

# ***A HOUSE DIVIDED*** **APPLYING NARRATIVE MEDIATION TO A FAMILY CONFLICT**

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In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries selected “post-truth” to be the Word of the Year.<sup>1</sup> Post-truth is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>2</sup> Since 2016, emotions, personal beliefs, and narratives – rather than objective facts – have shaped the manner in which many Americans engage with politics, discourse, and personal relationships. As such, narrative mediation is uniquely positioned to be an effective framework for managing conflict in our “post-truth” world. This paper, broken down in four parts, applies narrative mediation concepts and frameworks to a real life family conflict. Part one provides a brief overview of narrative mediation. Part two tells the story of the Smith family conflict through the narratives of the key parties. Part three analyzes the Smiths’ respective narratives based on the key concepts in narrative mediation. Part four provides recommendations for how I, as a narrative mediator, would approach mediating the conflict. Finally, the appendix includes a tongue-in-cheek narrative from a party that is often unheard in these conflicts—the family dog.

## **Part One: Overview of Narrative Mediation**

Narrative mediation is distinguished from its sibling forms of mediation based on its theory of conflict. The narrative framework – primarily developed by John Winslade, Gerald Monk, and Sara Cobb – understands conflict as arising because parties view a given situation from their own perspective (and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See Amy B. Wang, *'Post-Truth' Named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Nov. 16, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.b3c84bcc8bc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b3c84bcc8bc7).

<sup>2</sup>*Id.*

position), and are unable to directly access the truth of a situation.<sup>3</sup> This differs from more traditional mediation practices that view conflict as the result of polarizing positioning.<sup>4</sup> As such, in narrative mediation, the mediator engages with the stories that the parties tell, in order to deconstruct the parties' (often) opposing narratives and to reconstruct an alternative and shared narrative. In this sense, the goal of narrative mediation is not to reach a solution, like in problem-solving mediation, but to create the conditions for building a shared narrative among the parties.<sup>5</sup> Rather than striving to find the single truth, the narrative approach invites the complexity of competing stories and recognizes the powerful influence of the parties' backgrounds.

The structure of a narrative mediation differs from a problem-solving mediation, which entails moving the parties from positions to interests and generating options based on the interests. Narrative mediation, rather, is based on three phases: engagement, deconstruction of the conflict-saturated story, and construction of an alternative story.<sup>6</sup>

During the engagement phase of narrative mediation, the mediator focuses on establishing a relationship with the parties and on the stories that the parties tell. The mediator pays specific attention to the discursive positions that parties call each other into.<sup>7</sup> During the deconstructive phase, the mediator (gently) seeks to separate the parties from the conflict-saturated story, and move the parties from narrative certainty to narrative complexity.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, the mediator might make visible the parties' position calls,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See JOHN WINSLADE & GERALD MONK, *NARRATIVE MEDIATION: A NEW APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION* 41 (2001); see also JOHN WINSLADE & GERALD MONK, *PRACTICING NARRATIVE MEDIATION: LOOSENING THE GRIP OF CONFLICT* 6 (2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Nikolaj Kure, *Narrative Mediation And Discursive Positioning In Organisational Conflicts*, 2 *EXPLORATIONS* 24 (2010), <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2010-2-nikolaj-kure.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> See *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> See JOHN WINSLADE & GERALD MONK, *NARRATIVE MEDIATION: A NEW APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION* 58 (2001)

<sup>7</sup> See *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> See *Id.* at 74-5.

<sup>9</sup> Position calls in narrative mediation have a different meaning than positions in a problem-solving mediation, where they represent a party's initial desired outcome. A position call is when one person, through their words, labels another

invite the participants to view the dispute from a different vantage point, and encourage them to consider unique events that seem out of line with their general story.<sup>10</sup> Narrative deconstruction enables the parties to craft an alternative, shared story. While this might lead to a resolution, problem solving is expressly not the goal of narrative mediation. An alternative narrative might also foster cooperation and mutual respect, which could be more important than a substantive agreement.<sup>11</sup>

## **Part Two: Conflict Narratives**

Part two is broken down into a) background information that is relevant to, and undisputed among, all of the parties, and b) the parties' narratives. This is based on a true conflict and changes to their names, locations, and other details have been done to preserve their confidentiality.

### **Background information:**

The Smiths live in Yarmouth, Maine. Steve and Linda are in their early 50s and have been married for almost thirty years. They have two children: Suzy (age 24), and Daniel (age 18). Suzy lives in Portland, ME and works in marketing, and Daniel is a freshman in college. Steve has three siblings – a younger brother and sister, and older sister named Michelle. During the fall of 2015, with encouragement from Steve and Linda, Michelle left Randy—her alcoholic and verbally and emotionally abusive husband of over 20 years—and moved from Detroit into the Smith house in Yarmouth.

Both Steve and Linda grew up in difficult households. Linda's father was an abusive alcoholic, and she stopped speaking to him years before his death. Steve's siblings are (in Suzy's words) "train wrecks", and Steve is the only one of his siblings to

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person and calls them into a relative position. For example, imagine a conversation between two adult siblings where the older sibling says to the younger sibling, "let's act like mature adults here". The older sibling, in this scenario, is establishing him/herself as a mature adult, and is potentially calling the younger sibling into the position of the childish, and/or immature.

<sup>10</sup> See JOHN WINSLADE & GERALD MONK, NARRATIVE MEDIATION: A NEW APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION 74-75 (2001)

<sup>11</sup> See *Id.* at 82.

have a stable life and family. The Smiths are a tight-knit family and get along well. Steve and Linda succeeded in creating a home that feels nothing like the homes they grew up in.

### **Conflict Narratives:**

*(The following narratives discuss events up to September 2015)<sup>12</sup>*

#### **Steve**

My name is Steve Smith. I live in Yarmouth, Maine and work for the state government. I am the second child of four. I was born and raised in rural New Hampshire, but moved to Yarmouth after Daniel was born; to pursue better economic opportunities. Suzy now works and lives in Portland and Daniel just started college at Ohio State – go Buckeyes!

Michelle moved into our house in late September. For almost twenty-five-years, Michelle was married to Randy. While they had four kids together, who seem to be good kids, their marriage was terrible. Randy is an alcoholic, and verbally and emotionally abused Michelle for years. What a horrible situation for her. Over the past year, Linda and I learned the extent of Randy's behavior. We both told Michelle to leave Randy. I need to give Linda credit, as she spent hours on the phone with Michelle encouraging her to leave.

We offered for Michelle to come live with us in Maine. Michelle and Randy lived together in Detroit, and I knew that she would need a place to stay to get on her feet. I didn't have to think twice; obviously we were going to offer our home to her. Michelle is family. And while Michelle and I weren't particularly close as kids (I was always out running around with friends), she's still my sister. This is what family is supposed to do for each other.

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<sup>12</sup> Michelle's narrative is not included in this article for two primary reasons. 1) This article is focused on the conflict between Steve, Linda, and Suzy. While a conflict exists between Michelle and other parties, it is beyond the scope of this article. 2) Issues of domestic violence and alcoholism are complex and difficult. I had few conversations with Michelle and am unable to articulate her perspective with the requisite depth and complexity. Not including Michelle's perspective is in no ways an attempt to discount her experience or perspective.

**Linda**

“Poor Michelle; Randy is such a terrible guy; she’s got to leave him”, I thought as I spent hours on the phone in October and November talking to Michelle. For decades, Michelle has been putting up with Randy’s alcoholism and abusive behavior. I’ve seen this before: my dad was a raging alcoholic, and physically abusive of my mother and us, his kids. I know first-hand just how terrible living with an addict can be, and I also know how paralyzing it can be for someone to even think about leaving. And I liked Michelle, she’s always been a friendly person in the family.

So when we heard about Randy, I thought it was important to encourage Michelle to leave. Steve’s a guy, he wasn’t going to be able to talk to Michelle in the same way that I could, so I became the point person in helping Michelle manage. I was happy doing this. I like to help others—I’m a nurse at the local hospital. Knowing what it is like to live with an addict, I wanted to help in any way that I could.

I was so happy for Michelle when she actually left him. I didn’t know whether she would do it. And I was thrilled to be able to open our doors and help her get back on her feet.

**Suzy**

I remember when I heard that Michelle might move in with my parents. I had pretty mixed feelings. On one hand, I’ve heard about how nasty Randy can be. On the other hand, I thought my parents were signing up for more than they realized. My parents didn’t set any expectations or boundaries up front, which made me nervous. Things finally seemed to be going so well for them, and I worried that this would disrupt that momentum.

This past summer was our best summer in recent years, but the summer before was one of our worst. During the spring of 2014, my mom was really sick. Doctors still don’t know what she had, and the whole summer we were dealing with trips to the hospital and our fear that she wouldn’t recover. But she did recover. By the fall, she was back to normal and working again. My folks seemed to have a new lease on life—they wanted to

explore, to go on a family trip, and they were actually treating themselves. This wasn't usual behavior; money was tight growing up, and my folks never splurged on family vacations or on themselves.

My parents' savings are up and their expenses are down, as I'm fully self-sufficient and my brother got a full-ride to the U. He's such a braniac. So, because of their increased savings and epiphany from my mom's illness that life can be short, they have started to treat themselves. In the summer of 2015, my family went on a trip to Peru. This was the first time my parents in 15 years that my parents had left the country and they had the most amazing time. I was so happy. As the summer continued, so did their attitude of having fun, enjoying life, and – within reason – treating themselves. My parents seemed so happy together. I was overjoyed.

And then I heard Michelle was moving in. I know my parents lean towards helping people, and I was worried that this would make life complicated again. I suggested that my parents set some norms and expectations about duration of stay up front, but they brushed me aside. I was honestly pretty nervous... little did I know just how bad it would get.

*(The following narratives discuss events between September 2015 and February 2016)*

### **Steve**

Initially, it started out well. Michelle was so appreciative that we gave her a home, and it felt really good to provide my sister with a fresh start. Michelle joined Linda and me for dinner every night; we'd have some drinks and hang out. But by the time Halloween rolled around, things had begun to sour. Michelle didn't just have a couple drinks. Michelle drank a lot. And she would say some pretty rude things to Linda. I mean, they were just jokes, and I know Michelle appreciates all the things that Linda did for her, but they still rubbed Linda the wrong way.

Fast-forward through Christmas, and things have just gotten worse and worse. It seems everything Michelle does bothers Linda in some way. From the dogs shedding and barking, to

Michelle's jokes, to Michelle not cleaning up after herself, it feels like there is always something.

Linda is livid, and wants me to do something about it. But what can I do, kick Michelle out of the house? She doesn't have anywhere else to go. My siblings are such messes that she can't live with any of them. My mom passed away eight years ago, and my dad has dementia. I can't believe Linda is asking me to do something about Michelle, especially after all Michelle has been through. The least we can do is put up with a few bad jokes and her not cleaning up. Plus, it's not like it will last forever. When Randy and Michelle finalize the divorce agreement, Michelle will have some money to move out.

### **Linda**

My husband has betrayed me. At dinner (and in front of Steve!) Michelle makes all kinds of rude, snarky comments to me and Steve doesn't say a thing. Just the other night, she told me that I'm so boring and a waste of time to talk to. Steve just sat there silently. I wanted to explode.

Who does this woman think she is waltzing into our home, eating our food, drinking our beer (and I mean drinking A LOT), and being so rude to me?! I can't stand her. She acts like a damn child. She brings food home from her work, at a local diner, and just leaves it on the counter. She leaves dirty plates sitting on the counter. She never cooks, cleans, or offers to help. It's like I have a moody 14-year-old daughter again—except she's also a drunk.

The other week I told Steve that I would leave if he doesn't do anything. This situation is not sustainable for me. Honestly, it feels eerily similar to my family's dynamic growing up, where people put each other down and would drink way too much. I worked so hard to remove myself from that situation and build a kind, loving family. I refuse to fall back into that.

I also thought Steve would stand up for me, and watching him do nothing when Michelle insults me really hurts. I need an ally (which is crazy, because I'm in my own home and should not have to feel like I'm at war), and I'm so worried that he is siding with Michelle.

It's gotten so bad that I now stay at work longer, because I would rather be there than at home. When I come home, I need to clean up after Michelle, deal with her two massive shedding dogs (she NEVER vacuums, it drives me nuts), and cook and clean for three.

I'm grateful that I have been able to vent to Suzy. She's been there through all of this, and I know she is angry with Michelle too. I don't think I could go through this without having someone to vent to, and I could never really vent to Daniel.

What do I want? Short term, I want Steve to set some boundaries, including telling Michelle to: a) stop being rude to me, b) start pitching in and cleaning up after herself, c) clean up after her dogs, and d) drink less. Long term, I want Michelle to move out. I wish I had my husband back. I wish he would listen to me. I wish he would see the impact this is having on me. After all, he's my husband, not Michelle's.

### **Suzy**

It's been a really rough go lately. I'm frustrated with both of my parents right now. My mom has started venting to me about her frustration with Michelle and with my dad. I really sympathize with her, and – I'm kind of embarrassed to say this – I hate Michelle. I hate her for what she has done to my parents' lives and to their relationship. A few weeks ago, my mom told me that she threatened to leave my dad if he doesn't do something / the situation doesn't change. I was... pretty crushed to hear that things had snowballed to this point. I don't know how serious she was, but that's pretty hard for a kid (even an adult kid) to hear.

I am shocked that it got so bad so quickly. I am also torn. I agree with a lot of what my mom feels, and from what she told me Michelle was very rude and unkind to her. And I know my dad—he's very non-confrontational. I don't want to pick sides, and am frustrated with both of them for not setting boundaries. It all comes back to that – there is a way to fix the situation and they aren't acting on it. Now the ramifications are potentially catastrophic for our family. I tried encouraging my mom to share the impact of the situation on her to my dad, to acknowledge that it must be hard for

him too, and to ask him to set some boundaries... but it seemed she didn't even hear me. It's so frustrating: I'm adult enough for my mom to tell me how she threatened to leave my dad, but not adult enough for my advice to be taken seriously.

This past weekend, though, things hit a real low point with my dad. I was home for a couple days, and the vibe was generally pretty tense and icy. But it got worse, as my dad just started snapping at us. I've never seen him behave this way. Whenever he didn't get what he wanted – be it what we were going to eat for dinner or watch on TV – he would make a snide comment about it. As I mentioned, he's extremely non-confrontational, so this was particularly different and disturbing.

It was the first time in my life where I felt like my dad didn't have my back. I've never doubted his love and support before, but his tone this weekend did not feel secure. He was being a jerk. I thought he was ready to snap at anything that didn't go his way. It was so unlike him. He even snapped at Daniel a bunch, like what the fuck? He's like the perfect, nerdy child. Sorry for my language.... It was just so shocking. I was rattled and really sad after the weekend.

I'm kind of like my dad in that I am also non-confrontational. But, I spoke to him on the phone earlier today and expressed some of my feelings about this past weekend. He seemed to hear me that his behavior was off, which was reassuring. He also tried to tell me that he has control of the situation and that I shouldn't worry. If only I believed him...

*(The following narrative discusses an event that took place in early March 2016)*

### **Steve**

I didn't realize how much this situation had gotten out of hand until I spoke to Suzy earlier today. This past weekend was hard, and I know the pressure I've been feeling has impacted my behavior. But I didn't realize the extent until I spoke to Suzy. She told me about the impact that my behavior had on her and Daniel, and her concern that Linda and I would break up. I hadn't thought

that this situation was affecting our kids. Clearly, I was acting out of character this past weekend and was a little rude to Linda and the kids. I think the pressure and stress has been getting to me, and only now do I see that the impact is pretty wide-ranging and even apparent to the kids. I told Suzy not to worry and that I have control of the situation. After all, she's my daughter and this is my problem, not hers. I think she was comforted by my words.

### **Part Three: Conflict Analysis**

Each actor in this conflict has built his or her own hero/victim narrative. Each actor's self-perception as, simultaneously, the hero and victim of the conflict contributes to narrative closure. Their stories are neat, feel good to them, and they interpret events through this lens. As the actors interact with each other, they call each other into delegitimizing positions based on their own narratives. The gaps between the positions they get called into and their own perception serves to reinforce their respective sense of victimhood, widen the gulf between their narratives, and exacerbate their own experience of the differend.

Following the difficult weekend, Suzy's phone call with Steve creates a liminal space in which Steve moved from narrative closure to narrative complexity; Steve began to see his own contribution to the conflict, which muddied his hitherto simplified hero/victim narrative. This space provides an opportunity for a narrative mediator to further deconstruct Steve's narrative, and eventually construct a new, shared narrative.

### **Hero/Victim Narratives**

Each actor considers himself or herself to be both the hero and the victim in this conflict. Prior to the phone call with Suzy, Steve is the hero in his narrative for fulfilling his familial obligation to his sister, Michelle. Steve's perception that Linda wants him to kick Michelle out of the house makes him feel like the victim, as he perceives Linda to be asking him to violate his moral code. In contrast, in Linda's narrative, she is the hero, as she is the one who spent hours on the phone convincing Michelle to leave Randy. Yet, at the same time, Linda is the victim: Michelle insults her, she cooks for Michelle, she cleans up after Michelle

and the dogs, and she feels that Steve has abandoned his responsibility to her. Suzy, similarly, views herself as the hero, as she believes that she knows the answer to their problems—they need to set boundaries. *If only her parents would listen to her advice.* Suzy's sense of victimhood stems from not feeling listened to.

### **Position Calls**

Steve calls Linda into the position of the unsympathetic and selfish sister-in-law. He emphasizes that he feels obligated to help Michelle and implicitly suggests that Linda is only looking after herself. Linda, meanwhile, calls Steve into the position of the bad husband, as she accuses him of taking Michelle's side when Michelle bullies Linda. Steve, a family-first guy, bristles at the notion of failing to live up to familial obligations, and rejects Linda's call by insisting that she is blowing the situation out of proportion. This contributes to Linda's experience of the differend (more on this below). Suzy, while speaking with her dad after the difficult weekend, suggests that he is not acting like himself in this conflict. As such, her position call is twofold: 1) of not handling conflict optimally, 2) of generally being a good father. Notably, this call does not pass negative judgment on Steve's identity. It also provides Steve with an opportunity to agree without compromising his self-narrative of being motivated by obligations to family. In so doing, Suzy opens the door to a liminal space (more on this below).

### **Differend<sup>13</sup>**

Each actor experiences the differend in this conflict. This experience contributes to each actor's feeling of isolation and frustration. Steve feels that Linda and Suzy do not recognize that he is motivated by his familial obligation to Michelle. Steve believes that Linda and Suzy's pressure to set boundaries is at odds with his obligations to be supportive of his sister. Linda's position call to him as being a bad husband ignores his noble intentions, leaving him feeling wronged and misunderstood.

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<sup>13</sup> The differend is the pain associated with not being heard.

Linda, meanwhile, feels abandoned by her husband. Steve discusses his obligation to Michelle, but not his obligations to his wife. When Michelle insults Linda – while sitting around Steve and Linda’s dinner table, eating the food Linda prepared – Steve stays silent. Not a word in defense of his wife. Not only was Linda instrumental in encouraging Michelle to leave Randy and has Linda born the brunt of cooking for and cleaning up after Michelle, but Steve does not even defend her. When Steve dismisses Linda’s concerns about the whole situation, she feels that her problems are being ignored. Her marriage feels like it is crashing down, yet her husband seems unperturbed, leading her to experience the differend.

Since Suzy heard that Michelle might move in, she recommended that her parents set norms and expectations with Michelle. She told her parents to make it clear to Michelle that staying with them was temporary, as Suzy was concerned that Michelle would stay too long. Yet, every time Suzy voices these thoughts to her parents, she feels that they either dismiss the ideas outright or do not take them seriously. In her mind, she knows the solution to these problems: a conversation with Michelle about norms of behavior in the house, about how long she plans to stay with them, and how long they would be open to her staying. By not engaging with Suzy’s ideas, Suzy feels left out and does not feel heard.

### **Liminal Space<sup>14</sup>**

During Suzy’s phone call with her dad, she told him that his behavior over the weekend seemed out of character and of her fear that he and Linda might get divorced. This creates a liminal space for Steve, as Suzy raises issues without attacking Steve’s

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<sup>14</sup> A liminal space is a threshold moment (or moments) in time where a party is able to overcome a mental obstacle. Sara Cobb writes that liminal spaces are implicated in tipping points during a negotiation, and that “in liminal phases, the binary opposition between good and evil, victim and victimizer, dissolves, materializing the morality of both characters and narrators”. Sara Cobb, *Liminal Spaces in Negotiation Process: A Case Study of the Process of Crossing Relational and Interpretive Thresholds*, 1 J. OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT 27 (2013).

identity or intentions; this allows Steve to see the truth in Suzy's comments rather than being blinded by defensiveness.

Suzy made a somewhat positive position call of her dad, as she said that his behavior over the past weekend was out of character. In doing so, Steve was able to agree that he contributed to a difficult weekend, without sacrificing his identity as a good husband and father. While recognizing his own contribution makes Steve's narrative more complex, it does not radically upend his virtuous self-perception. As such, Suzy gently enables the process of narrative deconstruction for Steve, without attempting to bulldoze his narrative (which would likely be met with resistance).

Furthermore, this is a unique moment, as it is a role reversal for Steve and Suzy.<sup>15</sup> Typically, parents worry about their children, not vice versa. In this situation, however, Suzy is afraid that her parents will break up. This role reversal is not consistent with Steve's dominant story that he is fulfilling his familial responsibilities, as a daughter should not have to be concerned about her parents' relationship. In deviating from the dominant story, this unique moment provides an opportunity for Steve to open his narrative and embrace some complexity.

In responding to Suzy's comments, Steve has an opportunity to return to the role of supportive father by comforting Suzy and reassuring her that the situation will work out. The only way for him to credibly do so, however, is to acknowledge that there is a conflict and that he behaved out of character over the weekend. Steve's desire to fulfill the role of supportive father leads him to acknowledging joint-contribution, which up until this conversation he had not considered.

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<sup>15</sup> Unique moments in narrative mediation are moments that do not fit with a party's general narrative. Unique moments often contribute to the creation of a liminal space, as they can spark movement from narrative closure to narrative complexity.

## **Part Four: Recommendations**

If I were mediating this conflict as a narrative mediator, I would first meet with only Steve and Linda.<sup>16</sup> In the first session, I would provide a space for Steve and Linda to share their experiences. Given that they emphasize different moments and conversations in their narratives, this would enable Steve and Linda to have a shared pool of data to draw from, and would allow them to hear how the other perceives the conflict. While simply sharing their perspectives is unlikely to lead to deep understanding, it could lay the groundwork for narrative deconstruction. In addition, they are both experiencing the differend and have not expressed the gravity of their feelings to each other. Simply expressing their perspective and being heard by the other party would mark a unique moment in the conflict and combat their experiences of the differend.

I would probe deeper when the parties describe heated interactions or use loaded language. My questions would be designed for both parties to express their intentions in the aforementioned heated interactions, and the impact that these interactions had on them. These questions might be useful in guiding Steve and Linda away from narrative closure and towards complexity, as there is likely a gap between their intentions and the impact that the other party felt. In particular, it would be important to broach the topic of Steve's silence in the face of Michelle's insults. As the narratives demonstrated, Steve and Linda each experienced that situation differently, and it forms the basis of Linda's feelings of abandonment by her husband. If Linda were to express the impact she felt, it might be powerful to push against the simplicity of Steve's hero/victim narrative.

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<sup>16</sup> I wrestled with whether to initially include Steve, Linda, and Suzy, or just Steve and Linda in the mediation. I am of aware of the general narrative mediation preference to meet with all the parties, as there is value for the participants to engage with, and hear the narratives of, each other. With that said, I worry that including Suzy would alter the dynamic between Steve and Linda. While I think that Linda would not be affected, Steve would be much more reticent to appear vulnerable in front of his daughter. This might limit his willingness, and even ability, to engage with Linda's narrative and to look critically at his own narrative.

I would also focus on the events leading to Michelle moving into the Smith household. Until Michelle moved in, Steve and Linda seemed to be on the same page, and were impressed and respectful of how the other was handling the situation. Steve was grateful for Linda spending time on the phone and encouraging Michelle to leave Randy. Linda, meanwhile, respected that Steve felt an obligation to support his sister and that he wanted to open his home to her. These feelings, however, have been pushed aside by the stronger feelings associated with experiencing the differend. Providing an opportunity to vocalize gratitude and respect would be a marked difference from their interactions over the past couple months. This could assist them in seeing the other as more nuanced than simply a bad actor. In so doing, it might contribute to narrative deconstruction.

I would ask Steve and Linda to share their fears about this conflict. At this point, neither of them realizes the depth of the other's fears. In line with the conversation about Steve's silence, Linda might be inclined to share her fear that she is losing her husband. Steve, meanwhile, might share his fear that in order to appease Linda, he needs to kick Michelle out of their home. This line of questioning would drive towards recognition that Steve overestimates what Linda is asking for. In the short term, Linda wants Steve to encourage Michelle to stop being rude, start pitching in, clean up after herself and her dogs, and drink less. Steve thinks that Linda wants him to kick Michelle out of the house, which is a significant source of anxiety for him. In recognizing that Linda is not asking for Michelle to be kicked out of the house, Steve's anxiety, of having to make an "impossible decision", would be minimized. This misunderstanding might also garner sympathy from Linda.

By this point, each party would hopefully view the conflict with more complexity than upon entering mediation. I would then encourage Steve to share his realizations after his phone call with Suzy, which took place after the difficult weekend. That conversation prompted Steve to realize that he had contributed to the situation. Steve acknowledging his contribution might free Linda to see, and vocalize, her own contribution to the conflict. I would ask both Steve and Linda to write down (and share) ways in which they have contributed to conflict. If they are having

difficulty coming up with their own contributions, I might prompt them to think of some particularly difficult moments. Sharing their own contributions might enable Steve and Linda to build an alternative shared narrative. If the parties seem to be taking strides away from delegitimizing each other, I might ask them to share with each other something about the other person for which they are grateful.

It is difficult to predict how mediation will go. As I move further into the steps that I would take, it becomes harder to predict how the parties will respond. At some point, I would engage Suzy in the process, and encourage Steve and Linda to share with Suzy some of their progress and their appreciation for the role that Suzy has played in the conflict. I would ask Suzy to tell her parents how excited she was that they seemed so happy this past summer, her fears, and the difficulties that she has experienced over the course of this conflict.

At the end of the process, I would write a letter to the Smith family describing the arc of their journey, and include my hopes for them going forward. This letter would be intended to capture their progress and alternative shared narrative. In addition, it would provide them with a resource to return to if they experience more conflict or hardship in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is designed to demonstrate the application of the narrative mediation framework to a contemporary real life conflict and to stimulate attention and scholarship on narrative concepts. Narrative mediation is an increasingly relevant and effective tool for addressing conflicts as we continue to shift towards a “post-truth” society. In addition, the concepts and techniques of narrative mediation are not limited to use by narrative mediators; narrative techniques could be adopted by mediators trained in different mediation systems. For example, problem-solving mediators could draw upon the narrative approach in highly emotional negotiations as a means to move parties away from their positions. Finally, the scholarship on narrative mediation is much more limited compared to other strands of mediation. Increased attention and thought on narrative mediation will build upon the existing scholarship and

improve the narrative approach. In writing this paper, I hope to draw attention to narrative mediation and spark greater attention to this relevant approach to mediation.

### **Appendix: Milton's Narrative (March, 2016)**

I am Milton Smith. I was born in Tennessee, but have lived most of my life in Yarmouth with my adoptive family. While I remember feeling afraid, I hardly remember anything else before being adopted. I love my new family. Since day one, they have shown me love and kindness. With that said, the past few months have been pretty difficult and really different.

For the first year living with the Smiths, life was great. In the summer, we go to the ocean, and in the winter I curl up by the fire. We have a backyard that I can run around and dig holes in. My mom yells when I dig holes, although I think she actually finds it funny. Maybe one day I'll dig all the way to China!

About five months after I became part of the family, Suzy adopted a dog. Her name is Penny and she is my best friend. She's a little smaller than me, but she does all of the fun stuff that I do: we run around, chase balls, dig holes, eat peanut butter, and snuggle. I LOVE it when she comes to Yarmouth, and whenever I hear her name I get so excited. One day, I'm going to marry her.

Life was so good until this past November, when Michelle and her two giant, slow, middle-aged dogs (Janet and Jenny) moved into our house. I thought they were just visiting for a few days (like Suzy and Penny do), but they never left! Her dogs are such jerks, and Michelle doesn't do anything about it. I also noticed that a few weeks after they moved in my parents seemed upset with each other... there's still a tense aura in the house and I don't like it.

Every so often, one of Michelle's dogs does something that crosses a line. Sometimes it's bullying me, sometimes it's eating my food, other times its just cramping my space or taking my favorite napping spot. At first, I tried being nice about it. But I've noticed that no one is standing up to Michelle and her dogs. So now when one of them crosses a line, I snap at them. I need to

stand up for myself. How dare they call me into the position of beta dog? This is my home. They're not the alpha, nor is Michelle. Steve, Linda, and I are the alphas. It's been really disappointing that, when I snap, my parents have disciplined me... Woof, are they intentionally ignoring my pain?

The other day, I had enough. I was sick and tired of dealing with Michelle and her dogs. I was in Michelle's room, and Michelle and her dogs were acting like they owned the place. So, I decided to send them a message. I looked Michelle straight in the eye and – while making eye contact – I peed on her bed. It felt so good. It was cathartic. It felt like I was peeing truth to power.

The funniest part about all of this? I think my parents are secretly really pleased with me. I thought I was going to get disciplined, but my mom and dad snuck me a treat. Maybe they are no longer mad at each other? Maybe they realize they need to do something about Michelle, Janet, and Jenny? I hope so. I can't wait until they are gone. Then, everything will be good again.

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