Change is the narrative

BY CARMEN G. FARRELL

I used to think my twenty-three-year-old son was broken, that his impairments made him "less than." It was the predominant narrative about disability when I was growing up, a story I'd internalized as "the truth." It originated from an even older story about eugenics promoted by Francis Galton and other Darwinians that divided humans into "fit" and "unfit" binaries, which in turn came with a set of playground taunts about intellect and capacity. We know the unhappy story of forced sterilizations and stigmatization that resulted from eugenic propaganda. We're still trying to divest ourselves of the remnants of segregation and institutionalization.

But we create the stories that shape our lives, and as the late Harold R. Johnson showed us in his book, *The Power of Story: On Truth, The Trickster and New Fictions for a New Era,* it's possible to make new ones. First, though, we need to understand the stories we're trapped in.

As a mother, I also believed I could "fix" my son, that therapy and effort could make him fit into the world more "normally." I spent years in that fiction. My son's story is no longer a tragedy to me because I see how he's a catalyst for positive change. Now I understand my choices and can live and grow into new stories about disability.

Yes, my son has impairments, but his body does not disable him or who he is. He becomes disabled when his condition—how his body and mind work—interacts with negative attitudes, inaccessible spaces, and limited social opportunities and supports. His environment and the people around him determine the extent of his disability: in public, in private, in bureaucracies, and at work. Lack of opportunity and the inability of others to see his capacities disable him. He has impairments, but he is not disabled until others say so in words, actions, or attitudes.

What I learned through my experience with my son can be applied on a larger scale. It's easy to feel discouraged at the state of the world, but as writers we have tremendous power to change our stories at this level, too. Our current problems exist because of a set of values and beliefs we've collectively bought into. But we can create new stories and a new way forward.

As human beings, we tend to act in alignment with the stories we believe. If we tell ourselves the same

tale over and over, we start calling it "truth." But it's still a story—about political systems, climates, or social supports. Take your pick. What we call ethics and morals are stories as well. The reality is that there are many ways to interpret "facts," because we're constantly breathing meaning into our experiences. We have the capacity at every moment to create new stories about ourselves, each other, and the systems that operate in our world.

So what do you care about? What stories trap you? How do you, as a writer, want to show up in the world? What kind of change are you aiming for? Are you hoping to spark a conversation, influence minds and hearts, or inspire action?

Our current problems exist because of a set of values and beliefs we've collectively bought into. But we can create new stories and a new way forward.

Fellow memoir and autofiction writers know the core of a narrative is not what happens to us, but what sense we make of it—not simply a string of facts, then, but how we shape those facts into story and meaning. But sense-making isn't limited to "true" stories; our fiction and poetry can lead us to new understandings as well.

The key to writing for change is crafting a narrative that resonates deeply but subtly. Bashing someone with a manifesto seldom works, but storytelling that leaves us wondering about our role in existing systems of justice and power stays with us long after we close a book's cover. Think, for example, of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A good story grips first and transforms second. Our writing's purpose determines how we balance those two elements.

If good storytelling is the key to change, then this is where the tools of fiction shine. We need characters we care about, whose pain matters to us. Our characters' struggles and growth should mirror the change we want. As you've probably heard, the best dialogue comes from within our characters. Show the stakes of a social issue through their experiences and conversations.

If you can, reflect current debates, values, and events. A story that feels contemporary has more power to influence and shift perspectives. Make the setting believable: an authentic story reflects the issue's reality. Is it the environment, discrimination, or poverty that you care about? Weave in details that show you've done your homework.

Plant seeds for reflection through dialogue, action, and consequence. Conflict is your friend—social change doesn't happen without struggle. Highlight the friction between ideologies, systems, and individuals so that readers are immersed in the real-world challenges of progress.

Close with a bang. What's your agenda? If you're actively writing for change, give readers something to chew on—an implicit nudge to get involved, a new lens on an old problem, or a moral dilemma. People need a reason to act; if you can offer a small victory or a glimpse of a better future, they have that reason.

Whether you're actively writing to change something specific or writing to entertain, you are writing into a new reality each time with the details you choose, the character struggles you identify, and the places and systems that influence your narrative arc. Your stories transform. Your stories are powerful. As Harold R. Johnson tells us, our words matter. They can heal or they can hurt. Today, let's heal.

Carmen G. Farrell, at carmengfarrell.com, is a force behind community initiatives for neurodivergent individuals: para-athlete opportunities for highschoolers, learning-to-work university programs, and playground inclusion groups in elementary schools. Her creative nonfiction focuses on disability and inclusion, questioning the assumption there's a "normal" way to be with each other. She's a director of the North Shore Writers Association, and volunteers with The Writer's Studio at SFU ('24 alum). North Vancouver is home.