



A NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVE GADDIS

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Editor's Note: This was an interview that I conducted with Steve Gaddis in 2019. The NEJRSP editorial team decided that, in honoring the life and influence of Steve Gaddis, it would be fitting to have his words and vision be the concluding article for this issue of the journal. You can find the video of the interview at the NEAFEST Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIUCtdGTWiQ>

Jeremiah Gibson: I'm so happy to be joined this afternoon by Steve Gaddis. Steve is the Director of the Narrative Therapy Initiative in Salem, and we wanted to take a few minutes today to talk about some upcoming trainings that are going on at NTI and to talk a little bit more about narrative therapy. So, Steve, thanks for joining me today.

Steve Gaddis: It's a pleasure, Jeremiah. Thank you for making this happen and keeping the family therapy world active and alive in Massachusetts. Family therapy was my first home professionally.

Jeremiah Gibson: Yeah, definitely. Mine too. And I'm curious, as family therapy was your first professional home, how did you kind of meander from family therapy specifically into narrative therapy.

Steve Gaddis: Well, there are so many places to start and so many stories to tell that's hard to select what to begin with, but I guess I would say that I met narrative therapy in my Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy at Colorado State University. I was a graduate student there and Toni Zimmerman was the Director at the time. And Toni was way ahead of her time in terms of infusing the program with social constructions...

Jeremiah Gibson: Toni is still ahead of her time.

Steve Gaddis: Yes, she is. I mean I have not been in touch with Toni for so long. So you Toni!

Jeremiah Gibson: Yeah, she did a training for me when I did the AAMFT Supervision.

Steve Gaddis: Oh, fantastic! She's an amazing, intelligent, energetic person who I really feel grateful to have been at the head of the program at the time. She had brought a lot of feminist, multicultural, and social constructionist ideas into the program. And I was learning a lot. I had started in Psychology and was pretty unexcited by most of the ideas and ways of thinking about how to help that I was learning in Psychology. I had decided to become a therapist later in my early thirties. I'd had experiences throughout my adolescence in therapy because I'd been subject to abuse and violence as a boy and was experiencing the effects of that. People who were trying to help me—my mom, therapists—were all well-intended, caring, good people. But the therapy itself was not helpful for me and upon reflection, you know, I think had harmful effects. So when I decided to become a therapist, it was after I'd had some really nice experiences with a therapist in San Francisco when I was about thirty.

And so I had these juxtaposed experiences in therapy that inspired me to think about exploring the idea of becoming a therapist myself and seeing if I could be helpful. I wanted to explore what it meant to be helpful, what it meant to think about problems and how to be with people. So when I went into graduate school I was looking for something that could help me answer those questions in a way that felt good to me.

And I wasn't finding anything until there was a three-hour class that was dedicated to narrative therapy. Michael White and David Epstons book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* had just come out. And Toni said, "If you were going to read one thing in this particular approach, here's what I would suggest." That was, I think the first book I decided to actually read, and the first chapter of that book is about power and knowledge and story, and that just hooked me. I became really excited and interested in what that was and immersed myself fully in it. And it's been a love affair ever since. It's taken me around the world. It's gotten me to write. After my wife and kids it's my most precious relationship.

Jeremiah Gibson: When you studied narrative therapy, who and what were some of the profound experiences that you had in your training of narrative therapy?

Steve Gaddis: I had to kind of train myself because there wasn't much available to me except through what I was reading, and I started reading everything I could that Michael White had written and found that to be really helpful in getting me to think about how to try things in my practice. I learned through trial and error and making mistakes and reflecting. I quickly became known as the narrative guy because nobody around me knew much about narrative.

And it was kind of painful at times because I was kind of characterized pejoratively as too narrative. And I felt like that was a misunderstanding of what I experience as the sophistication and the rigor and the breadth of the assumptions and ideas that are the foundation of the narrative worldview.

So the first formal training I had: Michael White came to Albuquerque in 1996 and did what became kind of a famous workshop there. There were probably about 150 of us present. Through that conference, I decided to get a Doctorate at Syracuse, and one of my professors there was Ken Harvey, which many people will know. And Ken really was an amazing teacher for me. One of the things that I came to care a lot about through Ken's teaching was congruence: people striving to live the ideas they say they stand for.

And one of the things about Michael that I really experienced was that sense of congruence; that he was really embodying a lot of the values, the ethics, the practices that he was also teaching and kind of benefitting from in terms of people being interested in and stuff. So that was very heartening. And the first formal training I had whet my appetite for more.

Jeremiah Gibson: Right. Narrative Therapy isn't just applied Foucault. Narrative therapy is an embodiment of some of the values and some of the principles of Foucault, some of the post-structuralists, and some of the folks who evaluated that. And I'm curious which of those values came the most natural and were the most exciting for you as you began to practice narrative therapy?

Steve Gaddis: That's a great question, Jeremiah. Like most people I was introduced to power at a young age, so I had a pretty strong sense of forms of power that had to do with domination and physical strength and intimidation; the ability to influence through repression and holding people back through physical threats or violence.

But I think I also had knowledge about power in the form of meaning-making, and yet I didn't have a language for it; I didn't have a way of making sense out of it other than through a felt experience. And so when I was introduced to narrative, and Michael's introduction to Foucault and the idea that power operates in this normative judgment and discourse and meaning-making, that just got exciting because it helped me have a way of understanding ways of being influenced and constrained or even constituted. I felt like it made it possible for me to experience something different in relation to the problems in my own life.

One of things that was immediately exciting to me was that I felt like I was engaging with narrative ideas and practices and ethics, and I was discovering some help for my own struggles in my life. So I thought that might be a legitimate criteria to think about possibly bringing these things to other people to see if they found them helpful.

But I would say even more specifically, the notions of accountability was one; that kind of practice of accountability in relationships and being curious about the real effects, however unintended they might be in a relationship; the sense of who's at the center of the meaning-making at any time. Understanding what Michael White would describe as the de-centered and influential position that the narrative therapist takes up in their conversations. We're bringing skills

to be helpful, but the people we're talking with are at the center of the meaning-making and leading the conversation.

Jeremiah Gibson: The thing that I love about our field is that so many of the different therapy models that we have don't just transform us as therapists; they transform us as people. And in a bit we'll talk about some of the yearlong training modules that you guys have. But I'm curious: what are some values that you hope that participants of these programs also get to embody and experience as they go through these two programs?

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, again, I appreciate the question. Just to back up a second to something you said, I think, something very important for me to hold up is this idea that narrative therapy is more of a way of being in a worldview than a technique or a strategy. It's not something that I do when I'm with clients and then I don't do in the rest of my life. It informs all domains of my life from my relationship with Ashley, as a dad, as a teacher; hopefully it's shaping how I'm approaching this conversation with you. So for me, I have a hard time now separating conversations that are different in what gets called "therapy" or what gets called "training" or what gets called "life."

And so I hope to embody these in the trainings that we do and the teachers that are part of Narrative Therapy Initiative now do as well. And our hope is that we help people know about what's possible through the narrative worldview and practice primarily through experiential learning, through exploring how these ideas make it possible for them to develop richer stories about what they care about, what they stand for, their hopes and dreams, and through that, see how it helps change relationships with those problems.

And in that process, we think that people will get the best knowledge about whether this is a way of working that they like or they don't like. We really emphasize the experiential quite significantly. The personal, professional, and political really are part of the experience.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are some other aspects of the narrative worldview that you get excited to witness in your students and with your clients as you teach and as you practice narrative therapy?

Steve Gaddis: The most exciting thing for me is when I witness people experiencing themselves as the knowers of their own lives and relationships. When I witness them experiencing an ability to have the final say for themselves about what things mean and how to understand things. We just recently had an end-of-year ceremony for our certificate program, and the structure is the students present what had been most meaningful to them in the course. And these are some of the most moving days of my life. I get to witness, not them sort of explaining what narrative therapy is or teaching narrative therapy or anything like that, but showing how their ability to know what's precious to them, to have it be unique and specific to them is presented and honored and witnessed and celebrated. And so the thing that I love most is just helping each person experience

a kind of dignity that I think is at the center of the ethics and values in the narrative worldview.

Jeremiah Gibson: That's great. I wonder if I can ask a couple questions also about the programming for 2019-2020. You've alluded to the Narrative Certificate Program. And then there's another program that you guys are offering too that's called—remind me?

Steve Gaddis: It's the Apprenticeship Program.

Jeremiah Gibson: The Apprenticeship Program. I'm wondering if you could take a few minutes to describe those: the Certificate Program and the Apprenticeship Program.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, I'd love to. You know, these are emerging programs. You know, we're a small nonprofit organization that started ten years ago and we've just been slowly growing, trying to do it at a sustainable rate, without any outside funding. Everything is tuition-funded at this point. But, we've tried to develop training opportunities where people can fit in at whatever level they're at and whatever interest level they have.

So right now, we offer a one-day kind of introduction to the worldview called "What is Narrative Therapy?". And we offer that a couple times a year as a way for people to get a taste of this without too much of a commitment. And then we have a two-day "Narrative Therapy and Practice" for people who want to follow up on the one-day, where they can learn more about some of the practices that have been developed within this worldview: externalizing, deconstructing, re-authoring.

And then if they still find themselves interested, then we have these two ten-month-long programs. And the primary difference between the two is just the level of commitment. The Apprenticeship Program is a peer-facilitated consultation exploration of the narrative worldview that meets once a month on a Friday for the whole day. And myself or another NTI faculty are there to help facilitate that. It's highly experiential, lots of practice of being introduced to some ideas and then putting them into practice and trying them out and that kind of thing.

The Certificate Program is more rigorous. It involved some readings, some writings, some practice intensives—so we meet a few times a year for two-day practice intensives where we dive into different practices quite deeply. There's a weekly online small-group meeting that happens on Tuesday nights so people can stay connected to the learning and their concerns. There's multiple faculty who teach in this course who students just adore. And so those are the primary differences between the two that I can think of.

Jeremiah Gibson: How might someone interested in learning more about narrative therapy be able to make an informed choice as to whether the Apprenticeship Program fits them better than the Certificate Program or vice versa?

Steve Gaddis: You can read some about it on the website—the differences. The website is www.narrativetherapyinitiative.org. We’re developing an application kind of process so that people can discern whether it’s a good fit for them. Those are some thoughts.

Jeremiah Gibson: What are some things that you would like participants of these programs to know or to come into the first day of these two programs with?

Steve Gaddis: For the two year-long courses, I think it’s important that people have some exposure to the worldview and some of the practices. So at a minimum I would say at least the one-day “What is Narrative Therapy?” and the two-day “Narrative Therapy and Practice”, or a course in graduate school that they might’ve had in narrative therapy. It doesn’t have to be very extensive, just not completely brand new to the worldview.

Jeremiah Gibson: Gotcha. You mentioned in the Narrative Therapy Certificate Program that there is a project that students do—a way of incorporating the narrative worldview and narrative principles into a particular lens or pocket of practice. I’m curious to learn more about how that works and what’s an idea or two that you’ve seen students that have been really valuable.

Steve Gaddis: Well that’s a good question. The goal of all narrative therapy is what’s called “rich story development.” So that, you know, if we think about people living their lives through stories and internalizing narratives that are often supported by culturally-dominant discourses of gender, race, class, etc., then they’ve often internalized stories as truths that are not fitting best with what’s important to them and yet have a lot of power.

So part of the Certificate Program project is for students to experience personally what it means to have their own stories about what they care about much more thickly developed and described as a result of participating in the course. The projects are them sharing with us a rich account of something that they hold precious. It’s very unique to each student.

One of the practices in narrative therapy is what’s called “outsider witnessing.” So when these presentations are made, we follow them up with responses about how we were moved by them and where it took us and what we care about and an acknowledgment of that. It’s very moving.

One example of a presentation that comes to mind was one of the women in the course was in her small group interviewed about what’s meaningful to her, what’s precious to her, and she talked about how she experienced problems as the metaphor of a fog that would creep over and have its affects on her life and try to convince her that there was something wrong with her. Many of us can relate to how problems try to influence our lives.

I live pretty near the ocean and she decided for her presentations she was going to take us all for a walk to the beach. And in the walk to the beach she was sharing with us what the significance of this event was—the significance to her of taking us to the beach and reclaiming her life from the fog that kind of had too many negative affects on her life and talked about how...I forget exactly the words that she used, but something about the importance of it being okay to not be perfect and not have to kind of succumb to the perfectionist discourse. And then she linked that to how that had her thinking about who and how she wanted to be as a therapist in her work, particularly around chronic illness, which is an area that she both has a lot of knowledge of personally and wants to do work in professionally. There are ten or twelve of those in two days. They're thirty minute presentations and they're just stunningly moving.

Jeremiah Gibson: Right. I imagine it's really cool as a Director to also be not just in the position of Director but also as a learner.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, I mean that's another principle in the narrative worldview that I adore is that these are two-way relationships; they're not one-way relationships. So yes, I am certainly benefitting immensely—both from the learning and the ways it keeps me hopeful and heartened about the possibilities that this tradition of thinking can make.

One of the hopes I have for the Narrative Therapy Initiative is to be a vehicle to help grow and authenticate and legitimize these very nontraditional ideas about how to think about help, how to think about people, how to think about problems. And so as more and more people come through and become part of our community and then go out and grow these things, it's just incredibly satisfying and invigorating. And we have just an amazing community of people that I come to really think about family as much as anything else.

Jeremiah Gibson: Absolutely. What are some ways that you've observed students take the narrative worldview and apply it effectively and meaningfully in the ways that they practice therapy, be that with individuals, couples, or families?

Steve Gaddis: It's not easy because so many of them go into contexts where there's no immediate support or appreciation for these ways of working. It really takes a lot of perseverance and some subversiveness at times to change the culture or open up possibilities for something new. But I've seen everything from these heroic micro influences to students bringing me in as a consultant to their agency and training entire staffs. One of the recent graduates is bringing ideas about how to have conversations around racial identity from a narrative perspective into a school context where he works.

What I hope to create next is a program that follows the Certificate Program that I've called the Diploma Program, but we haven't really got it up and going yet. That will be where people who really have a good grasp of this narrative worldview—of which the Certificate

Program gives you a really solid foundation—can then take on a topic or a subject that they're passionate about and develop either a workshop or a paper or both.

Jeremiah Gibson: What feedback would you give to therapists who are new to the field to help them maintain a sense of perseverance?

Steve Gaddis: I get very concerned about how completing graduate school can introduce new practitioners to this idea that they should now understand themselves as fully equipped and prepared to know what to do. And that somehow they should adopt this identity as expert and professional and knower. And I think that can really be very oppressive and harmful and support burnout. And so what I would say is most important is to find your own relationship to ways of thinking about how to help, ways to think about problems. See if you can find a community to be a part of. If you need to, even though we don't make much money, try to find some way to get support for your ongoing skill development, your ongoing confidence, and feeling like you have a story about knowing what you want to do and how you want to be. And I think graduate programs and agencies often aren't able to provide that for you. So, I think that would be one thing. But I'd be curious about what you think about those, Jeremiah.

Jeremiah Gibson: Well, I'm really drawn to this idea of not knowing. Knowing has been a really important part of my story and a lot of the construction of my identity—as someone who grew up in gifted and talented programs in school, as a man, as a white-presenting person, as a Christian, as someone who grew up in a Christian context. I think that a lot of the work that I've done through a narrative worldview practice is becoming okay with the process of not knowing and experiencing kindness to myself, being gentle with myself when things don't come out the way that I want, or if I ask a question that doesn't make sense, being compassionate towards myself and practicing that and giving myself the permission to not know, which is really an equalizing principle from a relationship standpoint that allows me to join me with my clients, with my partner, with my friends on an equal playing field.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, that's lovely. I think one of the most important practices in the narrative worldview is curiosity, right? And so I think, for me, rather than not knowing, I prefer to think about curiosity.

Jeremiah Gibson: How would you distinguish the difference between the two?

Steve Gaddis: Well, I don't think it's true that we don't know things. I think it's whether or not we're centering them or not. So if we're curious, we can be centering the knowing of another person.

I think we are learning things that we know about how we practice. Like, what are the skills that we're bringing? Why are we asking this question and not this question? There's knowing in that. So I don't want that to be disqualified or marginalized.

But I really appreciate what you're saying about the idea that not knowing what's meaningful to another person, not knowing what stories are influencing their lives. And I do think, like you, I had a relationship with knowing as kind of what was the measure of a successful person. It is always uncomfortable for me to take up this curious practice but it's an ethic that I am committed to. I see it as an act of love. I see it as an act of respect. And I don't know what more people want than to be met with that kind of interest in their lives and their thinking and their hopes.

And if we're providing that, that, to me, is such an honor. And so I guess back to what you were saying about the ideas that I might offer to younger practitioners who are newer in the field. I know a lot of them get very nervous about doing harm and they really care a lot about not wanting to make things worse for people. And one thing I would say is: If you stay genuinely curious, you're probably less at risk of doing any harm than interpreting, giving advice, giving solutions.

Jeremiah Gibson: Even if you push a client to an uncomfortable place.

Steve Gaddis: Say more. What do you mean by that?

Jeremiah Gibson: Well, I think that there's a difference between safety and comfort. I think for a lot of new therapists those two ideas get really blurred. That: "I don't want to ask a hard question because I don't want to make a person uncomfortable"—which really reflects on: "I don't want to make myself uncomfortable." "Oh my goodness, what am I going to do if this client across from me is super anxious." I think that what you're saying is that if you build a relationship around compassion, around curiosity, that gives you the space, that gives you permission to ask some of these tougher questions, but also to do so in a way that's warm, that's inviting of reflection, that's non-judgmental, non-shaming.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, I don't think those things can be said enough. It's often taken for granted that practices of non-judgment are critically important to any effort to be helpful. I guess what you said made me think about the idea of asking tough questions. One of the things that helps me recognize is a skill that I've worked very, very hard on is staying really close to what the person's been saying, the word they're using, not introducing much new, but building on what's been said.

And I think one of the things that helps is not taking people kind of into spaces they're not prepared for. I don't find people often getting to places where they're uncomfortable about the territory we're talking about. They might not know exactly what the answer is yet for them or what their thinking is, and so there's certainly discomfort around that. But I appreciate you saying that because it helps me to recognize that in my own history or practice.

Jeremiah Gibson: Right. I think that therapy is about addressing and to some capacity overcoming the discomfort of our life. The discomfort from problematic stories, the discomfort

that comes from recognizing the amount of privilege in our stories, and being able to write alternative narratives for the ways that we tell our stories and the ways that our stories play out in the ways we live.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah. Narrative therapy is a social justice approach because there's so much about power. If the story that everybody internalizes is that we should desire comfort, then anytime we are entering a territory of discomfort, we're vulnerable to turn somebody else into a problem, we're vulnerable to kind of get aggressive, confrontational, and in the service of maintaining our rights—our privileged rights—to maintain comfort. So I see it as a really ethical commitment to be comfortable with discomfort as a commitment to social justice, as a commitment to doing power relations differently, doing white maleness differently.

I'm so grateful to the narrative worldview; after all, for many people I think, it's not like they haven't thought these ideas before. They just haven't had the kind of language that's helped them articulate it for themselves. So for me, that's what that worldview has done: it's given me a language for things I think I know but I didn't know how to articulate, I didn't know how to put into practice.

Jeremiah Gibson: Yeah, I like that. Harlene Anderson comes to mind in saying that language is really the only intervention that we have in therapy.

Steve Gaddis: Yeah, I would love a world where we become much more humble about ourselves as a species and recognize that all we ever are are meaning-makers. We've been tricked in western society for thousands of years that we are really truth-finders, not meaning-makers. And so I think we could do relationships and accountability and power a whole lot differently if we were to kind of move into more of a recognition of ourselves as meaning-makers.

Jeremiah Gibson: Yeah. And it sounds like these two programs that you're presenting in 2019, 2020—the Apprenticeship Program, the Certificate Program—are two ways that we can incorporate these principles both into our therapeutic practices and also into our lives and relationships.

Steve Gaddis: That's exactly my hope and my dream. I started this because when I got to New England—I came here because when I was finishing my Doctorate program at Syracuse in Marriage and Family Therapy—I was looking for an internship where I could kind of become part of a narrative community. And at the time there was a family therapy institute called the Family Therapy Institute of Cambridge. And there were a handful of people there who were doing narrative stuff. They were hosting Michael White when he came to the U.S. as one of the few spots he would teach in. And it was Kaethe Weingarten and SallyAnne Roth and Phil Decker and Xijuan Wu and Betsy Buckley.

And so, you know, there were a handful of people who were around here, and I started working at a big social service agency—The Home for Little Wanderers—doing home-based family therapy with Phil and Betsy and XiJuan. It was a lovely experience. But I was up on the North Shore and kind of out of that community a lot, so I started a place called the Salem Center up here in Salem. It was a general post-modern therapy training program with two dear colleagues. And I was doing a lot of narrative stuff and they were doing other collaborative language systems, other traditions within this post-modern, post-structuralist world.

And then, Michael died unexpectedly and tragically. And I think many of us who had the privilege to be his students—I was able to do a yearlong training program at the Dulwich Center in Australia—so many of us felt a huge hole from his loss, and I think many of us have tried to figure out what to do as a response to try to keep these ideas growing. And they're growing fast around the rest of the world, but it's hard to get them going here in the U.S. So that's when I decided to break away from the Salem Center and begin the Narrative Therapy Initiative. And here we are, you know, ten years later. Proud to be one of the members of NEAFast.

Jeremiah Gibson: You used the word “subversive” earlier as a way of encouraging people to not get so stuck inside the box of the agency world. And it sounds like the development of NTI is another version of that too; another way of creating a more holistic, more humanistic way of doing therapy in a state, Massachusetts, that's very centered around first-order change, around the medical model, and the bureaucratic systems that reinforce that. So...so thank you.

Steve Gaddis: Oh, well, thank you. I mean, that's a gift to me. It's fun to have this description of NTI as a “subversive organization.” But it really fits. You know, I think you can be kind and respectful and hold people, stories, traditions, and structures accountable in a way that makes change. I've experienced many legitimate ways of doing social justice work and I think there are many pathways for that. I prefer the subversive one.

Jeremiah Gibson: Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview.

Steve Gaddis: Thank you, Jeremiah. This was lovely to have this time with you. I look forward to our future growing relationship.