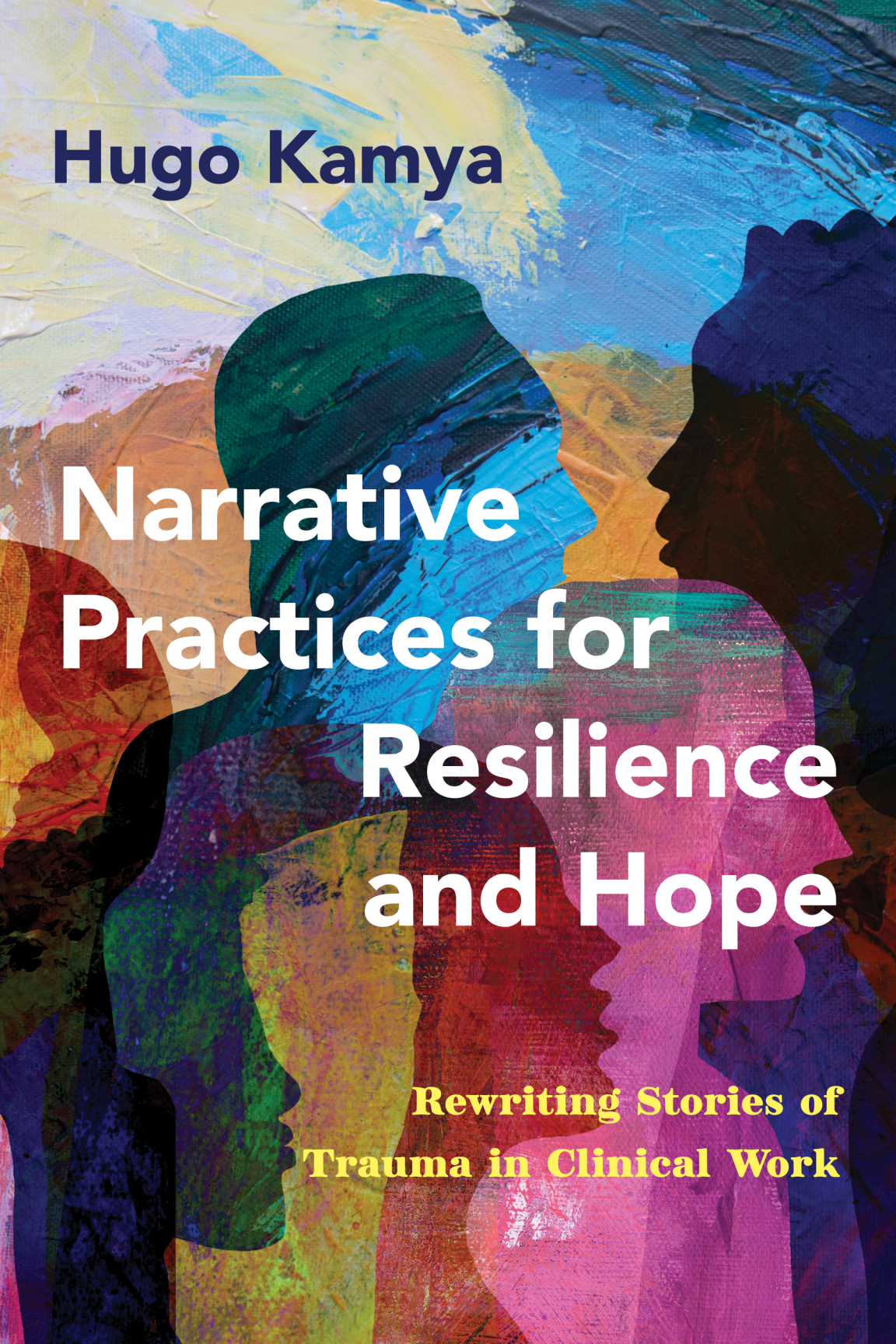


The background of the cover is an abstract composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes in a variety of colors including blue, yellow, green, red, and purple. Overlaid on this are several dark, silhouetted profiles of human heads facing each other, creating a sense of dialogue or shared experience.

Hugo Kamya

**Narrative
Practices for
Resilience
and Hope**

**Rewriting Stories of
Trauma in Clinical Work**

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Introduction

Throughout my childhood in Uganda stories were an intrinsic part of my family's culture. My parents used stories to teach us lessons, learn about our African culture, and help us make sense of natural and relational worlds. They were also a means to communicate important messages and, when times were tough, they were used as a survival mechanism to keep us safe. Stories were also a source of entertainment, rich with folklore and tales based in African traditions. For my family, it was a way not only of preserving our history, culture, and identity—it was a way to bring them alive in our day-to-day lives.

Oral literature is a collection of stories, both myth and history, that ensures people's cultural and historical traditions are not forgotten, used as sources of insight, reflection, and guidance. Folktales, legends, proverbs, and epics serve multiple purposes, from educating children to imparting societal values. As a communal activity, storytelling becomes a collective experience, one that connects us as human beings to one another and helps us form a spiritual relationship to the divine balance of nature.

In African tradition, animal characters possessing extraordinary wisdom, wit, and perseverance often populate stories, each symbolizing different qualities and lessons. These characters represent lives in nature and are used to impart essential relationships between human beings, the natural world, and the universe's origins. For example, the tales of *Anansi*, the spider, is known for cleverness and ability to overcome challenges; *Kamuje*, the hare, is celebrated for agility, strength, and wit; and *Nfudu*, the slow-paced turtle, is recognized as a symbol of

grace and wisdom. These animal figures serve to teach various lessons through their actions.

Along with characterizations, metaphor, proverbs, and aphorisms are used to teach moral lessons and create a collective language that binds people together in community. Some share simple messages, such as “The person who hunts two rats catches none,” which emphasizes the importance of focus and attention. Others are more complex, like “The person who asks questions cannot avoid the answers.” When my grandmother used proverbs, they provided us with a moment to pause and reflect, as they often revealed profound and enduring life lessons.

My grandmother often told us stories before bedtime. Some took place by the warmth of the outdoor fireplace; others were told in fields under the moonlight. One such evening, as we sat outside in the dark, I recall her saying, “When the moon is not full, the stars shine more brightly.” I looked up and noticed how brightly the stars shone that night. Another of my grandmother’s stories that has stayed with me reminded us about the importance of remaining steadfast in any endeavor. She always ended it with a saying: “A strawberry blossom will not sweeten dry bread.” She explained that it’s important to earn what one reaps.

Stories are told in multiple ways. They are performed through music, the spoken word, and dance. For example, among the Baganda of Uganda, elaborate dances were performed at harvest time. The dances are carefully choreographed to celebrate the yield from the harvest of crop. Exuberant dance celebrates a good yield while subdued movements signal a poor yield of harvest. Visual art is another potent storytelling medium. Paintings, sculptures, beadwork, masks, and icons tell stories through images that transcend language and cultural barriers. More recently, film, plays, and digital platforms have been added as mediums of storytelling.

Stories are inescapable: They give meaning, provide direction, and reveal what truly matters in life. I firmly believe, and I’ve learned from people, that the meaning of any event is shaped by the story we tell about it. I love telling and listening to stories, and over the years my fascination with them has only deepened. As a therapist, I have been invited to bear

witness to clients' stories and to explore with them the complexity and diversity of their lives. This narrative journey has opened my eyes to the importance of active listening, suspending assumptions, and willing to be open to multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives.

The chapters of this book are in themselves stories. They seek to engage readers in learning from a range of narratives offered from different perspectives, including those we tell about ourselves and those that are told about us, ones that contribute to who we are and who we are becoming. They are stories of how we make meaning of relationship with others and of the world that are both ordinary and extraordinary, tales of individuals and community. Last, they are stories that come with privilege—to be allowed into others' stories and to be a respectful observer in the process of meaning making and healing.

It is important to acknowledge that while I bring my personal stories and understanding to this work, I am mindful that the narratives within this book are incomplete. All case studies presented, whether titled “vignettes” or “stories,” are composites, created by combining information from different clients' stories. With that in mind, I hope that they illuminate the power and beauty of stories and advance your understanding and use of narrative practices.

In Chapter 1 I tell my story, and by doing so, I invite the reader to do the same. I believe that clinicians have an obligation to stay connected to the telling and retelling of their stories as they influence how we listen to and make sense of the stories clients share. We need to remain cognizant of how formative experiences shape our lives and inform our beliefs, how they significantly impact what we deem important and worthy. When I reflect on my story, certain key elements stand out: my family of origin, my parents' humble beginnings, the politics of turmoil, searching for our spiritual roots, stories told, and stories not told. This chapter welcomes readers to examine their own stories, to find meaning and inspiration in them, and raise awareness of how they may collide with clients' stories in nontherapeutic ways. Being aware and open with oneself about the influence of inner narratives increases the likelihood that one can authentically connect with the people who become our clients (Koenig et al., 2020).

Chapter 2 lays the foundation for understanding narrative practice. Using composite client case material, I discuss key concepts of narrative practice within the framework of culture. Culture is a dynamic and intersectional process that takes many forms, including but not exclusive to one's ethnic, regional, community, or intersectional identities. Narrative approaches appreciate the relevance of contextualizing therapy within a cultural framework, and from the position that clients are experts in their cultural knowledge and experience. In this chapter, we explore and apply these foundational principles through narratives and their analysis.

Chapter 3 explores the transformative power of questions to foster a “not-knowing” and curious stance within narrative practice. According to feminist theorists, “not knowing” is a conscious process of remaining open to understanding another. It requires a willingness to challenge one's assumptions and explore diverse perspectives achieving a deeper and authentic understanding of those we encounter (Belenky et al., 1986). Questions matter and therapy is about seeking answers to life questions. It is also about learning to live with uncertainty knowing that the answers to some questions might never be revealed. Collaborating with clients through narratives is a process of re-storying that leads to new learning and the discovery of new knowledge. Narrative practitioners focus on the generative effects of questions, emphasizing their role in shaping and facilitating meaning making. This chapter presents a range of prompts and questions that help clinicians facilitate collaborative story exploration and foster deeper understanding of client narratives.

Questions are inherently embedded in language. Chapter 4 explores the various forms and functions of language, examining how language influences thought, shapes reality, and is, in turn, shaped by reality. The chapter delves into the dynamic relationship between language and power, highlighting its capacity to both empower and disempower, privilege, and marginalize. Language also plays a formidable role in fostering human connection and relational accountability, which underscores its significance in narrative practices and meaningful interactions.

Stories of trauma are complex and challenging for practitioners, calling them to be present to pain and suffering and engage in witnessing

practices. Chapter 5 explores these practices through narratives of clients who have experienced various forms of trauma. Clinicians are positioned to be key witnesses and play a vital role in holding hope and accompanying clients as they restore meaning in the aftermath of trauma. The chapter draws on Kaethe Weingarten's (2000) seminal work on witnessing, and Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin's (2005) exploration of choice and agency, providing insights into how relational practices can help clients reclaim their sense of self and agency.

Chapter 6 poignantly illustrates the potency of narrative therapy from Rwandan survivors of the 1994 genocide as they continue to reconstruct their lives through narratives and storytelling. It acknowledges the role of colonialism in Africa as a significant factor in the events leading to the Rwandan genocide. The suffering endured is conveyed through the stories by individuals like Rudeka as well as from the descendants of genocide survivors. The chapter highlights various storytelling tools and techniques, such as the use of metaphor and expanding the audience. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of double listening: attending to both stories of suffering and stories of resilience (White, 2004).

Chapter 7 explores narrative practices in therapy with couples that bring intricate, highly complex, and multifaceted stories to the therapeutic spaces. Couples present both individual and shared narratives as they work toward a centering story for their relationship. Intercultural couples navigate complex dynamics as they seek connection and understanding.

Addressing these layered realities requires a sensitive, informed, and holistic approach in therapy. The chapter draws on the influential work of John Gottman (2011), Mona Fishbane (2019), Peter Fraenkel (2023), Jill Freedman and Gene Combs (1996), Thomas Carlson and Amanda Haire (2014), and Michele Scheinkman (2017), whose contributions provide valuable insights into supporting couples in their relational journeys.

Chapter 8 explores illness narratives that often resist categorization and are frequently overlooked. Collaboration with clients is essential to access their insider knowledge of illness, recognizing that these narratives are deeply personal and complicated especially when their stories have been dismissed by others, including health providers and family. In the face of uncertainty, therapy involves holding reasonable hope for clients

(Weingarten, 2022). While modern medicine often prioritizes curing, the need for compassionate care for those with chronic and life-limiting illness has never been more necessary. Clinicians play a pivotal role in witnessing, believing, and embodying such care.

Chapter 9 examines spirituality as a search for purpose, connection, and meaning. Making sense of senselessness, suffering, and often unimaginable circumstances is an invitation to embrace social justice. “Spirituality and justice-seeking are inextricably linked” (Perry & Rolland, 2009, p. 384), and in tandem with commitment to social justice and an ethic of care, they foster meaningful relationships and help people cope during the toughest of times. This chapter brings to light the role of spirituality, beliefs and practices toward healing and recovery.

Chapter 10 focuses on the significance of personal stories as shaped by social identities especially those that exist at the intersection of marginalization and privilege. Client narratives celebrate social identities as they challenge systemic forces of oppression. To be effective, clinicians need to understand how social identities relate to a client’s sense of self, their relationship to community narratives, and to the broader cultural discourses, which may restrict the rich and unspoken stories in people’s lives.

In the concluding chapter, the epilogue, I return to the image of the crack in the window, a defining moment in our family. The crack speaks to how we connect to stories in our life and those of our clients. It also highlights the role of metaphors in storytelling.

No single volume can reflect all perspectives, nor do justice to honor the contributions and legacies of narrative theorists and practitioners, including Michael White, David Epston, Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin, Gerald Monk, Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, Kaethe Weingarten, Sallyann Roth, Bill Madsen, David Denborough, Cheryl White, and many more who have written eloquently in this field. That said, I fully recognize that the following chapters are personally constructed from many sources; what I have learned from those before me, from my own stories, and from the spaces and social identities I inhabit as a Black, African man, immigrant, academic, narrative therapist, social worker, son, father raising children of color, and spiritual and religious person. Like everyone,

my life story is a slice of a tapestry—woven from the narratives that I have chosen to share. It is my hope that elevating stories and the important roles they play in therapeutic conversations will inspire you to value your own stories as well as those that are shared with you in your personal and professional encounters.