



Gardening Narratives and Writing Stories

Adriana Müller¹

"Land of enchantment love and sun

I don't speak English or Spanish

Those who know you don't forget

my Brazil is with S"

(Brazil with S – João Gilberto)²

I'm Adriana Müller (AM) and I live in the Abya Yala region, in the territory known by the native peoples as Pindorama, but named on maps as Brazil. An area with more than 8 million square kilometers filled with exuberant nature and a diversity of flora, fauna and geography, which extends from the Amazon rainforest to the gaúcho pampas, passing through the *sertão* and the swamps. A region that has always been inhabited by people who know the seasons' cycle and know how to take care of the land; a territory that, over the centuries, has received people from all continents, who arrived in different ways and for different reasons. Today, we are the mixture of these stories that often reveal themselves in our way of being cheerful, talkative, interactive, welcoming people with coffee and hugs, enjoying soccer and carnival, having different faiths and beliefs, speaking in metaphors, and living with passion. Creative and diligent people, who enjoy bathing and preparing good food with everything the earth provides. Solidary people, who have a remedy for everything, who fight and resist, who sing and dance their pain and their love in various tones and rhythms, who find ways to survive the weather and life, who know their value and honor their legacy.

This article is a way to honor this entire cultural heritage. I present a work that I have been developing with a focus on narrative therapy, especially on the use of narrative metaphors, which brought me to the central theme that I present here: gardening. Here in Brazil, we have expressions that connect us to the land: we call

¹ Narrative psychologist, who works in private practice and teaches narrative therapy since 2005, as well as collective narrative practices since 2009, having created the Rhythms of Life methodology in 2010.

² Gilberto, J. (1982). *Brazil with S*. Rita Lee and Roberto de Carvalho. Acronym Studio: 1982. Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtQfI3zetNE>



someone who lives in the reality and is not easily deceived as having their “feet on the ground”; traditional *samba* is known as “rooted *samba*”; anyone who owns “a palm of land” has a place to live and the “children of the land” are all those who were born here. It is from the land that we derive our sustenance, and, throughout Brazil, people know how to clear the land, the fields, open the furrows, sow and harvest. In the *Tupi* language, people who are born in the territory known today as Espírito Santo are called *capixabas*, which means 'land ready for planting'. It's where I live – in Espírito Santo. Inspired by personal experiences, both in planting and in gardening, I started therapeutic conversations based on the metaphor of the garden. Having as fundamental four steps in the process of taking care of a garden, and aligning this with the principles of narrative therapy, people are invited to build a narrative that involves the metaphors of: 1) removing weeds; 2) choosing the good seeds; 3) hoping like the farmer and 4) celebrating the harvest. The process involves therapeutic documents such as letters or poems, the relational construction of meanings, and the invitation for the person to understand their personal agency through the metaphor of gardening.

The Magic of the Narrative Therapeutic Encounter

According to narrative therapy, our life is made up of multiple events that, when grouped according to a certain temporal sequence, generate a narrative about a specific theme. We are not predefined, fixed, and predetermined beings. On the contrary, in each of us there are stories that await the right moment to come to light and reveal their power. And each one of them is activated through questions that are asked, resonances with other people's stories, situations experienced in the present that connect us with past experiences, in short, in different ways, but always as an invitation to access, connect, and chain the events. In the words of Freire (2008) “Pieces of time that, in fact, were in me, since when I lived them, waiting for another time, which might not even have come as it did, in which those pieces lengthened for the composition of the larger plot” (p. 19). Thus, I share here in this article some of these alignments of moments in my life story that occurred through my encounters with the people I worked with in my clinic – and how we transformed the images and resonances of these consultations into metaphors and poetry.





As a rule, people seek therapy when they are faced with problems that limit their sense of competence, their agency ability, and the perception of themselves as a person of value. In short, when the story reveals more about the problem than about the person. In these moments, a process based on the narrative seeks to make therapy a space in which questions, paths, and processes lead to a rescue of the beauty and dignity of life, highlighting the information that contributes to the creation of a good story (Carlson, 2020).

According to Epston (2018, personal communication), questions guide the conversation since trivial questions lead to trivial answers, boring questions build boring narratives, and poetic questions are seeds for poetic stories. He presents the questions as Gnomes: those that come from the heart and bring to the conversation “the spirit of narrative therapy full of enthusiasm, irreverence, improvisation, imagination, righteous indignation at injustice, solidarity with those who suffer, collective creativity, fascination with the magic and mystery that lie at the center of everyday life”, among others (Epston, 2019, p. 1-2). An invitation to look at life from the perspective of wonder (Marsten, Epston & Markhan, 2016) – which Paulo Freire (1996) would call the 'beauty' of life and relationships –, finding aspects that no longer emphasize the stories saturated with problems and start to portray versions that reveal people's preferred identity.

Externalizing conversations (White, 2012), in which the problem is named and spoken of in a way that is separate from the person, contribute to the necessary distance so that preferred stories can be accessed. In this process, reflection on the effects of problems in contrast to personal goals makes room for people not only to distance themselves from the problems, but to reconnect with what La Taille (2006) calls the 'ethical plan' – the one who seeks to answer the question “what life do I want to live?” and, consequently, “who must I be to live this life?”. Connecting to the ethical plan means defining for yourself what a life worth living is, and striving to be a person who deserves to live such a life. When developing an ethical personality, one will guide their actions according to values, beliefs, principles, skills, competencies, goals, and purposes, among other aspects that form one's character and strength in the face of life's challenges and dilemmas. Such aspects are part of the person's history, which means that they are immersed in a socio-historical broth, involving other people and happening within what Gilberto Freire calls *tribium* time: an existential time that “is not just past,



neither just present, nor just future, but all three simultaneously” (Gilberto Freyre)³, an intersection of past, present and future that both evokes and prophesizes, and in which survivals and anticipations intertwine.

Still for La Taille (2006), responding to the ethical plan leads us to the question that guides the moral plan: “how should I live?” – a question that involves action and its individual and collective reflexes. In the same way, Paulo Freire tells us about the dialectical unity 'action-reflection' necessary for the development of a critical conscience that constitutes the way of being and/or transforming the world, and that is proper to the human being. Such concepts are very close to what Michael White (2012) calls personal agency:

A sense of being able to regulate one’s own life, to intervene in one’s life to affect its course according to one’s intentions, and to do this in ways that are shaped by one’s knowledge of life and skills of living. (p. 263-264)

In this context, the re-authoring conversations, which involve connecting the action (reporting of events) and identity (perception of meanings) landscapes, seek to reveal the potentialities present in the story and the individual’s agency at all times. In addition, re-memembering conversations seek to connect us with significant people and the mutual contribution to the idea of being a person of value. Knowing oneself to be part of a network of affections that constitutes us and in which we actively participate, giving and receiving – and, with that, building meanings – is something important for the construction of the notion of oneself as a person of value.

During therapeutic meetings, such conversations reveal precious things that we therapists write down or keep in mind. Words that, later, can be returned to people in the form of documents that 'rescue what was said' (Newman, 2008) and that, thus, can help in the construction of stories that reveal their preferred identities. The documents I usually make are in the form of poetry – which can become song lyrics, as in *Ritmos da Vida* (Müller, 2013) – because, like Rubem Alves, I believe that “Words only make sense if they help us to see the world better. We learn words to improve the eyes” (1999).

³ Gilberto Freyre, in an interview with TV Cultura in São Paulo. Source: http://www.nomedasuaescola.com.br/professor_inesquecivel/pi034_gfreire.html



But, how do we know which words to rescue to later be delivered to those who said them? Grandesso (2018) helps us:

If any lighthouse or compass to guide the journey in the field of meaning could be available, it would come more from the reactions of our body, responding more to the poetic forms of the words that touch us, than from any previous knowledge. (...) What (the therapist) can offer for that moment, are not explanations or theoretical knowledge, but understandings in the form of reflections coming from words and images that arise in a generous listening. (p. 162)

This way, the narrative metaphor helps throughout the therapeutic process, reminding us, as White (2002) warned us, of the ethical responsibility we have in the construction of meaning, since it “powerfully shapes the activities of formation of the self” and the relationship in which we engage under the name of therapeutic practice (p. 14). The narrative process is always respectful and seeks to position the clients as the experts of their lives; therefore, a metaphor is generated during the meeting, never before. It represents the harmony arising from the therapeutic context and is always a symbolic, figurative, and poetic invitation for the person to leave what is known and familiar and go towards what is possible to be known.

Such scaffolding conversations, which White elaborated based on Vygotsky's writings (White, 2012), are very similar to what Paulo Freire (1987) called the construction of the 'unprecedented-viable': that which, because it is not known yet, is unprecedented, but whose originality is within achievable possibilities. Paro, Ventura & Silva (2020) show that, according to this Brazilian educator and philosopher, we face, individually or collectively, forms of oppression are concrete, challenging, and historical obstacles that impose themselves as if there were no way out, which Freire calls 'limit situations'. We do not passively accept or receive such 'limit situations', but rather, seek to overcome them through 'limit acts'. The distance taken from 'limit situations' brings out the 'perceived-distinguished': that which cannot and should not remain as it is, but that needs to be faced, discussed, and overcome. 'Limit situations', when detached from reality, can be objectified and understood as 'themes-problems'. So, we start “to dream of another possible world, something that does not yet exist, but may exist through the articulated action of its subjects, as an ontological need for the



transformation of our individual and social reality (...), the 'unprecedented-viable'" (Costa & Furtado, 2015, p. 3).

Creativity, joy, hope, eyes that see 'beauty', freedom, dialogue... ingredients that make the difference in a therapeutic meeting that aims at the 'unprecedented-viable'. The magic of the therapeutic encounter creates the possibility for client's to write and live their life in an unprecedented way and, in a creative way, to 'write-and-live' their story.

My Story with the Gardens

One year after graduating in Psychology, I moved, for professional and family reasons, to the city of Venda Nova do Imigrante, in the interior of the state of Espírito Santo, where I lived for 10 years on a farm. Living in a farm community, soon gave birth to the idea of creating a Sustainable Development NGO – CDS Guaçu-Virá.⁴ This whole experience, both in contact with the land and the inhabitants of the region, as well as with people connected to the area of ecology and preservation, taught me a lot about nature, its cycles, its diversity, and its peculiarities. I learned, in practice, the importance of our relationship with this living organism that we inhabit, and I bring from this life experience something that I define as 'knowing down to earth': that which we incorporate because we experience it in our daily dealings, with the 'feet on the ground' and in constant partnership with Nature. For example: how to have potable water? We had to recover the sources, "planting water"⁵ and taking care of it like a precious commodity. And, to this day, it supplies all 15 homes, the factory, and the lakes. With this and other praxis, year after year, I learned from nature about Life and living.

When I returned to the capital, Vitória, I brought this knowledge and experience with me. I surrounded myself with plants and realized that the more attention I paid to them, the more they reciprocated. Nature always responds and, even living in an apartment, my care was translated into plants full of buds, flower buds in bloom, birds, butterflies, and bees arriving – I found myself surrounded by what I had on the farm, right in the middle of the city. As mentioned by Reis, dos Reis,

⁴ For more informations: <http://guacuvira.org.br/>

⁵ Reference to the Plantando Águas Project, which teaches that planting trees means having water. <https://iniciativaverde.org.br/atuacao/plantando-aguas>





and do Nascimento (2020), gardening and other activities that involve caring for and contemplating flowers and ornamental plants, whether in the external or internal environment, generate a sense of well-being by stimulating the senses through luminosity, colors, sounds, aromas, textures, and shapes, in addition to activating the aesthetic sense. That's why they can be important allies for the preservation and recovery of health and well-being.

When I started using the metaphor of the garden in consultations, I realized that the enchantment was as fast as nature's response. There is something in us that connects in a special way with the idea of the garden: being a gardener, being a seed, being a flower bud, understanding the phases of a garden... There are many possibilities for applying this metaphor, and all of them invite us to beautiful narratives of agency, of creating meaning and finding resources to deal with life's challenges. The metaphor of the garden is an invitation to rescue each one's connection with nature. Below I present the metaphor *Jardinando* (Gardening) and two stories. My hope is that these ideas I'm sharing with you will be able to contribute to the enchantment and poetry of nature so as to activate creativity in everyone. Let's sow narrative ideas!

Gardening Narratives

"Go the animal man, fruit of the seed, (memory)

Reborn of his own strength, own light and faith. (memory)

Understanding that everything is ours, has always been in us, (story)

We are the seed, act, mind and voice. (magic)"

(Redescobrir (Rediscover) – Gonzaguinha)⁶

According to White and Epston (1990), "the narrative way of thinking is characterized by good stories that gain credibility by their resemblance to life" (p. 78). Good stories have a dose of metaphorical images that organize the story and help build positive images about the individual. If you have taken care of a garden – small and made in pots, or large over lawns – you can identify 4 phases of this work: removing the weeds, choosing the good seeds, waiting for sprouting, and

⁶ Gonzaguinha. (1980). Rediscover. Album Saudade do Brasil. WEA label: 1980. Access: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsiH25p_rAk&ab_channel=MariaRitaVEVO





being happy with the result. So next, I present the metaphor and its relationships with narrative therapy.

1) Removing Weeds or Invasive Plants

Every garden suffers from weeds that appear as unwanted visitors. Dealing with them requires some specific skills: knowing how to differentiate plants from weeds, understanding the effects of the presence of these invasive organisms on the plants, and establishing an action plan so that your garden conforms to your plans. This is the stage of the externalizing conversation (White, 2012) in which we invite the person to name the problem (weed), check the effects of the problem on their life, evaluate such effects, and develop action plans to recover their life (your garden) from the effects of the problems. In Freire's terms, we can say that this is the 'perceived-distinguished' stage.

A garden overgrown with weeds is like a story saturated with problems: it loses its strength, vigor, and beauty, not because it lacks these characteristics, but because all energy is being dislocated to the maintenance of the problem. That's why it's important to help people recover their personal agency (White 2012) through 'action-reflection' (Freire, 2008) that will help them to elaborate and put into practice their action plans to go back to writing their story as protagonists of the plot.

Here are some questions (metaphorical or not) that contribute at this moment:

Questions about the effect of the problem:

What have I been feeling/thinking?

What has been bothering me?

How is this 'weed' bothering me? Is it mistletoe that suffocates? Is it a cat scratch that traps and hurts me? Is it a weed that competes with me for water and nutrients?

Questions about the action plan:

How do I want my garden?



What do I want to see bloom?

What are the potentials of my garden?

What should I do to make it stay as my dream?

Which people can help me with this task?

What are my skills and abilities to deal with this challenge?

When can I start fixing this garden?

These reflections separate the person from the problem and contribute to starting a process of connecting the person with the preferred version of their story – the garden they dream of.

2) Choosing the Good Seeds

Speaking about gardens and gardeners, Rubem Alves (1999) invites us to the following reflection:

What is at the beginning? The garden or the gardener? It's the gardener. If there is a gardener, sooner or later a garden will appear. But if there is a garden without a gardener, sooner or later it will disappear. What is a gardener? A person whose mind is full of gardens. What makes a garden is the gardener's thought. What makes a nation is the thought of those who form it. (p. 24)

After removing the weeds, the disturbed but clean soil is ready to receive the seeds. And, if the garden is in the gardener's mind, at that moment, it is up to us to help them in choosing the good seeds: those aspects of life that people value, consider important, and want to be present in their life. It is what people want to plant and watch grow that activates the notion of 'beauty' and wonder.

In addition to ethical and moral questions (La Taille, 2006) – How do I want my garden to be? What should I do to make it that way? – Others also contribute to this construction, as they open the possibility for the notion of agency, values, and wonder:

What seeds do I choose to plant?



What do I admire and consider important to be present in the garden of my life?

What is beautiful and special about me that I want to see blossom?

What aspects of my life do I value?

What matters⁷ in my life?

Who are the people who help me in this planting?

What did they teach me? And I them?

What is special and unique about this garden?

Through these reflections, people connect with their own treasures and their favorite stories take on meaning, shape, color, and scent. The garden is taking shape.

3) Farmer's Hope

Something that has always impressed me in my experience living on the farm is the farmers' wisdom. Planting is an art and, as such, requires very specific skills, including what I usually call the 'farmer's hope'. First, the farmer lets the land rest after harvesting, and only then does he start working on it. From sunrise to sunset, he spends his day plowing, adjusting the soil, watering, and sowing the next crop. Tireless, he continues to water that soil already sown, but still without a sign of life or success. Every farmer needs to believe in his work and in the power of the seed – he needs to believe in the 'unprecedented-viable'. And for that, it is necessary to hope, being “neither just patient nor just impatient, but *patiently impatient*” (Freire, 2013, p. 62, my emphasis).

Achieving the 'unprecedented-viable' involves having hope from the verb to hope. But let no one be mistaken: hoping is an energetic attitude, that of positioning oneself towards life, and not a mere linguistic pun. There is the hope of the verb to wait, which keeps us passive, static, waiting for something to happen or for someone to do something. And there is the hope of the verb to hope that puts us

⁷ The word *importa* comes from the Latin 'in' (inside) and 'portus' (passage) meaning what we want to bring inside – of ourselves, our lives and into our garden.



in an active, dynamic position. In the words of Freire: “To hope is to get up, to hope is to go after, to hope is to build, to hope is not to give up! To hope is to move forward, to hope is to join with others to do otherwise...”

Everything we plant in life has a time to come into being. It is in this position that it is up to us to hope like the farmer. It is at this moment that I usually write and deliver poetry to people.

4) Celebrating the Harvest

As important as preparing the soil, planting the best seeds, and knowing how to hope is, to perceive the field producing and harvesting. Celebrating this moment means recognizing the strength of the whole process. In the words of Freire (1996): “Joy does not come only when finding something, but it is part of the search process. And teaching and learning cannot happen without the search, the beauty and joy” (p.160). As an educator, Freire talks about the process of 'teaching and learning' which, in this text, we metaphorically call 'sowing and harvesting' – and which, as such, applies to the most different processes in life.

The harvest reveals the power of wonder – the revealed 'beauty' – which forms the basis of the preferred story: the one that reveals the preferred identity of the person we're talking to. Realizing that one is capable of transforming soils previously taken over by weeds into gardens full of 'beauties' reveals the capacity of each one, individually and collectively, to sow dreams and harvest realities.

I now present two stories of therapeutic processes in which the Gardening Narratives metaphor was used. It is important to say that both were authorized to be published and that, to maintain secrecy, the names were omitted or modified. Another point to be highlighted is that, like any process, nothing happens linearly or following a rule. The fluidity and organization required in a written text are not found in the same way as the dynamics of interactions and dialogues which are more based on simultaneity, dynamic responsiveness and continuous reorganization. In the words of Freire (1992): “An event, a fact, a deed, a gesture of anger or love, a poem, a canvas, a song, a book never have a single reason behind it. (...) That's why I was always much more interested in understanding the process in which and how things happen than the product itself” (p. 18). So, I invite you to understand the process and I hope that the essence of Gardening





present in these stories will be revealed beyond the didactic sequences just presented.

First Story: I Met a Gardener

She arrived at the office with tears in her eyes and a story of suffering to tell. There, in front of me, another woman reporting on when she discovered her husband's betrayal, on the effort she made to forgive and allow the couple a second chance. At that time, they were two. Time passed, the wound stopped hurting and they dreamed of being three. Pregnancy came as a gift, and on the day of the birth, she decided to put all that bad history behind her. She wanted to be born as a mother and as a new woman. It was time for a renewed family to be born. Along with the son, forgiveness also came. And she wept with joy.

She went home, breastfed, took care of the baby, and felt complete. She felt that there was reciprocity in the attention and care, and she was sure that this was the family she had always dreamed of. Until, a few months later, she discovered that the betrayal was not a shadow of the past, but the harsh reality of the present. That's when she arrived at my office, and I learned about this story that mixed pain and hope.

Michael White taught us that we are external witnesses to the stories we are told. This is not trivial and involves a responsibility both in listening generously and in responding to what we hear. He clearly and didactically presents us with a four-step map to navigate this unfamiliar terrain of the therapeutic conversation: calling our attention to the expression that struck us during the narrative, the image it conjures up in our minds; the resonance of it with our life, and where it takes us (White, 2012). That day, when I heard that story, several images – real and metaphorical – passed through my mind. I heard as a woman, wife, and mother. I heard a storm, saw bolts of lightning, and devastation. I heard it as birth, life, forgiveness. Until she wiped her tears, looked at me, and waited for me to speak.

Inside me, echoed the phrase: “I feel devastated”. The image came naturally: a garden all turned upside down, holes everywhere. And the resonance took me back to the time when I lived on the farm and dedicated myself to the garden at home. In this home garden, I built flowerbeds with colorful flowers and medicinal plants. Surrounding the land, I built a living fence of *calendries*, with their fragrant





flowers that bloom announcing rainy days. Throughout the garden, I planted fruit trees to invite the birds, yellow *ipês*, and a *jambo tree* so that their flowers would make a beautiful colorful rug in the garden and a tree for each child that was born. In my garden, I planted trees, dreams, and stories.

But in the same garden, weeds also grew – lots of them! And they taught me a beautiful lesson: it's easier to remove a weed when it's still young and small and you can do it with your own hands. After it grows and takes root, only with a hoe and a lot of force – and all this action leaves holes, disturbed soil and the garden loses part of its beauty. That was the image that the story provoked in me – a revolved garden – and that's what I told her. But I continued reporting what I learned: we can look at the holes and the ugliness of what was left, or understand that the land was fluffed up for new planting, the weeds were removed and the hole for a new seedling is ready. It was this memory that the story provoked in me and that I shared with her. “Does it make sense to you?” I asked. She said yes, and we started talking about how to take care of an overturned garden.

This metaphor came back at various times, throughout the meetings and conversations.

As she carried out the re-authoring conversation, connecting the landscape of action with the landscape of identity, going back and forth in time, reporting what matters in her life, the people who contributed to her being who she is today, her dreams and projects, skills and competencies, values and principles, a new image was emerging in my mind: that of a garden that was ever more alive and beautiful. It was then that I realized that she was gardening narratives.

First, she strengthened herself, connecting with everything that matters and has value. She reorganized her routine, realized her ability to move forward, engaged in activities she likes, rescued her religiosity, looked with wonder at the 'beauties' of her life and, little by little, started sowing in her garden.

Then, she hoped for a new stage: the reunion. Not a re-living of the past, like a closed circle, without beginning or end, but a living in the present-spiral that provides something new and growing. That's why she invited her husband to be close by, to see her garden. There was in this movement a hope to return to taking care of the most special part of the whole garden: the family. And in her,



there was the strength of someone who recognizes herself as an agent and sower of possible futures – of 'unprecedented-viables'.

Today she continues gardening narratives, living in the *tribium* time that intertwines past-present-future and making her story a garden of planted dreams and harvested realities.

Gardening Narratives: Poetry

Below I present the poetry I wrote based on the 'rescue of what was said from what was spoken' – her words are highlighted. I delivered the poetry when she was still suffering and trying to understand what had happened, and after we talked about what matters to her. My intention was to make a list of all the good seeds she already had on hand and help her realize her ability to care for herself, the child, and the garden.

For the gardener that lives in you

(and who knows that...)

After the rain comes the rainbow,

after every winter comes the spring,

after pulling out the weeds, comes the time to sow.

In the revolved soil, fluffed by the withdrawal of what is no use, your hands touch the fertile land

*and you create **blessed** flowerbeds in every corner of this Garden.*

In it, the best seeds will germinate:

*the **Courage to act***

*the **Self-esteem of recognizing one's own Value***

*the **Filter of more solid and mature Friendships***

*the **Family Ties strengthened***





*the **Maturity as a wife***

Collaboration

Respect

*and many other **Strengths...***

A multicolored and fragrant Garden

***to restore energy and rejoice.** Because the Gardener that lives in you knows that*

after the rain comes the rainbow

and after winter, spring always comes.

Second Story: Breaking the Shell of Fear

Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering /

There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in (Leonard Cohen)⁸

I don't think Leonard Cohen ever met her, nor that she ever heard that song, but the 35-year-old who walked into my office seemed to be a living example of these words from the singer. From the age of 6, her father began a sequence of sexual violence that lasted until she was 13, when she finally managed to leave home to live with an aunt and never saw him again. During those seven years of daily suffering, her strategy to get rid of those aggressions was to “get out of here”: she used to call her friends to play, visit her aunts, or stop by her colleagues' houses to study. Sometimes she tried to tell people close to her what she was going through, but no one believed her. So, she decided to shut up. The bell remained silent for nearly thirty years and her father became a ghost who haunted her from time to time. Until, one day, her sister brought the news that her father was very sick, almost dying, and needed the family's care. Despite being separated, her mother agreed to bring him home and, after thirty years away, the girl found herself facing a great dilemma: to take care of the father or not?

⁸ Cohen, L. (1992). Anthem. The Future Album. Columbia Records: 1992. Access: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8-BT6y_wYg&ab_channel=LeonardCohenVEVO





Dilemmas often place us facing ethical questions whose answers can reinforce the story saturated with problems or then, evidence a counter-story that reveals our preferred identity. From the point of view of narrative therapy, the preferred identity is the one that reveals our best: values, beliefs, dreams, skills, and everything that demonstrates who we really want to be. It is very close to what La Taille (2006) calls an ethical personality. For this author, ethics is linked to longing, to a project, to a conscious construction – it is the answer to the question “what life do I want to live?”. This question reveals a life that the person considers good, worth living and that is worth seeking to fulfill. But in order to live that desirable life, another question needs to be answered: “Who am I supposed to be to live this life?”. In other words, what person must I be to be able to carry out the project of a life worth living? – a question based on duties, on actions oriented towards an end.

According to La Taille (2006), when the answer to the ethical question is answered based on values that contribute to the common good, we are building an ethical personality. In it lies our strength to be able to overcome challenges, carry out projects, define new directions, guide our steps, and be the person we want to be. The dilemma that the girl faced at that moment was ethical: how should I act? What life do I want to live and who must I be to get to live that life? In other words: what story do I want to tell? Who am I in this story I want to tell? How can I evidence my preferred identity in such a way that this story reveals my best version, the one that aligns my values and my actions in a coherent way?

When she came to me to help her deal with her current dilemma, we had a long conversation from which I highlighted the following excerpt, which begins precisely with the dilemma.

NZ: (...) I demanded a lot from myself. I got to thinking: am I so bad that he's on his deathbed and I don't even want to go there? Am I that bad? Is everyone right and I'm wrong? I talked to my aunt: am I so bad? And she told me: you have a very good heart. That's why I tell you, what you feel in your heart you do, what you don't feel, you don't do.

AM: So... are you managing to visualize and perceive all your good, kind, beautiful sides?



NZ: I even posted a story this morning that things need to be broken down for you to see the inside of them.

AM: And what is breaking in you?

NZ: This whole shell of fear I had, of sadness remembering what happened, this protection I had for fear of him looking for me... it's as if I was freeing myself, taking a weight off, you know?

AM: Breaking it down...

NZ: Yeah. (...)

AM: As if this shell that was protecting you, but at the same time arresting you, paralyzing you, limiting you, is breaking? And what's showing up? What is it about you that is being born at this moment, that is unfolding? What light, what beauty is this that was inside that shell and that you are surprised to see, perceive, feel?

NZ: People said "ah, your father is in such a place, your father is very bad, your father doesn't know what..." And I, with all the anger I had, I still judged myself... people they could say "what a bad daughter who abandons her father"... Because nobody knows the story. Then today, an aunt of mine sent an audio saying "I feel so proud of you! After everything you've been through, you're taking care of him." I'm realizing that, in addition to being a muggle, I'm a good person! (*How beautiful!*) I am a good and silly person at the same time. And today I see and I'm sure that I'm not what I imagined to be. That I am not a person who abandons the father. It was a way of protection for me. And today I see that I'm a very good person because if I were anyone else, I wouldn't do what I'm doing.

I pause here to invite you to reflect on some interesting points in this passage. First, see that the problem-saturated story and the counter story go together, side by side, like two possible versions of the same situation. We, narrative therapists, look for the wonder version by asking questions that shed light on the person's preferred potential.



In addition, we perceive the importance of external witnesses in consolidating a certain narrative line: both the one that reinforces the story saturated with problems with what others say or may say about our actions, and the one that strengthens the preferred version in which the wonders and the 'beauties' of each stand out.

I also want to share the echoes I got when she mentioned that “*things need to be broken down to see the inside of them*”. That phrase brought the image of a seed germinating and I remembered when we started reforesting the farm. In addition to receiving several native tree seedlings, we also had a seedbed where we made our own seedlings. I learned, during this time, that the differences in seed formats and structures aim to guarantee the dispersion of the species and the protection of the embryo against the action of the environment. Thus, some are light to be carried by the wind and do not take long to germinate when they reach the soil. Others are hard and heavy to keep something precious inside. The first are seeds of primary trees and the second of noble trees. Upon hearing that sentence, I imagined the thick shell, protecting at all costs the beauty that was inside – and my question was motivated by this image: what was being born? What beauty was about to emerge?

Her response revealed her preferred identity: “I'm playful, I love being around friends, I love seeing people laugh, I love making people feel good. I like to do whatever I can for people. So, today I see that I'm a good person, I'm not the bad person I thought I was, you know?”. This list of wonders showed the principles that support her ethical personality and guide her actions in life. Not just in that challenging moment, but in every situation she lives.

So, I presented the image that was strong in my mind to her to check if it made sense to her too.

AM: And I keep thinking about the forests where the seeds fall to the ground and have the thinnest coat – they are the pioneers. They die quickly to fertilize the land and the seeds are like beans, just a little moisture and they sprout. Now, the hardwood, the strong trees, the trees that will last for centuries and centuries: they have thick bark.

NZ: I think it's this shell that I was...



AM: Because their content is very precious. They are the queens of the forest and they need to be protected so that, when the time is right, they will take root and give the protection they need. Because they are known as mother trees because they grow taller and give shade and protection – and they are home to birds, monkeys and all kinds of critters.

NZ: There you go: I'm a tree too because I think you described me!

AM: Above all, noble tree!

NZ: You think that's a little thing?! (laughs) See?! But that's right. It's like I have a shell and now I'm showing what's inside me. I'm showing that I can be that little girl, but happy! Free now! Adriana, today I know that I have a good heart! I know that whoever needs me, I'll be there.

Hope on the Sown Seeds

I presented here the metaphorical idea of life as a garden, and how we can Garden Narratives in our therapeutic encounters, helping people to continue writing and living the most beautiful version of their stories.

The gardening metaphor can be used in different therapeutic contexts, in addition to the individual treatments presented here. Couples, families, groups, experience situations of grief, challenges, and dilemmas in many different ways – all of them can connect with the metaphor of a garden that, despite looking devastated, has a lot of strength and potential to regrow.

Here in Brazil, from 1964 to 1985, we lived through a period of military dictatorship, a sad and dark period of Brazilian history that devastated gardens, destroyed orchards, and razed flowerbeds, but did not prevent words from becoming seeds, ideas from becoming fertilizers, or dreams from becoming realities. From this time, I bring the verses of Ivan Lins and Vitor Martins, sung in the voice of Elis Regina:

When the flowers bloom

When the forests grow

When they reap the fruits



*Tell me the taste*⁹.

I consider this article as being a seed. May it find lands in which to germinate, flourish, and bear fruit. And I leave you with an invitation: when you pick the fruits, tell me how they taste. Could you do it?

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⁹ Martins, V., Lins, I. (1978). To our children. Album Today. EMI label: 1978. Access: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUSYSVluES8&ab_channel=cubebossanova



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