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Francesca Polletta

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# How to Tell a New Story About Battering

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## Abstract

As Evan Stark observes, getting domestic violence against women recognized as coercive control will require a major effort of storytelling. Women's accounts of subjugation have to be narrated in a way that is both true to their experiences and capable of eliciting public understanding, sympathy, and action. This essay draws on an interdisciplinary literature on narrative to show why doing that poses such a formidable challenge. In lieu of the tragic form that has dominated battered women's storytelling, and in lieu of the *quest* and *mystery* forms that appear in Stark's own accounts, this article argues for using a *rebirth* story line. This genre, which has affinities with the fairytales *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, seems an unlikely vehicle for asserting battered women's combination of victimization and agency. Drawing on the stories told by battered women as part of a successful reform effort, however, this article shows how women have used the form effectively.

## Keywords

coercive control, domestic violence, narrative, storytelling

Evan Stark (2007) makes a powerful argument for reconceptualizing domestic violence against women as coercive control. However, he also recognizes that a powerful argument alone is not enough. To change current approaches to domestic violence, approaches that are so institutionalized as to have achieved the status of common sense, requires new stories. Women's accounts of subjugation, isolation, and entrapment have to be told in a way that both is true to their experiences and capable of eliciting public understanding, sympathy, and action.

In this essay, I draw on an interdisciplinary literature on narrative and persuasion to show why doing that presents a formidable challenge. My argument, in brief, is that new stories are heard against the backdrop of old stories. As a rhetorical form, stories are persuasive. However, their believability comes in part from hewing to canonical plotlines.

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Culturally familiar plotlines shape audiences' expectations about protagonists' characters, the relation between their characters and their actions, and the conclusions to be drawn from the story. Stories that depart from those story lines risk being heard as unbelievable, idiosyncratic, or unintelligible.

From that vantage point, I develop a somewhat different critique of mainstream approaches to woman battering than Stark's. The problem with accounts hinging on battered women's syndrome, I argue, is that the tragic form taken by those accounts make the woman's plight seem either unbelievable or somehow her fault. From that vantage point, too, I find reason to doubt that the alternative story lines provided by Stark will succeed in changing public views about woman battering. One story line analogizes the experience of coercive control to that of prisoners of war. The familiar escape tale that it draws on generates expectations of battered women's fortitude that are unrealistic. The second story line, which shapes Stark's accounts of women he has encountered in his own practice, unintentionally diminishes the women's agency by emphasizing Stark's own unraveling of the mysteries they represent.

However, I also find in narrative scholarship ideas for yet another rendering of coercive control. Rather than the tragic narrative that proponents of battered women's syndrome have relied on, or the *mystery* and *quest* narratives that Stark presents, I propose reworking the *rebirth* narrative characteristic of stories such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. This may seem an odd choice, given both stories' completely passive heroines. However, the genre captures the experience of living death that is similar to that of coercive control, along with the power of love (which can be self-love) to liberate. When the story is told in the first person, moreover, it makes the protagonist into a shrewd observer of her own entrapment. The result is that she is rendered both victimized and agentic, both naïve and keenly insightful. Drawing on a film that was made by battered women's advocates to reform state laws around battered women's defense, I show how such a story line can work effectively to produce a new understanding of battering.

## The Argument

Conventional approaches to woman battering, Stark argues, are misguided in at least three ways. First, they fundamentally misrepresent what contemporary abuse looks like. An incident-specific and injury-based conception of battering misses the minor and cumulative character of the violence to which women are subjected. In fact, it normalizes that violence by treating each incident as new and below the threshold of criminal assault. Moreover, just as important, it misses the fact that for most women violence is only one component of abuse that also includes intimidation, isolation, and the regulation of one's everyday behaviors, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for one's children. Indeed, this element of coercive control is not only experienced by women as the most debilitating aspect of their abuse but it is also possibly the most dangerous. Stark cites a study showing that the men who were most likely to kill their partners were not those who were the most violent; it was those who were the most controlling.

If contemporary approaches to woman battering misrepresent what women are subjected to, they also fail to capture why most women stay. The question, a familiar one, is unavoidable in cases where the woman is on trial for having struck back at her abuser. To answer it, professionals have relied on psychological explanations, the most nuanced of which center on the effects of trauma and the most popular on battered women's syndrome. As a result of cycles of violence, battered women develop "learned helplessness" in which they lose the capacity to accurately judge the danger that they face (p. 114). Staying with the violent man they know seems less risky than leaving for the unknown. Such accounts miss, first, the fact that battered women often do not stay with their abusers; second, the fact that battered women tend to be energetic help seekers, turning to family, social work professionals, and the police; third, the fact that, far from unaware or unreasonable, battered women tend to be keenly sensitive to changes in their partner's behavior that signal that violence is imminent, developing a *special reasonableness*; and fourth, that most battered women do not display the typical signs of posttraumatic stress disorder.

Stark does not deny that there is a psychological element to women's entrapment. In his alternative rendering, battered women are in a constant battle for their personhood. The control, intimidation, isolation, and denigration to which women are subjected are assaults on their autonomy, dignity, and integrity. Like prisoners of war and kidnapping victims, battered women develop a sharp awareness of the constraints they face and develop sophisticated strategies for retaining some sense of self. They carve out spaces of autonomy in a larger regime of control. Stark describes a woman who deliberately forgot to make the purchases on the list her husband had given her, even though she knew she would incur a beating for the infraction. Such behaviors may seem pathetic to us, but they are vital means by which entrapped women preserve some autonomy. There is a point, too, Stark goes on, at which battered women know that their survival demands more than these acts of resistance. Invoking battered women's special reasonableness, Stark explains that women have struck back at their abusers when they knew that their lives truly were in danger. When the husband of the woman I just mentioned went to sleep after beating her rather than requiring that she have sex with him, which is what he usually did, she interpreted that as a sign that her life was more endangered than all the times he had said he would kill her. She attacked him as he slept.

Having misjudged the character and the ontological experience of abuse, conventional approaches have also misjudged the appropriate response. This is their third major flaw. Conventional responses are aimed at prosecuting individual acts of violence and protecting individual victims. They are not aimed at comprehensive social transformation. However, systemic change is needed, Stark argues. Women, not men, are coercively controlled. Men, not women, are coercive controllers. At a time when gender inequalities have been mitigated in many areas of social life, men's entrapment of women in personal life remains a tolerated (albeit regulated) form of male dominance.

Of course, systemic change cannot be legislated with the stroke of a pen. Stark imagines a movement reenergized by an understanding of woman battering as coercive control. He also proposes a series of concrete changes in the way that woman battering

is policed and prosecuted. Fights should not be policed or prosecuted. Coercive control should be criminalized. Stark would define it as a course-of-conduct crime like harassment, stalking, or kidnapping rather than as a discrete act. He thus highlights its restriction of liberty and autonomy rather than its infliction of physical injury.

## The Stories

To make his case, Stark draws on an array of impressive statistics and research findings, on legal theorizing about the status of personhood, and on the stories of some of the women he has met in his 30 years of counseling, research, and expert witnessing. He tells the story of Donna, whose husband required her to keep a daily log of all her activities and conversations, and then subjected her to violent interrogations about her entries. Cut off from her friends and family, beaten routinely, denigrated ceaselessly as stupid and fat, Donna took a kind of pride and pleasure in forgetting to follow her husband's orders and even in her inability to lose weight. Bonnie, a woman who had finally separated from her abusive husband only to have him continue to harass her, pulled a gun on a man who accosted her outside a bar, fatally shooting the woman he pulled in front of him as a shield. Laura continued to embezzle money from her employer even after the boyfriend who had concocted the scheme died; so convinced was she of his continuing power over her.

The stories, shocking and poignant, do more than illustrate Stark's points about coercive control. Stark argues that telling stories is necessary to advancing political and legal reforms. In court, Stark (2007) argues, stories "bridge the divide that separates legal reality (procedures, rules of evidence, and so on) from the normative meanings jurors and other legal audiences bring to the courtroom" (p. 139). Outside court, too, telling stories about women's entrapment in everyday life is essential. "Before a problem gains public acceptance," Stark observes, "it must be fit into a narrative that evokes public interest in intervention" (p. 371). Current approaches to woman battering gained traction through a narrative of violent victimization. A new approach, one that emphasizes not violence but rather control, and not women's powerlessness but rather their agency within constraints, requires an alternative to the victimization story.

But what alternative? Before I discuss the alternatives Stark proposes, I want to consider the notion that telling stories is likely to be an effective way to press for policy reform. That policy reform requires an effort of rhetoric is undeniable. Laws rarely pass when public opinion is unfavorable toward them. Reformers thus have a great stake in framing their message in a way that elicits public interest and support (Gamson, 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Where reformers are able to do that, they may be able to enlist the public's help in persuading lawmakers, may be able to secure media coverage and financial support, and may be able to discredit opponents. Where they are not, they are likely to fail (Snow & Cress 2000).

The question, then, is how to frame the case for coercive control. One can imagine using rhetorical forms other than stories. Stark cites powerful statistics to document the failure of conventional responses to domestic violence, based as they are on an incident-specific understanding of violence. One can imagine advocates using statistics similarly to

press their case. They might use a point-by-point logical argument to draw out the similarities between coercive control and other crimes of capture, such as kidnapping, stalking, and harassment. Stark does this too, and persuasively. So why even bother with stories? Indeed, one might argue that stories, especially first-person stories, are rhetorically risky. As critics have pointed out, first-person stories are vulnerable to being attacked as idiosyncratic, personal, and subjective. They may produce in their audiences an emotional catharsis but little in the way of practical action or even lasting opinion change. They may be dismissed as “just” stories (see discussion in Polletta, 2006; see also Higgins & Brush, 2006).

However, recent research on persuasion corroborates Stark’s enthusiasm for storytelling. Until recently, communications scholars thought that people processed messages in one of two ways: centrally, where they really scrutinize a message and evaluate its claims critically, or peripherally, where they absorb a message casually, judging it less by its content than by the appeal of the speaker or by the mood they’re in (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Peripheral processing may lead to attitudinal change in the moment but it doesn’t last. To get people to change their opinions requires that they process information centrally. The hitch is that they’re likely to do that only when they already have a personal stake in an issue (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Of course, there are people who do have a personal stake in the issue of domestic violence. However, the kind of reform effort that Stark has in mind will require much broader support, including support by people who have little interest in the issue.

This is where narrative comes in. Recent research suggests that people process stories by a third route. Whether or not they have a prior investment in the subject of the story, they immerse themselves in it, striving to experience vicariously the events and emotions that the protagonists do. Green and Brock (2000) found that participants who were highly absorbed in a story (indicated by statements like “activity going on in the room around me was not on my mind” while reading the story and “I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative”) were likely to report beliefs consistent with those implied in the story. Another experiment probed the dynamic involved. Participants were asked to circle every false note in the story. The more absorbed they were, the less likely they were to see such false notes. This suggests that when they hear stories, audiences suspend their proclivity to counterargue, to raise doubts about the veracity or relevance of the information they are hearing. They truly suspend disbelief, and they do so in a way that has lasting effects. The attitudinal change brought about by stories tends to persist or even increase over time (Appel & Richter, 2007).

This research is tremendously important in empirically demonstrating narrative’s persuasive capacity. Scholars since Aristotle have recognized stories’ rhetorical force, of course, but until now have been unable to explain it. The research is important for another reason, however—one that should temper an uncritical enthusiasm for storytelling. There is an important condition for stories’ persuasive power, the research has shown. Stories have no effect if their message is too explicit (Slater & Rouner, 2002; Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006).

This is not surprising. Readers resist being beaten over the head with the moral of the story. They want the events recounted in the story to yield their own meaning. However, events in a story never yield their own meaning. We evaluate, even understand, what is happening in a story by reference to stories we have heard before. Narrative’s dependence

on plot is a key feature of the form (Brooks, 1984; Polletta, 2006). As we listen or read, we gradually recognize events as part of a David and Goliath story about the little guy triumphing over the big guy or a Pride Before a Fall story about the little guy biting off more than he can chew.

Scholars disagree on just how many plotlines there are. Literary critic Christopher Booker (2004), to whose analysis I will return, argues that there are seven basic plots: overcoming the monster (think: Beowulf to James Bond), rags to riches (Oliver Twist), quest (Jason and the Argonauts, Lord of the Rings), voyage and return (The Odyssey, The Wizard of Oz), comedy (Figaro), tragedy (Macbeth), and rebirth (Sleeping Beauty). All stories hew to one of these plotlines. Other scholars maintain that there are more than seven, and all agree that stories with similar plots can take innumerable versions. The craft of story comes not in the plot but in the telling: in the use of characters, point of view, suspense, and so on. A Cinderella story told well—with a novel setting, quirky characters, surprising twists—will make us truly worry that this time the Prince will not find the foot to fit the slipper.

The important thing for my purposes, however, is that a story that strays too far from the familiar risks seeming unbelievable, unintelligible, or just strange. This poses a real problem for those wanting to use stories to challenge common sense. When activists try to tell a new story, it may be assimilated willy-nilly to the plotlines of the stories their audiences already know. Audiences hear a familiar story, and they produce expectations in line with the familiar story. If they think they are hearing a quest story, they expect the hero to meet a series of tough tests of character along the way to victory. If they think they are hearing a comedy, they expect that the misunderstandings that bedevil the main characters will be cleared up by the end. If the story that they do hear defies those expectations, if the protagonist behaves in ways that stray too far from the familiar plotline, if the ending fails to match up with the expected one, audiences will probably find the story unsatisfying, confusing, or implausible. This is the problem: Even true stories are judged by how well they accord with familiar plotlines (White, 1980).

## **Battered Women's Syndrome and the Constraints of the Tragic Genre**

Advocates hewing to the more conventional view of domestic violence have struggled with this problem. They too have tried to tell a story that is not heard in terms of more familiar stories. The difficulty of doing so helps to explain both why their stories have often seemed to deny women agency and, at the same time, have not served them well in court when battered women have been accused of killing or injuring their abusers.

Let me explain. The story of battered women's syndrome takes the classic form of tragedy. This is made clear by comparing the tragic form with the account of battered women's syndrome given by Lenore Walker in a film about women who killed their abusers (Public Justice Center, 1990). Walker is the psychologist most identified with the concept of battered women's syndrome. As described by Booker (2004), all tragedies begin with anticipation and dream phases. The central character is presented with an object of desire,

that or who seems to fulfill her or his unmet needs. The tragic hero makes what the audience recognizes as a pact with the devil to obtain the object of desire but at first seems to experience only good fortune. Think of Oedipus, Dr. Faust, Madame Bovary, or Anna Karenina. Next comes what Booker called the frustration phase, in which things begin to go wrong. We, the audience, know that this is just the beginning of a downward spiral, but the hero does not. In fact, he commits dark acts that further lock him into his impossible position. In all tragedies, according to Booker, the hero becomes isolated from supportive family and friends. At that point, the nightmare phase begins. The die is cast. The hero has lost control. He or she has a mounting sense of threat and despair. Events spiral inexorably downward. We know the ending will be disastrous.

Now, consider Walker's account of battered women's syndrome. She begins by observing,

Most relationships that turn into battering relationships start off a little more nurturing and a little bit more loving than a normal relationship even. There's an intensity, even, to it that people don't recognize right away. But it's positive. The man calls them a lot, he brings them flowers. He's nice to them. It's the good part of the relationship. And that period of time, where it's really very good, tends to cement the relationship, it really bonds that couple together.

Next comes the frustration phase. "And then all of a sudden, there may be a little incident. Maybe a little push, a shove, a slap. He's angry. . . . And she excuses it." We, the audience, know this is just the beginning but the protagonist refuses to see it. That refusal to see locks the protagonist further into her plight. Walker goes on,

And so you ignore it and then the next thing happens, and the next one may be a little bit worse. But again, you've got a lot of time invested in the relationship and you don't want to give it up. And you think, "If only I could be a little bit better. If I could just cook his favorite food or if I kept the children cleaner or quieter or whatever. If I didn't pick on him . . ."

As in tragedy, the battered woman is isolated from her friends and family. "He tries to isolate her, he doesn't want her to see her friends, he's jealous of her family or other children if they're involved." And then, finally, the nightmare phase, as observed by Walker:

Before you know it, it's quicksand. You're in it. . . . And he's saying, "You think you can leave me. I'm going to scar your face, I'm going to take the children, I'm not going to give you any money, I'm going to kill you." . . . And then you're really trapped.

There is another expectation that audiences have of tragedies. Tragedies are not just stories in which bad things happen to the hero. The hero is in a sense responsible for his fate. He suffers from a "fatal flaw" (Booker, 2004, p. 329)—something that leads him to undertake a dangerous course of action, to throw in his lot with evil, notwithstanding



common sense or friends' counsel. It may be his ambition (Hamlet), his naivety and disobedience (Icarus), her romanticism (Anna Karenina). Hamlet is killed, Icarus plummets to his death after the sun melts the wax affixing his artificial wings, Anna Karenina throws herself under the train. Insofar as the protagonist is responsible for his or her fate, he or she must pay for it. The destruction that ends tragedies is unavoidable and, indeed, necessary to right the chaos that has been created.

Of course, advocates are unwilling to present battered women as somehow responsible for the brutality they have endured. Moreover, if the woman is accused of a homicide or injury, her advocates want her to be seen as innocent, not as justifiably punished. The form of the tragic romance might lead audiences to expect just that: that both members of the tragic pair must be destroyed for social order to be restored. The alternative is to make the protagonist so innocent, so powerless, that we the audience could not possibly blame her. In line with that alternative, accounts of battered women's syndrome tend to emphasize the woman's helplessness, her incapacitation.

The problem with that rendering is that it makes it difficult to see the woman also as a rational agent. As Martha Mahoney (1994) and others (Dunn, 2005; Loseke, 2000; Schneider, 2000) have observed, in our society, agency and victimhood are seen as unalterably opposed. "Agency does not mean acting for oneself under conditions of oppression; it means *being without oppression*, either having ended oppression or never having experienced it at all" (Mahoney, 1994, p. 64). When the battered woman has killed her abuser, emphasizing her victimization has undermined her claim of rational agency. That, in turn, has made it tougher to meet the standard of reasonableness necessary to claim self-defense. The woman who has killed her abuser can assert her agency, telling a story of her actions in which she appears composed and in control of herself, but then she may not be seen as victimized at all. Alternatively, she can emphasize her victimization, telling a tragic story of her spiral into despair, but then her actions risk being seen as unreasonable. They are to be excused through an act of judicial solicitude rather than justified by her experience of abuse. Moreover, if she departs from the stock image of the victim—if she is too angry, aggressive, or insufficiently remorseful—she may not be seen as a victim, no matter what she says. If she is Black, given popular images of Black women as strong and powerful, she is especially vulnerable to being seen as agentic rather than victimized and therefore to being held culpable for actions taken in self-defense (see, e.g., Davis, 2006; Garfield, 2005; Potter, 2008; Richie, 1996).

One way, then, to reframe Stark's critique of the trauma account is to say that the tragic form that account takes forces its tellers into emphasizing battered women's passive and pitiful character. However, that emphasis, in turn, makes it difficult for audiences to see them as rational agents. The fault is neither that of the storytellers nor their advocates. No one is deliberately representing victims as irrational. Rather, the association between women's victimhood and their lack of rational agency is embedded in the many and varied stories that together make up a popular cultural image of victims. In other words, the problem is not so much the stories that battered women tell as it is the stories through which they are heard.

## Two Alternatives: Quest and Mystery

So what is the alternative? As I noted, Stark tells many stories of women he has met who have been subjected to coercive control. In each of these stories, women are both abused and resistant. Stark also presents a second kind of narrative in likening the experience of coercive control to that of being a prisoner of war or a kidnapping victim. We have all heard stories of people in these situations. However, neither of these sets of stories does what Stark wants them to do. The first set fails to account for why women stay in the coercive relationship. The second fails to account for why women leave the coercive relationship. Neither supplies audiences with the understanding of coercive control that would lead them to sympathize with its victims and support the kind of reforms that Stark wants to see.

Stories of prisoners of war and kidnapping victims follow what Booker (2004) calls the quest story line. Think of *The Colditz Story*, *The Wooden Horse*, and *The Great Escape*. In all these stories, the hero is called to undertake a voyage. The call is urgent; the voyage perilous; the goal (whether it is buried treasure, freedom, or paradise) priceless. The hero, who is usually accompanied by a band of faithful companions, must overcome a series of ordeals to reach the goal, with the worst and longest ordeal coming when the goal seems finally within reach.

In the version of the quest narrative that is enacted in war escape stories, Booker explains (2004), "the story's driving force is the contrast between the intolerable constriction in which the heroes begin as prisoners of war and their dream of the all-important distant goal of 'freedom'" (p. 85). A good portion of the story is taken up by the planning of the escape. The protagonist plots and schemes, seeking to exploit any crack in the enemy's fortress, any lapse in his surveillance.

Applying this story line to the experience of battered women is appealing in several respects. It makes the battered woman the hero of the story. It emphasizes her agency and her keen powers of perception. Rather than remain a passive victim, she actively battles her victimizer, who is more powerful than her in every way save her cleverness, courage, and fortitude. However, the story line has a real liability. It may lead audiences to have excessively high expectations of what women who are coercively controlled should do to escape. The protagonists in quest narratives are always seeking escape routes, always scheming and imagining ways to foil their captors; they never succumb to the temptation of inaction.

Few of us have ever experienced captivity as a kidnapping victim or a prisoner of war. Our knowledge of what those experiences are like comes from the stories we have heard about them. The fact that most stories of kidnapping and prisoners of war take the form of the quest means that our expectations of what is reasonable and natural to do in those situations comes from quest stories. Even if all the research in the world tells us that kidnapping victims quite often behave in ways that seem like acquiescence, we still judge the actions of kidnapping victims based on narrative templates of the quest. Remember Patricia Hearst's struggle to convince a judge that she had been brainwashed by members of the Symbionese Liberation Army? Experts' testimony about the effects of confinement, sensory deprivation, selective liberties—all things to which Hearst was subjected—was

not enough to convince the public that she was not a willing accomplice in the Symbionese Liberation Army's plans.

The women in the stories that Stark tells were prohibited, on pain of beatings, from leaving the house; their phone calls were monitored; they were required to record their actions every day; they were threatened if they contacted friends or family; they were surreptitiously or ostentatiously observed by friends of their abusers. However, they were not guarded as closely as the heroes of quest stories. They could leave the house. They could call the authorities. They might be beaten or killed for doing so, but they could escape. My point is not that coercive control is less serious or debilitating or wrong than kidnapping or imprisonment. To the contrary, the fact that the entrapment to which the women in Stark's stories were subjected went on for years in plain daylight and was tolerated by authorities and normalized by community may have made that experience in some sense worse than those to which kidnapping victims or prisoners of war are subjected. My point, rather, is that to make these women's experiences fit the quest story line would require that audiences gain a different understanding of capture than that usual in prisoner of war and kidnapping stories, along with a different understanding of resistance.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, about the actual stories that Stark tells? The stories of Bonnie, Laura, and Donna take the form of mystery. Each story involves a puzzle. A crime has been committed. In typical mysteries, what is unclear is who has committed the crime. In the stories that Stark tells, the question is rather whether a crime indeed has been committed. Why would Bonnie pull a gun on a man who had merely asked to buy her a drink? Why would Laura continue to embezzle money from her employers even after her boyfriend, who had persuaded her to start the embezzlement scheme, had been killed? Why did Donna, angry rather than depressed after killing her husband, not fit the model of battered women's syndrome? The stories are similar to typical mysteries, though, in the sense that initially a person is held responsible for a crime she did not commit (Bonnie, Laura, Donna), usually by somewhat less than competent authorities.

In typical mysteries, the keen intellect of a detective is required to solve the crime. For the audience, the suspense lies in whether the detective will be able to put the pieces together, to extract the logic underpinning the whole. The release comes when he or she does. In the stories that Stark tells, he is the detective. In each case, he is confronted with seemingly damning facts about the woman's guilt. He pieces together the same facts in a way that reveals the women's innocence. Stark does not intend to make himself the hero of his stories. In fact, the very first story he tells, which involves his exposing what police should have known—that a woman was about to be killed by her husband—is intended to illustrate Stark's powerlessness. Despite the clear evidence that the woman was in grave danger, Stark is forced to concede that the police could not have done anything. Until he killed his wife, the husband had not committed a crime. The story crystallizes the problem to which the rest of the book is devoted, namely that existing approaches to domestic violence, focused as they are on individual incidents and physical injuries, are simply not equipped, legally, and more important, conceptually, to combat the problems that battered women face.

So Stark does not intend to privilege his insight and agency over that of the women whose experiences he recounts. The problem is that if you take Stark out of the stories he tells, the stories lack narrative drive. As students of storytelling since Aristotle have recognized, stories require a reversal, a twist. This happened, and then this happened, and then this happened. The last *this*—the denouement—should also make sense of what preceded it in a way that makes the ending seem inevitable. The reversal in the stories that Stark tells is the moment where his reconstruction of the facts yields a completely different conclusion than the one arrived at by the prosecuting authorities. If the women are to tell their own stories, as Stark surely wants them to do, they must provide an alternative turning point.

Presumably, the women who tell their stories publicly will no longer be in the situation of coercive control that they once were, whether because they left their batterer or had him arrested, because the batterer left them, or because they killed him. The women's stories must make sense both of why they stayed and why they left or struck back. The stories must supply a turning point that is both explanatory and dramatic. They must do so in a way that underestimates neither the woman's agency nor her entrapment. Tragedy, mystery, and quest genres do not provide the material for such stories. Instead, I argue we should look in a strange place: fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*.

## Rebirth Story Line

Booker (2004) calls this genre the rebirth story:

A hero or heroine falls under a dark spell which eventually traps them [*sic*] in some wintry state, akin to living death: physical or spiritual imprisonment, sleep, sickness, or some other form of enchantment. For a long time, they [*sic*] languish in this frozen condition. Then a miraculous act of redemption takes place, focused on a particular figure who helps to liberate the hero or heroine from imprisonment. From the depths of darkness they [*sic*] are brought up into glorious light. (p. 194)

This synopsis fits *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. In each, a beautiful princess falls victim to a spell that puts her into a deep, death-like sleep. Years go by as the world within the world remains frozen. Finally, a prince breaks through the princess's trance to awaken her with a kiss. Booker notes, though, that in another version of the rebirth story, it is the heroine who liberates the hero from his imprisonment: Think of *The Frog Prince*, *The Practical Princess*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Snow Queen*. In *A Christmas Carol*, it is a boy, Tiny Tim, who frees Scrooge from his state of miserly darkness. This suggests that the identity (and gender) of the redeemer is less important than what the protagonist is redeemed from: a life-sapping state of living death, a world existing within the larger world in which nothing is as it should be. The story's climax occurs when the protagonist wakes up and is released back into the real world through the transforming power of love.

As a model for a narrative of coercive control, the story line may seem less than ideal. Even if the protagonist's liberation does not depend on the arrival of a Prince Charming,

the protagonist is a fundamentally passive figure who spends most of the story asleep. Conceivably, one could make the protagonist into her own rescuer. However, as she is unconscious, how would she wake herself up? If understanding coercive control requires that we see the battered woman as constantly struggling against constraints, then this story line would seem to fall short: The woman is too passive to struggle against anything. Indeed, the story line should fall short on both counts I identified above: neither capturing what makes the woman stay in an abusive relationship nor accounting for what makes her leave or strike back (except through a miraculous act of redemption).

What makes the rebirth story line valuable nevertheless is its emphasis on a state of lifeless living, a kind of imprisonment occurring in a self-enclosed world, from which the protagonist is liberated in the story's climax. That almost dream state is one in which things that should not go together are combined: the protagonist is alive but dead, life continues but time stands still, the protagonist inspires love in spite of her lifelessness. To be sure, the story has to be reworked from the classic *Sleeping Beauty* form to be made to capture battered women's agency, but that can be done by making the protagonist also the narrator of the story.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside the literary category of the unreliable narrator, most narrators come off as knowledgeable and trustworthy, if not omniscient. After all, we depend on the narrator to grasp what is going on. When the story is told in the first person, and the narrator is recounting events that took place in the past, she can capitalize on the gulf separating herself then from herself now. She can effectively draw attention to her helplessness (then) without jeopardizing the audience's perception of her rationality (now). She is changed but she is the same person. That makes it possible for the audience to attach to the same person qualities that are usually seen as contradictory—here, helplessness and rational agency. If *Sleeping Beauty* were to recount her own experience of being imprisoned in plain daylight, of being paralyzed while life continued around her, perhaps of struggling and being unable to wake up, she would come off as victimized but not pathetic, as made passive but not essentially passive.

## Rebirth

Let me turn now to a set of stories told by women subjected to coercive control, stories that effectively used the rebirth genre to secure a new public understanding of their plight.

In 1989, as part of a campaign to gain the admittance of expert testimony into trials in which women were accused of having killed or injured their batterers, activists in Maryland made a film in which four women in prison for their offenses told their stories (Public Justice Center, 1990). The film was shown to legislators, the governor, parole commission officers, and the public. Remarkably, where past efforts had failed to gain traction, this one succeeded in securing public officials' support and then action.

Interestingly, this is the film from which I quoted earlier in describing Lenore Walker's use of the tragic genre to recount the successive stages of a battering relationship. Indeed, at first glance, the four women in the film seem to contribute to Walker's tragic rendering of their experience. The film is organized around Walker's account of the stages of the

battering relationship, from the early days of intimacy, to increasingly severe abuse, to the woman's desperate act of violence. Statements by the four women are intercut to illustrate Walker's points. Then a former assistant attorney general summarizes the relevant law and calls for reform. The women are not named until the end of the film, and their testimony always follows Walker's descriptions of the stages of a battering relationship, matching Walker's descriptions closely enough to justify Walker's references to "the" battered woman and to a generic battering relationship.

The women seem not only generic but also helpless, so incapacitated as to have been unconscious of their actions. After describing the escalating violence to which they were subjected, three of the four narrators say that they do not even remember taking the action that killed their partner. "I didn't feel my hand pull the trigger. I don't remember shooting him. All I remember was handing him the weapon and him grabbing it and I remember it going off," said one. Another said, "I don't recall stabbing him no 22 times with no scissors." And a third stated, "My daughter said that I loaded the gun, and it will be five years this September, and I still don't remember loading that gun." Such actions seem the opposite of reasoned and the women responsible for them the opposite of agentic.

Yet, in other important ways, the film undercuts this image. The women come off as victimized and agentic, in pathological relationships but not pathological themselves, unable to recount the details of their murderous actions but compelling in their candor and insight. How do they do this? By turning a tragic narrative into one of rebirth, and by shifting the story's point of view from "who I was then" to "who I am now" in a way that effectively combines victimization and agency in one person. Let me describe the second strategy first. Although some portions of the women's stories are rendered vividly, one never loses the sense that events are being related by a narrator. Yet, rather than a clear, obvious "I" who is recounting events, the point of view in each woman's story shifts repeatedly: between the narrator now, who is trying to understand at the same time as she relives the experience of her abused self, and the narrator then, who is that woman. We get two points of view and two images: the women as insightful and naïve, rational and victimized.

The narrators display not only distance from the events they describe but also a rueful irony. One woman says,

He would hit me with anything. He would bite me all over. Pick up things and throw them at me and hit me with them. But I never went to the hospital for anything. It was too embarrassing. I was so determined that this was going to work if I would just stop and just make him happier.

She sounds bemused: Even as she was abjectly victimized, she was convinced of her own power to make the relationship work. The strangeness is the idea that a relationship in which violence is kept at bay only by the wife's unrelenting effort can be said to be working. Another woman recounts,

Soon after we started dating I had noticed that he was kind of possessive and he was very jealous. But I didn't really count it as out of the ordinary; it kind of flattered me, to be honest. I kind of thought, well, he loves me this much that he cares, he don't want me speaking to this one or he don't want me going there without him. And I kind of thought that was really kind of nice—so I must have been something really special.

Drawing out the word *special*, the woman highlights her own confusion of possessiveness and caring. The irony is that her dehumanizing abuse began, in her mind, as the recognition that she was special.

An ironic stance is even clearer when a third speaker recounts her response to her boyfriend's suggestion that she quit her job: "I was like, girl, my boyfriend told me I don't have to work; he's going to take care of me so I don't have to go to work nowhere." She goes on, "I didn't know he was in the process of putting me in his own little prison." Here, as in the previous account, the woman mocks her misinterpretation of her partner's blandishments. However, in doing so, she exposes the societal norms that make such misinterpretation easy. The real ironies, in other words, are that pathological possessiveness in our society is taken as a sign of romantic passion, that the line between violent relationships and ones that are thought to be working is so fine, and that women fantasize about being rescued from the world of work. We, the audience, may begin to recognize that the narrator was trapped by powerful social norms as much as by a violent man—a central point Stark makes about coercive control.

The women also defy an image of themselves as passive victims by telling an altogether different story than the one Walker tells. The story is not about women so brutalized and degraded that the only option they see—"rightly or wrongly," as the film's narrator puts it—is to kill their abusers. It is not about their progressive loss of will but about their discovery of the fact that they have a will. The climax of the story is not the point where the woman strikes back at her abuser but rather earlier when she awakens to her own desire to live. Let me rehearse in some detail how that moment plays out in the stories the women tell.

About two thirds of the way through the film, one woman describes believing that her boyfriend would kill her but not even caring. She wouldn't be leaving children, she explains, and she hadn't even come from a loving family, she says in what sounds like a kind of obituary. Then she describes her boyfriend's beating her in the kitchen as her boyfriend's friend looked on.

But right in midstream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator, something inside me was like "I wanna live." You know, I have something to live for. Something is out there for me and I'm going to get it. And I'm not gonna die, and I'm not gonna let him kill me in here with his friend watching. I meant that.

She decides she wants to live when she is "sliding down my refrigerator"—an odd image. And she vows to herself that she will not die with her boyfriend's friend watching. It is the idea of someone's watching her own murder that is repugnant to her.

The absurdity of the situation is startling, and it is the narrator's recognition of the absurdity of the situation that moves her from passivity to action—we surmise. For in a way that is characteristic of stories (Polletta, 2006), the central transition, the key causal relation, is represented but not explained. That gap—between passivity and self-assertion—is what engages us. “But right in midstream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator, something inside me was like ‘I wanna live.’” This is the climax of her story. Its importance is suggested by the fact that this is in fact the second time we hear her say it. Her statement, “But right in midstream, as he was beating me and as I was sliding down my refrigerator . . .” opens the film as a voiceover to images of a police officer knocking on a door, a woman being handcuffed, and a prison door being closed by a female guard. At the beginning of the film, the statement is easily ignored; when it is repeated, it becomes thematic, what the film is about: “something inside me was like ‘I wanna live.’” In that moment, she wakes up to her own amour propre—love of self—and her amour propre revives her.

When this woman describes not wanting to live any longer, she is the third to express the same feeling. The first woman, who has described her husband playing a sadistic game of Russian Roulette with her, says,

Because I kept thinking, when is the time, when is it going to be? We kept playing these little games with the gun up to my head, and I kept thinking, well one day, it's just finally going to be over. And I really can't wait until it's over.

The film then cuts to a second woman who sighs loudly and says tiredly,

Many times I thought I would die. Many times I didn't want to live anymore. Because what was going on, I thought it would never end. I thought it wouldn't. I said, if he don't kill me, I'm sure I'll kill myself because it was that painful.

The third woman, whom I quoted a moment ago, begins, “And on the night that I stabbed my boyfriend . . .” in a way that suggests her story follows on from that of the woman before. However, her story takes a different turn: As her boyfriend's friend watches her slide down the refrigerator, she determines that she wants to live and says so in a voice that is assertive and powerful, unlike the women who have preceded her.

The film now cuts back to the second woman who, crying, declares, “I know I want to live. No, I don't want to die. I don't want to have anybody beat on me or threaten my life.” She does not explain the change from her last statement about expecting to take her own life. It seems almost as if the preceding woman's story is her own, despite its strange particularity. “I want to live,” she says, echoing the woman before. At this point, the film cuts back to the first woman, who had recounted wanting the gun that her husband put so often to her head to go off. Now, without any preliminaries other than an “ummm,” she says,



So he went and got the gun. He loaded the service revolver. And I was on my knees begging him for life. And for a long time, he was taunting me. And I told him, I couldn't do this. Of all the things, I didn't want to die, I really didn't want to die.

Again, the shift from wanting to die to wanting to live is not explained, only rendered, strikingly so.

When each of the four women describes picking up a weapon and attacking her abuser, it comes after the story's climax. The women seem genuinely not to remember what happened. However, set against their clear and striking memory of the point at which they realized that they wanted to live, it seems almost unimportant. The important point, and the one with which the viewer identifies, is the moment that each woman discovers her desire to survive. The women's stories emphasize their choice to live far more than their decision to kill—indeed, recast their decision to kill as a determination to live. They do not explain that decision—for, in fact, can anyone explain a decision to live rather than die? Instead, the women seem to simply wake up to their desire to live.

The protagonists in these stories were pathologically dependent on abusive men, they lacked supportive friends and family, and they killed another human being. What made the women sympathetic was neither the sheer pathos of their stories (which might have elicited only audiences' pity) nor the fact that their stories made them seem just like their audience (which likely would have been impossible to do, leaving their acts still unfathomable). Instead, the profiled women used literary tropes to tell a different story than the one they were ostensibly telling, a different story than the one that an audience anticipates when the topic is husbands, wives, abuse, and murder. The women's stories shifted the point of view in a way that combined an abject victim and a rational, insightful actor in the same person. They used irony to highlight the social norms that kept them with a violent man, and they used a story line of rebirth to draw the audience's attention to a different point in the story than the one they might have expected: not the moment when the woman decided to kill but the moment she decided to live.

Of course, I am speculating that the stories had these effects. In support of my interpretation, however, I offer not only the fact that, after viewing the film and meeting with the profiled women, Maryland's governor became a staunch advocate for the women's cause despite the fact that he had never before supported legislation to help battered women but also how he explained his change of opinion. "This isn't something they made up," he told reporters. "A long history of abuse, terrible abuse. . . . So I felt that some of them, there was not any question in my mind that they were in danger for their own life" (quoted in Lewin, 1991b). In this and other statements, the governor referred to the women's victimization but then made clear that the women were acting in self-defense. He eventually commuted the sentences of eight women convicted of killing or attempting to kill their abusers and pressed successfully for legislation allowing the introduction of testimony about a history of abuse and about the phenomenon of battered women syndrome. In subsequent news stories, his criticism of a justice system that made it difficult for abused women to plead self-defense was as prominent as his description of their horrific abuse (Lewin, 1991a).

## **Conclusion**

Stories are persuasive. The problem for those who want to use stories to challenge the status quo is that new stories are heard in terms of old ones. The old stories have force not because they are told over and over again in identical fashion but because they appear in so many different versions, versions that navigate similarly between the poles of culturally familiar oppositions. The diverse and variegated qualities of such stories give them the feel of common sense. Against them, new stories cannot but seem thin and abstract, idiosyncratic, or simply incredible.

The solution is not to give up on stories as a persuasive form. Rather, it is to rework old plotlines to new purposes. Neither tragic, mystery, nor quest story lines effectively capture women's experience of coercive control, I have argued. None of them conveys the experience of total subjugation in broad daylight that characterizes coercive control. None of them conveys coercively controlled women's combination of victimization and rational agency, what Stark calls their special reasonableness. Small wonder that they fail in these regards, as the oppositions of physical freedom and control, and of victimization and agency, that they must refute are so familiar as to pass as common sense. Women have succeeded in challenging such oppositions, I have argued, by relying on a different story line: that of rebirth. The story line has made it possible to grasp the condition of living death that is something like that of coercive control. It has made it possible to understand both why the woman stayed and why she fought back. When told in the first person, the author's strong narrative voice has conveyed an impression of agency and reasonableness, even as she has described experiences of dependence and dehumanization.

None of this is to say that women subjected to coercive control should spin their stories or misrepresent them. It is not to say that battered women and their advocates should stop themselves from recounting their experiences honestly and authentically. To the contrary, speaking from the heart probably means speaking in a more literary fashion than challengers have often done when they have concentrated instead on generating a simple, unitary message.

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## **Notes**

1. In Higgins and Brush's (2006) terms, the problem is that the protagonist of a quest story is expected to be heroic: autonomous, responsible, resilient, almost superhumanly

strong. However, the protagonists of these stories were not these things, could not be these things.

- For variants on this theme and strategy, see retellings of the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale by feminist fantasy/science fiction novelist Sheri S. Tepper (1991), horror writer Anne Rice (1983; in this case writing under the name A. N. Roquelaure), and graphic novelist Linda Medley (2006). Tepper (1996, 2000) also has written numerous fantasy/science fiction novels featuring battered or abused women as protagonists (e.g., *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* about a time-traveling geneticist escaping her abusive husband and *The Fresco* in which a battered woman of color becomes Earth's emissary to visiting aliens).

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## Bio

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