In the Company of Awkwardness: Counterstorying Toughness in Therapy

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The story related in this paper is real, retold here to the best of my recollection. Any edits were made solely for purposes of length and clarity, never to alter the story itself. The transcript and prose poem herein are included with permission from the person at the center of the story. However, because of the deeply personal nature of what is discussed, identifying details, including names, have been redacted.

Introduction

When I was growing up, there was not a single day when I wasn't teased by the athletes or "jocks" at my school. I learned to cope in quiet, strategic ways, namely avoidance. I became adept at steering clear of the areas where they typically gathered. However, I often felt exposed and vulnerable under the gaze of boys and men eager to point out the ways I failed to conform to societal expectations. I survived school, but the experience left me scared, mistrustful, and fearful of others, especially those who embodied traditionally masculine traits. This isn't an uncommon experience among gay men, many of whom learn to navigate the world by suppressing essential parts of themselves, often at the cost of fuller, more liberated lives.

Even after the boys from school were long gone, my fears and mistrust lingered. Which is why it might come as a surprise that, after becoming a therapist, I packed up and moved 1,748 miles to begin a career as an adolescent therapist in an all-boys residential facility. Unsurprisingly, these early injuries shaped how I engaged with the young men I worked with. No matter how deeply I wanted to help, I was often overwhelmed by anxiety, unsure of how to show up authentically in these relationships. Once again, I was doing my best to cope, but this time, avoidance was no longer an option. I had made an important commitment as a helper, and my clients needed me to pursue an alternative path.

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This paper explores how therapeutic relationships and narrative ways of working guided me to counterstory the relational wounds I carried from childhood. In supporting young men through their struggles, I found myself reengaging with subjugated aspects of my own self-narrative. I focus in particular on my work with Quentin, a young man referred to me for substance use counseling, and on the use of Internalized Other Interviewing (Epston, 1993; Tomm, 2010; Tomm, 2025)—a practice that transformed our therapeutic relationship by allowing each of us to confront and work through our own distinct anxieties and reservations.

Naming the feeling in the room: Awkwardness

One lasting impact of the bullying I faced as a child was a persistent and frustrating sense of unease in conversations with young men. It was a deeply embodied experience: my body would tense up; my words would stumble; my accented English seemed heavier to me and, I worried, harder to understand. I became overly self-conscious, so much so that it pulled me out of the moment and away from the therapeutic work I needed to be doing. I was, of course, frustrated with this development, but I was not sure how to address it. And since avoidance was no longer an option, I did the only thing I could: I grounded myself in the experience, accepting the burden. In doing so, I forced myself to remain present in spite of the distracting bodily and psychological distress that infiltrated my therapeutic conversations with my clients.

But one day, this experience, as uncomfortable as it was, became a surprisingly useful element in therapy. One client in particular, Quentin, was especially instrumental in helping me learn how to work with it. He shared that he, too, had been experiencing something similar in our sessions, though for different reasons. Chief among them was the emotional vulnerability talk therapy often demands, something many boys and men in Western cultures are taught to fear and avoid.

One of the qualities of narrative therapy I value most is its collaborative spirit. Narrative conversations are intentionally scaffolded through transparency and purposeful relationship-building practices, including, at times, self-disclosure (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Schloemer, 2000). This proved to be quite effective in my work with Quentin. Letting him in on my discomfort proved to be a turning point, marking a shift in our therapeutic relationship. Realizing we were no longer alone in this experience, we named it,

"awkwardness," and began co-creating ways to work with it, around it, and through it. And with that, Quentin gave me permission to engage the *"awkwardness"* rather than retreat from it. The rest, as they say, is history.

Inheritance of silence: A moment remembered

Quentin (23) began consulting me for court-ordered therapy following ongoing struggles with substance use, or in his words, *"because I couldn't keep my ass out of jail."* At the time of our initial session, he had already been revoked from probation four times due to new drug-related charges and was staring down the real possibility of additional jail time.

Quentin looked every bit the all-American jock. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and the kind of boyish yet sturdy build that made him seem like the golden kid from a suburban family with every opportunity laid before him. Sitting outside my office, he could have been mistaken for someone with an uncomplicated present and inevitably bright future. However, his eyes implied a more complex story—curiosity edged with confusion and unease, tempered by a flicker of determination and hope. That subtle openness, glimpsed behind the surface, quickly disrupted my own assumptions and drew me into seeing beyond the jock stereotype, revealing a young man searching for direction and possibility—a story yet to be written, one in which I was about to play a meaningful role.

Our first conversation was a memorable one. Quentin appeared forthcoming and communicative, but at the same time, he seemed intent on controlling my perception of him. I noticed how he would withdraw from the conversation whenever vulnerability was inevitable. But I also realized I was contending with my own form of vulnerability avoidance. Quentin was accompanied by his father, who, fortunately for both of us, did not shy away from emotional expression at first. Fearing he might lose his son to drugs, he spoke with a raw honesty that set the tone for what would eventually become possible in Quentin's and my work together.

During that first meeting, as his father wept, recounting the anguish of watching his son slip away, Quentin stared beyond me at the bare, colorless, and forgettable wall. I figured he withdrew because the moment made him feel exposed and uneasy—awkward. After some time, Quentin and I came to

understand that his avoidant responses echoed those of his father, who had long struggled to express vulnerability himself. During that first interview, a palpable awkwardness filled the room, which I instinctively perceived as a problem and tried to avoid. I suspected Quentin's father sensed the awkwardness too, as he quickly wiped his tears, straightened in his chair, and shifted the conversation to a new topic. Looking back on that moment, I am struck by the image of three men in the room, quietly wrestling with what they could not name or bear to express freely. However, this is what we are taught to do as men: suppress our feelings, toughen up, and move on (Schermer, 2013). In fact, the avoidance felt so familiar, so automatic, that I did not question it at the time. Instead, I saw the awkwardness as the problem to overcome.

When awkwardness becomes the doorway

Throughout our work together, Quentin and I not only challenged the notion of "toughness" that men often perform to affirm their masculinity but also came to see how it constrained the depth of our therapist-client relationship. Beneath that facade of strength, we uncovered awkwardness, anxiety, discomfort, and vulnerability. Rather than avoidance, this time we chose to welcome awkwardness into our conversations.

As our work deepened, we learned how Quentin's commitment to performing toughness had silenced parts of him that were hurting. We eventually came to understand that it was his unaddressed pain that underpinned many of the challenges he was facing, including his abuse of alcohol and drugs, as well as a growing pattern of anger. In Quentin's words, his life felt "abstract." He shared that whenever something bad happened, he never quite knew how to find his way out. He explained that he felt trapped in a way of living that left no room for hope or dreams about the future. In describing his experience, Quentin spoke of "just existing day to day, running in circles, wasting away," and wondering, "How much alcohol do I need to drink to feel better?"

The problems Quentin faced were conditioned, reinforced, and even justified by the unforgiving ideals of toughness upheld by our patriarchal society. These expectations, of course, had to be thoughtfully deconstructed before awkwardness could successfully guide us toward discoveries we had not anticipated. It was at that point that we gave ourselves permission to be

vulnerable, to feel awkward, to name emotions, to face pain, and to recognize its impact. The result was a counterstorying of long-held reservations that influenced his presence as a client, and mine as his therapist. Now, we were connected in more sincere ways. For me, that counterstory left a lasting impact on my work with other young men I would have once felt awkward around, lifting the barriers that had stood in the way of the work I was meant to do with them and for them.

Over time, I not only learned to sit with the awkwardness; I managed to lean into it and use it to my advantage. In my work with Quentin, this shift opened space for conversations about past traumas, grief, and deep-seated low self-esteem. It also gave me permission to experiment with less conventional therapeutic practices, for example, Internalized Other Interviewing (Burnham, 2000; Epston, 1993; Tomm, 2010, 2025). This curious practice, perhaps sometimes uncomfortable by nature or design, became a shared tool through which we embraced awkwardness rather than evading it. And it was through this very awkwardness that we found our way into conversations that exposed how pain had shaped Quentin's life and fueled unhelpful coping strategies.

The absent but beloved: An encounter with loss to remember the self

Internalized Other Questioning (IOQ) draws from the premise that we carry the relational presence of others within us. It invites clients to step into those internalized echoes by speaking from the imagined perspective of someone significant in their lives (Epston, 1993; Tomm, 2025). The therapist addresses the client as if speaking to that other person, creating the condition for the client to encounter themselves through the relational lens of the other's experience and understanding. In this sense, IOQ is not a performance or role-play but a reflexive inquiry into one's relationship with the internalized community that shapes identity and meaning (Tomm, 2025).

David Epston once shared with me that many narrative therapists shy away from Internalized Other practices (*D. Epston, personal communication, July 17, 2017*). This piqued my curiosity, and I wondered, *Is it because of how awkward these practices can feel in the room?* I'll admit, I too, had my own moments of hesitation and sometimes avoided such practices altogether. I often found myself preparing more carefully before sessions where I planned to use Internalized Other questions. And yet, I never stopped trying them because I genuinely

believed in their unique potential. Nonetheless, the more I practiced, the more I noticed the awkwardness. Eventually, I came to see that the awkwardness was not a problem to be solved; rather, it was an essential part of the process.

It turned out that Quentin had long been concealing many painful stories that had quietly shaped his experiences, strained his relationships, and cast uncertainty over his future. When we were both trying to avoid the awkwardness, we were unknowingly turning away from the very doorway to discovery. It was within these stories of pain that we found something close to magic. Many stories were told and retold, but it was the story of losing a best friend for which the awkwardness proved most valuable, guiding us gently toward what needed to be felt and said.

I learned that, while in high school, one of Quentin's closest friends had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He shared how he set aside his own pain and grief to focus on creating meaningful memories during their final times together. Socialized to be tough, Quentin was no stranger to suppressing his feelings. He admitted that this period of his life made him even more adept at turning emotional concealment into a default coping mechanism. The day we talked about the loss of his friend, Quentin and I did not just invite awkwardness into the room; we pulled up a chair and gave it a central role in the conversation.

That very awkwardness, which we allowed to lead rather than linger, became a pivotal force in shaping what I now call *Time-Traveling Internalized Other questions*. The following transcript illustrates how awkwardness made space for me, as the therapist, to introduce these questions and engage Quentin in a process that allowed him to revisit and reimagine a meaningful relationship in his life:

Transcript excerpt

Mauricio: Quentin, I wonder if you would be willing to engage with me in a conversation about you and Steven in a pretty different way, perhaps might seem a little bit weird or strange… I have done this exercise with other people in therapy and have been told how useful these sorts of strange conversations can be…

Quentin: Yeah…?

Mauricio: Yeah. It might invite emotions, different emotions or ways of expressing these emotions… what do you think?

Quentin: Oh, about what?

Mauricio: Having this sort of different conversation with me?

Quentin: Oh yeah, for sure, yeah…

As I tried to initiate an Internalized Other conversation, I found myself feeling awkward and anxious about engaging Quentin in this way. Aware of how deeply the ideals of toughness shaped both his experience and my own, I began to worry that the entire exchange might fall flat. In hindsight, choosing not to retreat and continuing with this line of inquiry marked the moment I stopped resisting the awkwardness and began letting it guide me.

Mauricio: Ok. Let's see… maybe let's go back to the time right before he got diagnosed. Do you remember what you were up to or what you guys were doing at that time in your lives?

Quentin: Yeah… it was homecoming week, my parents were gone, pretty much just ran all over… all over town. It was the best time of my life.

Mauricio: Can you help me understand how this was the best time of your life?

Quentin: It was really fun. There were like a lot of activities, you know, with homecoming week, you know, a lot of stuff to do. It was junior year so… and yeah, we were on the football team and there's always this tradition at our school where the junior girls would play the senior girls in a flag football game… we called it the puff football game, and then the boys from the real football teams were the coaches. I remember that game was coming up and like the three of us were coaching, like these girls our age. I don't know, it's silly, but it was really fun.

I intended my question to be directed toward Steven, but I noticed Quentin was still responding in his own voice. I could have allowed that to stand as it would have been a safer path, but I sensed the importance of staying with the discomfort and pressing forward. So, I tried again, this time framing my next question with greater focus and directness.

Mauricio: It might be interesting for us to transport ourselves back to 2010, right before Steven passed. And I would like to learn a little bit more about Steven but from his point of view, from his perspective. Because you knew him pretty well, I wonder if I could interview you as if you were Steven. So, you would answer my questions as you think Steven would have. Would that be something you'd be willing to try?

Quentin: Ok, I can try it.

He seemed curious, but still half-guarded. I sensed that he was beginning to trust the therapeutic process, and so was willing to entertain my odd request. I felt it was important to acknowledge my gratitude for his willingness to step into this exploration with me.

Mauricio: Ok, we can try… thank you. Alright, let me think how we can start… what to ask first… so this would be back in 2010, ok?

Although the awkwardness still created pauses and hesitation, I was beginning to feel more ready to transform it into something meaningful. I glanced at an empty chair in the office and imagined awkwardness sitting there, quietly urging me on: "Go ahead…"

Quentin: Ok.

I looked Quentin in his eyes but addressed him as Steven.

Mauricio: So, Steven, tell me a little bit about your life these days?

Quentin as Steven: I go to school, I play sports, I hang out with a few friends on the weekends.

Mauricio: Steven, can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with Quentin?

Quentin as Steven: Ummm, close. Lots of joking around, always laughing. Lots of putting things aside and being in the moment.

Mauricio: Steven, how would you describe you guys putting things aside and being in the moment? Or what was that like?

Quentin as Steven: Ummm, start a conversation and an hour later you're still talking and laughing, but not about what you started talking about. It's hard to describe, but I have never had a connection like that with a lot of other human beings, if that makes sense.

Mauricio: It sure does. Steven, what do you think made it possible for you and Quentin to develop such a unique connection where you can laugh about anything together, and even as time passes, you are still laughing?

Quentin as Steven: Time and closeness.

In the following section, I incorporate a question originally suggested by David Epston in his review of the transcript for the apprenticeship program I was enrolled in (Epston et al., 2017). Quentin and I revisited the original conversation together, using some of David's questions to guide our reflection and deepen the dialogue.

Mauricio/David: Steven, it sounds to me that the time you spent with one another and the closeness you felt to one another was unparalleled. Was there a kind of magic between you? Do you know what I mean?

Quentin as Steven: Quentin and I knew we were good friends without talking about it. It was an understanding between us. Most people try too hard to be liked by their friends, but with Quentin, we were ourselves and liked each other without effort. That's just the way life went. Life put us next to each other… that was the magic.

Mauricio: Steven, is there anything about Quentin that you can think about that might have played a role in you wanting to develop and nourish this connection?

Quentin as Steven: His friendship.

Mauricio: Beautiful. If okay with you, now let's travel in time again… Steven, you have been diagnosed with cancer. Quentin is going through a lot of pain because of what you're going through. What do you think about this pain your friend is experiencing right now?

Quentin: I don't even know how to answer that. I don't know. I'm wondering if that ever even crossed his mind.

The question seemed to throw Quentin off, and for a moment, he stepped out of the role of Steven. Perhaps seeing his pain reflected through his friend's eyes was simply too much for him to tolerate in that moment—another glimpse into his ongoing struggle with vulnerability, which continued to surface from time to time. After all, the voice of *"Quentin-behind-the-mask"* was only beginning to emerge, while the performance of toughness remained a well-developed and rehearsed narrative. Still, I chose to stay with this line of inquiry, letting awkwardness carry me forward. It felt like an important opportunity to finally explore the pain of losing his best friend, a long-suppressed reality that was asking to be expressed and felt.

Mauricio: Steven, based on what Quentin has shared with me about his pain about your illness, and the closeness and unique connection you've described, I can only imagine the pain all the friends in this trio were experiencing… what do you know about this pain?

Quentin as Steven: We were all worried and scared.

Mauricio: Steven, can you teach me about your experience of these worries and fears?

Quentin as Steven: All the doctors that I've been through have told me there's no chance. I mean it's stage four. I mean, everybody tells me it's just a matter of time before I die.

Mauricio: Steven, and what would be your guess about how Quentin experienced these worries and fears?

Quentin as Steven: He put them on hold temporarily.

Mauricio: How did he put them on hold?

Quentin as Steven: Umm, in a way not giving up on life, I guess.

Mauricio: Steven, do you have any knowledge about how exactly it is that Quentin was able to accomplish putting his worries and fears on hold?

Quentin as Steven: He focused on encouraging me. He really encouraged me to keep playing basketball throughout my chemotherapy. Umm, we still went bowling and did all the stuff we used to do.

Mauricio: Steven, what do you think as to what might have been so important to Quentin that he continued to encourage you to keep playing basketball throughout your chemotherapy despite his worries and the fears, and the pain?

Quentin as Steven: Because he admires and respects me, I guess.

Mauricio: Steven, do you admire and respect him as well?

Quentin as Steven: Yes.

Mauricio: Steven, can you share with me what it is you admire and respect about Quentin?

Quentin as Steven: That he's been there for me and keeps encouraging me no matter what.

Here, Quentin begins to recognize himself beneath the masks he has grown used to wearing. Through his friend's eyes, he starts to recognize the kind of friend he was and comes to understand these descriptions as reflections of choices he made, grounded in his values and what he stands for in life. I made a note to revisit this part of his narrative in future conversations, but at that moment, I chose to trust my instincts and continue exploring through Internalized Other questions and time-travel dialogue.

Mauricio: I see. Thank you. Now if it's okay, let's travel in time again. Time has passed, maybe six years. Steven, what do you think about what has been going on in Quentin's life?

Quentin as Steven: Ummm, I feel sad actually. I feel sad for what's happened.

Mauricio: Steven, what specifically makes you feel sad about what's happened in Quentin's life?

Quentin as Steven: He had a lot of other ideas about where his life was gonna go.

Mauricio: Steven, what sort of ideas did Quentin have about where his life was going that you might wish for him to seek out again and revive in his everyday life?

Quentin as Steven: Definitely not what's happened. Playing football somewhere. Be a college graduate.

Mauricio: Steven, did you ever imagine what's actually been going on in Quentin's

life instead of where he knew it was gonna go?

Quentin as Steven: Ummm, no.

Mauricio: No? Steven, how come? What do you know about Quentin that does not fit with where his life has been going?

Quentin as Steven: He's reserved, not that outgoing.

Mauricio: Steven, how do you think that being reserved and not outgoing would have kept Quentin from all the troubles he has been going through in his life since your departure?

Quentin as Steven: Just like… I think he would have been more in control, I guess.

Mauricio: Steven, Quentin would have been more in control of what?

Quentin as Steven: Himself.

Mauricio: Being in control of himself. Steven, what do you think he would have been able to accomplish because of being in control of himself?

Quentin as Steven: Anything.

Mauricio: Did you say anything, Steven?

Quentin as Steven: Those dreams of being like a student athlete. I think he could have accomplished his dream of going into the Navy.

Mauricio: As you may know Steven, those things have not happened. Instead, Quentin has had some problems with substance use and some struggles with the law. He also has been struggling with anxiety and has been thinking that he's not good enough. He has been thinking about all these problems and his lost dreams. Steven, if you had the chance to say anything you wished to say to Quentin, what would you say to him?

Quentin as Steven: Get big. I don't know, man up and be tough.

Mauricio: Steven, does Quentin know what you mean by that?

Quentin as Steven: He would know exactly what I meant.

At this point in the conversation, it became clear that Quentin's model of toughness had been reinforced within the culture of athletes and "jocks," where emotional restraint and stoicism were expected. Further exploration of expectations like "getting big" and "manning up," for example, may reveal important insights into how they have influenced him. Just as important would be helping Quentin see that emotional expression in therapy—allowing himself to feel and be seen—could represent a new kind of strength or toughness. Steven's voice and perspective might help anchor this emerging counterstory.

Awkwardness creating possibilities

When asked to reflect on the Internalized Other conversation above, Quentin described it as *"wonderful and horrible,"* a phrase that I thought summed it up well. The awkwardness coexisted with the prospect of transformation. While initially uncomfortable and obtrusive, the awkwardness soon enough became a helper, guiding and carrying both of us as the conversation unfolded. As we leaned into that space, I could feel layers of shame, anxiety, and pain beginning to peel away. This was not a process that belonged to Quentin alone; we experienced it together.

There was something extraordinary in watching Quentin recognize himself in new ways, seeing himself and what he stood for in life reflected back through the imagined voice of a beloved friend no longer living. That moment carried a kind of quiet magic. The Internalized Other conversation presented above was profoundly transformative. Yet transformation, I realized, is never contained within a single exchange; it requires ongoing practice and repeated engagement. The awkwardness, as I experienced it, would continue to make this possible. It opened space not only for more Internalized Other conversations, but also for many other practices that would shape our therapeutic relationship and the trajectory of Quentin's becoming.

Quentin was able to continue setting aside some of the masks he had long hidden behind and to allow different aspects of his humanity to come forward—to be

seen, witnessed, and valued. I had the privilege of witnessing those different versions of Quentin emerge in our work together. One such example follows below.

Reclaimed strength: Unmasking the poetic self

Once awkwardness was welcomed as an active participant in our work, Quentin began to make full use of this unexpected ally. Our work in therapy expanded beyond Internalized Other interviewing to include metaphor creation, letter writing, and poetry. What follows is Quentin's own articulation of anxiety—an expression shaped through the very awkwardness he once avoided but had come to embrace in our work together.

> *Anxiety is like the ocean. There is a natural energy that is strong enough to move me, it builds somewhere deep and comes in waves, leaving precious moments of tranquility in between. Although some are stronger than others, the waves are relentless.*
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> *As a child my first experience in the ocean was overwhelming. A wave was strong enough to knock me over as I underestimated its power. I went under and had a strange feeling of being totally out of control. I did my best to right myself, finding the surface and taking a gasp of air. I discovered, however, the ocean did not wait for me to collect myself. It rudely slapped me again, knocking me back under. I quickly learned that the surf is unforgiving and unkind to inexperienced swimmers. I retreated to shore to ponder the natural force I had just come face-to-face with. I was intimidated.*
>
> *Anxiety is like the ocean. It comes in and then washes away. It is not kind to newcomers. It is unforgiving to those who don't know how to co-exist with such a natural force. Many avoid it at all costs, the risk too much to bear. But there are a few thrill seekers among us who throw caution to the wind, and brave this formidable force. They can be found hanging 10 toes off the front of their surfboard, or down in the depths among the sharks. Either way, there are more than a few enlightened individuals who know that a new world awaits, if we learn to ride the wave.*

My first time standing up on a surfboard was some kind of accomplishment. No longer did I feel at the mercy of the mighty ocean. I felt a surge of energy, a thrill. It wasn't the exact same wave that had beaten me down as a child, but one just like it. It was not as if I had beaten a former foe, but more as if I found a new friend. A person whose friendship I had been resisting, maybe because I had not yet learned how to play along. The same thing that had me frightened for my life had become something fun and exhilarating. Not because the ocean was now different, but my relationship with it was.

Anxiety is like the ocean. It is an energy that comes in waves. It can drown you and leave you tumbling. But if you learn how to paddle into it, and stand out in front of it, you can ride it and unleash feelings of joy within you.

I am no longer scared of my anxiety the way I used to be. It used to wash over me, leaving me speechless and out of breathe. Now I recognize its waves and I've begun to learn how to ride. Some waves are meeting new people, some waves are opening up and not liking what I will find, some waves are revisiting the death of a dear friend. As a child these things would beat me down and keep me under the surface. But, as a man I'm learning how to go with it. Standing on a surfboard is much like standing in the face of your anxiety. It isn't a sure thing. You're going to fall quite a bit, and once you're up, there's no guarantee you stay there. But with time and a lot of discomfort, you become more acquainted with the waves.

I am now at a point where I have ridden some of these waves to completion. I have been faced with a lot of anxieties and worries, but I have now taken notice of the energy it brings into my being. I do not run from it like I used to , but instead I find a way to ride with it. I have found that I often find feelings along the way that are amazing. I try to stay out in front of that energy, and when you do it right you can find feelings you never would have found, had you stayed on the shore.

Quentin described writing this thoughtful reflection on his experience of anxiety, which he held onto for several weeks before finally deciding to share it in therapy.

Reflecting on his hesitation to share his writings about anxiety, Quentin explained that his struggle with awkwardness had kept him from embracing an important part of himself: *"It's a part of me that I'm not really in touch with and that I didn't identify with until recently. It is a part of me that uses metaphors and is more poetic. I guess it is a poetic intelligence if I try, but I didn't care in the past."* I wondered if this reluctance was tied to Quentin's tendency to perform toughness in the world. In earlier conversations, we had used the metaphor of *"wearing a mask"* to describe this way of showing up. He described, *"The mask… the football player me was celebrated by all people. It was something that set me apart and made me feel that I was the best at something."* As we grew more curious about the *Quentin-behind-the-mask*, we began to catch glimpses of him, thanks in part to the awkwardness we had learned to welcome into our conversations. As he gave voice to the person behind the mask, he reflected, *"I have a soft side and a poetic side, a side of me that was really in pain and that I was running away from. This is a side of me that second-guesses and that limits the steps I can take in my life. It is indeed a better version of me. It is this side of me that got me to bring in my writings on my experience of anxiety. The old version might not have brought it."*

I rejoiced at hearing Quentin refer to an *"old version"* of himself, confirming my suspicion that something had shifted. He went on to describe how he had internalized patriarchal beliefs like, *"guys aren't really supposed to do that kinda thing… showing a softer side, having a poetic and more vulnerable side."* This gave rise to important conversations where rigid ideas of masculinity were further deconstructed, allowing us to explore how they had influenced Quentin's identity, limited his emotional expression, and fueled ongoing pain and self-defeating choices.

Counterstories born in relationship

In this paper, I have reflected on how my personal childhood wounds once influenced my work as a therapist with young male clients. I explored notions of masculinity and the demand for toughness, and how such dynamics can complicate therapeutic work between male therapists and male clients. For me,

they often bred reluctance toward emotional expression and vulnerability, which gave rise to an experience of awkwardness and, in turn, ways of coping that undermined the core goals of therapy. While avoiding awkwardness and discomfort once seemed like the only option, grounded in my commitment to helping, I learned that I could choose to face these experiences differently. In embracing awkwardness, I came to see therapeutic relationships as potential sites of repair for the client and therapist alike. I learned that counterstories can arise in the therapist–client relationship, allowing long-standing scars to be experienced in renewed ways. To illustrate this, I focused on Quentin's story and our unconventional work together. I described the central role that awkwardness played in shaping my use of Internalized Other practices. That awkwardness, instead of standing in our way, became the very ground of a shared transformation—a counterstory born from the therapeutic relationship itself and our courage to follow where discomfort pointed.

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