

# Restorative Narratives: Defining a New Strength-Based Genre

By Mallery Jean Tenore

The media has a profound impact on the way we see the world, how we interpret news events, and the way we respond to these events. This is especially true in the wake of natural disasters, shootings, bombings, and other tragedies.

The media tells us what happened, how many homes were devastated, who was killed or injured — all the facts that keep us informed. These stories are important, but they're often confined to tragedy, despair and loss.

As days and weeks pass, the media move on to new stories, often neglecting to tell the “what’s possible?” stories about how the people and communities affected by these tragedies are coping and what they’re learning. We hear these types of stories on one-year anniversaries, but they’re not an ongoing part of the media’s coverage the way that the “what happened?” stories are. A growing body of research is confirming what many have long suspected — that a steady diet of trauma and disaster triggers stress, fear and trauma in those consuming the stories.

What if the news media covered stories of recovery and resilience as much as they cover stories about devastation and despair?

We’ve coined a term — Restorative Narratives — which describes a genre of stories that focus on recovery, restoration and resilience in the aftermath, or midst of, difficult times. This genre is by no means new, but there’s never been a constructive name for it until now.

## What is a Restorative Narrative?

A restorative narrative is a story that shows how people and communities are learning to rebuild and recover after experiencing difficult times. While these narratives are often about restoration after a tragedy, they can also focus on restoration in the midst of chronic situations — such as Detroit’s bankruptcy, poverty in a city, etc. These types of narratives can be found in all types of media — journalism, documentary film, photography, gaming and more. Additionally, they:

- **Capture hard truths.** These narratives don’t ignore the difficult situation that a person or a community has endured. They explore the rough emotional terrain of the situation, but instead of focusing on what’s broken, they focus on what’s being rebuilt. They reveal hope and possibilities.
- **Highlight a meaningful progression.** Restorative Narratives show progressions — from heartbreak to hope, tragedy to possibility, suffering to recovery. It’s important to focus not just on where someone is today, but how they got there.
- **Reveal universal truths that awaken a sense of human connection.** Restorative Narratives speak to truths that others can relate to, and they may even teach us something in the process. Our hope is that by telling more stories about people and communities that are exhibiting resilience, the media can empower other people and communities to be resilient. Research shows that resilience is an acquired skill.
- **Are sustained inquiries.** Restorative Narratives are mindful of the fact that recovery is a process that takes time. These narratives may not come to fruition until months or years after a tragedy or period of disruption. Pursuing these narratives requires patience.
- **Are authentic.** Restorative Narratives are true to a person’s or a community’s experiences. Sustained inquiries into a person’s life or a community enable us to determine the authenticity of the narrative.

- **Are strength-based.** Restorative Narratives speak to people’s strengths and help others find strength. Instead of focusing on the most dismal aspects of a situation, these narratives get people to care and listen by highlighting what’s possible. After attending our 2014 Mindful Media Summit, The Solutions Journalism Network’s David Bornstein said: “To me, what’s restorative is when journalism truly helps people understand the world in its fullness, so they can properly diagnose the ills, envision possibilities with a realistic eye, and see meaningful pathways forward.”

