Finding Children's Imaginative Know-How

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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.

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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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