Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

Founding Editor: David Epston

ISSN 2767-3766

October 2025

Editors: Tom Stone Carlson, Sanni Pajlakka, marcela polanco, and David Epston

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www.JournalCNT.com

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Editors' Note

We are excited to announce this very special "David Epston" release of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy. This release contains two original papers by David Epston, along with a set of notes on the topic of moral character and wonderfulness.

The first paper is an unpublished keynote address that David gave in 2017 at Massey University in New Zealand on the topic of "Finding Children's Imaginative Know-How." This paper outlines some of the key theoretical and ethical concerns related to working with children in therapy and how wonderfulness interviews can serve as an ethical reorientation to the many ways that children are marginalized in therapy.

The second paper, "Wonderfulness Interviews: An Origin Story," has been a long time in the making and is well worth the wait. As the title reveals, this paper tells the story of how David Epston invented the practice of wonderfulness interviews in a moment of necessity and under the most unusual of circumstances. I am sure that you will agree that this paper was well worth the wait.

Sincerely,

Tom Stone Carlson

Narrative Therapy News and Training Opportunities

Trainings and Workshops

Uncommon Answers to Common Questions about Burnout: December 5th – 6th, 2025 by Sanni Paljakka & Tom Carlson

Are you tired and burned out by old ideas about burnout and self-care? Join us for an evening and a day of anti-burnout inspiration, joy, and discovery. This workshop will introduce unique narrative therapy perspectives and uncommon wisdom related to both the problem of burnout and the pathways beyond it.

We will host an intimate and deeply felt gathering that includes presentations, live interviews, and many opportunities for laughter, tears, and self-discovery. Our hope is that you will leave with a renewed reverence for the miracle of change, a lightness that relieves the anxieties and cynicisms of life, and a rediscovery of your own soul's wonder — always at the center of invisible breakthroughs.

Socrates famously said, "The one thing I do not advise is that we stay the same." This is our greatest hope, that you won't be the same after our time together.

All proceeds from this event will go to support the charitable activities of the Calgary Narrative Collective and help us fulfill our mission to offer high-quality, barrier-reduced counselling to people in need in the Calgary Area.

For more information click here: https://www.showpass.com/not-the-same-uncommon-answers-to-common-burnout-questions/.

Save the Date: 2nd Annual Contemporary Narrative Therapy Conference, November 6th – 8th, 2025

Don't miss the 2nd Annual Contemporary Narrative Therapy Conference. We are committed to bringing together some of the brightest thinkers and talented therapists who are working to reimagine narrative therapy for our contemporary times and problems. This unique workshop-style conference offers participants an in-depth look at the latest thinking in contemporary narrative therapy.

For more information and how to register: https://www.socalnarrativetherapy.com/event-details-registration/2nd-annual-contemporary-narrative-therapy-conference

JCNT Subscribers can use code “JCNT 2025” to receive a discount.

Apprenticeship in the Artistry of Narrative Practice with David Epston

Immerse yourself in this unique year-long apprenticeship with David Epston’s narrative therapy practice. This is the only place in the world where you can learn directly from the co-originator of narrative practice together with his closest colleagues. We use a unique pedagogy developed over decades for teaching advanced narrative therapy practice. Nowhere else can you experience such intensive training that takes place within a very detailed story of your own therapy sessions and that of others.

This is a boutique learning experience, with between 6-10 apprentices in each cadre. New group will be starting at the end of February 2026.

The course will take place in an online learning community made up of like-minded, skilled narrative practitioners from all over the world. For more information go to: https://narrativeapprentice.com/

Three Interviews with David Epston

Counterstories, Wondefulness Enquiries, Witnessing Practices, & Possibilities for the Future with David Epston & Kay Ingamells.

This course demonstrated David’s innovative teaching methods to teach the craft and art of narrative inquiry training using immersion earning through transcripts and internalized other questioning to focus on three interviews: 1) David’s well-known interview and follow-up seven years later with Sebastian; 2) David’s interview with counselor Viola who has met 8 times with 16-year-old Joel, and then 5 minutes in, he begins to interview her as Joel; 3) David’s interview with social worker Karen as Jane and then as Jane’s son, Tim. Each time, David and his

close colleague Kay Ingamells review a recorded interview, alongside a transcript, paying close attention to questions and reflections. Relevant papers, essays, commentaries and opportunities for registrants to contribute are integrated throughout the course.

For more information go to: https://reauthoringteaching.com/narrative-training/ce-courses/buses-dont-run-yet/3-interviews-david-epston/

Finding Children's Imaginative Know-How

David Epston

The content of this paper was part of a plenary address given at the Equity for Education Symposium, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand, Feb. 15, 2017.

First of all, let me thank the organizers of this Conference for the honour of addressing you today. I had some reservations given that I have worked all my life in a parallel 'field of practice'- as a social worker/narrative family therapist primarily with young people and their families. The titles of two of the books I have co-authored should give that away: *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative Therapy with Children and their Families* (1997); and in December of last year, *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland: Connecting with Children's Imaginative Know-how* (2016).

My concerns about 'a kind of equity' may very well be preaching to the converted here, and if so, I will be glad of that. I am arguing for a kind of equity between what I am going to refer to as 'insider and outsider knowledges' and the domains of each, and what my co-authors and I have come to call 'children's imaginative know-how' as a specific term for their 'insider knowledge'.

Before I go any further, let me quote the Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes:

> It seems to me this is because in childhood, freedom is identical to imagination, and since here everything is possible, the freedom to be something more than the family and something more than the school flies higher and allows us to live more separately...we were, as children, singular magicians. (2011, p. 58)

Similarly, the American novelist, Joyce Carol Oates, refers to this domain where children's imaginative know-how has free reign as a 'counterworld':

> No doubt child psychologists have speculated on the phenomenon of children's imaginations and the extraordinary energy invested in play....But the fact remains- it is a mysterious activity, exciting, fascinating,

> unpredictable. Like Lewis Carroll's heroine, Alice, the child plunges willfully down the rabbit hole, or through the looking-glass, into another dimension. The counterworld both mirrors the 'real world' and distorts it; in it, you both are, and are not, yourself. (2009, p.42)

Now let me tell you a story about Serena and her dirty, dirty underpants: Serena, a disgruntled 11-year-old, accompanied Jenny, her single-parenting mother, into my office. Jenny wasn't in a very good mood either. When Serena turned towards her, she couldn't help herself from scowling at her daughter. Whatever the problem was, it was one of those that had set each of them at odds with the other. Serena looked vengefully back at her mother as if she had been injured by her. When I tried to translate the looks on her face, I came up with something like: "If you tell him what the problem is, you'll be very sorry when we get home afterwards!"

As is my custom, I tried a tack that I suspected caught both of them off guard. "Look, do you mind if we go about this conversation in a way that might be very, very different than what you both might have expected?" They both looked at me askance, but I proceeded without any further ado. "I was wondering, Serena, if I might get to know you through your 'wonderfulnesses'? You know—your talents, abilities, and what your friends think is cool about you. Jenny, I wouldn't be surprised if you wanted to know why. Well, by the looks on both your faces, this problem has got you pretty upset with one another. So I have to assume that it must be a tricky problem. And we might have to 'team up' if we are going to do anything about this sort of problem. But before we even can think about teaming up, I guess it would be good for me to know what your 'wonderfulnesses' are, Serena, so we can all see what you have going for you. Then we can figure out how to put some or all of those 'wonderfulnesses' against the problem that has got you so upset with one another." Serena and Jenny were certainly taken aback but, if nothing else, they were intrigued and consented for me to proceed. I doubt that at this stage they could have known exactly what lay ahead of them, but at least both were now able to temporarily tear themselves away from their unspoken mutual recriminations.

I began by addressing Serena. "Serena, might it make you feel uncomfortable, perhaps big headed, if I were to ask you about your 'wonderfulnesses'?" She

concurred with a head nod but the look in her eye remained quizzical. “In that case, do you mind if I ask your wonderfulness questions to your mum?” She raised her eyebrows as if to say, “What is all this about?” but stumbling over her words, she said, “Yah, go ahead... ask her” in a far less disdainful tone of voice.

Although it was not entirely smooth sailing at the beginning of the half-hour-long discussion but by the end of it, I was in no doubt that Serena, according to her mother’s endearing accounts, was a wonderful 11-year-old young woman. Jenny, initially with strained enthusiasm, told me about her daughter’s wonderfulnesses. She related to me that Serena could be “lovely, friendly, and kind to little children.” I refused to leave it there. I sought considerable elaboration of these claims by calling forth from Jenny stories in which Serena’s attributes were embedded. “Jenny, would you be so kind to tell me one story from amongst the many stories you could tell me about how Serena goes about her loveliness, friendliness, and kindnesses to little children. And when I hear the story you decide to tell me, I will deeply understand how she practices such wonderfulnesses.”

Jenny blinked in response to the sententiousness of my expressions but then appeared to pass into a kind of reverie as if she were looking over the past to find an apposite story. Jenny chose Serena’s attention to and care for the young children of their next-door neighbors, in addition to her preschool-aged cousins, as the crux of an ensemble of tales in which to portray her daughter. Slowly, the enmity that had pervaded each and every interaction began to fade. When I enquired if such expressions of kindness were extended towards her, Jenny said: “At times, could be a good help. After school, you go out and bring in the washing off the line before I get home from work, which makes it easier for me, and when I work late on Fridays, you take the dog out for a walk so I don’t have to do it late at night.”

By now, Jenny started to appreciably warm up to these questions while Serena looked far less chilly. Spontaneously, Jenny had cause to commend her daughter for the way she babysits for Olivia, their 6-year-old neighbor. When I asked how significant this was for an 11-year-old to be entrusted with the care of a youngster, she observed, “Serena’s nice considerate nature.” She thought when Serena turned 14, she could babysit on her own.

At my urging, Jenny now turned to another arena of her daughter's wonderfulnesses ("Jenny, do her wonderfulnesses show up anywhere else in her life?"). Before I could propose some other sites, such as at school, on school holidays, in her sports, in the things she loves to do either by herself or with her girlfriends, her mother, with a measure of pride in Serena, reported that she could be "daring, fearless, and brave when it comes to her cheerleading and trampolining." I quickly turned towards Serena and asked her the following question in a mischievous manner: "Serena, whatever the problem might be, do you think it knows just how brave, fearless, and daring you so obviously are? Do you have any idea what it might think about you if it knew everything your mum knows about you?" She seemed somewhat surprised by this form of enquiry, but once again grinned and, somewhat hesitantly, said she supposed it wouldn't know this about her. "Do you think this problem is pretty clueless about you?" She found herself unable to answer, but we just carried on as if she had. "What do you think about us teaming up and telling the problem about this?" Once again, somewhat bemused and then starting to giggle out loud, she said, "Oh... oh. Okay!" "Well, say we all got together and told the problem, whatever it may be, the truth about the kind of person you are that allows you to get out there and cheerlead and risk jumping up and down when you are trampolining? Do you think this problem would have second thoughts about intruding into your life if it knew full well just how daring, fearless, and brave you truly are?" Now smiling through her bafflement, said, "I dunno!" "Jenny, most problems have a pretty narrow version of a young person because they only know the kid in trouble and not out of trouble, and probably aren't that interested in knowing about their daring, bravery, and fearlessness." She conceded that this was probably so. "Serena, do you think your daring could cause some trouble for the problem?"

Before we could take this up, Jenny sat up in her chair, looked Serena directly in the eye, and boldly announced, "You are independent-minded!" I immediately took this opportunity to inquire if she had fostered Serena's independent-mindedness. Jenny had no doubt this was so and spoke of her resolution: "I brought her up like that so that she can do things for herself. I don't like children being mollycoddled!" Turning to Serena, I asked if she had been aware of her mother championing her independent-mindedness before now. Serena, still

bemused, just peered at her mother. “Serena, is it good news or bad news to know your mother was behind your independent-mindedness?” Serena confirmed it was good news after giving my question careful consideration. “Jenny, does your policy to raise an independent-minded daughter go way back to even before she was born?” Serena was now unselfconsciously staring at her mother as if her mother was revealing to her something I suspected was previously unknown to her. Jenny stated, “It’s a hard world for a woman, and you have to be able to look after yourself and not depend on men to look after you.” Jenny went on to say that she had always been determined that Serena “grow up to be an adult who can think for herself and be self-reliant.”

I pursued this inquiry further. “Serena, are you of the opinion that your mother is an independent-minded mother, woman, and saleswoman?” She smiled and nodded in confirmation. Further, when I asked her if Jenny had a reputation amongst her family and friends for her independent-mindedness, nodding in unison, they laughed out loud. This left me no doubt. “Serena, do you think there is any of your mother’s independent-mindedness in you?” Serena again confirmed this with a grin and then looked towards Jenny, who was now beaming with a measure of pride. Once again in a roguish manner, I asked, “Serena, do you have any idea what the problem might think of messing with an independent-minded young person?” Yet again, Serena looked at me with equal measures of mystery and bemusement. “I dunno!” Turning to Jenny, I continued to pursue these novel and perhaps arcane speculations about the problem: “Do you think a problem would prefer to do the thinking for Serena and make up her mind about things for her?” Jenny and Serena concurred after considerable banter that no problem would like an independent young woman. That this could spell trouble for any problem that tried to do an 11-year-old’s thinking for them, especially if they were raised from birth to be independent-minded by an independent-minded mother.

I now considered it was time to address and confront the problem directly, whatever it was. Still, I had my qualms, and for that reason, I steeled myself for Serena’s response to my next inquiry. I did my best to ask in the most casual manner I could muster.

“Serena, by the way, what do you call this problem?”

To my surprise and delight, she answered me in a relatively matter-of-fact manner: “Dirty underpants!” “Oh no, dirty underpants!” I exclaimed sympathetically. “Tell me, is your dirty underpants problem like so many dirty underpants problems I have met over the years?” Serena now queried me. “What do you mean by that?” “Well, I don’t know a problem that can play more dirty tricks on a young person than a dirty underpants problem. Can I run through some of its tricks people your age have told me about? I will start with the least dirty trick and then work my way up to the dirtiest of dirty tricks. Is that okay?”

Without any apparent reservations, Serena indicated that I should go on. Over the years, I had worked with many young people, aged 4 to 17, to undo the problem’s tricks, and we had come up with a list in order of dirtiness.

I had decided to summarize the effects of such a problem in what I hoped was a form that would not only intrigue Serena but render relevant to her those wonderfulnesses that we had concluded might have the capacity to make trouble for the problem: first, their shared mother-daughter independent-mindedness, and second, her daring, fearlessness, and bravery. I hoped too that Jenny would realize that the wonderfulness inquiry was not mere window dressing.

“Well, Serena, here is the No. 1 dirty trick. Does it pretend it’s not a problem and you shouldn’t bother yourself about it?” Serena pondered this and then thoughtfully commented, “Sort of.” Jenny was in no doubt: “That’s right! It does do that!” By now, their attention was rapt in what possibly could be dirtier than that No. 1 dirty trick.

“Well, here is the No. 2 dirty trick. Does it try to have you believe that if it is a problem, it's not yours, but it's your mother’s?” Jenny smiled ruefully. I suspected this was in recognition of so many arguments she and Serena had had over the problem and whose problem it was. Serena appeared somewhat confused.

Emboldened, I proceeded. “Well, here is the No. 3 dirty trick. Does it try its old favorite that if you do nothing about it or even forget about it, it will go away all by itself?” Once again, Serena mused, “Sort of,” but Jenny insisted: “No, that’s right!” But now Jenny’s comment was suffused with kind regard, and from what I could see, Serena accepted it in that spirit rather than as criticism. They were smiling at one another and shaking their heads at the temerity of the problem to

try to pull a stunt like that and get away with it. At least until now! “Well, here is the No. 4 dirty trick. Now, I need to forewarn you that this is a particularly dirty trick.” They both stared at me expectantly. “Serena, does the problem tell you that it is good for you and will help you grow up?” Both Serena and Jenny laughed out loud at the problem’s effrontery. After a brief consultation, Serena proclaimed that it would be unlikely: “We are too independent-minded for that, aren’t we, Mum?”

“Well, Jenny and Serena, if you think No. 4 was a particularly dirty trick, here is No. 5, which, in my opinion, is the dirtiest trick of them all. Serena, has the problem tried to convince you that your poo smells as sweet as roses and everyone should wear some poo on their body for its perfume?” They laughed uproariously at my exaggeration before Jenny called it to a halt, saying, “You know, there’s something to that.” She told me she worked in a paint and home decorating shop, and her friends had to remind her that she smelled of paint and turpentine, whereas she was oblivious to these odors. She commiserated with Serena: “You know, you get so used to it that you can’t smell it yourself”.

Serena looked thoughtful until she suddenly expostulated: “I don’t like it!” Somewhat confused, I enquired, “What don’t you like, Serena?” “The dirty pants problem!” “Do you think we do?” “I suppose not!” Serena replied. Both Jenny and I tried to offer her some solace by indicating that we wholeheartedly shared her dislike of such a problem and the dirty tricks that made it possible. To this end, I declared, “Serena and Jenny, I am heartsick to learn that this problem has been playing the same tricks on you that it has played on so many young people I have met over the years.” I then turned to Serena and spoke directly to her: “Serena, you are now an independent-minded 11-year-old, and this comes from your mother both by the example she has provided for you and her fostering of it in you. Do you think the problem’s dirty tricks are wearing a bit thin, even if they can fool you every so often?” To my surprise, she replied that the dirty tricks could fool her quite a bit, but that they were wearing thin. “Serena, if you weren’t quite so to the far-reaching conclusion that “it’s a bad problem and I can do something about it!” I then asked a question that I believe would have seemed audacious before Serena’s assertion of her distaste for the problem and her belief she could seek some remedy. “In that case, would you be willing to put pressure on yourself

to put pressure on the problem?" "What do you mean by that?" Serena wondered aloud. "Look, the problem has been putting pressure on your mum to put pressure on you. How about turning the tables on the problem by putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem?" "How?" Serena asked with zeal. It now seemed like a viable tack to take to get her own back, a kind of revenge, and out-trick the problem. "Well, you might have to play clean tricks on the problem instead of being taken in by its dirty tricks. Would that be okay with you? Would that be okay with you, too, Jenny?" There was no dissent. If nothing else, we had teamed up against the problem's dirty tricks and had outlined the ways to respond, for example, "putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem" and naming them clean tricks.

I do not have the time to go in to the details of how they went about this. However, what I can tell you is that I never met them in person again. However, we kept in touch over email and Jenny declared Serena to be a 'clean 11year old woman' two month's later.

…

When children participate, usually at the request or command of their parents or caregivers, in family therapy, it is likely they will be subjected to the ideas, theories, strategies, and interventions of the professionals who enter their lives. There is a longstanding tradition supporting the establishment of professional knowledge. This venture is an ambitious one and strives to create both universal and timeless 'Truths' and rules, regulations, canons, manuals, and apps to 'hand this down' from above to below. Unsurprisingly, children are taken to be below the below.

Young people, though often characterized as intuitive, spontaneous, imaginative, innocent, etc., implying an original purity, are at the same time conceived of as inherently helpless. They are not thought to possess any of the requisite knowledge and skill assumed to be essential to the difficult endeavour of problem solving. The problems of young people that often intrude upon family life or school rooms, it is thought, require a response that is made possible only through a kind of slow maturation, made complete in adulthood.

Our aim as narrative practitioners is to destabilise fixed knowledge as it is applied to people's lives and, in this instance, young people's lives. We favour an 'experience-near' locale as the site where 'problem solving' can be co-discovered and co-generated. This shifts our attention from knowledge to knowledges. Our interest is in flattening hierarchies of knowledge and the ways they have been established between adults and children and, moreover, between 'experts' and children. We are not advocating for a reverse hierarchical model of family or classroom life with a conception of children as organically or intuitively correct.

We do suggest that young people, like anyone else, can and ought to be engaged on their own behalf and that the terms of engagement may well be grounded in local knowledges derived from their imaginative know-how bringing to the fore their talents, skills, humour, tender hearts, keen minds, and weirdly ablenesses. By the way, weirdly abled young people are those who are so 'abled' that adults think they are weird.

Let me put it another way: it is well known that sporting teams win almost twice as often on their own home ground then when they play away. For this reason, equitable arrangements insist that teams divide their season equally between home and away games so that home advantage is mediated by the handicap of playing away.

We find that when we bring children's imaginative skills and knowledges into our focus, it is incumbent on us to bring them to the centre of the work and to pay heed to them not only as valuable but perhaps even as invaluable. We assert the following: that young people's knowledges are just the kind that, in the first place, deserve to be known to young people themselves. When confronted by challenges or dilemmas, they can be supported in coming to know themselves as capable and up to the task of meeting the circumstances that beset them.

'Insider knowledges'-or, in the case of children, imaginative know-how- those knowledges that are derived from personal experience and that of family and community- can be accessible as their knowledges of first choice. Outsider knowledge, or ideas derived through scholarly research and the professions, should be understood as potentially limiting as a result of its incubation and development, not on the home grounds of young people, but far away.

The American novelist and essayist, Michael Chabon, writes in the same vein but suggests far-reaching implications:

> What is the impact of the closing down of the Wilderness on the development of children's imaginations? This is what I worry about the most... Recently, my younger daughter, after the usual struggle and exhilaration, learned to ride her bicycle. Her joy at her achievement was rapidly followed by a creeping sense of puzzlement and disappointment as it became clear to both of us that there was nowhere for her to ride it—nowhere that I was willing to let her go. I permitted her to cycle to a nearby grocery store. What struck me at once on that lovely summer evening, as we wandered the streets of our lovely residential neighborhood at that after-dinner hour that had once represented the peak moment, the magic hour of my own childhood, was that we didn't encounter a single other child. Even if I do send them out, will there be anyone to play with? (2009)

Art is a form of exploration, of sailing off into the unknown alone, heading for those unmarked places on the map. If children are not permitted—not taught—to be adventurers and explorers as children, what will become of the world of adventure, of stories, of literature itself?

Michael Chabon's Harry Potter-styled children's story*, Summerland*, published in 2002, adapts Norse mythology, Native American folklore, American fables, Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis into what I take to be a classic form. In it, young Ethan Feld, the 11-year-old protagonist, along with his companions, Jennifer T. Rideout, also respectfully referred to as the Dude-ette, and Thor Wignutt, who played on the same baseball team, confront the Coyote, the trickster whose intentions are to destroy the universe as we know it. However, before the trials and tribulations of their adventures begin, they are taken to a huge clam, called Johnny Speakwater, who is his sponsor's oracle:

> Ring finger Brown gave Ethan a gentle push at the small of the back. "Go on boy," he said, "listen to what Johnny Speakwater gots to say."
>
> Ethan stepped forward. There was a deep rumble from inside the clam and Ethan's heart began to beat faster as he saw the briny lips of the shell part. "Burdle burble slurp slurp burble burdle slurp", said the clam, more or less.

The chief, Cinquefoil nodded to an aide who pulled out a rolled sheet of what looked like parchment. Then another aide helped unroll it. It was a sheet of pale hide...something like a ouija board, only the letters had been painted by hand.

“Johnny,” the chief said finally: “Ya done warned us that Coyote was coming. And ya was right. You said we ought to fetch a champion, and we done tried. But look at this one."

Cinquefoil made a dismissive wave in Ethan’s direction. “He’s just a puppy. He ain’t up to the deal. What are we to do now? How can we stop Coyote? Where can we turn?”

One letter at a time slowly, with deadly accuracy, Johnny Speakwater spat out his prophecy. As each wad of thick clam saliva hit the parchment, the letter affected was copied into the sand by Cinquefoil and then washed clean. Everyone gathered around the inscription. Then, one by one, they turned to Ethan with renewed interest.

“What does it say? Ethan said. “Why are you all looking at me?”

Ethan looked forward to see how the old man had translated the words of the oracular clam.

Feld is the wanted one.

Feld has the stuff he needs.

When he read these words, Ethan felt a strange warmth fill his belly. He was the wanted one- the champion. He had the stuff.

“Sign that kid up”, the chief said. (Chabon, pp. 55-6)

For me, this is the essential narrative of the stories that inhabit children’s imaginations. “He has the stuff he needs.” The adventures over the next 450 pages where he and his companions must defeat giants, bat-winged goblins, and on the last 10 pages, Coyote’s so far invincible baseball team, when to no

surprise, he proves Johnny Speakeasy's oracular prophecy correct. He indeed had the stuff he needed.

In our chapter, "Weird Science/Imagination Lost in Narrative Therapy in Wonderland," the psychiatrist, Allen Frances, who had chaired the task force to write the Diagnostic Standard Manual 4 turned renegade, critiquing the next version of it - the recently published DSM-5:

"Psychiatry takes increasing license, reaching into everyday experience and treating temper, distractibility, sadness, and nervousness as signs of disorder".

Why, you might ask? The evidence points to its corruption by the pharmaceutical industry, with children as one of their last untapped markets. How are they doing, you ask? Not bad. Consider that in 2011, in the United States that 11% of school-age children overall- including nearly 20% of high school boys-had received an Attention Hyperactivity Disorder diagnosis and were consuming psychotropic medications, the long-term effects of which are as yet unknown. And it would seem that the recent 'settlements' demanded by the US government...for bribery and fraud...I have just surveyed 2012-GlaxoSmith Kline 3 billion dollars, Abbot Laboratories 1/6 billion, and Johnson and Johnson 2 billion. No individuals have been charged in any of the cases.

What will become of children's imaginative know-how-stupefaction? And if the CEO of GlaxoSmithKline took over from Johnny Speakwater and 'spat out' his prophecy for young Nathan Feld, I suspect this is what it would read:

Feld is the wanted one.

Feld doesn't have the stuff he needs.

We have it.

Don't sign him up; sign a prescription for Adderall.

Thank you.

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Wonderfulness Interviews: An Origin Story

David Epston

This paper tells the origin story of what has come to be known as the wonderfulness interview. Like so many inventions of practice, it was not conceived in advance but discovered in the midst of necessity. I was faced, on that particular day, with a situation so unusual that my usual repertoire of practices was of little use. I found myself having to improvise something entirely new if I was to be of any help at all. Louis Pasteur once remarked that "fortune favors the prepared mind." I have always liked that sentiment. While I cannot claim that my mind was particularly prepared, I was — for reasons that still elude me — open enough to stumble upon something novel. Only later did I realize that what had happened that day would go on to become one of my most favored and enduring practices. What follows, then, is the story of that fortunate day, and of the practice that grew out of it.

I am used to twelve-to-fourteen-hour long flights from Auckland to Los Angeles and the same duration for my repatriation so the scheduled hour and a half flight from Detroit to Philadelphia seemed inconsequential to me. Merely the time for an on-board snack.

Nothing could have turned out more contrary to my expectations on this particular winter's day. The first sign that all was not well was the continual delaying of the flight, and then learning from a fellow passenger that there was a blizzard up and down the eastern seaboard of the United States. And that Philadelphia was at the heart of it. Some hours later, we boarded the airplane to be told that we would not be taking off until the airport there could inform us we had a designated snow-cleared runway. Apparently, the crews there were only able to keep one runway open, and they did not want planes circling the airport for fear of a collision. In the most upbeat voice you could possibly imagine, a flight attendant announced we were going to have fun in the meantime and proposed singing folk songs together. They had obviously trained for such an eventuality. I must confess singing 'She'll be coming round the mountain' along with my fellow passengers did little to soothe my anxieties.

I was soon to learn how different it is to sit for several hours in an airplane on the ground than when it is flying, and how many people become claustrophobic as a consequence. After an hour or so, the knuckles of the passenger seated next to me started turning white from holding on to her hand rests so tightly, as well as beginning to over-breathe. I rushed to her rescue by engaging her in conversation to distract her and myself from our circumstances.

Well, we did finally reach the Philadelphia airport eight hours later than the scheduled arrival time.

During this period of time, I had worried myself sick about arriving so late, as I knew my sponsor was expecting 100 plus attendees at my two-day-long workshop that would begin at nine in the morning the very next day.

Still arriving at my colleague's home at about ten pm, I presumed that now all would be well. However, almost immediately, the 'bad' of my flight turned to 'worse'. My colleague asked me to phone Linda from her training group, who had arranged for a family to join me in a live interview the next day. "It's a psychiatric emergency!" she forewarned me.

In the nicest possible way, I enquired about such arrangements as I remembered nothing about them. My colleague went to her computer and returned soon after with a hard copy of an email explicitly requesting she arrange a live interview early on the first day of the workshop. I pleaded with her that this would be impossible. "I am wreck! A psychiatric emergency! I am not up to it!" She sympathetically suggested I phone Linda right away.

Before I did, I retired to the toilet, anticipating I might vomit, and if I could avoid that, to give myself a moment or two to consider my predicament. Almost immediately, I had a flash of inspiration. I then phoned Linda, asking her not to tell me what the Problem was until she heard my proposal. Why? Because if I heard the Problem, I suspected I would have felt the urgent requirement to respond to it as best I could the next morning.

My proposal was that, given my stressful flight and my anxiety about arriving at all, I could only count on myself as "50% of a therapist". I requested she submit the following proposal to the family. Since we had two days scheduled for the

workshop and I am 50% of a therapist, would they be willing to come two days instead of the one? And that by the end of the two days, they would have experienced 100% of a therapist.

Linda returned my call not long afterwards and said that the family appreciated my situation and that my proposal of two meetings instead of just the one would be fine with them.

My relief was short-lived because now I would have to figure out how I would get through an hour-long interview without knowing what the Problem was. How could I make this interview highly pertinent to a family in the midst of a 'psychiatric emergency', as well as for the 100-plus attendees who had come expecting to witness a conventional live interview? No one could possibly stretch the social pleasantries of getting to know one another over that hour-long meeting. Or could you? Well, I was soon to find out.

It is well known that in such circumstances, 'necessity is the mother of invention!' If ever I was required to invent something quickly, tonight was the night. There was not much time, but my exhaustion ushered me into what seemed a deep sleep. Fortuitously, I awoke with a resolution to my dilemma. How about getting to know them by getting to know them 'against' the Problem rather than 'with' the Problem? Essentially, I chose an inquiry that by implication would ask them what they collectively had to bring to bear to the matter at hand- the 'psychiatric emergency'? What histories could be made available that could very likely be at odds with the pathologising histories that would be commonplace in an interview such as this? I formulated my question as this:

'Katie (aged thirteen), can I get to know you outside of the Problem so we all get to know what you have got going for you that you can put against the Problem that is besetting you? And tomorrow we will find out everything there is about the Problem? I will be asking you, your mother, and stepfather about your talents, abilities, your moral character, and generally what people think is wonderful about you….your wonderfulnesses.' It was here I coined the word 'wonderfulnesses' to refer in general to what we might together ponder and reflect on in the circumstances of a first meeting (interview), which conventionally did nothing of the sort.

Attempting to meet the exigencies of their situation the best way I could think of, I had no idea at the time how radical such a proposal would bring about. In some ways, I was turning the conventional order of the 200-plus-year-long convention of the medical assessment interview (which usually has two stages: 'What is the Problem?' and 'What do we do about it?') upside down or backwards. Here I was asking first: 'What have you got to put against the Problem?' with 'What is the Problem?' to follow. One father commented aloud near the end of such an interview several years later: "David, you are telling the story backwards!"

I had no idea that this would lead to anything other than merely getting through the day. However, my personal circumstances serendipitously forced me to think otherwise and come up with doing something I had never done, nor considered doing ever before. That is not to say there weren't some precedents for this. But in retrospect, I think of it as an unforeseen, natural experiment. But there was more to come that made this an extremely unusual experiment with a very convincing outcome.

On meeting Katie, aged 13, her mother, Cathy and her stepfather, Joe, we re-negotiated what must have seemed a very unusual arrangement, but the family gave their wholehearted consent for me to proceed. I now had ahead of me an hour-long interview in which the way had been ethically cleared to reveal what they had to put against the Problem. Essentially this was to be their side of the 'match up' with the as yet unknown Problem. That is the Problem was unknown to me; they knew it only too well. But now they had the right to go first, and the Problem came second. I was determined to lavish every possible means at my disposal to represent this family as a worthy adversary for the 'psychiatric emergency' they were facing. But as a consequence of this strange first meeting, the family was no longer 'demoralised' but rather 'remoralised'(ref).

Arthur Frank (2004) writes:

> My advocacy is grounded in my understanding of personal narratives of illness as acts of 'remoralization'. I derive this term from Arthur Kleinman's usage of 'demoralization' in his classic study The Illness Narratives. Kleinman advanced a new idea: chronic illness wears people down not only by its physical effects of pain and debility but also by the social treatment that patients receive. This message was hardly news to ill people, but

> Kleinman's eloquent, scholarly advocacy advanced the legitimacy of medical demoralization as a topic for study. He writes, "The contribution of professional orthodoxy to inadvertently heighten the passivity and demoralization of patients and their families is all too common in treatment of the chronically ill". (Kleinman, Arthur, Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition, Basic Books (128)).
>
> Demoralization begins in the professional views that the patient has nothing to contribute to clinical judgment (129), and that clinical judgment is all that needs to be known about patients. (pp. 174-194)

Might this family regard themselves differently through such an interview format I was proposing? To be honest, what was of most concern to me was just getting through this hour-long interview and giving myself another day to recover my wits. To my delight, this meeting turned out to be entirely different from my forebodings. Serendipitously, I had chanced upon the means I had been seeking to get to know people as the feminist philosopher, Hilde Lindemann Nelson refers to as 'respectworthy' rather than pathological. By this she meant "a person who respects themselves as well as being respected by others" (2001).

During what has come to be known as 'a wonderfulness interview', each member of this family was able to impress themselves upon me in ways that would have been impossible through a conventional interview format. I came away thinking how fortunate and honoured I was to know each and every one of them. I was in awe of what Aristotle would have called their 'moral beauty' (Diessner, Iyer, Smith, & Haidt, 2013). Solidarity had been engendered between us rather than splintering them into individual parts according to the individualizing bias of clinical interviews.

In some ways, this hour-long interview was somewhat akin to what the legendary Harvard sociologist, Sara Lightfoot Lawrence refers to her qualitative research methodology as 'the art and science of portraiture' (2002).

Lightfoot Lawrence describes it:

> I wanted to create a narrative that bridged the realm between science and art merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography

> with the evocative resonance of fine literature. I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom and the perspectives of the subject but I wanted them to feel that although it may not look like them, but somehow managed to reveal their essence. I wanted them to experience the portrait as both familiar and exotic so that in reading them, they would be introduced to a perspective they would not have considered before. And finally I wanted them to feel seen, fully attended to, recognised, appreciated, respected and scrutinised. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and the generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation. (p. 37)

I summed up what I believed to be merely half of the first interview, 'Well, we now know what you have individually and collectively to put against this Problem that is besetting you. But tomorrow I will learn all there is to know about the Problem'. I can recall just how much I was anticipating this second half of the meeting. Whatever the Problem was, I felt it shrinking in direct proportion to the increase in the family's dignity and honour. My anticipation was interrupted later that day when Cathy, the mother, phoned to say they had to cancel the Sunday meeting as her uncle had died suddenly and they had to leave immediately to drive several hours north to be on hand for the preparations for the funeral.

Many in the audience were concerned about what had transpired and there was considerable debate. Given the contentious nature of these interviews- the one they had attended and the one the family had cancelled, it was very fortunate that Linda had already scheduled an appointment at seven pm on the following Monday. Remember the interview had taken place at ten am on Saturday.

What happened? The psychiatric emergency was their Katie's inalterable conviction, when she awoke on school days for the past two or three months, that she was unable to see and thereby unable to attend school. Over this period of time, several consultations with ophthalmologists had yielded nil diagnoses. That is, she was not becoming blind. This was thought unlikely given her visual problems disappeared on weekends when her school attendance was no longer required. She had received a diagnosis of ' conversion disorder'.

On Monday, she awoke and, without further ado, went off to school and did so from thereon. Her mother was completely satisfied with this outcome. However,

she had resolved that if Katie didn't go of her own accord, she would see to it that she did. The emergency was over. I suspect if the second half of the interview had actually taken place, I would not have been able to grant such an effect to merely half of what I had expected to provide- an hour-long interview regarding what was wonderful about each and every one of them. Or put in other words, each person's moral character. Linda also mentioned that Katie couldn't get it out of her mind that she had been an inspiration to her mother going back to school.

Some years later, I showed this video and met with a Director of a hospital service for young people with such diagnoses who was in attendance. She speculated that if Katie had been referred to her service, a 3 to 6-month-long hospitalisation would have been very likely.

From hereon, I am submitting the exact transcript of this wonderfulness(es) interview as I suspect that it represents a genre (if I can call it that) of inquiry that is not very well known and available. The names and location of this interview have been anonymised. We are so much more familiar and at ease with queries about a problem. eg, a diagnostic interview. Yes, perhaps something of this sort had been implicit in narrative therapy inquiry up until this time, but this makes it explicit. As well, many of the inquiries that are now commonplace in such an interview were invented during this interview.

Because you will not see Katie, Cathy, or Joe, let me describe them to you as best I can. Katie is a robust 13-year-old young woman wearing modest clothing. Cathy is in her early 40s, wearing a jean jacket with an embossed portrait of Minnie Mouse on it; Joe is 10 or more years younger than Cathy and has a speech impediment. Linda was to tell me later that in all her interviews with the family, he had never spoken aloud. They are from a traditional Irish/Italian working-class area with a distinctive accent. As well, I was to learn after this interview from Linda of Katie's numerous learning difficulties that Cathy referred to during the interview and that she herself had a 2-year-long psychiatric hospitalisation with a diagnosis of anxiety disorder….which seemed inadequate when I learned her ex-husband had violated her and often had threatened to kill her. They divorced some years ago.

I must tell you why the interview for the first 20 minutes is me telling the 100+ attendees behind a one-way screen what had already happened so far in this

interview. When I was told by Linda that they had arrived, we went to greet them in the waiting room. Obviously, I was oblivious to this fact as I commenced the interview right then and there. After about 20 minutes, I was thinking to myself, 'Hey, this is going so much better than I had anticipated'. My self-congratulations ended immediately when one of the organisers knocked on the door and, looking peeved, sternly asked me: "When will you start the interview?" I was miffed and replied as pleasantly as I could. "I thought I had". She drew to my attention that we were in the waiting room and reminded me that I had 100+ attendees waiting impatiently for the interview to begin in the one-way screen room. How could I possibly have confused a waiting room for an interview room with its 3-mounted cameras? Well, I did!!! This obviously had to do with my exhausted state of mind.

I will interpolate the actual text of the questions I asked below, as I mainly provide the answers to those questions for the workshop attendees in brackets.

David: Would you be so kind as to fill these people in on any blanks I'm leaving because I've had a very enjoyable conversation, and they have been left out of it. I feel badly for them. Cathy is the mother, and Joe is the stepfather. Katie, you are 13, but your preference would be to be thought of as a 14-year-old.

("Katie, how old were you on your last birthday? 13. In that case, do you wish me to ask you 13-year-old questions, 14-year-old questions, or 15-year-old questions?")

David: And Joe and Cathy are in a relationship that, according to Cathy, "are the five happiest years of my life". And that has a lot to do with when I asked if I could be better informed of the five happiest years of her life with "more caring... more sympathy and understanding... and we talk". You led me to believe that this had quite a lot to do with a previous marriage that didn't have any of these qualities at all… maybe the opposite. I didn't ask you but I suspect from the tone of your voice that that was so.

(While they were seating themselves in what was the waiting room, I observed something which I took to be very unusual. Joe was extremely solicitous of Cathy and Katie, holding the chair out for them to seat themselves, checking on their

comfort, and asking if they were warm enough or if they wished him to remove their coats and hang them up. Not only was I struck by his solicitude, but also their appreciative responses. I was mesmerised. This led me to what might have been considered a preposterous inquiry if you hadn't witnessed what I had.

"If you find the question I am about to ask you inappropriate or out of order, please let me know and I will apologise to you. But by any chance, do either of you consider you were God sent to the other?"

To my surprise and delight, they both confirmed they were Godsend one to the other without any hesitation whatsoever, each for their own particular reasons, almost as if they might have predicted my inquiry ahead of time.)

David: Cathy, you said that, in fact, when I asked if 'you were God sent to Joe and Joe was God sent to you,' that God had put you together for the reason that "we needed each other".

And then I asked, 'If God could speak and articulate his purposes or her purposes - whatever your God may be - Cathy, you said that it had to do with that you "have been so many terrible things" and you not only deserved but should be rewarded with "stability". And Joe, you told me when I asked about the 'five happiest years of your life' that you had "always had a dream of a loving and caring family".

("Tell me, Joe, are the people you are sitting beside a materialisation of that dream almost from the Dream world into Real life?")

David: And that, in fact, the people you are sitting beside are a materialisation of that dream, almost from the dream world into real life.

And Joe, I asked where your loving and caring came from. You said it came from your mother, but Cathy, you didn't dispute this, but you also saw another source for this, which was from his father.

(In response to this, Joe immediately shouted, "He scream at me! He scream at me! He scream at me!")

("Cathy, by any chance, does Joe's father have love underneath his shouting?")

David: You told me that Joe's father has love underneath his shouting.

("Cathy, are you an advocate for that love?")

David: And that you are an advocate for that love.

("Cathy, can you assure me that you can discriminate between shouted love and shouted abuse?" She looked me straight in the eye, shaking her head with a hard-earned knowing that she indeed could do so, I assumed later, given the violence and threats to her own life from her ex-husband.)

David: And you could discriminate between shouted love and shouted abuse. They are different kinds of shouting, and you were pretty clear about that.

(She left me no doubts about that.)

David: And then to let Cathy know that my interest had been captured by Joe and Cathy that I wasn't leaving you out, I asked her if from her point of view, she agreed with their version of their relationship. Not only did she agree but you sort of added a few pluses to it.

("Tell me, Cathy, do you have what we call sleepovers when your girlfriends come and stay the night like we do in New Zealand?" 'Yep." "And would you agree that when your mother and stepfather have to come in about 2 in the morning to insist you stop laughing and go to sleep, that your girlfriends really get to know your real parents?" "Yes." "In that case, what sort of opinion do your girlfriends have about your parents?")

David: You made it clear to me that your girlfriends who know Cathy and Joe think they are the greatest parents… how far would it go... just in Philadelphia? Or would it go any further than that?

Cathy: Philadelphia…

David: They've got the Philadelphia prize.

("Cathy, do you think by any chance that your girlfriends envy you for your mother and stepfather and the kind of family you have?")

David: There is some envy on their part for your mother and step-father and the kind of family you have.

("Please tell me if I am being too intrusive or too forward when I ask you to help me to better appreciate your talents and abilities.")

David: And then I turned to you and I asked you, first checking to see if I wasn't being too intrusive or too forward but I asked you if you would help me to better appreciate your talents and abilities.

("You might prefer I ask your mother and stepfather first and come back to you next?" "Yep…" She readily agreed to that order and seemed relieved to going last.)

David: Everyone was pretty quick to know that Colour Guard was pretty much one of the natural places where you express these abilities.

("Cathy, do you mind explaining to me what Colour Guard is…I am not sure I know coming from New Zealand?")

David: I didn't know what it was, but I realise now that I may have seen it on TV. Everyone here may know but you told me you dance with flags and sabres and stuff and dress up in outfits.

("Cathy, do you discipline yourself when you both practice and march in Colour Guard?")

David: And that you really disciplined yourself around this…

("How much or for how long do you discipline yourself over the course of a week?")

David: Three times a week- 7-9, 7-9, and 1-6 on weekends. And I then asked what you had got from this. . . what had this brought out in you, and you said

something that all of us wish we could say and sort of take after you here – "I can do anything I want to do".

("Cathy, can you confirm for me that Katie 'can do anything she wants to' when she puts her will to it?")

David: And that wasn't idle because you, Cathy, drew to my attention that this really showed in her schoolwork, which doesn't come easy for her because of learning problems that you mentioned to me.

("Katie, does your school appreciate that you are disciplining yourself in the classroom as well as in your Colour Guard? ")

David: I was just asking if the school appreciated that you were disciplining yourself in the classroom… did they know what you are up against, and you said they did.

("Katie, is there any teacher in particular who is well aware of you disciplining yourself in the classroom against these learning problems?")

David: And Mr. McCann is one of these people.

("Katie, why is Mr. McCann so aware of you doing so?")

David: And he is your home room or classroom teacher.

("What do you think he would have been most impressed with you disciplining yourself in his classroom?")

David: And what he would have been most impressed with was the fact that you were making great progress in your spelling. And I asked you what was the biggest word you could spell, but that was too hard a question because you don't memorise them.

("Are you spelling better now than you were 6 months ago?")

David: What you did say was you are spelling a lot better than you were 6 months ago…

(“Cathy, are you even spelling better than you were a year ago?”)

David: And even better than you were a year ago.

(“Do you suspect you will even spell better in 6 months' time?”)

David: And you suspected in six months’ time that you would even spell better.

David: Is that about where we got to? We should tell the people there that I asked your permission, that I didn’t know anything about your problems because I just heard it on the telephone, but that I asked for this session- because we can meet again tomorrow if you wish- 2 for 1. Could I get to know you just pure and natural without the problems… We’ll get around to them...to see what you’ve got going to bring against the problems that are besetting you.

Katie, can we extend that conversation, or have we gone as far as we can go?… I know that your ability was natural in Colour Guard, and you went against a problem in the classroom in terms of learning problems. Do you call this ability - ‘I can do anything I want to’ - what do you call this ability? How do you describe it to yourself, that ability or talent of yours? Do you have a name for that...grit... determination?

Katie: Determination.

David: Determination. Do you think you inherited any of that Determination from your mom?

Katie: Uh-huh.

David: She’s got Determination, too?

Katie: Uh-huh.

David: Are you in line for her Determination?

Katie: Uh-huh.

David: Do you figure you inherited it, or do you figure you learned it from her by watching her?

Katie: Learned it from her.

David: Really. What was the best lesson in Determination that your mother has taught you?

Katie: That she went to school. . . she's back in college.

(I learned later that Cathy had, in fact, returned to high school in her late 30s/early 40s and had graduated and was currently attending a Community College pursuing a degree programme.)

David: Your mother is going back to college now?

Katie: Mm-huh.

David: What college is that?

Katie: Brownsville Community College.

David: Do you think in any way that you were a bit of an inspiration for her to take that step in her life, seeing what you could do?

Katie: Mm-huh.

David: How much of an inspiration do you think you were to your mum - a lot of inspiration, a middle bit, or a tiny bit?

Katie: A middle bit.

David: What, in particular, that you did could have been an inspiration for your mom to go back to school?

(Katie appears to be confused and appeals to her mother for assistance.)

Cathy: *(directs question to Katie)* Do you know what the word 'inspiration' means?

Katie: I think so... *(somewhat uncertain)*

David: Well, let's not go past it! Can you think of another word that would fit for inspiration… model like you look up to someone else… You know how maybe you look up to an older woman at Colour Guard who is really good at it... a championship team...you look up to them to learn how to do it.

Katie: Mm-huh.

David: Probably quite a common New Zealand word, but it might not be so common here. You think you were a bit of an inspiration for your mom to go back to school?

Katie: A little.

David: How would your mom have been inspired by you to go back to school?

Katie: I don't know about inspired because the reason she went back was for us to have a better life.

David: And a little bit of your mother being able to do that was from watching you?

Katie: Mm-huh.

David: What did she see about you... I know you got Determination from your mom, but perhaps you gave a bit back to her. You are sharing it around! Can you think of anything if your mom was watching down over your life from on high and was watching over the ways Determination was being used in your life, she would have picked up anything from you?

Katie: *(turning to mother)* Did you? *(a degree of excited curiosity in her tone of voice)*

David: I'm going to ask her but before I do, could you take a guess what it might have…

Katie: Maybe because I never give up.

David: *(writing in my notes while thoughtfully repeating her remarks aloud)* "Maybe because I never give up".

David: *(turning now to Cathy)* Can you tell me this - if she was a little bit of an inspiration for you going back to school, what was it?

Katie: Well the fact that I know she has learning disabilities and she's trying to cope with them and get round them and she has to learn made me realise she has a lot more to deal with in education and trying to learn that I did. I figure if she can learn algebra; I can learn algebra.

David: Really! Did you know, Katie, that you were a little bit behind your mother's education come-back?

Katie: No.

David: Is it pleasing to hear this or would you have rather not have known this?

Katie: Pleasing. *(a very shy smile appears on her face)*

David: Why? Why do you say that?

Katie: Maybe because my mom thinks that.

David: How do you think she's been an inspiration to you in your life?

Katie: Because when things were hard for her, she went from being a nervous wreck to going to school to going and getting As.

David: Really! When she's getting As in school, what do you think she's doing it for? What are her reasons? She could just pass you know…C is a pass. What are her reasons for committing herself to her education?

Katie: She wants to be better.

David: Katie, what do you think I should know and appreciate about Joe? I don't know him that well and you know him better than I do.

Katie: *(assertively)* Yah, I do.

David: What do you think I should know and appreciate about him?

Cathy: He's a very caring person. He usually puts me and Katie before anything about him. If he wanted something to do and Katie and I wanted something else, he would drop it, you know. . . he's very unselfish. It just seems that he keeps giving and giving and giving.

David: He's a giver?

Cathy: Yah, he is. He doesn't ask for much in return except for…

David: Does that mean like he's 'all give and no take'?

Cathy: No, he just enjoys giving. At least that's how he leads us to believe. I don't know if it's factual.

David: What do you think? Is he fooling?

Cathy: No, I don't. *(stated again with assurance)*

David: Joe, how did you learn to be a giver? It's not that usual in this day and age.

Joe: My father was a giver when I was growing up as a boy. He would give me everything I wanted. "Dad, can I have this, this, and this!" He would give it to me.

David: Really!

Joe: That's how I learned to give.

David: So is that what was beneath the shouting you might have been getting? *(I look towards Cathy for confirmation)*

Cathy: Yah.

David: And do you know if relatives in your family would say that your father has a reputation for this... being a giving person?

Joe: Some.

David: He just gives to his family or...

Joe: He gives to me... my cousins.

David: It's just not you?

Joe: Yah.

David: Is this something you admire about your father?

Joe: Yes...*(spoken with a depth of sincerity)* very much.

David: And do you consciously take that on to yourself to try to be like your Dad here?

Joe: Yah, I try to. I try to give everything. I try to be like my Dad. *(Spoken with earnestness)*

David: And, Cathy, do you think Joe's father appreciates this about him?

Cathy: I don't think he appreciates the way Joe has matured. I don't think his parents appreciate him at all. And sometimes they come down on him pretty hard. And I feel like I need to defend him because he is doing a great job, and everyone wants to be told they are doing a great job, especially by your parents. And sometimes they don't do that. And I might come to his defense and say, "He's really made great progress, and he's done so great! He's something to be proud of".

David: How are you going in convincing them to be as proud of Joe as you are?

Cathy: Because I just bring up all the good things he does all the time.

David: Are you winning them over to your point of view?

Cathy: Yah, I did hear his momma say: "Joe, you've changed a lot for the better". Yah, I think I am *(grinning with satisfaction, seemingly relishing the effects of her achievement).*

David: Hold on. *(writing and restating Cathy's comments)* "Joe, you have changed a lot for the better". Do you remember that, Joe?

Joe: It must have been said, but I don't remember that being said to me.

David: What do you think she meant by that - I know you can't remember it? What do you think she would have been talking about there?

Joe: Attitude…the way I act

David: Attitude. Did you change your attitude or…?

Joe: Not a whole lot.

David: From what to what?

Joe: I used to be…how can I say it…

David: We're all friends here… you can say it! *(spoken in a reassuring tone)*

Joe: I used to be "well, I don't care", but now I try to think about people.

David: Carefree?

Joe: Yah.

David: And what are you now?

Joe: I don't know about "carefree", but now I have the attitude, "Whatever I do, I do the right thing or the wrong thing".

David: Katie, do you think I should understand anything else about your mom and Joe? Do you know anything about them that you would like me to know? I know they are great parents, but I don't know if I've got all of it yet. Is there something that they are even too modest about? Would you agree that Joe is a great stepfather?

Katie: *(very vigorously)* Uh-huh. Very giving.

David: Oh dear, what do you mean by that? Do you think he's over-giving?

Katie: Uh-huh.

David: Help me understand that? What does over-giving mean?

Katie: If he had no money and I asked him for money, he'd go to the bank and get the money even though he didn't have enough money to pay the bill.

David: Really! *(genuinely surprised)*

Katie: Or if I was in the next room and I wanted to use the phone but didn't want to get up, he'd get it for me.

David: Really! Would you like to do more for yourself?

Katie: No!

David: You like it that way?

Katie: Uh-huh.

David: Is there any way you can give back to Joe, or is it sort of a one-way relationship- Joe -giving and Katie-taking? I'm not being critical, but maybe that's just the way it goes.

Katie: I don't know. *(addressing this query to Joe)* Do I give, or do I take?

Joe: You give back to Daddy. You give me love. And you tell me once and a while, "You're doing a good job... keep it up". Yap!

David: What about your mom? Is she a giving person?

Katie: Uh-huh… very giving.

David: Very giving. And is she the right kind of giving, from your point of view, over-giving or under-giving?

Katie: The right kind of giving.

David: They couldn't be giving too much to you, or you wouldn't have any 'determination'. You must have met people who are really, really over-given to - what should we say - whenever they have a problem, they turn to other people to get given to. Do you know what I mean? Have you seen that happen? *(They all nod, assuring that they have witnessed this)* Do you

think they've got the giving just about right because you certainly do have 'determination'?

Katie: Mm-huh. *(spoken with confidence)*

David: Have there been any times when your 'Determination' had to say "no" to their giving? You know - I'll do it myself. . . keep your giving and turn it back to yourself.

Katie: Yah.

David: You had to do that?

Katie: Yah.

David: Was it hard?

Katie: No.

David: Was it easy?

Katie: Yah.

David: What happened to their giving in the face of your Determination to do for yourself? *(She looks confused by my question.)* Is that a bit strange?

Katie: Yah. *(She ruefully admits this.)*

Cathy: I don't think she understands. *(Comes to Katie's rescue here.)*

David: Oh, that's okay. When you don't understand, I'll just keep going until you understand. You were saying that you've got a very strong Determination and that expresses itself in many ways - in natural ways like Colour Guard, where things come easy to you. You even go beyond that. You could have just gone to Colour Guard and said: "I can do this" and not advance yourself in your Colour Guard career and trained so hard. But your Determination shows itself strongly in those areas where you're up against something like reading problems and spelling problems. Right?

Katie: Mm-huh.

David: You've got people who bless you with lots of giving, and you said that sometimes the Determination has to halt their Giving. You have to say "no" to their giving. Here's an example - Just say you said: "Well, I don't want to go to Colour Guard. I'm feeling a bit tired." And your mother said: "I'll do it for you!" But that might weaken your Determination…it could. So, has your Determination ever had to say "no" to their giving ways... to stand on your own two feet?

Katie: Yah.

David: Can you give me an example of that?

Katie: Well, if she tells me "I'll go in your place!" I'll say: "I'll go!!" I'd do that fast.

David: What's that called... rapid come-backs?

Katie: Yah, a come-back!

David: You can have a rapid come-back when your Determination has to say "no" to their giving ways? Well, say you said: "I really want to go to Colour Drill" and your mother said: "No... no...I want you to stay in bed. I'll do the training for you". What would you do then?

Katie: It'd be like – "No, you're not. . . I'M GOING"*(spoken with authority).*

David: I see… in those sort of circumstances…

Cathy: When it comes to Colour Guards… sure. Other things she'll say "no" to giving when it's a hardship on us. And we try to give it because she asked for it. But she'll say, "It's a hardship… I'll take care of it myself".

David: Give me an example of that.

Cathy: Well, like I had a back problem, and I had to take care of the house. And Katie said: "No, it's my responsibility too. I live here. I put all the clothes there. I'll pick them up. I'll do it!" She's good ... very good in that sense. If she decides that that's what she's going to do, then that is what she is going to do!!!! *(Spoken with conviction.)*

David: You know - your 'Determination' and Katie's 'Determination'…do they march beside each other or against each other. . . do they march arm-in-arm or go against the other?

Cathy: No... it goes against. She's determined to do one thing, and I'm determined to tell her "no".

David: Katie, would that be fair?

Katie: Mh-huh.

David: So sometimes the 'mother Determination' and the 'daughter Determination' run up against each other than march side by side?

Cathy: That's right!

David: If your 'Determination' was to march side by side, where would you go, do you think, with that energy? Can you imagine where you would stop? *(Directing the query to Katie)*

Katie: Canada…I don't know…

David: You'd make it up to the border?

Katie: Yah, I guess. *(The distance is 606 kilometres from Philadelphia to the Canadian border.)*

David: So that 'Determination' when it is going in the same direction is pretty unstoppable?

Cathy: Yes… if you put the two of us together and we were determined to do something, then we're going to do it if it takes 2 hours... 6 hours... that's it. I'm very strong in that sort of thing. So is Katie. When she starts to do something, she finishes it.

David: Is that right, Joe?

Joe: Yap! *(stated proudly)*

David: Is it pretty awesome when you see them get it together?

Joe: Yap... when they do something, they finish it.

David: Really! You alluded to some things in your past that weren't easy for you and weren't good things. *(The violence and threats to her life committed by her ex-husband.)* Where you got to with your 'Determination'. Has that left quite a bit of that behind?

Cathy: YES!!!!...I've come a very long way from where I was before …an extremely long way… in the past five years…

David: What do you put that down to... OH…THE LAST FIVE YEARS…

Cathy: Well, like I said- "Some stability with Joe and everything".

David: You've got to go for your Colour Guard *(to Katie)*. Are you getting impatient?

Katie: Yah.

David: Can you last a couple of more minutes? I know you want to go marching. Do you call it marching? (*nods her consent for a few more minutes)* Cathy, how did you get ahead of all these things that were in the past, and you said it was five years ago, and it had to do with this relationship? Anything else?

Cathy: Sure… getting a good therapist to help.

David: Really! How did therapy get you ahead of the past?

Cathy: I've been in therapy with a lot of different people for a long time. But the one I'm with now, she's willing to say to me – "You're wrong"…she's willing to say you could have handled that in a different way instead of just saying, "That's the way you felt". Sometimes I need to be told something's wrong or better or changed. And I'm just determined to finally make something better of myself, and I HAVE.

David: What percentage of your success would you put down to the family you are part of...the 'stability' of your family?

Cathy: This family. *(She is referring to Joe, Katie, and herself and indicates that by pointing at each)* …you're not talking about…

David: No.

Katie: I would say probably 70%.

David: What would you put down to the therapy?

Katie: 20.

David: What's the other 10%?

Katie: My own growth.

David: Would that have just come naturally with age or does it have to do with wisdom?

Cathy: Wisdom... it did not come naturally with age.

David: Well, you know the old saying, "The older you get, either you get wiser or more foolish". It's not inevitable that you get wiser.

Cathy: No.

David: Is that something that you cherish about yourself?

Cathy: Now I do… now I do!

David: Are there some other people in your life who cherish your wisdom? Or is it just with you and Joe?

Cathy: No…no. There are my brothers... sisters...mother…

David: If I had met them and got to know them and they felt comfortable with me as a confidant, what would they attribute to you leaving these things in the past behind and getting ahead of them?

Cathy: Getting divorced!

David: They would see that as the secret of your success?

Cathy: Yes! ...Yes!

David: I know you have to go. I know we haven't talked much about what you are up against, but we now know what we've got to go with! Will we meet tomorrow to continue this discussion?

Cathy: Yes... *(sounding happy to do so)* What time?

David: Same time as today…9 am.

As I mentioned in the above, Cathy cancelled that appointment later in the afternoon to attend the funeral preparations for an uncle who lived some distance to the north.

I soon learned of the consequences of this single wonderfulness interview, and it was much on my mind when I returned to New Zealand soon afterwards. And when Marie, Billy's mother, rang me in despair, I resolved to do something similar, but this time not allocating the entirety of the first session, but what I thought might be 20 to 30 minutes of it. The results once again were so surprising, and in fact, I want the reader to know nothing quite like Billy's sudden disavowal of the Problems has happened since. But it certainly happened on this illuminating occasion.

Marie had forewarned me over the telephone of what I might expect when I met her husband, Jim, and Billy, their eleven-year-old son. Billy was in trouble in just about every arena of his life. He had been kicked out of his school class after his teacher had previously taken to shunning him by either having him face the back wall in class or turning his back to him on any other occasion. Jim, by the same token, had renounced Billy as his son and was now considering disowning him by writing him out of his will. The Auckland Regional Authority, which runs the public transport here, was also going to the extraordinary lengths of taking legal action against him to deny him the right to travel on their buses. How could a young person be in quite so much trouble? Marie was so perplexed and distressed by the very telling of Billy's "trouble" that she began to sob inconsolably. I tried to reassure her as best I could that "nothing was impossible" when at last she'd asked: "Do you think Billy is a hopeless case?"

Meeting them at my front door was odd. As Marie led her “family” inside, Jim and Billy avoided each other as best they could, and again in my waiting room. I led them to my interview room. Jim rushed in ahead of everyone else and started scrutinising the paintings on my wall. No one had ever deliberated over these paintings with such connoisseurship before. Marie followed, distressed and humiliated, taking her seat and then began to plead with Billy, who was reluctant to enter my room. Finally, he did, sitting where his mother indicated by her side, but couldn’t meet my eyes or anyone else's. It was only after Billy had committed himself to his seat that Jim immediately turned away from scrutinising the paintings and deliberately seated himself so he couldn’t ‘see’ Billy.

As is my custom, I commenced our meeting with as much hospitality as I could, given the pall that had fallen over the room. “Look, I don’t want you to think I don’t consider Billy’s troubles as a matter of great concern.” I then turned towards Billy and said: “However, Billy, if I were you, I wouldn’t want to meet a stranger my age through the trouble the ‘troubles’ have got you in. Jim and Marie, do you mind if I get to know your son through how you knew him before he got tangled up in all these troubles?” Billy, for the first time, raised his downcast eyes to meet mine and stared at me, somewhat bewildered, through his Harry Potter glasses. Both Jim and Marie, not knowing quite what to expect, gave their consent for me to proceed with my enquiries.

I turned first to Marie. “Marie, what would you like me to know about Billy that proves to you that you are a wonderful mother, or at least the kind of mother you dreamed you would be when you were pregnant with Billy?” That caught Marie off guard and seemed to break her out of her dejection. Her response took some time and consideration. But when she did, she mentioned his kindness. “Could you tell me one story about Billy’s kindness that would be worth 100 stories? That from such a story I would really understand what you mean when you say he is kind.” She responded quickly, telling a story of how when some Kosovar refugee children came to his school, he had gone out of his way to befriend a classmate, despite the barriers of language. And he had even gone so far as to invite this boy home to meet his family. Her disconsolation now gave way to some measure of pride.

I refused to leave the matter there. Turning to Jim, I asked: “Jim, is he by any chance a chip off Marie’s block?” His smile, tinged with pride, told me I had

guessed right. Responding to my enquiries, he told of all “the lame dogs” she had cared for, including an elderly neighbour for whom she provided meals on a daily basis. When I asked Marie if it was an accident that Billy showed such kindness to his Kosovar classmate, she was willing to admit that that was unlikely. In fact, when I asked Jim, he said that it would have been entirely predictable that Billy should grow up showing such kindness, having witnessed his mother’s caring ways day in and day out.

It was early in the year and hot. Jim was wearing a very short-sleeved t-shirt. Noticing a tattoo of a military regiment on Jim’s shoulder, I asked if he had been in the military. In fact, he had and took great pride in his current involvement with young people in the Sea Cadets.

”Jim, do you drink down at the Returned Serviceman’s Club every now and again?” He did. “You know when your mates are bragging about their sons, and it comes around to your turn, what would you brag about Billy before he got into so much trouble?” He thought for a moment and said, “His creativity!” “Jim, by any chance, did he inherit that from you?” Jim was pensive and then shook his head, before some sort of gleam of recognition came to him. “Not from me, but from my brother. You won’t believe this, but he makes his living as a potter and sculptor selling ceramic sheep shit!” “What?” I asked, but immediately considered the 50,000 million sheep in New Zealand, roughly how many sheep pellets a sheep produces per day, and how the Ministry of Research and Development might consider turning these into a very fast buck. I speculated about this, and everyone laughed. Jim brought me down to earth on this get-rich-quick scheme for New Zealand. “No, he lives in Yorkshire, and people buy these ceramic sheep pellets as some sort of joke. And you know it brings in enough money for him to be a sculptor.”

Well, we all had to admit that this certainly bore all the hallmarks of creativity, and by now, even Billy was joining in the fun. I then pursued the earlier matter regarding Billy, but once again referencing my questions to Jim. “Jim, how does Billy take after his uncle in terms of family creativity?” Jim no longer shunned Billy, but spoke kindly of the storytelling and paintings that he had been doing since he was ‘just a toddler’. “Have you saved any of his early works?” I asked. Jim looked chagrined as he told that in his repudiation of Billy as his son, he had recently thrown them all out.

Billy, for the first time, interjected and what he had to say first confused and then stunned us into a momentary silence. He said: “Let’s go home. This is over. I have just stopped all my trouble. There will be no more of it”. Marie and Jim both turned towards Billy, looking as if they were hearing things, and continued to stare at him. I tried to save the day by asking Billy what he could possibly mean by making such assertions. “Billy, are you trying to have your mother and father believe that you have renounced trouble? After all, Billy, there is not much more trouble an eleven-year-old could get into from what your mother told me over the phone. By the way, what trouble did you get into to have the Auckland Regional Authority taking you to court? A court case surely must be costing them thousands in lawyers’ fees. Billy, tell me, how far did you travel on a bus and how often?” He told me he bussed to school every day. “How far?” I asked. “About a mile and a half,” he said. “Billy, how much trouble can you get into in a mile and a half?” I asked. “Screaming!” he told me. Marie nodded her head to reassure me that Billy could and did scream. Billy looked at me as if I wasn’t getting his point. “Yah, it’s over, I’m not going to do it anymore.” I turned to Jim and Marie: “Surely, Billy has got quite a job on his hands to prove to both you and his schoolteacher that he means it?”. They agreed that this would be quite an undertaking on Billy’s part. “Billy, do you think everyone will just take your word for it, or do you think you will have to prove it to them?”. Billy admitted that it was certainly unlikely that either his father or his schoolteacher would believe him, although he thought he had a better chance with his mother.

I then asked Billy if he was serious, would he be willing to write a letter to that effect to the teacher who had recently expelled him. I assured him that I would be only too happy to give him a hand preparing it. “Billy, I’ll ask you questions and type up your letter. Marie and Jim, would you be willing to act as witnesses to such a document?” Billy willingly joined in such a project; his parents were still baffled, but agreed to go along with it

The first question I asked was: “Billy, does your teacher know about this appointment?” He did. “Can we start the letter like this?”

The letter began:

Dear Mr. Smith,

As you know, I, my mother and father went to meet David Epston at the Family Therapy Centre.

My next question was: "What do you think we should tell him about what we discussed here today?" Billy described to me his behaviour, but added his hatred for it, followed by how he might improve it. I then enquired if he had tried to already, even if his efforts weren't entirely successful.

At the beginning of the year when I met you, I thought this year was going to be really fun. You were a new teacher. I was at a new school.

I asked if he believed he had left his reputation for being what he and his parents referred to as a 'class nuisance' behind.

And I believed I had left my reputation for being a class nuisance behind me.

I asked if he was surprised that it followed him to his new school.

I wasn't surprised, though, when the problem came with me to Brown's Bay Intermediate School. I tried to stop it, but failed.

My next question to Billy had to do with what made him now believe that he could succeed.

But now I am almost twelve and feel I am starting to grow up, and I now want to get a good reputation and be a good student.

Billy seemed so earnest that I thought it prudent to provide some room in his good intentions for trial-and-error. For this reason, I asked him if this meant he would have to try to turn himself inside out and be humourless or a nerd.

Don't worry, I have too good a sense of humour to become a nerd.

I went on to ask Billy exactly what kind of reputation he was seeking.

The kind of reputation I want is just not a kid who is always bad. Still, I don't want to be squeaky clean either. I started off good this year, and I wish it had stayed that way, but it didn't.

I asked Billy if he had any ideas why his teacher had given up on him.

I realise, too, my annoying habits look like they have made you give up on me. I didn't realise how bad they had got.

"Billy", I asked, "When did you wake up to that?"

I woke up to it on that day when you sent me outside and came out and had a talk to me about how my behaviour has got to stop.

I enquired if that had got through to him.

That got through to me, and I tried to improve, but it still didn't work.

Tears came to Billy's eyes, as he re-told of his unsuccessful attempts at making amends to his teacher. I then asked if he thought he might have to put pressure on himself to put pressure on the problem. Despite the somewhat arcane question, Billy jumped at the proposal even when I added, "Billy, who do you think should put pressure on you- you or your teacher?" And added "Do you think your teacher will believe you?"

Believe it or not, I need to put some pressure on myself to put pressure on the problem. And what's more, it should be me who puts pressure on me, rather than you having to do that.

By now, Marie and Jim were warming up and willingly joined us in what I referred to as our planning. Billy had no trouble coming up with a number of ways to put pressure on himself in order to put pressure on the problem.

Here's what I am planning to do, and wonder if you would lend me a hand here (that's all I ask!).

First of all, could you decide how many slip-ups you can put up with in a week and let me know the number? Please remember that I have a good sense of humour

and lots to say, so don't expect me to be perfect overnight. I believe that, although it won't happen overnight, IT WILL HAPPEN!

Say I go over the limit you have for me slipping up (do you mind letting me know privately how I am doing and how many slip-ups I've done), I will donate 50 cents per slip-up to the class money jar from my allowance. At least if I am going to be a class nuisance, I can make amends by paying the class back. And if I can't face up to doing this myself, just contact my parents, and they will send you my allowance.

Although Billy seemed very satisfied with the prospect of this proposal, I worried that this might not be sufficient: "Say, Billy, you spent all your allowance to pay back your class for any nuisance, what might you go on to after that to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem?"

After the 10th slip-up and my allowance is all gone, I will need to put even more pressure on myself to put pressure on the problem. I think it is far better to put pressure on myself than on you and the class. This pressure will need to be fierce! You know how much I hate running! Well, I want you to see to it that I run twice around the field for every slip-up. That should do it!

I interceded again in the face of Billy's growing confidence in his prospects. "Billy, I am just a worry wart, so forgive me. But what would you do next if that didn't work? I say that hoping that it will work".

If it doesn't, I will do a further 2-mile run. Can you see how I am really serious about not slipping up?

I decided to press Billy further to ensure that he was willing to back up his good intentions with putting pressure on himself. His parents really seemed to appreciate this, if their lifted moods gave anything away. "Billy, I know you might think I am overdoing it here, but hey, this trouble has really got you into trouble. Just say you haven't broken these habits yet, what would be your final act of putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem?"

If, which I cannot believe will happen, I haven't broken these habits and slip up again, I will apologise in front of the class.

For the first time, Marie and Jim sought to join our conversation, which was producing this document as we went along. I was writing it up in long hand on my pad and having Billy verify every line of the document. "Billy, let me read back to you what I have just written down and see if you approve of it. How does this sound to you? Are you happy to put this in your letter to take to your teacher?" Jim, however, volunteered some ideas of his own and Marie, when asked, said she independently had a few of her own. I requested them to hold on to their ideas for Billy to put pressure on himself. "Billy, do you think you need any more ideas or do you think you've got enough of your own?". He confirmed this with a head nod and his parents agreed to give him a chance.

My parents have more ideas, but I have told them I don't need them. I don't need them to put pressure on me; I'll do it myself.

I will be meeting with David again in a month's time. Would you be so kind to provide me with a letter to take back to him, so he can know if I have put enough pressure on myself. He asked me to tell you that he too has many more ideas for me to put pressure on myself but has refused to tell me what they are. He believes I mean business this time, so he can't be bothered telling me what more pressure I can put on myself if I need it.

Yours sincerely,

Billy.

PS Although David typed this letter and asked me most of the questions, the answers are all mine.

Witnessed by Jim and Marie on March 21, 1994, in Auckland, New Zealand.

Marie and Jim dutifully signed the document when I sent them a copy before Billy took it to school to give his teacher.

We met a month later as planned. This time, the family entered my premises in concert with Billy, who was flourishing a letter in his hand. He couldn't wait to hand it over to me. However, matters hadn't turned out as I might have hoped.

Mr. Smith refused to read Billy's letter and continued his shunning of Billy. However, Billy had been placed in an alternative classroom with Ms. Jones. And consequently, it was a letter from her that Billy was brandishing.

Still, we decided it was reasonable to address the letter that documented this meeting to them both. The letter was composed in the same manner as the first, although this time Jim and Marie played a far larger part, and I authored it and subsequently signed it.

Dear Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones,

I met with Billy and his parents, Marie and Jim, on April 19. I would like to thank you both for your respective contributions to Billy taking both himself and his reputation seriously, both at home and at school.

Billy, Jim, and Marie all approved the above.

Mr Smith, from what Billy had to say, he understands that he had worn out any welcome with you. He regrets that, but nevertheless, it seems a blessing in disguise. Why I say that is that I believe his wish to redeem himself in your eyes was behind what I take to have been quite a come-back, if your letter of April 15 is anything to go by, Ms. Jones. My only regret in all this is that you, Mr. Smith, were not able to witness this turn-around in Billy's behaviour.

I then quoted from the summary of Ms. Jones' hand-written letter.

I have seen no evidence of 1) back chat to his teacher, 2) out of his desk distracting others, and 3) arguments with other pupils. I am enjoying his company in Room 15 and find his academic work well up to standards set here.

I then asked Billy if he thought Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones had a right to know how this turn-around came about. Billy was only too happy to provide them with this information.

I think you both have a right to know (and Billy, Jim, and Marie had agreed to hand over Billy's account of how this came about to Ms. Jones in person). Believe it or not, he reported that he sweated all weekend, anticipating his transfer to

Room 15. In addition, he was determined to break up with Teddy, whom he considered to be a friend to his trouble, even knowing there could be some repercussions from that. I understand from him that he weathered some defamatory comments and allegations and did so with a measure of dignity and self-respect. When we first met, he lamented the fact that he was friendless save for Teddy, whom he recognised as a bad influence on him. He reported that he now has quite a few friends, including Matt, who in the past had been his antagonist.

You might be interested to know that both Jim and Marie report a 50% improvement in his home behaviour and, accordingly, are quite delighted. They described him as "calmer and happier". What really thrilled them is that once again, they can reason with him and feel that he "has opened up". You may not be aware of the fact that Jim had become somewhat desperate about his son and was considering severing his relationship with him for good. Marie wept, commenting that she felt she was getting Billy back. Jim and Billy seem to have reunited and are once again enjoying each other's company. Billy had been aware that "he (Jim) didn't want to do much with me".

I suspected that Billy was pretty determined to redeem his reputation when we met around a month ago, but I would not have predicted it would have shown up as quickly as Billy claims it did. He himself puts it down to: "It happened on the second day. I was trying to start off good and carry on being good. And I've done it so far!" I think the best explanation Billy had for this was his realisation that "I was trying to fight my habit. I sometimes automatically did, but when I was going to go off the deep end, I held myself back, and it worked. The next day, I tried it again and it worked. I was quite pleased I had the power to stop my irritation from getting out. I was able to carry on with my work when someone was annoying me. At times, I have been able to say no and walk off and go to the library. I have stopped screaming because they know I can get into trouble if I scream. They are starting to lose interest and leaving me alone."

At this point in our conversation, Jim and Marie were insistent on adding some further considerations that they had had around Billy over the past month.

Everyone realised too that Billy has lived in the shadow of his sister. As Billy put it, "I want them to know me as me and not my sister's brother". Ever since this realisation, Jim and Marie have noted there are fewer fights with his sister.

According to Marie and Jim, what has impressed them most about the developments relating to their son is that he has opened up and talked. Billy confirmed this quite proudly: "I can now talk openly to my parents...with them I am trying to be good. This means I can open up to them more." Marie commented that "It was lovely"; Jim concurred: "It was as if someone turned the light on!". Billy had the last word in our discussion, and it certainly was a thoughtful one: "Turning twelve changed me. I said to myself, let's try to make the most of the term, so I can leave a good reputation behind me when I go to new school next year."

I would like to thank you both for your help in this matter, even though you both went about it in different ways. Mr. Smith, I believe taking Billy as seriously as you did woke him up; Ms. Jones, I believe your welcome made it possible for him to redeem his reputation, something that he had decided he wanted for himself.

Yours sincerely,

David Epston.

Not surprisingly, following these two consecutive meetings, I from then on included such an inquiry to virtually every meeting I had from then on to the present day. And strangely enough, in retrospect, many of my questions were invented in those conversations in Philadelphia and here in Auckland. As a consequence, it is a foundational response to Michael's query that he stated to me in 1984.

Let me quote from my foreword to Nina Tess Jørring's book: *Narrative psychiatry and family collaborations* (2022):

> But the story really begins in August 1984, when Michael White visited me in Auckland. From 1981 onward, Michael and I had collaborated on an outline of what was to become Narrative Therapy.

> Michael agreed to act as a guest teacher in a series of classes I was giving to trainees in Psychiatry at the University of Auckland School of Medicine. I suspected that my colleagues and their students would be interested in Michael's evolving practice with those who suffered from "psychotic experience" (White, 1995).
>
> As well, I was curious how Michale would be received by Auckland Psychiatry. Although it was only a two-hour lecture, he presented videotapes of his practice with his customary eloquence as well as theorizing it as he went along, similar to what Argyris and Schon (Argyris, 1974) referred to as "theory of practice". The blend of the two strands of his presentation drew considerable interest and Professor Bob Large, in closing the session, praised Michael for his respectfulness.
>
> Afterwards, we walked to catch our homeward bound bus. Michael fell silent on leaving the Medical School as if he were spellbound. Clearly, he was deep in thought. I was wondering why. Was he disappointed with his presentation? Had he felt injured by an innocent remark of a student? Or had something bothered him that I had overlooked?
>
> When Michael did break his silence, I was so aware of that very moment that decades later I can return to the exact physical spot, approximately six paces from the streetlights. He turned to me, pulling himself free of his reverie, and shared his private reflections on the comments about respectfulness. I committed his comment to memory.
>
> "It is not only a matter of us being 'respectful'. It is more a matter of our client experiencing our respect for them", Michael said. (Foreword)

The so-called 'wonderfulnesses interview' and what that entails to my way of thinking adequately satisfies Michael's wish. This had become from the very beginning of Narrative Therapy in the decade of the 1980s how narrative therapy practitioners aspired to 'come to know' those who sought their assistance. The 'Wonderfulnesses Interview' formalised this and provided a wealth of inquiries so that they "experience our respect for them".

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Notes on Moral Character and Wonderfulness

David Epston

What you see below is a series of quotes and notes that I have taken over the years on the topic of moral character. I hope that you will use these as a starting point for your own interest and curiosity on the topic of moral character in your work as a narrative therapist. For ease in reading, the quotes are in regular text and my subsequent comments are italicized.

For some time, how narrative therapists commonly came to know those who sought their help called upon notions of 'character'(or 'moral character',) a word that is so commonly used as perhaps to have lost its provenance and significance. It was obvious to me that writers of fiction were adepts at this and I might do well to research their considerations on such matters. For some years now, I canvassed the literature section of my local libraries and read widely. And as I did, I would write down anything relevant that assisted me to think to myself and speak aloud in workshops, training and apprenticeships. By agreement with Tom, I have edited them down to be as succinct as I might. I hope reading and re-reading below will assist you to undertake what I have referred elsewhere as 'characterising' another rather than 'pathologizing' them; something I believe has been one of Narrative Therapy's most critical departure from most other psychotherapeutic traditions.

For that reason, I have chosen to provide you with some of my references to indicate its relevance to me in my thinking and practice. And hopefully it will have the same relevance for you.

First from *Aristotle's Poetics*:

> Thought must be distinguished from character. 'Character' is what reveals a person's habit of moral choice - whatever he tends to choose or reject when the choice is not obvious…. And this element is, therefore, absent from speeches in which there is absolutely no choosing or rejecting anything by the speaker. 'Thought', on the other hand, is present when

> speakers are engaged in proving something is so or not so, or when they are making some general pronouncement. (Aristotle, 330/1982)

Now, from Stephen Most*:*

> A key concept that comes directly from tragic drama is character. The concept of character asserts that there are no ordinary people. What everyone has in common is uniqueness. “Character” has to be clearly defined. It is neither the totality of a person’s life nor what we call a personality, even though the word “person” comes from persona, the mask an actor wore to represent his character in a theatrical performance. Character has consequences. It appears when people remove the personal masks that help them fit in and instead reveal who they uniquely are.
>
> Character is an abstraction similar to the designations of people in the judicial system as witnesses, defendants, and plaintiffs or in the medical system as doctors, nurses, and patients. People bring to the courtroom or to the hospital neither their whole selves nor their general experience; their roles are relevant to the case in question. For the theatre or screen, a writer selects as characters people who have a part to play in relation to the story and represents them in terms of the actions through which the story unfolds. Character is the quality of a person’s will. It is revealed through action. (Most, 2017, p. 68)

From Hannah Arendt:

> I have always believed that no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain, as in a nutshell, the full meaning of what we have to say. (Arendt, 1960, p. 1)

From Richard Sennett:

> “We know a person has character when we are moved by them”. (2003)

From Sven Brinkmann:

> According to Ricoeur, to achieve self-constancy, we must reflect on our lives as a whole, and the best way to do this is to look at it as a narrative. In a sense, our lives consist of stories that we must interpret and endow our experience with meaning…in contemporary psychology, we refer to this as 'narrative identity' but this is often just a modern way of expressing the older concept of character. Ricoeur's point, then, is that people are only moral, in the sick sense, when they relate to their lives as a whole or as a unit that extends backward in time and is best as a coherent narrative. Can this form the basis of an ethical life?". (2019)

From Henry James:

> "What is character but the illumination of incident, and what is incident but the illumination of character?"

A few words from Orhan Pamuk:

> Like many people, I believe Shakespeare is responsible for our conception of the modern fictional character, developed initially in a broad range of literary writings and later in the 19th c. novel. The character evolved from its centuries-old definition- the embodiment of a single basic attribute, a one-dimensional role, historical or symbolic in nature….and transformed it into a complex entity shaped by conflicting impulses and conditions. (pp. 62-3)
>
> This has been influenced by scientific and psychological discoveries about the laws of nature, and later by the philosophy of positivism. 19th c. novelists began to investigate the secret souls of modern individuals, creating a splendid array of heroes and consistent characters, 'types' that represented various facets of society...spread around the world through novels/film…..excessive and disproportionate interest shown in the traits and quirks of novelistic heroes….

> So for a great many years, it was as if the entire community of world literature and critical thought forgot that what we call 'character' was especially in novels a figment of the human imagination, an artificial construct (p. 65)

> As a result of prevailing interest in psychology… a field that acquired a scientific aura in the first half of the 20th century, it quickly spread among writers like a contagious disease…
>
> 'Character' is a historical construct, and that, just like our own psychological and emotional makeup, the character of literary figures is an artifice we choose to believe in (p. 67)

> Yet having a character…confers distinctiveness on a person; it sets that individual apart from others...how they fit in to the surrounding landscape, events, and milieu (p. 68)

> The c. of my novel's main protagonist is determined the same way a person's character is formed in life: by situations and events he lives through (pp. 68-9).

> The story or plot is a line that effectively connects the various circumstances I want to render in narrative (p.69).

From Todd May:

> In rough terms, narrative therapy says that who we are is largely a product of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. If our stories have themes of things never working out, we become people for whom things don't work out. If our stories have themes of fear, we become fearful. In other words, our narratives about ourselves don't merely reflect who we are: they help produce who we are.

This doesn't mean that there are no facts to which our stories respond. It is not a matter of making things up - or at least not mostly so. Our stories concern the way in which those facts fit together. They create a plot and the themes that we think our lives consist in. And in creating these, we become complicit in the creation of our lives. We come to live the stories we think we are living.

As narrative therapy recognizes, some of the stories people tell themselves are disempowering. They recount lives in a way that makes it difficult to see a way forward. The therapeutic practice, then, is to investigate with people who feel disempowered, different and more empowering stories that they might tell themselves. Like the more disempowering stories, these other narratives need to respond to the facts of a person's life. But they weave those facts together in a different way, revealing the other sides of people and allowing them to become engaged with their world in a more satisfying way. We might say that, in creating new narratives, people 'reproduce' themselves into what they would rather be.

The idea that we live narratively is not restricted to narrative therapy. Recently, the role of stories in the shaping of our lives has become the focus of a number of philosophical and psychological views of who we are. The prominent psychologist, Jerome Bruner, tells us "that it is through narrative that we create ourselves, that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity".

Perhaps, then, if we seek to understand how our lives can be meaningful, we should look toward their narrative character. We should reflect on the stories that people tell themselves about their lives, to see whether we can glean something meaningful in those stories…We need not worry about whether we are discovering THE meaning of life. Our task is not one of isolating everything that might make a life meaningful. It is enough if we could find SOMETHING that offers meaningfulness. And for that, looking at the narrative character of human lives might provide a clue. (2015, pp. 65-66)

From Joan Didion:

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

From Isak Dinesen, the pen name of Karen Blixen:

> “To be a person is to have a story to tell.”

From Terry Eagleton:

> The word 'character' nowadays can mean a sign, letter, or symbol as well as a literary figure. It derives from an ancient Greek term meaning a stamping tool which makes a distinctive mark. From there, it came to mean a particular mark of an individual, rather like his signature. A character, like a character reference today, was a sign, portrait, or description of what a man or woman was like.
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> Then, after a while, it came to mean the man or woman as such. The sign that had stood for the individual became the individual herself.
>
> The shift from character as the peculiar mark of an individual to character as the individual himself is bound up with a whole social history. It belongs, in a word, to the rise of modern individualism. Individuals are now defined by what is peculiar to them, such as their signature of indomitable personality. What distinguishes us from each other is more important than what we have in common.
>
> Today, the term 'character' means the person's mental and moral qualities...The word, also, refers to figures in novels, plays, movies, and the like. (2013, pp. 48-49)

From William James:

> I have often thought that the best way to define a man’s(sic) character will be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt most deeply and immensely active and alive. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “This is the real me!” […] Now as well as I can describe it, this characteristic attitude in me always invokes an element of active tension, of holding my own, as it were, and trusting outward things to play and perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any guarantee they will. (1920/2011, Sect. VIII)

Lastly, by Colum McCann:

We tend to think and analyze in broad sweeping characteristics(honesty, perception, integrity, etc.), but for the purposes of good storytelling you must know your character in the most exact detail. […] We have to make them so utterly real that the reader will never forget them. Writing a character into being is like meeting someone who you want to fall in love with. […] You should be able to close your eyes and dwell inside the character's body. […] Allow your characters to surprise you. […] In the end, if you don't know your character, sit down and write a letter to her. Your first line might be: *Why don't I know you?* You might be surprised by the reply. It is, after all, you writing back to yourself. (2017, pp. 24-29).

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