

Emerging Horizons, Part Six. Bethany's Story: Layers of Meaning

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Abstract

This sixth installment of the *Emerging Horizons* series explores Bethany's digital storytelling (DST) experience (please see the introductory editorial, *Crafting Meaning, Cultivating Understanding*, to access the documentary film on which the series is based). In the film, Bethany demonstrates how a digital story can become both a signpost and a monument in the life of an Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) cancer survivor by indicating how they have changed, providing direction for their future selves, and creating a reminder of the meaningful moments that happened along the way. Her experience also reveals how DST can help participants craft a story with many layers of intentional meanings while the plurivocality of word, image and compositional elements of DST enables a profound hermeneutic excess (i.e., $x = x+$) and ensures that what is contained in a digital story is always more than what was intended by the storyteller. Using the screenwriting framework of the "said, unsaid, and unsayable," and Nicholas Davey's concept of "aquifers of meaning," I (Lang) demonstrate how a digital story artwork can act as an artesian well, providing AYAs and their friends and family an encounter with the "unsayable," by bringing to the surface what has been mute and beyond awareness.

Keywords

hermeneutics, digital storytelling, adolescents and young adults, psychosocial oncology, narrative interventions, arts-based methodology, documentary filmmaking

As a long-term cancer survivor (over 10 years), Bethany had lived through many of the same experiences described by the other adolescent and young adult AYAs in *Emerging Horizons*. She was told early on that her cancer would eventually come back, and therefore had learned to live

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with uncertainty in the same way as Kenzie. She also understood Amanda's experience of mourning the loss of a growing family as she made the decision to not have more children (after a conversation with her oncologist where she was asked, "how many children do you want to leave behind?"). Like Harmony, she had also learned to live with a constant reminder of her cancer due to a prominent scar on her face and neck. She had put on brave face for her friends and family through the blog she wrote during cancer treatments in the same way Kelsey had "smiled harder" through her delayed diagnosis. Finally, she understood, like Derek, the challenge of conveying the nuance and meaning of her cancer story in words alone, and had registered for this DST research project because it presented an opportunity to craft a new version of her story.

Bethany's cancer experience contained echoes of all the storylines in the film and this understanding, combined with her artistic background, enabled her to amplify the interpretive richness of the group interactions during the workshop. In particular, her creative suggestions in the story circle were often incorporated into other participants' digital stories, and her response to each story during the small group screening provoked multiple engaging conversations.¹ Through Bethany's interactions with the other AYAs in *Emerging Horizons*, we see the co-creative nature, and hermeneutic excess, of the DST process on full display.

Part of Bethany's ability to look beyond the surface level story and offer creative suggestions and interpretations came from her own extensive reflective writing experiences with blogging and journaling throughout her life ("I have stacks of journals"). During her initial interview for *Emerging Horizons*, she produced a binder containing the paper copy of her cancer treatment blog, describing it as her "story shame" as she opened it for me to review. I was visibly surprised by this description and sat awkwardly looking at the binder until she explained that now (10 years later) she no longer agreed with many of the things she had written. I responded:

Mike: Yeah! The interesting thing about a story is that you put it out into the world, and it stays static, but you continue to change.

Bethany: Absolutely, and that is kind of what excited me about this opportunity because I am really at a place where I do need to look at my story again . . . I want to do that work to look at that story and embrace it, and be thankful for that Bethany in 2007 . . . but then also let that go and look at Bethany in 2019 and how it has shaped me today.

It was clear in this exchange that Bethany was hoping to "do that work" of reconciling the past and present versions of herself through involvement in the DST workshop, a unique motivation amongst the workshop participants.

The inner conflict of Bethany's reconciliation process was apparent throughout the film, even as the specifics of what was being reconciled remained purposefully unclear. This context may also explain both the structure of Bethany's digital story (e.g., she speaks directly to herself, friends, and family in the middle section of her story) and why she continually emphasized that she was making a digital story for her own edification, not for the benefit of others ("this is 100% for myself!"). Notwithstanding this focus on personal reconciliation, Bethany was acutely aware of the implications of the digital story process as indicated through one exchange in the evening introductory session:

Mike: You got a few things written down.

Bethany: Yeah. Yeah, I know what it is. [I'm] just, ummm. Very like, ahhh. Anxious about sharing it.

Mike: Yeah? And why is that?

Bethany: Ummm, it's because of a feeling that the community that supported me so much would be angry, or . . . [long pause]

Mike: Not understand?

Bethany: . . . yeah.

This short conversation indicated that Bethany did care about the implications of her story beyond her own edification, despite her assertions to the contrary. Specifically, she recognized that the process of re-storying and reconciling her past and present self through a publicly available digital story and documentary film came with certain risks: in every digital story there are real life actors, and therefore every word, image, and compositional element has implications beyond the story itself. She would need to be tactful and creative in how she crafted the story.

Bethany's deep understanding of the other AYAs' experiences, her desire to reconcile her past and present self, and her acute awareness of the implications of her digital story combine to create one of the more nuanced and conflicted storylines in *Emerging Horizons*. There were many aspects of Bethany's experience left unsaid, and other aspects that were simply unsayable. Consequently, Bethany's DST experience afforded a unique opportunity to explore how AYAs can craft digital stories that act as markers in their lives, are layered with meaning, and contain profound hermeneutic excess.

Marking the Path: Digital Stories as Signposts and Monuments

Bethany: You put a story out there because that's a marker for where you are at. I didn't have a marker up until that [creating digital story].

Bethany was standing at the frontier of many profound life changes when she participated in the DST workshop. One of these was the 10-year anniversary of completing her cancer treatments for synovial sarcoma. In her own words, "statistics for my type of cancer go up to 10 years," and having passed this landmark a few months prior, she was now moving into unknown territory in her cancer survivorship experience. She had been told that her cancer would certainly come back, and like Derek and Kenzie, had been wandering the wilderness of cancer survivorship for a long time, learning to live with the uncertainty that comes from never hearing the word "cured" (Yang et al., 2019). Therefore, as she stood on the edge of this unexpected frontier, the DST workshop provided an opportunity to place a "marker" at this transitional boundary moment in her life.²

Both the noun and verb form of the word "mark" come from the same proto-Indian-European (PIE) root of **merg* meaning boundary or boarder, however, the noun and verb meanings have diverged and converged throughout the centuries (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). As a noun, "mark" was tied to the idea of a frontier, boundary, or borderlands before it evolved into a "pillar, post, etc. as a sign of a boundary," through to "a sign in general," and finally to its modern usage as an "impression or trace forming a sign" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Narrative-informed emotion-focused therapy employs its modern usage to indicate how different types of

stories act as “problem markers” (i.e., same old story, empty stories, unstoried emotion, and broken stories) or “meaning-making markers” (i.e., untold stories, unique outcome stories, and healing stories) that have potential to cultivate change in a person’s self-story (Angus & Greenberg, 2011). However, the sense in which Bethany used the word “marker” in the quote above appears closer to the meaning of “a sign in general” that marked not only where she was currently in her life, but where she wanted to go and where she had been. Said differently, Bethany’s digital story could be seen as a signpost and a monument, marking her life’s path.

A signpost is a marker that contains information about direction and distance (Oxford University Press, 2019). A digital story can act as a life signpost because it contains a significant amount of information in only three minutes (Laing et al., 2017), can convey important life lessons (Lang et al., 2019), and be aspirational in nature (Staley & Freeman, 2017). In a similar way to other facilitated creative writing activities (Bolton et al., 2004; Lent, 2009; Moules, 2000), a digital story could indicate movement and provide direction for AYAs as they move forward in their lives post-treatment.

As a signpost, digital stories can help AYAs mark the path they would like to follow by directly or indirectly transmitting beliefs, attitudes, and values (i.e., speak directly *to themselves*, or speak indirectly *through the story*). The indirect transmission of beliefs, attitudes, and values is evident to some degree in all the AYAs’ stories in *Emerging Horizons* (e.g., Harmony: focus on what matters, Kelsey: live without a mask, Derek: release emotions, Kenzie: embrace uncertainty), but Bethany was the only participant who chose to use the direct approach. As someone who blogged and journaled extensively throughout her life, Bethany intuitively understood how a story can be a valuable signpost and chose to directly speak to her future self throughout the middle didactic section of her digital story. Here she directly communicated her beliefs, attitudes, and values through the story as she spoke to her daughter (“child of the sun”), partner (“dearest companion”), friends, and the world (“humanity”). She then spoke to herself (“beautiful body...to my mind”) and ended with a personal affirmation (“gentle, pure spirit”). Bethany clearly recognized that it was her responsibility to place signposts in her life, and she directly embedded her current horizon of understanding (i.e., beliefs, attitudes, values) into the digital story to help mark the path she wanted to take into the future.

Additionally, digital stories as signposts could help AYAs determine the distance travelled (i.e., personal growth, maturity, understanding, etc.). Kenzie recognized personal growth in herself through the content of her two digital stories in the same way that Bethany recognized her own transformation from the “2007 self” represented in her blog, to the “2019 self” that she embodied in her digital story. This reveals the positive and productive side of the “story shame” Bethany described: by creating signposts (like a digital story), AYAs may be able to more easily recognize and appraise changes in their own understanding of the world. By crafting a digital story about their cancer experience, AYAs have an opportunity to qualitatively assess their own post-traumatic growth over time (Koutrouli, 2012). Indeed, this is exactly what Bethany had in mind for her digital story. In her initial interview, she mentioned that watching her digital story in 10 years will likely incite “story shame” again, leading to the need to craft another one (i.e., place a new signpost). This statement alludes to the difficulty of measuring personal growth during the daily slog on the well-worn paths of life and also reveals that when a frontier is

reached (e.g., 10-year survival), placing a marker – a signpost – allows AYAs to acknowledge and appreciate the distance travelled and the effort of “the journey.”

Finally, as time passes, a digital story signpost made by an AYA can represent more than a means for self-direction and appraisal; it can become a monument. The word monument comes from the PIE root **moneie* which means “to make think of, remind,” with the Latin root *monumentum* meaning literally “something that reminds” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). A signpost can help determine direction and distance travelled, but a monument is a *reminder* of the meaningful moments that happened along the way.

Bethany had been changed by her experiences while wandering the wilds of cancer survivorship and she wanted to craft a digital story that could act as a reminder of *why* and *how* she had changed. Leveraging the power of a single metaphor, the garden, Bethany created a monument to those 10 years. Specifically, the animated garden time lapse component of her story provided a visual representation of her transformation while her voiceover highlighted the slow change from a neat and ordered world before cancer to one where “the wildness grew over me and enveloped all pieces of my former life.” The time lapse sequences and poetic language served as a reminder of all that she had learned and how she had changed during her travels through the wilderness of cancer survivorship, without explicitly stating all the specific elements of her transformation.³

Importantly, Bethany’s digital story is a monument that conserved, not preserved, the meaningful moments of her cancer survivorship experience. The difference between these two purposes is best articulated through a description of therapeutic letter writing with families experiencing illness:

To preserve is to hold something in its sameness, to protect and save it from spoiling, whereas to conserve means to keep from being damaged, lost, or wasted. These letters serve to conserve the memories, accounts, and meaningfulness of a point in time, an event in suffering and healing; *they do not try to keep it the same or save it from reinterpretation* [emphasis added]. (Moules, 2009, p. 40)

Digital stories keep the life-changing moments surrounding a cancer experience from being wasted or lost by firmly planting a monument in the ground of lived experience, but they do not save those experiences from interpretation or reinterpretation (e.g., “story shame”). Digital stories, like all artwork, cultivate “a crucial interplay between analytical and speculative aspects of meaning” (Davey, 2013, p. 9), and do not simply mark the surface world like a signpost or monument on a path; they also point downwards, marking what lies underneath, encouraging viewers and the storytellers themselves to dig deeper. New, deeper understandings can always be unearthed from the fertile soil below a digital story marker.

Stories Within a Story: Layers of Meaning in Digital Storytelling

Kelsey: Every time I watch it again, you know, you find more and more things.

Bethany: Awww. I appreciate that [Smiling].

As a writer and artist, Bethany was aware of the challenges she would face in creating a publicly available digital story meant to reconcile the past and present versions of herself. This was demonstrated by her opening line in the film, “it’s going to be really hard on many different levels.” This intuition proved true throughout her DST experience, from finding and telling the story (“emotionally, it was hard”), to crafting the story (“I’m having technical issues”), and finally, sharing her story (“no one is going to get this”). However, this opening line also pointed to one of the most important elements of Bethany’s DST experience: there were many different levels to both her digital story and her experiences in the film. On camera, Bethany talked about her cancer experience, but the reconciliation between her “2007 self” and “2019 self” involved much deeper personal “work.” Similarly, Bethany’s digital story was a marker of her cancer survivorship experience, but there were multiple layers of meaning about entirely different aspects of her life embedded below the surface, accessible only to the friends and family who knew where to dig. As an artist, Bethany understood the interpretive potential available in the plurivocity of words, images, and composition (Davey, 2013), and she fully exploited this potential to entrench multiple stories within her story.

McKee (2016) provided a pertinent characterization of the phenomenon of layered meaning through his description of the “said,” the “unsaid,” and the “unsayable.” Although these concepts are discussed in terms of writing dialogue for the stage, page, or screen, they provide useful language to cultivate an understanding of layered meaning in DST. Briefly, the “said” are the words, ideas, and emotions that one chooses to express overtly to others (i.e., the text; McKee, 2016). The “unsaid” are the experiences, thoughts, and feelings that are deliberately withheld, implied, or expressed covertly (i.e., the subtext; McKee 2016). Finally, the “unsayable” are subconscious urges, desires, or understandings that cannot be expressed “because they are mute and beyond awareness” (McKee, 2016, p. xiv). In the context of DST with AYAs, the “said” are the words, images, and compositional elements that an AYA chooses to utilize in their story, while the “unsaid” could be the experiences, thoughts, and feelings, that are withheld, implied, or expressed covertly in and through the story. The reasons for selecting a particular word or image, and other editing decisions made during the crafting phase, could also be considered part of the unsaid as the audience does not have access to all the choices and revelations of creative process that are embodied the digital story (Lang et al., 2019).

An example of the gap between the “said” and “unsaid” from Bethany’s DST experience occurred during an editing discussion with me about the end of her digital story. As we watched a silhouetted video of her rising out of a mountain lake at dusk (the said) she stated, “this is the end scene that I kind of want to represent a re-baptism.” As she did not use the word “re-baptism” in her story, it is clear that she chose to leave the meaning of that particular video in her story “unsaid.” Likewise, she did not explain in her digital story that: a) the music was her grandfather playing old hymns on the accordion, b) all the beginning photos of her story were in her grandmother’s garden, or c) the rainbow dress at the end of her time lapse sequence resembled the dress she wore to her 10-year cancer-free party. All of these particular elements of her story were related to the personal reconciliation of past religious beliefs with her current belief system, however, this layer of meaning was only disclosed in conversations about her story, not in the story itself. Therefore, in the screening of her digital story, only her close friends and family could understand the significance of those particular audiovisual components. By choosing to include those elements Bethany purposely entrenched a deeper layer of meaning into her digital

story. To borrow the idiomatic phrase, the deeper meaning of personal religious reconciliation in her story was “hidden in plain sight” for the majority of the screening audience.

This example demonstrates how the space between what is “said” (i.e., words, images, composition), and what is “unsaid” (i.e., feelings, thoughts, reasons)⁴ enables a prolific layering of meaning in a single digital story and produces many possible interpretations contingent on the knowledge or awareness of the audience (both Kenzie and Derek also provided clear examples of layered meaning by including photos of friends who had died). In Bethany’s story, religious reconciliation was only the first layer of meaning below the surface-level cancer survivorship story. She purposely crafted her story with multiple strata and only revealed the other deeper layers to me, about completely different aspects of her life, after the filming was complete. By layering multiple meanings into all the words, images, and compositional elements of her story, Bethany was able to convey to the audience the “growth and transformation that [she] took on [her 10-year cancer survivorship] journey,” while also reconciling her past and present self and creating an important life signpost, all in just over three minutes. Bethany’s DST experience demonstrates that every word, phrase, or compositional element in an AYA’s digital story could “say 1000 words,” or perhaps, hold “1000 meanings.”

For the practiced artist, the possibilities available in the space between the “said” and “unsaid” are profound, however there is still another layer of meaning accessible in a digital story, the “unsayable.” Indeed, the “more and more things” Kelsey referred to in the quote that opened this interpretation goes beyond what has been discussed this far. Digital stories, as artwork, can extend deep below the surface of a cancer experience, providing access to aquifers of meaning surging below (Davey, 2013).

The Unsayable: Accessing Aquifers of Meaning Through Digital Storytelling

Bethany: [I’m] trying to share things in a way that is a little more abstract, and it’s challenging because I feel, like, it’s almost too abstract. Like, are people going to get the message?

With the context provided in this chapter, the answer to Bethany’s question, “are people going to get the message?” becomes clear: yes, *and* no, *and* more so. First, *yes*; during the friends and family screening, the words, images, and compositional components of the “said” created a fusion of horizons and enabled the audience to understand something of Bethany’s experience. To most audience members her story was a metaphorical and symbolic representation of the transformation and personal growth that occurred during 10 years of cancer survivorship (“It was beautiful the way you relayed your story in such an analogous way”). It was also clear that the story was an important marker (signpost and monument) for Bethany at this particular point in her life (“I liked how you talked to your soul at the end. Cause at the end of everything, like, your soul is who you are!”).

Also, *no*; the stories within the story, the choices made within the creative process, and the space between what was said and what was meant, ensured that the “unsaid” in Bethany’s story was only accessible to her friends who had additional knowledge of her life. The rest of the audience understood *something* of Bethany’s story, but not *everything*. To some extent, the message of

Bethany's story was, and will remain, buried deep below the surface components of her digital story.

The final piece of the answer to Bethany's question is *more so*; the plurivocity of words, images, and composition, the ever-shifting horizons of understanding, and the "always already" involvement of language, culture, and history, ensures that the message contained in a digital story is always *more than* what is intended by the storyteller (i.e., $x = x+$; Davey, 2013). It is here that the profound possibilities of DST with AYAs are finally tapped: every digital story has the capacity to bore through the surface experience of cancer and all the intended messages of the storyteller, said or unsaid, to access the ever-present "aquifers of meaning" (Davey, 2013, p. 28) coursing beneath it all. A digital story as an artwork can act as an artesian well (i.e., a well from which water flows under natural pressure without pumping), providing AYAs and their friends and family an encounter with the "unsayable," bringing to the surface what has been mute and beyond awareness.

There were multiple examples of new understandings springing forth from Bethany's story, despite the fact that it was, by design, the most enigmatic of all the stories in *Emerging Horizons*. One of the more profound responses to Bethany's story was from Kelsey's best friend:

I think the amount of gratitude she has as well, and not only for people, but for her body. I think a lot of people would've [been] very angry at [their] body, but to say now that she is very thankful for it really, really struck me. And that's [pause], that's really amazing.

Bethany's personal digital story, a single "case" (Moules et al., 2015, p. x) that she created primarily for her own edification, pointed to a universal idea (i.e., having gratitude for one's body) that spoke in a compelling way to another young woman who had never experienced cancer.

Although Bethany had a particular audience and message in mind as she crafted her digital story, the artistic nature of DST meant that "the message" would always be more than what she intended, and never fixed or finalized (See Interlude Two). This occurs because:

Once placed in external form, words [images, and compositions] can shift and mold, become something else, and be moved to other contexts, other applications, and other relationships, and in this process "thinking is freed of its bonds of time and event." (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 190, as cited in Moules, 2009)

Once Bethany crafted a digital story of her cancer experience and chose to share it with an audience, a dialogue *with the story* began (Davey, 2013; Gadamer 1960/2004). Her words, images, and compositional elements were intended to mean something specific (said and unsaid), but because they belong to spoken or visual language, they are always in motion, relentlessly burrowing through her own intentions to the aquifers of meaning below (the unsayable). The other participants might have had a deeper understanding of the said elements of her cancer survivorship experience, and her friends and family might have had more ready access to the unsaid elements of the story, but as an artwork, everyone had access to the unsayable world of meaning and understanding that attends all language and experience. Despite her concerns about

the “artsy fartsy, abstract” nature of her digital story with many layers of meaning, Bethany’s story proved to be as piercing as a diamond drill bit, boring into the unsayable aspects of human experience beyond her awareness and intention. In her story, it is evident that an AYA’s digital story is never only about cancer; it is about all of life.

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¹ Some of Bethany's creative suggestions included the traveling time-lapse videos fading into the "open road" in Harmony's story, Kelsey's mask metaphor, and Kenzie's ideas around learning to live with uncertainty. Her interpretations highlighted the two random "mistakes" in Harmony's story, the use of the family photo overlays in Derek's story, and Kelsey's visual representation of being stuck in a routine of "smiling harder," to name a few.

² As will be discussed later, Bethany's story had many layers of meaning, and perhaps the 10-year cancer survivorship frontier was one of the least important as she did the "work" to reconcile her past and present self. Nonetheless, it was a frontier that she mentioned multiple times in her interviews and throughout the DST workshop.

³ There is an interesting parallel between Bethany's description of "story shame" and the current trend of removing monuments of controversial historical figures. There is a natural desire to hide, dismantle, or cover over stories we are ashamed of, and at this particular cultural moment it could be important to rediscover the etymology of the word "monument:" its primary purpose is to remind us of the past, not to endorse, glorify, or justify it. Both Bethany's blog and her digital story served an important purpose as a reminder in the midst of her ever-changing beliefs, attitudes, and values.

⁴ The formulation of this same concept in hermeneutic philosophy would be the space between what is said and what is meant, or the difference between expression and thought.