.

Looking back on the choices I made regarding the analysis, I realize that my interest was not in making visible the pre-reflective lived experiences of these narrators because I was already pre-reflectively familiar with this kind of experience. Exploring the narrative work of these mothers was not only interesting academically, it also supported me personally as I engaged in the same kind of structuring and sense-making that I found in the interviews. What I have done in this analysis is simply an extension of what mothers of children with autism do every day: looking for meaning, order, and direction in a life lived outside the cultural narrative.

Narrative account of this research

My interest in this topic began with my own experience. My son, now 18, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder at age 7 and has always been included in general education classrooms. I began this study when he was in elementary school as an attempt to integrate my personal life with my professional life and quite pragmatically to use my time efficiently. Certainly my experiential framework guided the selection of my topic and the course of my inquiry. Both narrators were aware of my experiences during the time of the interviews, so I must be aware that my position influenced not only my choices regarding analysis, but the mothers' responses to the interview situation and perhaps even my conclusions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1986). Early in the conversations I had with the narrators, by way of introducing myself and my work on this project, I told something of my son's story, which at that time was exciting and positive. This undoubtedly provided the narrators with a launching point for their own part of the conversation and affected the choices they made in how to present their stories. My empathetic insider's perspective may have encouraged the narrators in some ways to be more candid and less guarded about sharing their experiences (indeed, mothers wept during the interview, and one brought me to tears as well), but these narratives are nonetheless interpretations and performances, and this analysis is a further interpretation.

Initially, I planned to compare experiences of mothers of children with autism in general education classrooms with the experiences of general education teachers of students with autism. So I interviewed thirteen mothers and seven teachers. Most of the interviews of mothers were conducted in the families' homes while the children were in school, including the two that are the focus of this study. All of the interviews were initially transcribed from audio recordings.

I began to examine the transcripts using a phenomenological approach, attempting to find what was essential to the experiences of the mothers and teachers interviewed (Patton, 2001). Attempts to divide up the mothers' language into small elements which could be coded, sorted, and examined by categories always left me with longer stories which addressed several topics in an integrated fashion and could not be sensibly divided.

After a colleague[1] suggested that the transcripts are most well suited for narrative analysis, I began to study texts about narrative analysis (Clandinin & Conelley, 2000; Crites, 1971; Czarniawska, 2004; Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997; MacIntyre, 1990; Mishler, 1986; Reissman, 1990) as well as relevant examples of narrative analysis (Avdi et al., 2000; Court, 2004). I studied these texts along with the interview transcripts in a "to-and-fro" analysis process, similar to that used by Court (2004). Czarniawska (2004) led me to the work of Northrop Frye, and I discovered an

unexpected and strong connection between the two longest interviews (which I examined first) and Frye's work on the narrative structures of Western literature. Frye's work *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) most directly informs my current analysis of these two narratives.

Eventually, the transcripts were interpreted into sentences with punctuation, omitting repetitions and non-word utterances such as *um* while listening to the audio recordings. The choice to adapt the transcripts into more conventional written language was made subsequent to the decision to interpret the narratives using a conventionally literary approach. Downplaying the details and characteristics of spoken language allowed me to stand back from these details and bring clarity to the larger organization of the narratives, as one would stand back from a painting (Frye, 1957, p. 140), even though it undoubtedly obscured other possibilities for interpretation and analysis.

Although the preponderance of stories in the interviews led me away from a phenomenological approach to narrative analysis, I have found that narrative inquiry overlaps significantly with a phenomenological approach; the study of experience nearly always involves the study of stories. "There is a wide recognition of the special importance of narrative as a mode through which individuals express their understanding of events and experiences" (Mishler, 1986, p. 68).

Discoveries, interpretations, and connections

The analysis of the narratives will focus on two patterns: what the narratives do and how the narratives do it. What the narratives do is to defend the narrators' goodness as mothers and defend the goodness of their children. The way that the narratives do this is through their structure, which holds many qualities in common with two traditional Western literary structures: romance and irony.

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye focuses on the archetypal structure of narratives. "The archetypal view of literature shows us literature as a total form and literary experience as a part of the continuum of life, in which one of the poet's functions is to visualize the goals of human work" (p. 115). This study reverses Frye's trajectory and considers life experiences through the lens of literature.

Narrative inquiry in social science research grows directly from the soil of literary interpretation. Hermeneutics, first developed by Fredrich Schliermacher to study biblical texts, eventually was extended to the examination of other kinds of "texts" –talk, acts, events — and provided an alternative lens for research on social situations distinct from the natural science lens (Bredo, 2006, p. 15). MacIntyre (1990) argues that the only difference between an imaginative literary text and the text of lived experience is the degree of control available to the authors. Imaginative text is more in the author's control as he or she crafts setting, plot, and characters. Lived experience is constrained by the settings and situations in which we find ourselves as well as by the narratives of others. Arguing that narratives should be analyzed and not simply taken at face value, Atkinson and Delamont (2006) point out that narratives are complex performances, complete with ethnopoetic, aesthetic, and dramatic features (p. 167). Tannen (2008) develops and works from a theory that conversations are "composed of the same linguistic elements and processes as literary discourse.... Everyday conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that are often thought to be quintessentially literary" (p. 208).

That the narrators in this study would adopt recognized Western literary structures for their own narratives is not surprising, given an understanding of the power of cultural narratives in the lives of individuals immersed in a particular culture. Crites (1971) argues,

> The stories people hear and tell, the dramas they see performed, not to speak of the sacred stories that are absorbed without being directly heard or seen, shape in the most profound way the inner story of experience. We imbibe a sense of the meaning of our own baffling dramas from these stories, and this sense of its meaning in turn affects the form of a man's experience and the style of his action.... Both the content and the form of experience are mediated by symbolic systems which we are able to employ simply by virtue of awakening within a particular culture in which those symbolic systems are the common currency. Prevailing narrative forms are among the most important of such symbolic systems... People awaken to consciousness in a society, with the inner story of experience and its enveloping musicality already infused with cultural forms (p. 79–80).

Frye uses a metaphorical spatial organization to explain his theory of archetypal structure in literature. In this organization, myth sits at the top of the page — highly stylized, idealized, symbolic stories about gods and demons, heaven and hell. In myth, the apocalyptic heavenly world is filled with highly desirable symbolic elements such as pastoral gardens, jeweled cities, and heroes with divine powers. The mythic demonic world is populated with highly undesirable symbolic elements: monsters, wastelands, dismemberment, and bondage. At the bottom of the page sits reality — the world of hard labor, common life, experience, and survival. In realistic literature, the symbols of heaven and hell are displaced by devices that make them more plausible in real life. For instance, the mythic dragon-terrorized wasteland restored to life by the sacrifice of a divine hero may be displaced in realistic literature as the recovery from a dangerous illness or the birth of a long-awaited child. In the center of the page, between myth and reality, is romance, more idealized than the grittiness of reality but more human than myth. A romantic hero does not possess the divine power of a mythic hero but is positioned above other characters by superior virtue, knowledge, strength, or other human qualities.

Julia's narrative shares many qualities with romance. Early in the analysis, Julia's interview surprised me because she talked more about herself and less about her children than I had expected. She spoke of many conflicts she had won against medical and school authorities regarding her children. She spoke of the intensity of her work with her sons to bring them to a point where they could speak and interact on a basic level. My early impression was that she characterized herself as a kind of hero who was fighting for her children. This impression led to the first connection between Julia's narrative and Frye's romantic narrative structure. Table 1 summarizes some of the parallels I found between Julia's narrative and Frye's romance.

Hopeful for an emerging pattern, I studied Meredith's transcript for evidence connecting her narrative to romance as well, but her transcript conveyed an entirely different quality. Meredith expressed doubt about her decisions regarding her daughter in contrast to Julia's certainty. Meredith seemed more concerned about her daughter's surviving the inevitable hard knocks of life than about treating Diana's autism or improving the special education system. Giving up on romantic narrative structure as a commonality between the two narratives, I returned to Frye and discovered that Meredith's narrative contained many elements of irony, another narrative structure Frye describes. Irony is positioned at the bottom of Frye's metaphorical page in the world of reality and mirrors the world of romance

Table 1

Romance	Julia's Narrative
The central plot structure of romance is conflict between good and evil.	Julia tells stories of many conflicts: with medical doctors, preschool teachers, strangers, elementary school teachers, school administrators, and her husband.
The two main characters in a romance are the hero and the enemy.	Julia portrays herself as the hero and autism as the enemy.
The hero's goal is to defeat evil and rescue someone innocent who is threatened by evil. Evil is associated with death and sterility.	Julia's goal is to defeat autism and rescue her children from its power. Autism is not fatal, but it is portrayed as a potential destroyer of her children's futures. Julia is not sterile, but she has not borne children who are not developing typically.
The hero travels a long journey in her quest, often through a labyrinth or cave.	Julia portrays the special education system as a confusing maze, full of deceiving turns, obstructions, and potential danger.
Sinister figures who oppose the hero are often parental or authority figures who predict the hero's failure or block the hero's efforts.	Julia tells about medical doctors who told her that her daughter would not live and that her sons would not walk or talk, as well as school administrators who attempted to block her efforts to place her sons in general education classrooms.

Table 2

Irony	Meredith's narrative
Irony portrays a struggle between two societies: one moral and sound, and the other absurd.	Meredith contrasts the soundness of her perspective about her daughter with the absurdly wrong understanding that school officials hold of her daughter.
Irony takes for granted that the world is full of danger and evil, but there is nothing we can do about it.	Even when Meredith confronts school officials, her goal is not to improve the system but to reduce the level of absurdity she sees in how her daughter is treated.
Mimics yet mocks the naïveté of the dragon-slaying theme in romance. In irony, the dragon role is played by evil people who are protected by their places in powerful institutions.	Meredith expresses frustration that school administrators and teachers who mistreat Diana or make poor decisions regarding her schooling are backed by the school system.
The message of irony is to be careful; do what you can to survive, but do not expect much.	Meredith frequently counsels Diana how to deal with teachers she does not understand or peers who tease her. She says several times that she hopes that the school does not ruin her daughter's good qualities.
Irony takes a stance that is suspicious of dogmas, science, ideals, and the educated point of view.	Meredith frequently disparages the advice of "experts" and believes that she knows better than many of the professional educators she has encountered.
Irony employs humor.	Many of the stories Meredith tells are ironically or darkly humorous, or Meredith marks them with comments such as, "it was kind of funny." Examples include an incident at McDonald's and an image of taking Diana to school on roller skates.

even as it ridicules the world of romance. Table 2 summarizes some of the parallels between Meredith's narrative and Frye's literary structure of irony.

In defense of the good mother

Julia and Meredith construct narrative identities that both draw on and counter the cultural narrative of motherhood. The rhetorical work that they do to defend their goodness as mothers rests on an assumption that outsiders neither understand nor approve of their ways of being a mother. Their narratives build a case that their ways of being a mother meet and even exceed some of the expectations of the cultural narrative of motherhood. This move creates such a strong identity as a good mother that divergences from the cultural narrative cannot disrupt this identity. In fact, the counter-narrative moves that highlight divergences from the cultural narrative of the good mother paradoxically work to strengthen that identity.

In some ways, the experiences of Meredith and Julia mirror the cultural narrative of the good mother almost perfectly. Austin and Carpenter (2008) describe the cultural narrative of motherhood as "a person in an interdependent relationship where she is self sacrificing, nurturing, selfless, emotional, compassionate, connected to nature, and gives efficient and effective attention to everyday tasks; she is always available to her children and assumes complete responsibility for them, she is unselfish and supportive and her children are always in need of her, particularly when they are young" (p. 380). Because Meredith and Julia are personally responsive to their children's particular situations and intense needs, in this way their mother-work qualifies them as the paragon of the cultural narrative of the good mother.

Meredith moved Diana to a new school when she was in fifth grade so that Diana and her kindergarten-age sister could attend the same school. When attending the new school became a difficult experience for Diana, Meredith suggested that she return to her old school.

> How many times I begged her to go back to [the old school]! I'll drive to two schools. I don't care. And it's funny — she just told me a few weeks ago too, something had happened at school, and... "I just didn't want you to drive to two schools." And I am like, "Diana, I would have rode you on a bike to school, eight months pregnant. I would have taken roller skates to get you to school." And so I said, "Diana, you know I will do anything for you. You know that I mean it. I go out on a limb all the time."

The work that Julia personally did with Miguel and Alex when they were preschool age sounds more like the services provided by a professional therapy center than in a home:

> We had lots of balls, and I don't know if you saw it or if it is even hanging up right now, we had a canopy swing in the house.... And so we had a lot of sensory calming stuff. I found these huge pillows, and I would mash them, roll them, and just did a lot of sensory integration techniques with them, and a time of speech therapy, and just demanded that they pay attention, and demanded that they sit at the table. My father designed a table where he fashioned an arc. They use them in the therapy centers. And I pushed them against the wall, and said, "Here, we are going to do work." And I had the schedule, you know, first we are going to eat, and all the way down to the end of the night. They knew to turn their card over. So I did a combination of a discrete trial at the table setting, and the TEAACH program with the visual pictures, and worked really closely with all of the professional stuff.

In other ways, the cultural narrative of good mother is not congruent with Meredith and Julia's experiences. In the cultural narrative of motherhood, the measure of a mother is her child, and by being different and disorderly, a child with autism indicates that the mother is a poor mother (Avdi et al., 2000). Julia acknowledges this explicitly: "They think there is something wrong with you, that there is something wrong with your kids, so there's something wrong with you... I don't think people always think that, but you think that they are measuring you by your child's conduct and behavior." Austin and Carpenter (2008) found that mothers of children with ADHD were judged to be poor mothers because of the behavior of their children; these mothers were marginalized by being silenced and were marked as troublesome when they defended themselves or their children. Meredith experienced this kind of marginalization in a fast food restaurant when Diana was three years old:

> We were in the McDonald's line at 10:28 in the morning. For all of you who don't know, at 10:30 is when they stop serving breakfast, not at 10:28. And I get to the counter, and I say, "Well, can I just order a Happy Meal now, and I will just wait?" "No, no, no, you can't." And I looked at the clock, and I said, "My gosh, it's 10:28." I mean they gave me a hard time. And then Diana...just started screaming her head off. Oh, my gosh! There was a whole line of people, and...I mean she would just not stop screaming and screaming and screaming, and I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, would you just chill?" So I got back in this huge line, and I just let her scream. I let her torture everybody, as mean as that was on my part. I just thought, "Oh, my gosh." I had a woman turn around and stick her finger in Diana's face and on her mouth and say, "Sshhhh! Quiet!" And I got back in her face, and I said, "You be quiet." So we got in this argument, and I said, "You just go tell them to give me a cheeseburger right now." And the lady was just, "I just said..." See, are you all happy now? You didn't sell me a Happy Meal. I mean, that was just one of those things. I mean that was bad, very bad on my part, and when I look back now, it was kind of funny in a way. I just tortured everybody in MacDonald's.

Julia generalizes similar experiences:

> I have heard people say, "Get your kids under control," and I'm like, "Yeah, you know, do you know anything about autism? Hey, if there is a trick about controlling them, I want to know about it. What do you know, huh?" And I've done that to people, and they look horrified, and I'm glad about that. Honestly, I'm furious.

The narrative structures that Julia and Meredith employ to organize their stories serve to establish that they are indeed good mothers. In Julia's romantic narrative, she positions herself as the protagonist hero, coming to rescue her children from the evil dragon of autism. Other active characters in the narrative are portrayed in relatively black and white terms; they are good if they help Julia in her quest, and they are bad if they obstruct Julia's quest. One teacher, who initially put Miguel's desk in the coat closet, was converted from bad to ambivalently good as she slowly came to agree with Julia about how Miguel should be included, but Julia had to

trick the teacher into thinking that her ideas were actually the teacher's ideas. As a romantic hero, Julia possesses superior knowledge about her children and how to treat them, superior dedication to her children, and a superior moral position when it comes to her children's treatment.

Frye's archetypal romantic hero typically goes through a period of development marked by adversity. Pearson and Pope (1981) confirm this notion and add that the most dangerous threat to the success of the female hero in American and British literature is insecurity (p. 10). Julia's heroism develops as she overcomes insecurity and mistrust of her own instincts. She tells of a miscarriage that may have been prevented if she had taken a bolder stance with medical professionals and concludes:

> I think that the experience of losing the first child really got me ready. It's made me trust my instincts. Because all through that pregnancy I was like, *Hello, I'm not feeling good*, or *Oh, I don't need an ultrasound*, and I was just like, *Oh, you tell me how I feel.* And I was so insecure and distrustful of my instincts that I lost my baby, quite frankly. And I'm telling you that would never happen now, because I would say, "I'm telling you — I am sick, can't you hear me?" ...I would bang that door down until I got what I knew I needed. So that experience almost had to happen for these three [kids] to have any chance in hell, quite frankly, because I was that meek.... I didn't have any confidence in my instincts or trust in that voice inside myself, so that experience was good for me.... And you know, sure, I have made mistakes, but I have no regrets, because I trusted what I was feeling inside and I acted accordingly.

In the archetypal plot of romance, the story ends with recognition and exaltation of the hero. Julia ends the focused conversation by telling about her dreams for herself. She keeps up with the political scene regarding disability services and wants to travel and speak on behalf of children and adults with disabilities, acknowledging "in order to get on that circuit you've got to write a book." Julia is also writing a screenplay that is loosely based on her own life before children, when "it was thrilling; it was fun; I enjoyed it." The mythical exaltation of the hero is displaced into the more plausible realistic situation of being a recognized author, speaker, and autobiographical screenwriter. By positioning herself as a romantic hero, Julia defends herself with a counter-narrative against the cultural narrative that would judge her disparagingly by the atypical behavior of her children.

In Frye's work, irony is a parody of romance. Instead of a high conflict between unambiguous good and evil, the conflict of irony is between two societies — one moral and sound and the other absurd. The absurd society is frequently represented by characters whose power is protected by a powerful institution — the source of dogmas, rules, generalizations, and intellectual decrees. The ironic protagonist attacks the absurd society but does not expect to defeat it or even to change it. The best she can hope for is to keep her balance in the face of it all.

In Meredith's narrative, Meredith, Diana, and others who understand Diana comprise the morally superior society, and the school district and its representatives comprise the absurd society. Meredith does not expect the absurd society to be defeated or changed but endured. In a parody of the confident and superior romantic hero, Meredith admits confusion and portrays herself as simply pragmatic in a world marked by injustice and foolishness. She tells stories about poor decisions and actions she regrets. Meredith admits,

> I like to say I'm doing the right thing, but you know, it's really hard. It's like looking for the light switch in the dark. There's no map. There's no road. There's no right or wrong. It's just, you've just got to do it; you've just got to try. That's kind of where I am.

The ironic protagonist experiences life's complexities, struggles, and confusions with down-to-earth common sense and flexible pragmatism. She holds no illusions of the mystique of the educated point of view, no illusions of professional educational institutions, no illusions for Diana's future, and no illusions of her own knowledge. The counsel of irony is prudence, and Meredith counsels her daughter how to cope with unreasonable teachers, school situations, and the ridiculousness of society in general. She explains, "I just want her to feel good about herself, you know, whatever anyone else thinks, you know, you are OK. I've worked hard for that for years — you are OK. Trust me. It's everybody else that's got problems around you. You can't please everybody." Meredith values common sense and the situated personal knowledge she has of her daughter more than the decisions imposed by the systems and procedures of the school district. She hopes for Diana not to be damaged by her school experiences. "I just like her the way she is. And I don't want anybody taking that away from her. And that means the school district things are just run too much one way. She is just a great person the way she is. She may not fit into their criteria, but that's life. You can't please everybody."

Meredith's position as an ironic protagonist lacks the unquestionable and decisive superiority of the romantic hero, but by placing herself as a member of the moral and sound society she defends her goodness as a mother. In fact, even more than the romantic hero, the ironic protagonist is positioned in direct and overt opposition to the absurd society that would pass judgment on her. Julia's defense must be inferred from her heroic work to rescue her sons from autism. Meredith's defense is straightforward and explicit as her counter-narrative criticizes the school district, people who are protected by the power of the school district, and individuals in society who do not understand her life experience.

In defense of the good child

The previous section examines how Julia and Meredith use counter-narratives to construct for themselves identities as good mothers. These counter-narratives also serve to identify their children as good children. The cultural narrative of a good child is of good behavior, achievement, and a trajectory toward success. Diana, Miguel, and Alex all presented behavior challenges and had not achieved in the way that their peers had. The counter-narratives respond to this cultural narrative by explaining and defending the children's behavior and by extolling the children's progress as examples of true achievement. Moreover, the narratives are structured in a way that expresses hope and anticipates a happy ending for the children.

The diagnosis of a child with autism is a major disruptive event for a family (Avdi et al., 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006; O'Brien & Dagget, 2006; Fleischmann, 2004). Parents' narratives of their children's lives and their lives as parents are fundamentally challenged because the old narrative cannot explain the new reality (Kirkman, 2003). Events in the past are reinterpreted to fit into the new narrative (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). Children's behaviors which in the past were puzzling or disturbing are reinterpreted as symptoms of autism. Meredith explains,

> People used to say things to me when she was young, and they would say, "Gosh, she is so good. She just sits there. You are so lucky.... She doesn't seem to cry a lot. She doesn't seem to bother you." And that should have been an indication, but how would I know that something was not right?

Parents learn to use the discourses of disability, medicine, therapy, special education, and psychology to explain their children's behaviors to the world. These explanations in part serve to defend their children against judgments of the cultural narrative that the children are poorly behaved, low-achieving, and generally deficient.

The first thing that Meredith offers in her narrative is, "Diana is actually, she is a very good kid.... She had a lot of behavioral problems when she was young, and she doesn't have them anymore." Meredith goes on to qualify that Diana does have what she calls an "attitude problem," but she does not leave the criticism unexplained. The perceived attitude problem stems from Diana's literal understanding of language which does not always allow for the subtleties of good manners. For example, when Diana's teacher offered her some peppermint candy, "Instead of saying, 'No thank you,' or just discarding it later, she just went, 'Ooh, that's really gross! I hate those! I don't want it!'" Meredith offers that Diana "knows her manners" but cannot help but speak her mind. Diana may come across as rude, "but she doesn't really see it that way." Consistent with Meredith's ironic positioning of herself and Diana as members of the sound and moral society, her narrative

contains many positive generalizations about Diana's behavior and achievement: "Diana has really come very far.... I just think she's a neat person the way she is.... Diana has compassion and sensitivity.... She has made dramatic improvement.... Socially she has made great strides."

Julia, focused as she is on problem solving and her battle to save her sons from the power of autism, does not make as many positive generalizations about her children. Nevertheless, she offers anecdotes indicating that her sons are not only highly regarded in the community but that they have played the part of hero as well, changing the lives of children, parents, and teachers for the better. When Julia threw a birthday party for Miguel and Alex in the park,

> There were probably about thirty [kids], close to thirty. And [the boys] were very popular. It was very cool. Wherever we go in town, they are noticed, or locally to the markets, and kids stop and say hello, and parents that I've never seen before say, "Oh, hi. You are Alex's mom." So that's something that I'm not really accustomed to. But they are just so cute. And they really have touched a lot of people.... One teacher said to me, "You know, I have been teaching for ... almost 20 years now, and I can't think of another student who has challenged me more than Miguel has, and I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean that in a good way. I mean he has made me examine myself and my rigidity, and I love him. I just absolutely love him." And she keeps in contact with me. She asked to be his first grade teacher after kindergarten.

Besides explaining the past and the present, narratives look to a possible or anticipated future, "a variety of ends or goals — towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present" (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 101). For Julia and Meredith, the futures for their children are characterized by hope for their success. Julia, although frustrated that "this is not going to be fixed ever; this is what it is... the work is never done, never," admits, "There are plenty of other things to look at and feel that there is success here. And their futures are very bright. I have a great hope for them." Meredith, true to her flexible and pragmatic approach, concludes,

> What I hope is that I will be sitting here in...six years, and Diana will be graduating. And Diana will still have her good qualities that she has as a human being. And she'll be able to choose what she wants to do. College? Great. Work at Target? Great. You know, it doesn't really matter to me [as long as] you're doing what you want, and you're happy in what you're doing, and more power to you. That's all I really want for her.

Both the romantic and ironic narrative structures project hope for a happy ending. Hope is a concept that is highly regarded in endeavors from literature and fine arts to politics, yet it is complex and difficult to define in experience. Hope plays many roles and is embedded in emotionally rich experiences that create a

wide variety of kinds of hope. Hope lives in the pleasure of optimism, the determined defiance of adversity, comfort in loss, and persistence in hardship (Birmingham, 2009). "Hope seems to be something basic, like a driving force in life that enables one to keep his or her eyes on the future while in practice acting in the 'here and now.' Without hope, it is difficult to maintain a mental orientation toward life" (Estola, 2003, p. 184). For these mothers, hope is a way of extending the defense of their children's goodness into the future.

By structuring her narrative as a romance, Julia expresses hope for a victorious ending. The plot of Frye's romantic structure concludes with triumph in the redemption of society, the rescue of an innocent from evil or the winning of a treasure, along with recognition and exaltation of the hero. Energized by hope for this victory, she redirects anxieties for her children's welfare into an active force that energizes her to work to help her children develop (Fleischmann, 2004, p. 39). Julia never states explicit hopes for her sons, such as high school graduation or independence, but she does state explicit hopes for changes in the special education system, "a radical transformation."

Meredith's ironic narrative structure is hopeful as well; however, she anticipates not a glorious victory but a sigh of relief. Although Meredith tells stories about Diana's past behavior challenges, present social struggles, and worries about her adjustment to middle school, her prevailing position is that she likes her daughter just the way she is; Meredith does not want to rescue Diana from autism. Meredith believes that Diana's future is threatened not by autism but by an absurd society that does not understand or appreciate her. Neither does Meredith envision transforming the special education system. Although she verbally attacks and ridicules educational institutions and their representatives, she seems to accept that society's injustices and foolishness are permanent and inevitable. Her hope is not for justice or redemption but for endurance and survival in a world characterized by absurdity.

Specific and general significance of this counter-narrative

Danish author Isak Dinesen is reported to have said, "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (Wilkinson, 2004). This axiom is confirmed in Fleischmann's (2004) examination of internet sites published by parents of children with autism. He concludes that "the process entailed in creating stories is particularly important for persons under stress, in periods of transition, when formulation of the life story imparts new meaning to the past and creates meaning for the future" (Fleischmann, 2004, p. 42). He suggests that when parents of children with autism share stories and correspondence with each other, they are empowered to remake their own stories into more optimistic and hopeful stories.

O'Brien and Dagget (2006) expand on the therapeutic value of stories for parents of children with autism. "By encouraging parents to share their stories, professionals can identify the source of parents' ideas and fears and therefore be better able to provide the kind of information parents need and are able to accept" (p. 46). In a study of women who were single, Reynolds and Taylor (2004) call attention to the importance of "culturally available narratives," especially for individuals whose experiences are not congruent with the dominant cultural narrative. Likewise, in a study of women who are involuntarily childless, Kirkman (2003) notes that there is a paucity of socially sanctioned answers to help women reconstruct their stories (p. 251). Culturally available narratives about children with autism are becoming more numerous and accessible, both online and in print, and parents of children with autism can benefit from the stories of other parents in similar situations. Meredith and Julia did not allude to any specific published narratives by parents of children with autism; instead, they draw on the culturally available narrative structures of romance and irony to create their hope-filled counter-narratives. By telling their stories, "parents are empowered and sense that they have regained control and reached their children by successfully meeting the challenges their child's autism presents" (Fleischmann, 2004, p. 41).

More than indicating the specific therapeutic benefits of sharing stories with people in similar situations, the study of these narratives is intended to create a new sense of meaning and significance regarding lives influenced by autism or any other challenge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). The notion that something seemingly as academic and esoteric as narrative structure can promote hope in the face of adversity and defend goodness in the face of a judgmental cultural narrative is both instructive and significant. If narrative structure interacts with personal meaning, so does theory with story, academic with personal, and it is appropriate that this academic narrative analysis is woven together with my personal and professional stories.

That we construct counter-narratives when our own stories are not congruent with the dominant cultural narrative is well documented, and I would venture that any one of us who reflects on the stories of our lives could find a number of counter-narrative threads in the collection. I am withholding the stories of my own son's childhood precisely because I am still constructing a counter-narrative in which I defend myself as a good mother and my son as a good child (although he is now a young man). The completion of this paper comes as my son steps out into college and the larger world, and I do not want my renditions of his childhood stories to follow him. I cannot think of a way to tell those stories while protecting the narrative identity that I see him constructing for himself. The omission of the

details of my personal stories of motherhood is a way to defend my son's goodness. Besides, it is time for him to tell his own stories.

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