

**SYSTEMIC NARRATIVE INQUIRY (SNI) METHOD: THEORY PRESENTATION  
AND APPLICATION WITHIN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN**

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**SYSTEMIC NARRATIVE INQUIRY (SNI) METHOD:  
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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a method that can be applied toward the cultivation of peace, called systemic narrative inquiry (SNI), which invites its practitioners to create shared meaning and connection with people who hold opposing or conflicting viewpoints. The author's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides the context for the method's formalization. SNI emphasizes a systemic view of the complexities of conflict and has as its main form the cultivation of disciplined and creative storytelling. Based on the conceptual thinking of soft systems methodologies (Ackoff, 1988; Banathy, 1989; Checkland, 1981; Churchman, 1979) and critical systems thinking (Flood and Jackson, 1991; Jackson, 1992), this method assumes that perspectives in a violent conflict are subjectively constructed and are representations of various levels of oppression. The paper presents an example of the application of SNI. The method is then assessed for its strengths and limitations and implications for the use of SNI beyond the arena of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are suggested.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict; storytelling; peace; conflict resolution; soft systems methodology; critical systems thinking.

**INTRODUCTION**

The following weaving of theory and experiential learning represents a synopsis of my doctoral dissertation, reflecting not only the culmination of my doctoral studies but an inquiry process that has been in place for years. It reflects the ways in which I have grappled with such themes as emancipation, methods for encouraging the creation of community, and the evolution of humanity, all particularly in regards to peace. For a vision of healthy and sustainable global communities can not emerge without attending to the very real issues associated with violent conflict and its resolution. It is my foremost intention to offer here a systemic method that I have found of great use in my work toward ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Not a means of dialogue as such, but a method in which people can build bridges of meaning and understanding, a core principle of other dialogue methods (Bohm, 1996; Christakis, 1996).

I call this method systemic narrative inquiry (SNI), and since the method has such a strong emphasis on narrative, or in lay terms, storytelling, the form of this paper will depart in some ways from traditional academic presentations. The reader will be most aware of this departure in that the description of the method's practice and principles is grounded in the embodied experience of the author. This is based on the fact that, as the reader will soon see, a core ethical stance on which this method stands is the avoidance of imposing one's worldview onto others. It would be similarly problematic, considering this ethical guideline, for me to suggest a definitive template for others who wish to apply the systemic narrative inquiry method to their work in the world. Therefore, I will offer the guidelines I have formulated for my use as *one* model for its practice. Others may then use this model as a starting point for their own practice of SNI.

In this way and others, I will actually use within this paper the principles of the systemic narrative inquiry method to explain its theoretical presuppositions as well as its use in practice. The form of the paper will therefore weave a narrative sensibility into a traditional academic construct, a seemingly unlikely marriage of styles. I ask the readers to therefore bring a sense of adventure to the reading and to enjoy the novel ways in which scholarly writing and narrative forms conjointly unfold.

### **PRINCIPLES THAT GIVE RISE TO A SYSTEMIC NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHOD**

Before presenting the principles that form the foundation for the systemic narrative inquiry, I want to point out their interconnected nature. It is not possible to present each in isolation and inevitably, each principle's description will relate to others.

#### **Using a Dynamic System of Models**

I begin each meeting with another person by assessing the appropriateness of using with them, a narrative method of engagement. SNI is only one of many models that have value when applied in social situations and applying the methods deemed most appropriate encourages effectiveness and ethicality (Minati, 2001; Minati & Brahm, 2002).

#### **Avoiding Cognitive Overload**

In telling my stories, I attempt to make them as accessible as possible to the listener. Christakis (1996) emphasizes the importance of avoiding cognitive overload for participants in his boundary-spanning dialogue approach (Christakis & Magliocca, 2001; Christakis & Brahm, in press). My practice of SNI embraces a similar priority. I work to shape my stories by shaving away extraneous details, thus avoiding overwhelming the listener with too much information, so that the stories express essential human themes.

#### **Appreciating the Reflexivity of Knowledge**

I accept that my perspectives are, by nature limited and this compels me to reach out to others for theirs. Von Bertalanffy (1968) posits that scientific knowledge specifically, and all knowledge in general is more subjectively based than a rigidly objectivist framework

would suggest. Drawing further on the work of Hayles (1999) and von Foerster (1992) I would like to suggest the notion of reflexive knowledge that is not purely objective nor purely subjective, but a dance between the two. Acknowledging this reflexivity invites me to create a sense of shared understanding with others.

Vickers (1981) points out the importance of accepting the uncertainty, ambiguity, and paradox inherent in design and by extension, life. I embrace this point of view recognizing that it undermines the traditional view that reality is solid and fixed. It allows me to approach reality as a tapestry of stories and meaning that is co-created. In applying SNI, I reflect on my attachment to versions of reality throughout the inquiry process.

### **Gaining New Perspectives**

SNI provides me with the opportunity to apply my commitment to gaining new perspectives. Von Bertalanffy (1968) suggests that one of the most important contributions of General Systems Theory is the ability to see problems in a new light. In addition, Churchman (1979) asserts that the systems approach is, by definition, seeing the world through the eyes of another. This principle is the very fabric of the SNI method.

### **Inquiring Reflectively**

I practice SNI by emphasizing the value of the process rather than narrowly focusing toward some fixed goal. And by calling this method an inquiry process, I recognize that I am *seeking* understanding. This idea of inquiry also brings with it the spirit of curiosity, what Suzuki Roshi (Suzuki, 1988) calls "the beginner's mind", a spirit which opens me to new possibilities.

### **Moving Beyond Current Constraints**

I practice SNI with the intention of moving beyond current conceptualizations about possible solutions to social problems and to begin to picture alternative possibilities that are not yet evident. As suggested by Banathy (2000), this intention to see possibilities not yet imagined, moves our understanding and subsequent framing of social systems along its evolutionary journey. I recognize that I must first be able to envision a change before that change is possible of being implemented.

### **Addressing and Practicing Ethics**

In the process of applying SNI, I reflect on its ethical use initially, as well as throughout the practice, thus heeding Churchman's ethical imperative (1995). The following statement encapsulates my initial ethical guideline for using SNI: *I must not impose my worldview onto others*. This is inspired by Banathy's ethical imperative in the context of design (1996). Additionally, based on the work of von Foerster (1995), I apply SNI to increase the choices of people with whom I interact.

The *application* of ethics, as defined by LaFlamme (2002) is a self-referential process, an inquiry into the complex weaving of different moral frameworks depending on the context and circumstances. This idea of ethics as a *process* is at the heart of my application of SNI.

### **Defining and Assessing Oppression**

Central to my use of SNI is a continual reflection on the role of power and privilege in the method's application. As Jackson (1991) suggests, this is a requisite task toward the emancipation of our systems. In the application of SNI, I begin by clarifying my definitions of oppression and emancipation. I then reveal these definitions to others as the first step toward co-creating a shared framework for understanding oppression.

Ackoff (1988) offers that the act of deconstructing existing power hierarchies begins when the facilitator examines his own posturing as an expert. I examine and re-examine how power and privilege are played out in the role of storyteller as well as the role of listener. SNI works to deconstruct the hierarchy that might arise in this interplay of teller and listener first by acknowledging the possibility of its existence.

### **Creating an Emancipatory Agenda**

The previous principles help me to cultivate mutual understanding with others and to identify the conditions of oppression. This core principle however, serves to confirm that understanding and identification are not enough. Activity toward emancipation is necessary. Therefore, in practicing SNI, I clarify and articulate my emancipatory agenda—the principles that I am willing to champion and the suffering I feel compelled to alleviate. This agenda is dynamic, not fixed, and changes in response to world events as well as to refinements to my personal values and ethics.

### **Reflecting Complexity and Interconnectedness**

SNI encourages me to embrace a systemic worldview that is as diverse and complex as possible. Mary Catherine Bateson (1972) says, "Any kind of representation within a person of something outside depends on there being sufficient diversity within him to reflect the relationships in what he perceives (p. 285)." Therefore I practice to expand a sense of inner diversity by continually embracing the many facets of what it means to be human and by reflection the diversity I experience within the stories I tell. SNI gives me a forum for sharing the nuances of the human condition as I experience it, for stories provide a rich structure in which to depict the many facets and complexities of embodied human experience.

### **Inviting Inspiration**

Frantz (1993) asserts that cognitive processes, although essential to any design, are not sufficient; inspiration and passion must be woven with intellect. I embrace this position in my application of SNI by continually accessing my sources of inspiration in order to express a passion for living in the stories I tell. In addition, Strum (2002) suggests that stories have the potential to create opportunities for a sense of expanded consciousness. I like to invite a reflection of the mystery of life into the storytelling process. Similarly, Hayles (1999) speaks about embodied knowledge, another way to conceptualize experiential learning that occurs beyond cognition. In applying SNI, I practice to connect with the wisdom that is held in my body for this is a personally powerful source of insight.

### **BASIC ASSUMPTIONS THAT SHAPE THE SNI METHOD**

My basic systemic stance is that change starts with the individual, and not an objectified individual that resides "out there" somewhere, and not an individual that I have to "fix" by taking on the role of the expert clinician or consultant. For me, that individual is the most personal definition--myself--and therefore change starts here with me. The reader that accepts this stance can also say, "Change starts with me". This stance carries with it a sense of personal responsibility for creating change and suggests a sense of self that is not selfish. The individual in the framework of SNI is a self in service to others. The importance of the individual is only seen in the larger context of social relationships, for within this stance the strength of any social system is found in the strength of the connections.

Implicit in my concept of change, is the idea of peaceful change, using Kathia Laszlo's definition of peace (personal communication, February 2, 2003): "an active, purposeful, and collaborative engagement in life-affirming relationships". The most basic means I find effective in encouraging this change is the creation of conditions within which it can arise, the creation of a "space" in which change has the possibility to emerge. In order for this possibility to manifest, I find that a sense of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual safety needs to be achieved and one way I find useful to do so is by developing an environment of mutual understanding.

From my perspective, mutual understanding is a necessary but not sufficient condition for creating change. It must be balanced with the assertion of the emancipatory agenda that I continually develop--an agenda that is perpetually checked against my evolving ethical guidelines. I find it important to make transparent this emancipatory agenda and associated ethics, knowing that others may have different criteria for social engagement. The desire to create a sense of mutual understanding is a constant shepherd for me in the assertion of my emancipatory interests so that I do not inadvertently oppress others with my agendas of emancipation.

This method, although starting with me, seeks community and spheres of influence beyond myself. In the development of community, I am able to clarify different levels of affinity with other people. Of importance to the practice of SNI are the following affinity areas. I seek to discover others who conceptualize change as starting from a sense of personal responsibility. I also seek to identify other people who share similar emancipatory agendas. I recognize that through this seeking of community, I inevitably influence those around me and endeavor for that influence to be peaceful.

The " cohesive conceptual container" that holds the various levels of my perceived distinctions with others is the following supposition. On the broadest level, I share some sense of community with every person I meet and therefore I work to develop the largest possible definition of human community. The more I find a human connection with someone, the more understanding I have of her life, the more I see her as one of *my*

*people*, the less likely I am to strike out at her if she expresses a perspective that appears threatening. I like to think of this large human community as my "community of the heart". In this way, peace is not a distant goal but something I practice right now.

## **PRATICE OF THE SYSTEMIC NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHOD**

### **Our Need for Stories**

It has been suggested by Dyson and Genishi (1994) that we actually need stories to help us organize our experiences in order to create a sense of meaning about our lives. Additionally, both Heller (1994) and Bateson (2000) suggest that telling our stories helps us not only feel a sense of belonging in a community but also may be vehicles in creating and transforming community. Brand and Donato (2001) help us understand the ways in which storytelling creates opportunities for integrated learning and Blayer and Sanchez (2002) help us see the rewards of telling our stories toward a greater understanding of cultural diversity. McConnel (2000) explains the need for historical narratives to embrace the unspoken stories of people often marginalized by society. It is this collection of ideas about personal narrative that are at the heart of my practice of the SNI method.

Meade (1995) gently suggests that everyone is indeed a storyteller, even if they have yet to express their stories. I hope that my continued practice of SNI will inspire others to discover their personal stories and to see that storytelling need not be relegated to interactions with children. I also hope it sheds light on the ways in which we informally story our lives in daily depictions of events both personal and global. For me, the practice of SNI has been a way to create a conscious practice out of a basic human activity.

### **Practice Parameters**

I find that the systemic narrative inquiry method can be implemented in a number of situations. I have found the benefit of applying it in daily, informal actions as well as interactions with groups. As I will describe in a later section of this paper, I have also used SNI to structure presentations to a large audience.

Because the method has at its core, the process of storytelling, it is a familiar activity for most people and as such does not require a formal or in-depth educational process in order to begin. This level of simplicity does not however negate the amount of practice that it demands to become skillful. Although simple in structure, I find the method is demanding in the amount of self-reflection required. It seems to me that the systemic narrative inquiry method is one that can be practiced for an entire lifetime and will still reveal new levels of awareness to me as its practitioner.

### **Practice Model: Guidelines for Application**

#### *Listening*

My best attempts to tell a story start with the act of listening. I listen for the emotions of the person with whom I am speaking, for the degree of emotion can sometimes give me a sense of what really matters to the person. I also listen to the general themes of the



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content being shared. I listen for how the details illustrate a larger idea or impression. I also listen for what I consider to be deeper human themes such as loss and grief; betrayal; connection and accomplishment; desire for happiness, comfort and safety; discovery and transformation.

### *Tracking my personal reactions*

I attempt to divide my attention, half toward what is happening outside of me, as in the process of listening to others, and half toward what is happening inside of my mind and body--feelings, thoughts, sensations. When I am speaking, I work to divide my attention similarly, half on what I am saying and half on the cognitive, emotional and bodily processes that are occurring simultaneously. Not only do I track the feelings that arise but I also track thoughts and desires, for instance, my desire to be right, to be seen, to be justified. I also note the judgements that I form.

### *Co-creating a "container" for sharing*

I like to think of the experience of sharing with others as an experience that is being held in a conceptual container or holding environment that is co-created by those engaged in the sharing. It is the development of this holding environment that creates for me a sense of safety and trust. Thus, the stronger the container, the more comfortable I am about sharing. When strong feelings come up in me I assess if I want to express them and if I choose to express them, I assess how they will further support mutual sharing. I evaluate whether to share any material, either a reaction to someone else or a new offering of my own, by assessing whether my statements will contribute to strengthening the holding container.

### *Looking for the open doors of shared human experience*

When I hear a theme in someone's story that relates to themes that are relevant to my life, I make a mental note of that so that I can share related aspects in the telling of my story. Sometimes I ask questions to elicit more details of a certain aspect of someone's story but I tread lightly when asking questions. I am careful to make sure my questions do not become intrusions and I am also careful not to use my curiosity to divert the storyteller from the point she is trying to convey. When I am in doubt about the appropriateness of a certain question, I do not ask it.

### *Finding the soft rhythm of the interaction*

I find that one of the cultural influences of living in the United States during this time to be the idea that everything should happen now. I have had to relearn to slow down so as to allow processes to unfold with a sense of patience. I practice bringing this relearning to the sharing of stories. For instance, if I feel a strong urge to say something, I note that and begin to explore what forces create that pressure to speak. I often choose to wait in such situations and many times I realize after the fact that it was indeed better not to speak from such a feeling of the "pressure of now". The practice of slowing down has also allowed me to see that change is sometimes a very gradual thing and that time is required for intimacy to ripen. When I listen to others' stories and share my own, I experience the development of human intimacy and I try to honor the rhythm of that.

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Pushing to be closer to people or to force change, from my experience, dishonors the people I am with and actually delays the process of shared mutuality.

### *Offering the opportunity for others to get to know me*

I practice telling my stories as a way to make my life more open to others, to make my process as a human being more transparent. When this is my intention, sharing with people seems to be richer. I also notice that sometimes I tell stories to impress people or to prove a point. When I tell stories with these intentions, the stories tend to isolate me and create barriers with others. My experience has taught me that when I share more openly, this very act invites and inclines others to do the same.

### *Exercising self-care*

In being willing to become more transparent and open with others I have come to see that I also need to exercise self-care. In the past I have lived in more shielded ways and though this guarded stance prevented a certain level of openness with others it also provided a sense of safety. Now I have discovered new ways to nurture myself and create a sense of personal safety without needing heavy armor to do so. Additionally, I am constantly balancing the desire to take risks toward being more open with the desire to honor the limits I feel in terms of becoming more vulnerable. Sometimes it is most appropriate for me to refrain from becoming more transparent and sometimes it is most appropriate to reveal more, and the only way I have been able to know the difference, over time, is through practice and reflection. When I am engaged in storytelling with others, I listen for the limits of openness that are being set by them and I respect and work with those limits. I may choose to take a chance to expand beyond the limits, but only after time to reflect and to do so with care. In this way, I take care of myself so that I do not feel overexposed or too vulnerable; in addition, I demonstrate respect for the other person by honoring his limits.

### *Telling the story*

This overarching arena of the practice is intricately connected to all the other arenas with an emphasis on the storytelling process itself. I have read many books that have given me guidance in the art of telling a story. The art of oral presentation is articulated beautifully in several classic texts (Lyman, 1971; Shedlock, 1951; Wilson, 1979) and several writers' works have been instrumental in my development as a writer (Bly, 2001; Goldberg, 1986; Lamott, 1994; Sharples, 1999; Ueland, 1987). Personally, it has been more effective for me to practice the art of storytelling in a written form first; the lessons I have learned through crafting a story on paper have transferred into the art of telling an oral story. When I develop a story, I consider the story's arc, its mood, its layers, its energy, and its ability to capture the attention of my audience.

I do a tremendous amount of editing when I craft a story and I find that my willingness to let go of material is a great asset. I am not afraid to delete themes or threads, or whole stories for that matter, because even if I do not use the exact text I have developed, the process of writing that text brings me the clarity I need to write a more fitting text. I edit as I write, but I find that my most useful editing comes when I have set the work aside for a time and returned to it with fresh eyes. When I feel bored with or burdened by words I

have written, I assume my audience will feel similarly and I start deleting. I always attempt to attend to the elegant flow of the piece.

The most important part of my writing and presentation preparation process is to claim my narrative voice (Bowden, 1999). If I am writing something that I think I "should" write, I examine that imperative more closely and I have learned to recognize when I am writing in a way that does not honor my integrity. When I express my integrity, my voice, my truth, I find that the product has a much better chance of being a lively and interesting piece. I additionally find it important to express my story as succinctly as possible, thus reducing the possibility of cognitive overload for the reader/audience. In addition, I conduct a reflexive process of valuation throughout the writing process; the kinds of triggering questions that I use are listed in the following section.

### **Practice Valuation--Reflective Triggering Questions**

I have found the following questions valuable in conducting an on-going valuation of the implementation of SNI. Many valuation processes are exclusively conducted after the work is completed. However, I have found these questions to be useful in shaping my narrative throughout the formulation process as well as a reflection after a particular story has been presented. I have however, formulated several questions that are best used only upon completion of a certain application and they will be presented as well.

#### *Valuation Questions for Use throughout the SNI Process and after an Application*

Does the story I am choosing have in it the potential to change me, either in the act of shaping its details or in telling it?

What thinking and behavior does this story demonstrate? Does it represent aspects of myself that I want to model to others?

Does the story that I am choosing to tell adequately reflect that change is a continual process?

How does this story reveal aspects of myself through a style that allows people the opportunity to connect with me in a deeper way?

Do I adequately honor different perspectives in the story's telling?

In what way does this story reflect the complexity of its subject?

Does the story contain moments that are inspiring?

Does the story reflect the possibility for transformation?

Does the story encourage a sustainable connection with others?

#### *Valuation Question Most Useful after an Application of SNI*

What do I perceive was the impact of the story on the listeners?

Did I meet my intention of building bridges of mutual understanding with others?

What lessons did the most recent application provide?

How can I improve my practice based on the most recent application?

## APPLICATION OF SNI WITHIN THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

### **Narrative Background**

The formulation of the systemic narrative inquiry method was shaped by my work related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is within this arena that I have applied it, both on an informal basis in my day-to-day contact with people who hold a different political view to my own, and as the method of structuring educational presentations that I make concerning the conflict. My starting point in all applications is to tell something of my on-going development in understanding the nature of the conflict between Palestinians and Jews, and about my personal connection to the conflict. As such, I will provide some background in this paper as follows.

I was raised and nurtured within the Jewish community in the United States and attended Jewish religious primary school, followed by public high school where I was very involved in religious youth groups. I then chose to attend Yeshiva University, an orthodox institution, where I graduated with a degree in Judaic Studies. From a political perspective, I was taught that the state of Israel was the Jewish refuge in a hostile anti-Semitic world and our insurance of never again becoming victims of another Holocaust. I learned that as a Jew, the Holy Land was my birthright.

When I was in my twenties, I had an experience that I like to think of as a wake-up call. Some sort of conceptual alarm went off that required me to live a more examined life. I began to question everything, and relevant to this paper, I began to look at the practices of the Israeli government toward Palestinians. I began to understand another narrative about the Holy Land, that it had been cultivated by its indigenous people for generations, people who had a similarly strong historical and religious attachment to the land as do Jews including, Muslims, Christians, Bedouins and Druze. I learned of the displacement and expulsion of these indigenous Palestinian people (Pappe, 2001) and became very disturbed to understand that another people are suffering so that I can be safe. Mostly these were private explorations; I was too fearful to articulate them within my conservative Jewish community.

Then in October of 2000 at the beginning of the current *intifada* (Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation), I received news that one of my closest friends from Yeshiva University, who had become the rabbi at the hotly contested religious site of Joseph's tomb in the occupied territories, was killed. He was one of the first Jewish casualties of the uprising; I was in shock. His death became a second wake up call for me. No longer did I feel I had the luxury of private disagreements with people in my community. Lives were being lost, Jewish lives, and at a higher proportion, Palestinian lives. As Martin Luther King Jr, said when he finally spoke out against the war in Vietnam, "A time comes when silence is betrayal."

Since then I have become politically active toward ending the suffering of the Palestinian people as a way to end the current violence that devastates both Palestinians and Israelis. I have come to understand that the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are living under a brutal military occupation that strips them of basic human rights, even those that

are supposedly protected by the Geneva Convention. I wish, like others do, that the cycle of violence would stop. But I understand that this cycle, which is kept going by Israeli army incursions and Palestinian suicide bombings, has at its core issues of colonization and oppression that must be addressed.

It perhaps goes without saying that these views produce a strongly negative reaction from many people within my Jewish community. I am called "an enemy sympathizer", "a betrayer of my people", "a self-hating Jew", and likened to a "Jew who supports Hitler". I continue to apply SNI when engaging with people who consider me as such a threat, because from a systemic perspective, we are all part of an interconnected whole. Each person represents essential aspects of the larger community and even if we have the tendency to reject each other and to demonize each other, a systems view suggests that we actually need each other and the community needs each of us. My continual work is to better understand the ways in which I am intricately connected with people of radically different perspectives. I might want to change their views but really what I need to do is further understand and embrace the inherent contributions of those views. By applying SNI, I am able to include more people into what I like to call my "community of the heart", indicating the caring I feel, even for people who call me their enemy.

### **Presentation of Possible Solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict using SNI**

I was invited to present my perspectives about possible solutions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as part of a panel at the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and used SNI to structure the presentation. I emphasized personal responsibility for systemic change that underlies SNI and presented an exploration of the necessary considerations of any solution. I will provide excerpts of the presentation here as way for the reader to witness an actual application of SNI.

"I am most interest in exploring the idea of a shared democratic state. The basic notion that I am referring to is one political entity that encompasses Israel proper as well as the West Bank and Gaza--historic Palestine, one system of governance where all people are granted the same rights and privileges --one person, one vote. I am not interested in determining a specific political outcome with my exploration but instead, I am interested in the process of envisioning such a solution because it gives me the opportunity to clarify some underlying assumptions that are important for any future configuration. The focus of my presentation today will be to look at these underlying assumptions, one being the character of the Jewish State. Even if the more traditional two-state solution is realized, a Palestinian state alongside Israel, the exclusively Jewish character of the state of Israel must be addressed in terms of the lack of rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel.

"I will specifically be focusing on Jewish responsibility when looking at some core contributions to the conflict because my personal style is to address my responsibilities for misunderstandings with other people. For instance, if I get into some misunderstanding with a co-worker, I do not think about what they could have done better but I work on what I could have done better. I hold my community to this same standard and since my community is the Jewish community, I am addressing our contributions and responsibilities. This style does not negate that Palestinians have

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responsibility for their contributions, but I don't believe it is not my job to define that work for Palestinians or to predicate the work we Jews need to do on their actions. "Therefore I will move forward using the word "we" to indicate this Jewish communal responsibility.

"In my mind, it is no accident that the State of Israel rose out of the ashes of the Holocaust. The push to create a Jewish homeland was, I believe, our best communal response to the traumatic overload of that event and before that, to the general European anti-Semitic sentiments that allowed the Holocaust to happen. We ran from our plight in Europe, thinking that if we could create an army and properly defend ourselves with that army, like other nations, we would no longer live in fear. That was our working hypothesis so we ran from persecution within our countries of origins, and went to another part of the world where we systematically stripped the land of Palestine from its indigenous people in order to be safe.

"We built our system of governance and system of defense in Israel based on our perpetual fear of our "hostile neighbors" who we have decided are hostile toward us because we are Jewish. It is difficult for us to see that their hostilities are related to our colonization of their land. We have concluded that an ethnically exclusive state, what we call a Jewish homeland, is our island of safety within this "hostile sea". Here is where we have gotten ourselves into trouble. We defend our island of safety with one of the most sophisticated armies in the world, but somehow we are no safer. The fact that Jews in Israel are at substantially higher risks of harm and death than Jews in any other part of the world is a testament to our faulty logic.

"For instance, in our brutal attempts to suppress the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, we are perpetuating the exact situation we fear most--hatred toward us. Our violence against the people in the occupied territories and the inequities that we systematically impose on the Palestinian citizens of Israel fan the flames of hatred against us. So by our own acts of injustice, we continue the cycle of hate that keeps us living in fear.

"As such, to dismantle the structures of an exclusively Jewish state, is not only the *only* way to grant appropriate democratic freedoms to the Palestinians. But it is the only path to our own freedom as well, because it releases us from the faulty thinking that our safety lies in our exclusivity. To uphold a dream of safety by shackling others has created the continuation of our greatest nightmare. In other words, we can not end our victimization until we end the victimization of others. In essence, I am not *only* working to dismantle the ethnic Jewish state because of my sense of basic human connection with the Palestinian people but because I see it as the necessary step to ensure Jewish communal safety. Further, this will allow for the healing that still needs to take place in each of our communities.

"I recognize that I have been quite vague about any specifics concerning a shared democratic state. It would be fantastic if at this point in time we could address practical concerns--What would the system of governance be? How would social and economic

equality be ensured? Unfortunately we are not yet at that point. The injustices first have to stop, reconciliation has to be worked through and healing has to take place before peaceful existence is even possible. And I believe that we Jews have the responsibility to take the risky first steps in the process toward this healing and reconciliation."

"I want conclude by moving to action. What can we do? And because I take personal responsibility for my role in the conflict I ask, "What can I do?" Although the idea of living in a shared state, in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence is necessarily in the future, the work toward getting there starts right here, right now with me. I believe that the divisions among people that appear external are really reflections of our own internal divisions and that is the place where the work must start. How easy is it for me to demonize Ariel Sharon or a suicide bomber? How much more difficult is it for me to embrace these people and others for what they have to teach me? The extent to which I still demonize members of our collective community is the extent to which I am limited in creating peace in the world.

"Lastly, I continue to clarify my vision and identify the values and ethics that drive it forward. We can all do that, no matter what are the particulars of our vision. We have the ability and the responsibility to guide and shape our futures instead of sitting back and watching the future unfold without our approval. This is our collective work, no matter our political bent and I challenge us to continue that work from this moment forward."

### **Reflections on the Application of SNI in Panel Presentation**

A question and answer period followed the conclusion of my presentation and the people who came to the microphone were by and large people who were very upset by what they had heard. I found myself working very hard in the practice of several core SNI arenas, particularly, "tracking personal reactions" and "looking for the open doors of shared human experience". It was a difficult hour and a half. One of my colleagues commented to me the day after, "it's like the moderator announced, 'now we are going to open the floor for venom to be spewed at the panelists. The first spewer please.'" I worked diligently to find ways to connect with people using *each* of the core aspects of SNI when responding to questions such as, "How could you betray your people in this way?" "How naïve do you think we are--you give the veneer of academic scholarship but this isn't a balanced view at all." "How can you justify suicide bombers?" "How can you trust people who teach their children hate?" "Are you denying that Arabs want to drive Jews into the sea?" Although each of the panelists, including myself, said they condemned suicide bombings, the accusations of our support of them continued. There were times when audience members yelled and there were occasional hisses.

The most compelling moment in my interactions with audience members came when a woman at the microphone and made a personal connection with me because I had gone to the orthodox university where her daughter goes. She said, "We should commend such a fine school for having produced such an articulate person as yourself. In this idea that you have about a shared state, what is going to happen to that school? What is going to happen to Yeshiva University (meaning Jewish institutions in general)?" This was my answer to her, "One thing that I find difficult about these lecture formats is that I am all

the way over here and you are all the way over there. It is hard for us to really talk at such a distance. And maybe sometime we can talk. For now, we'll do the best that we can, considering this configuration. What I hear in your question is a lot of fear." To which she answered, "that's right." And I continued, "I understand your fear. I am also afraid. I am suggesting that we need to look at the ways we are managing our fear and to be careful about the ways in which we project our fears onto others and demonize them. Yes, you are right, it is risky to take chances and to see what happens. I am also afraid, but I believe we must take these risks." One colleague commented afterward about that "moment". "I think you touched her. You planted a seed," she said.

My personal assessment of the experience of this particular application of SNI was largely positive. I was surprised to have come away from the experience feeling more connected to the larger community of Jews and Palestinians due to the simple fact that I had brought my voice to the public discourse. I did not realize that I would become a more active part of the community by my mere decision to speak out. Even the negative reactions I received were positive in that they allowed me to develop a deeper compassion for the predicament in which we together find ourselves. In this way, I reflect that it was a successful implementation of SNI but the application also pointed to some of the limitations of the method, which will be described in the following section.

### **LIMITATIONS**

It seems most appropriate to begin this section by stating what might be obvious. All methods and models are inherently limited and the systemic narrative inquiry method is no exception. Since the audience response to my panel presentation was not wholly positive, it is clear that this method will not resonate for all people and will not be effective in touching all people. In addition to this overarching limitation of SNI, I have identified several other categories of limitations with specific examples informing each. And at the risk of sounding overly recursive, I also recognize that my ability to assess the limitations of this method is limited. Therefore, I look forward to continual feedback from others interested in SNI for its theoretical contributions as well as from those who experiment with practicing it in their respective domains.

The systemic narrative inquiry process in its current form is limited conceptually by nature of the fact that I am currently its exclusive developer and practitioner. When other practitioners apply SNI within multiple practice settings, the method will be strengthened by subsequent associated feedback. This kind of feedback will greatly contribute to further development of the specific practice points of the method and the evolution of the underlying assumptions and principles. The following limitations are the practice-related issues that I have identified as requiring fuller development based on expanded use and multiple applications.

Currently within SNI, there is no mechanism for increasing the understanding of story elements that come from a different cultural context. For example, I make culture-specific references, as we all do, when telling stories and these kinds of references might not be automatically understood by people from outside of the cultural context from



which they emerge. It seems to me that it would be useful to develop a process for bridging these specific metaphorical gaps in meaning within SNI. Another current limitation of this presentation of SNI is that there has been no attention to the application of the method when the interaction between people is not face to face. In other words, I have not yet conceived of how I can practice SNI through e-mail exchanges, or through other internet-related technology.

Additionally, it seems to me that it might be difficult for another person to implement the practice of SNI based on the ways in which I have presented it. It was necessary for me to ground the practice points in my personal experience to honor the ethical system of SNI but it creates a challenge to someone who wants to make it their own; some sort of converting process is necessary. It is not a method where you can "just add water and serve". At this point, it seems to me that I can best conceive of conveying the practice through a mentoring process, but that requires close proximity to the mentor. In further development of the method, I will work with how to better convey its practices so that it can be applied more readily by other practitioners as well as practiced without a formal mentoring process.

Whereas the above-mentioned limitations are a result of a current lack of development, the following limitations are inherent in SNI. First, although the basic guidelines are simple, its application requires a tremendous amount of practice. Because it does not offer a finite set of rigidly defined injunctions, its practice can be unwieldy, anxiety producing, and can require a level of self-reflection not commonly found in various conflict resolution practices. It may be considered more of an art in this way, thus making it challenging to learn and carry out with grace.

An additional inherent limitation of SNI is that storytelling, although it is a tradition found in cultures all around the world, is not embraced or necessarily respected within the culture of scientific academia. To introduce storytelling and the use of personal narrative within this culture presents inherent limitations to its acceptability as a valid academic practice. Since this is the case, I see that part of purpose of SNI is to help create a sufficient level of change in academia such that one-day the use of personal narrative will become acceptable.

### **FURTHER APPLICATIONS AND ARENAS OF EXPLORATION**

Although the systemic narrative inquiry method was developed in consideration of the specific concerns of regional political conflict, I see that it has useful applications beyond conflict as well. One area of application that has to some extent been referred to already is in bridging understandings between different cultural perspectives. People from different cultures who are not experiencing violent conflict also have the need to understand each other in deeper ways and SNI could provide a structure for such understanding. This has implications within corporate environments that are working in the global marketplace as well as in international academic communities. It could also be applied within smaller contexts such as in families were people have married each other from different cultural traditions. Similarly, SNI could be applied to further an

understanding within interfaith communities. Perhaps the systemic narrative inquiry process could also be incorporated into some aspects of school curricula as well, providing a method for students to understand each other on an embodied level, thus supporting Gardner's (1993) notion of multiple intelligence.

Additionally, I think it will be important for me to begin to further explore how SNI fits within the larger spectrum of methods aimed at conflict resolution as well as methods that are conceptualized by the systems community for other social system applications. In a sense, the application of the boundary-spanning dialogue method (Cogniscope/Interactive Management) between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots (Christakis and Brahm, in press, Broome, 2002) marks the first intersection between these otherwise distinct fields. This intersection is therefore very interesting for me as a future research interest as well as practice arena. I would additionally like to explore how the SNI process can support the boundary-spanning dialogue methodology as well as understand how boundary-spanning dialogue can support the work of SNI.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the systemic narrative inquiry method, presenting its basic systemic philosophical and foundational assumptions. In addition, I have provided practice guidelines for its use. In order to further illuminate the method, I have offered an example of its application in the form of a presentation made considering solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have additionally outlined some of the limitations of the method as well as presented suggestions for its use beyond applications within a violent conflict.

This paper has not only presented a method, however. In the style of presentation, I have invited readers to further explore the ways in which they define systems and systemic change, specifically the ways in which an individual can be understood as a complex system. Considering the importance of the connections between individuals within our social systems has by extension been explored as it relates to the development of SNI. I offered these ideas in addition to the specifics of the method.

I would like to conclude by referring to Von Foerster (1992), who speaking of the human-language "dance" asks, "With whom are you going to dance your story?" This is precisely the question SNI explores. The systemic narrative inquiry method has become an important personal practice guide for me in dancing the beautiful language dance that creates a complex story of human conflict.

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