



## Friendly Introduction to this Special Release by David Epston

Late last year, I entered in to a correspondence on email with a gym to renew my membership. After a few exchanges, I resolved to sign a contract for another year. I made an appointment to go to the gym to do so. When I identified myself to the woman at the desk, she looked at me oddly as if I were an alien, but friendly. She indicated to her side-kick that “he’s here’ who rushed off to the adjoining offices. To my amazement, everyone quickly assembled at the desk to greet me. Even the woman who oversaw the child care center joined them. I wondered to myself if they might be overdoing greeting longstanding gym members and commented to the person who had offered me the contract to sign: “Aren’t you overdoing your welcome!” She was confused at first but then explained to me: “No, that’s not the reason we are here. We all wanted to meet the person who writes letters like you do!” I was somewhat taken aback as I had corresponded at no greater length than I considered necessary or customary. So I enquired: “How do other people correspond with you? What do they write?” She replied: “They text ‘how much’!”

I realized in a flash how even the insubstantial a ‘letter’ I had written was cause for the entire gym’s administrative staff to wish to see who could have possibly have indulged in such a medium. Ever since I have wondered how a client and in particular a very young client might receive such a document. Can we assume that it is very likely that this is the first time for a young person to find themselves represented in such a fashion? I suspect so. For so long, I have considered ‘letter writing’ as something I was ethically required to do. What do I mean by that? In my evaluations, (how many sessions do you consider a letter is worth), I invariably received an average of 4.5. Consequently, to knowingly deprive the client of such advantage, I felt compelled to write after every session. For the reasons that I am a very able typist and over time, the storylines of my previous letters so influenced the lines of inquiry, I was able to write a very substantial ‘letter’ within a half hour. And this was the time I would allow myself. In addition, I considered that the exercise of writing the letter of a session afforded me the opportunity to reflexively appreciate it. Or in some cases, when I found it difficult to write a letter, I realized I needed to make amends for a meeting that didn’t go anywhere. And the letter allowed me to do so. In some ways, writing letters was for me the best sort of supervision, not only as I mentioned above but as well being able with client’s feedback to evaluate my own practice. I consider I have learned as much from writing letters as any advantage my clients tell me it gave them.





While letter writing is a practice that was central to the development of narrative therapy practice, documentation on letter writing in the NT literature seems to have gone missing in recent years. In fact, to my great surprise, in my travels throughout the world over the past several years, it is getting more and more rare to hear from therapists who are actually writing letters in their work. Given the long history of letter writing in narrative therapy and its documented influence on clients and therapists alike, it seems to me that a revival is in order. And I am not talking about a mere return to letter writing as we have known it, but rather a revival that takes therapeutic documentation in new and exciting ways that draw on recent developments in performance and storytelling in an effort to return narrative therapy to a therapy with literary merit.

I am happy to say that such a revival has already begun and the papers here testify to this and to the ways Kay, Sanni and Sasha have taken up therapeutic documentation, in their own style and creativity.

This first paper in this special release entitled “My Romance with Narrative Letters: Counter-storying Through Letter Writing” tells the story of how the history of Kay’s letter writing practices developed under her almost 15 years of supervision with me (DE). While she still uses many of what might be considered ‘traditional’ letter writing practices in her work, Kay highlights how she views her more recent letter writing efforts as the telling of a good story; with a particular focus on ‘actions that move the story forward.’ Kay’s paper is filled with actual letters from her work as a way of showing rather than merely telling about her work.

In the second paper in this special release, entitled “Writing Narrative Therapeutic Letters: Gathering, Recording and Performing Lost Stories,” Sasha highlights some of the new developments in her letter writing efforts that focus on writing in ways that allow people to experience themselves as witnesses to their own life stories. One of the primary ways that she accomplishes this is through actual performances of her letters. Sasha also offers readers with a practical look at the ways that she goes about writing and structuring letters.

In the third paper, entitled “A House of Good Words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents”, Sanni introduces readers to her novel innovation of poetry as a means of narrative therapeutic documentation. Sanni tells the story of how she stumbled upon the idea of turning her client’s words into poems and how the writing of poems supervised her into narrative practice as a result of the ways in which the poems required her to listen, attend, and reflect on the words of the people with whom she works.





It is my hope these innovative papers will spark a revitalization of narrative letter writing practices and that their words will have life outside their pages, finding their way into your work. And if they do, we invite you will let us know where their words and ideas have led you in your travels.

*Note: Each of the papers in this special release have been adapted from a workshop on letter writing that I organized at the TC 14 Conference in Vancouver, Canada in 2017.*

