



The coming together of the LA Insider Witnessing Team

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I first encountered Insider Witnessing Practice when Tom Stone Carlson and David Epston presented it at a workshop in Vermont in June of 2017. I was instantly excited by two elements of the work: I saw its tremendous potential as a means of training narrative therapists, and also hopeful about the difference an Insider Witnessing experience might make in the lives of some of the people we serve at the Southern California Counseling Center (SCCC.)

SCCC is a non-profit counseling center and training facility where pre-licensed or para-professional therapists provide counseling under the supervision of volunteer licensed professionals. Trainees are typically there for two years, but at SCCC we serve many people whose lives have been up against a lot in life and whose identities severely compromised. The resulting hopelessness they feel is often overwhelming, and often contagious. Their often-novice therapists are frequently infected with that hopelessness, and begin to lose faith in their abilities to help. This is damaging to *their* identities as therapists.

Given that the work is organized around “hope biased interviewing,” my first thought was that it might benefit the clients most by how it acts upon the therapists: to learn to conduct an interview that brings forth a richer “counter-story” is to learn to traffic in a counter-story of what therapy can be. What if through Insider Witnessing Practices therapists can learn to better hold hope?

With that wish and better training in mind, I formed a team at SCCC to investigate Insider Witnessing Practice in September of 2018. Since then, we’ve been meeting alternate weeks for two hours. Each meeting we study transcripts and tapes of Insider Witnessing that have been completed by Tom, Sanni, and other teams that they’re working with, and we’ve begun to experiment with conducting Insider Witnessing ourselves. We initially brought Tom and Sanni to Los Angeles both to train our team, and to present Insider Witnessing to the broader community of Los Angeles narrative therapists. We then began to experiment

LA IWP Team



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with doing Insider Witnessing on our own, and had completed all three stages of one Insider Witnessing interview when we brought Tom and Sanni back to LA to do a second Insider Witnessing interview with our team in February, 2019, to help us develop the work further. We've learned to "let go" a bit of the illusion of "getting it right," and give ourselves more space to be creative, playful, and more willing to reveal how we've been moved. Initially, I was a bit worried that Insider Witnessing was trying too hard to have a grand impact on the client, or risks taking excessive liberty with the telling of another's story. However, we've come to understand Insider Witnessing in ways that were not initially apparent to us. We've come to believe that the value to the client likely resides not so much in the dramatic retelling, but in the degree of 'outsideness' that the work creates for the client, a chance to view their life from further outside than normal therapy conversations—or even Outsider Witnessing Practices—allow. We now feel that the portrayal doesn't have to fully represent the life of the client, rather, that the portrayal has to be moving to the client, that we have to create an experience where they are moved by their own life as they look at it from a higher altitude.

What has Insider Witnessing taught us about what makes a re-telling moving? When I train, my initial job is to coax therapists down from whatever well-intentioned Panopticon they've learned to occupy unawares, so that they can get closer to their clients lived experience while becoming more accountable to the political nature of our work. I've long used various forms of embodied interviewing, as developed by David Epston, Johnella Bird and others to help therapists get closer to their clients' lives. When a therapist is interviewed as their client, as is the case in Insider Witnessing Practices, their empathy grows exponentially. But in Insider Witnessing, where the embodied interview is going to be later witnessed by the client, their commitment to making sure they come as close as they can to understanding the clients' experience grows exponentially as well. This responsibility to represent well radically impacts the way therapists' interview, take notes, track story threads, and enter the world and unique vocabularies of their clients.

Given the name, *Insider Witnessing Practice*, one might think that this is where the power of Insider Witnessing resides: that a therapist becomes enough of an





‘insider’ that *their* account of their clients’ counter-story somehow breaks through the din of the problem saturated story so that the client can see themselves afresh. But I don’t think this is the key. In fact, I think this mistaken understanding has led some to worry that Insider Witnessing might risk being itself colonizing in its organization around a therapist’s—rather than a client’s—tellings.

Rather, I think that the key lies in what it might mean to someone that their life is considered worthy of a bit of poetry and theater, that they are granted the position of being a valued critic of the performance, and—at least for a moment—*their* performance is not what is being evaluated. That their therapist wants to do their life justice, is willing to put herself in a position of falling short of that, and is clearly personally moved by their story is likely at the heart of why Insider Witnessing seems to have a profound effect on many of the people who’ve allowed us into their lives in this manner. Whether such an experience has a lasting effect is something I look forward to studying much more carefully as we develop and research these practices with our clients at the SCCC. I believe that when you read to paper that follows, which focuses mostly on MC’s account of her experience of witnessing her life as “performed” by her therapist Michelle, you will see why our worry has decreased, our confidence and excitement has grown, and we are very enthused about the work on MC’s behalf that Michelle and Tom and Sanni present here.

MC’s Song: My first attempt at Insider Witnessing and it’s surprising and shared effects by Michelle Chong and MC

I participated in Tom and Sanni’s *Stories that Sing: Beauty, Love, and Poetics in Narrative Practice* workshop in Los Angeles in June 2018. While watching one of their videos of an Act I interview, I was so moved by the way the therapist embodied their client with such compassion and care, and I immediately thought of my client MC. At the time, I had been working with MC on and off for about three years. She was one of my very first clients I started to work with as an Intern at SCCC, and she later followed me into my private practice after I became licensed. I have learned and grown so much from working with MC. She is very





special to me. Together, we have navigated some difficult conversations about ideas MC read about in a Psychology class about ‘co-dependency’. MC felt some of her experiences were validated by this notion of co-dependency, but remained distraught by some of the ways that this notion strengthened the grip of the problem story that she was somehow to blame for struggles in her intimate relationships and that she was not good enough to live any other kind of life. In our work together, we discussed her relationship to these ideas, but I struggled to help MC experience freedom from their weight and the ways in which they constricted and confined her.

After studying Insider Witnessing as a team for about six months, Sanni and Tom planned a return trip to LA to go through an entire Insider Witnessing experience with one of our clients. I nominated MC for the Insider Witnessing interview in hopes I could share with her how moved I’ve been as a witness to the life that she has lived, and most of all, that she might, through a retelling of her own life through my eyes, gain a deep sense of appreciation for the courage and bravery that she has brought to bear in reclaiming her life from the neglect and criticism that she faced as a young person. In preparation for Sanni and Tom’s visit, I introduced MC’s story to the team and together we began to study her life in hopes that we might be able to tell a counter-story on her behalf. One of the things that we have learned in our study of Insider Witnessing practices is the importance of getting a detailed account of what it is that the person has been up against and the events that might make up the counter stories of her life. This detail matters because good storytelling relies on showing a person as a moral agent, actively shaping the events of their lives as they unfold. As we were preparing for the Insider Witnessing interview, I realized that I needed to know more about the events of MC’s life that had built the momentum necessary for her to reclaim her life from neglect and criticism. To do justice to her story, my retelling of her life needed to do so in a way that showed her moral deliberations at every turn.

Fortunately, we had a few weeks to prepare for our Insider Witnessing interview and I had the opportunity to study the counter-story of MC’s life in greater detail. To help us prepare for their visit, Sanni and Tom sent me a document with





questions that might help us to explore what MC has been up against in her life, the master narratives that might be behind the particular identity conclusions that the problem is exacting on her, and the possible counter-story lines that might have the effect of sowing suspicion on the problem story (See Questions to Preparing for an Insider Witnessing Conversation in this issue). These questions were immensely helpful in my process of better articulating what MC has been up against in life and the counter-story that has been behind all her efforts. Armed with these questions, I poured through all the notes from my conversations with MC, dating back to the time when I was an intern and spent hours reviewing them. I needed to not only know the events of her life, but I needed to be intimately familiar with her own words and unique dictionary for describing them. Upon finishing my study of our conversations, I sent a document to Sanni and Tom with stories from MC's life that detailed what she had been up against using images drawn up from her words. Studying MC's life in this way created a collective excitement among us all as we embarked on this work to engage in a witnessed retelling of MC's life. When we all finally gathered in Los Angeles in March, we spent an entire day studying MC's life even further and gathered the events together in a way that might, when retold, do justice to her story and show her as an active moral agent in shaping the events of her life. It wasn't until we had undertaken all of these preparations that we felt ready to record the Act One interview where I would be interviewed as MC and retell the events of her life in her own words. MC would then join us the next day as a witness to my retelling during the Act Two interview. Before sharing MC's experience of my retelling, I think it is important to share a little context about what MC has been up against in her life.

MC's parents separated when she was seven years old, and she and her two siblings went to live with their mother. They grew up very poor, and their mother struggled with meth and alcohol and was unable to look after them. MC heard a lot of criticisms from her mother and siblings about not being good enough, not pretty enough, not skinny enough, not smart enough, and that she would never be enough. She said it felt like "being backed into a corner" and all she could do was scream back even louder. When she tried to express herself, she was criticized again for being too much, too emotional, too crazy, out of control, and a





big baby. She felt like as if there was no way out of the corner. From these experiences, MC concluded she was flawed and there was something wrong with how she was “hard wired.” She believed she was not worthy of love and she was destined to “end up like my mother”.

MC’s older brother was kicked out of their home by their mother, and MC was left to look after her younger sister. At the age of ten, MC got her sister dressed, out the door, and ready for school every day. Not only that, but she paid the bills “so the electricity wouldn’t be turned off” and woke her mom up to go to work, or called in sick for her when she was too strung out to get out of bed. While the moral character of such a person was easy for me to see, MC struggled to see anything other than a person who was living in “survival mode”; an understanding that had the effect of explaining away the significance of her own efforts and the moral deliberations that made this all possible.

In her early teens, MC had had enough and she started looking for a different life. She started stealing, drinking, using meth and “any other drug I could get my hands on.” During this time, her mother went to jail and MC and her sister were bounced around from different friends and family homes. It was a very unstable time and MC’s drug use got so intense that she overdosed and was hospitalized at the age of thirteen. After that incident, MC and her sister were put into a group home, but they ran away to live back at their mother’s place where they could continue to party and use drugs. Over the next five years, MC continued this life with drugs. She felt a constant presence of paranoia and was frequently accosted by the police. These experiences kept telling her that she was underserving of anything else. And then, one day, when she was about seventeen years old, something amazing happened. As MC found herself passed out in the back of a car with a bunch of other people passed out and strung out around her, she realized these people weren’t really her friends, but just her “drug buddies” with whom she had nothing else in common. She thought to herself: “This can’t be my life. This can’t be forever.” And she decided right then and there she would end her relationship with drugs. Soon after, she reached out to her father with whom, up until this point, she had a very estranged relationship. While this was terribly difficult for MC, it paved the way for a new life and to reconnect with her father’s





side of the family. This event had always moved me and spoke to a unique and unparalleled resolve to live, and it was my hope that that the significance and beauty of this moment might be amplified to MC as one of amazing triumph as she took up the position of a witness to this particular hope biased retelling of her life. How could we retell the events of her life, the very events that she recounted to me in our work together that had somehow become evidence of her failures and of not being good enough, in a way that showed a moral character that had shown an against the odds fierceness for life? These were the questions that guided my hopes during the Act One interview.

MC met with Sanni, Tom, and me for the Act II (the showing of the recording of my Act One performance of Michelle's MC) on the following day. MC shared that she didn't really know what to expect from the Insider Witnessing experience. She knew she would be watching a video but she had no idea just how profound the experience of watching it would be. During the beginning of the Act II, MC paused the video to share some of her initial responses.

"It's weird to hear it as an outsider looking in... It is like reading a story and you think about all the adventures that the person went through, and tying in the memories to all of that. It is kind of crazy to hear it in that form. People have told me that "you are one of the strongest people" that they know, and I don't get it, I have just survived, gone through the motions, but then you hear it like that, like you are hero in a story going through all these adventures and it is just like WOW! It is crazy to think about because it is actually me."

A couple days later, when MC arrived at our regular evening session she was beaming with ideas and emotions about her experience. She talked about how the way she had viewed herself for such a long time was now different, "like looking through a new lens". She described this new lens as the difference between merely acknowledging something, compared to truly accepting it.

"I took away so much from Sunday...my whole thought process that I've had for a very long time of having to conform and be something for somebody else...having this new kind of lens after Sunday, just kind of put the picture in place or the





puzzle piece in place...that was a twist that I didn't know and didn't expect...going through it was so moving and so profound...the rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts and internalization that has happened in the last 48 hours..."

When I enquired about what she meant by 'internalization' she said:

"It's like, we go through these things all the time. We're in here all the time talking about things that I should be proud of myself for, the work that I'm doing and the progress that I'm doing, and it's all talked about all the time. And I try to remind myself and check in, but sometimes...it's hard to see that and feel it deep in as knowing it's you. I see it, and I get it, but it's not like feeling it, and internalizing it, and accepting it...it's not like getting in, you know?"

Something about seeing her life, portrayed by me, in the form of a play or drama allowed these feelings of strength and pride to get inside of her. As if viewing it all from the outside made it possible for her to feel pride for the person in the story, which just happened to be her own self.

Another thing that MC commented on more than once was that watching the story of her life in the Act Two was similar to seeing herself as a character in a book. What seemed particularly important to MC was that this telling of her life, as opposed to the one that has been replayed over and over in her mind by way of the problem story, was told "with great love and care" which allowed her to feel love and care for the character who was the center of this particular telling.

"It was very much like...reading a book about the character and feeling for them and understanding what they're going through...I was feeling love and care about this girl that they were talking about, who is me...that third perspective really allowed me to give those compassionate thoughts to myself, instead of me having to tell my mind like, okay, stop with the negative talk or whatever. Like you're good enough, you're good enough! It's like one thing to have the conversation inside, but it's another to have it externalized and think about how you feel about those characters, about those people that you love and care about, and yet it's you. It was very profound...to be able to connect the love and the compassion





that I have to others but to really accept it and internalize it for myself. It wasn't like just an acknowledgement. It was very much inside of me. All of it was just very profound...words can't even explain what I feel... Oh my god, I can't even believe it. Nobody will ever understand how I feel now...It almost feels like another world...I can't...I can't...I can't verbalize it."

The day after Act II, MC was already able to bring these new appreciations of herself into a situation at work. There had been a high level of stress at work lately due to the arrival of a new president of the company and a number of impending layoffs. MC commented how her experience of the Insider Witnessing interview transformed her experience of her first formal one-on-one meeting with the new president that next day. Before her Insider Witnessing experience she was almost overcome by the thought of this meeting and had considered calling in sick. However, after the Act II, she felt "surprisingly calm, content, and assured."

"I guess the way that we could probably describe it...like a bubble sort of, but not in a like a sterilized way, kind of bounce house type of way...where it like didn't even matter. I think my ability to go in there and say what I wanted to say, and not be reserved...it was very much of just 'be open and honest and true to what you have to say". And that's what I did...I walked away from that feeling better because I had spoken my truth and said what I needed to say. And you know, just allowed it to flow...I felt really, really good after that...even though nothing has changed in the situation at work."

One of the themes that emerged during the Act II interview was MC's counter-story having 'a fierceness for living'. And MC talked about how she was able to connect with Fierceness during her meeting with the president. She talked about how Fierceness is now a part of her: "...to feel and know that this [fierceness] is who I am, and that is what I exude, and that's what I have to offer and can give...it was very motivating for me to come from that place...it was very connected in a sense of knowing my true self..."





- Michelle: So it sounds like you're saying that you feel perhaps connected to that fierce character who is you?
- MC: Totally.
- Michelle: And holding her in these situations?
- MC: Yeah, totally. It is like, I made a friend... But it's me. It's so weird to describe it I like that, but that's how it feels.

After MC returned home from the Insider Witnessing interview, she felt compelled to write about her experience so that it could never be erased from her memory. Here are her words in their entirety:

"I'm still reeling from the Insider Witness practice I did with Michelle yesterday. It was one of the most moving moments of my life. Sitting with two strangers who knew me so intimately was a bit intimidating, but the kindness and respect they showed me was unlike anything I've ever experienced. To have Michelle in my corner, knowing this was her gift to me made me feel so incredibly happy. Through their kind of words and warm eyes, they were able to show me what a special person I am, how I'm strong enough, and smart enough, and beautiful enough. I am enough. I have never in my entire life been more proud to just be me. Thank you.

As I reflect on all the discussions and watching myself unfold, the more profound my experience becomes. It's like a rush or a wave of contentedness. When I think about the feelings of inspiration and love and gratitude I have when I look at those around me, I feel that way here and now, except it's about me. I'm in awe of myself and it feels so good to just sit in the space of me, surrounded by others wanting nothing but the best for me because they know me now, not some fabricated character that I have to live up to... but because I was that awe-inspiring all along and the IWP helped me to see that."

MC referred time and again to how her Insider Witnessing experience offered her an "outside view" of her life. She likened it to "a loving parent's view" of their child.





“Probably the best way that I can explain it, even though I don't know, like the way that a parent looks at their child...just being there. The love that like exudes from them...you want to squeeze them...They're so cute! You just want to squeeze them to death. That's how I feel [about me]. I can't even believe it. This is just...I'll never ever, ever, ever, ever, ever forget this feeling and how it touched me.”

The effect of coming to see her own self through loving eyes is particularly significant given that the problem story was one of her never being quite good enough, and that she was somehow not worthy of being loved had gripped her life for so long.

After her Insider Witnessing interview, MC couldn't wait to share her experience with her family, especially her father. Here is MC's attempt at describing what the experience was like as well as his response.

“...it turned into this warm bath of sunlight...like comfort and caring and kindness...he was like ‘the clouds opening up and sun shining the sun down on you!’ ... that was a perfect analogy...my dad just had this like huge grin on his face the whole time I was talking about it. You can just see how happy he was. And I was just living in that moment and explaining to him and being so proud and happy...and he was beaming...I could just imagine if I were to put myself in his shoes and see the struggle that I've gone through, and him seeing how that's taken effect on me, and taken a toll on me and my life and my relationships, and then hearing me explain how I felt and how the experience...changed me. He was just like a kid in a candy store. It was so nice to see him be so happy for me...that felt like a really special moment too. So already it's bleeding out in other areas of my life.”

During the Act II, MC's ideas shifted and she came up with new language to describe her counter-story as “living life on my own terms” and that it is more of a *curating fierceness and love* by expressing her feelings, saying her thoughts and opinions, and moving more freely “out of the corners.” A huge part of MC's





counter-story is about all the expectations weighing her down like boulders on her back, and how she has been able to break free out from under them.

“...that was a really eye opening thing for me on Sunday...expectation and obligation has been such a huge, huge, huge like black cloud I guess, or weight on my shoulders, you know? And sometimes you get used to having the weight on your shoulders and you don't realize, you know, or sometimes somebody stuck another rock on top so it feels even heavier on that day. And so like after Sunday, it feels like not only did I shed the weight, but I was able to like actually realize like, 'Holy crap Dude!', you've been feeling like shit for a really long time because you had this like 200 pound whatever on your shoulder and your neck, but you just were used to it. You're like, well, isn't this how everybody lives? Everybody feels like this. Right?”

One of the ways that the problem story had convinced MC to make sense of her actions as a young person caring for her sister and watching over the household was to explain it all away as “I was just surviving.” This interpretation removes any sense of herself as a moral agent in her life and undermined her own ethics, resolve, and fierceness in life. After MC watched the retelling the events of her life, with her actions and moral deliberations at the center of the telling, Tom asked MC if this notion that she was just surviving does justice to the life that she had lived. MC recounted the effect of this question in the following way.

“And I was thinking about what he [Tom] said...doing a disservice to say ‘just surviving.’ And that made me feel very empowered and very strong... I use the analogy of the book...that was my life I lived and I was just surviving and yet if I were to read my life story in a book, I would be thinking, ‘Oh my god!’, this is so crazy and so inspiring and like motivational and like everything could have kept her down and yet she's still going through it. So much more than surviving.”

Once again MC talks about how the Insider Witnessing interview gave her a glimpse of her life from the outside, like reading about an inspirational character in a book and then realizing that the person who inspired you was actually you.





Here MC takes this analogy a step further by saying that her Insider Witnessing interview was akin to watching a movie about her life.

“...it was like rewinding everything in my movie of just starting from the beginning and being like, okay, no wonder...Sunday helped me realize, me curating and me making these decisions and surviving and doing these things...I feel like, it's like a Christopher Nolan movie with all of this hidden imagery and Easter eggs [hidden surprises that a director puts in a movie] and all of these little things that were going on and there's so much going on with the main plot line that you're just following along and there's all these interesting characters and nuances with the characters. And then there's this big twist in the end and you're like, what the hell? And you go back and watch it the second time and you're like, how did I miss all of this? That's how Sunday felt. Like my life, I watched as a movie just going through the motions of getting to the finish line or the end, which was Sunday, and then we rewound it and watched it all over again and we're picking out all of like the hidden, little details.”

Towards the end of our follow up interview, MC talked about the parallels between the counter-story that emerged during the insider witnessing interview and one of her favorite childhood books, *The Never Ending Story*. As her therapist for so many years, to see her connect with the beloved character, Bastian, whom she has looked up to for so long and to experience a “revelation” of her own moral character was decidedly awe-inspiring.

“It's like you were always you, and you were always as good as you could be and enough and that's how you should be. And so when I think about Sunday and I think about the book analogy and reading the chapters and how close that book was for me my whole life. And I reread it all the time and like truly identifying and relating to that character now and seeing myself go through all of that on Sunday and do all those things and feeling like at the end what a good feeling that is to know and accept and understand that you were good enough all along. It's a very scary, like weird parallel that that book just happened to be my favorite. Maybe it was my favorite because I saw myself in it and I just didn't acknowledge it.”





For the purposes of this paper, MC chose to change her name to ‘MC’ which stands for Moon Child, another pivotal character from this book. MC explained to me that because of Moon Child, Bastian was able to go on this special journey and reflect on his life and what was really important to him. MC sees a parallel between Moon Child and Insider Witnessing where the Insider Witnessing interview was her catalyst to reflect on her journey and realize what has been important for her all along.

A few personal reflections about my experience- Michelle

As MC’s therapist, I am blown away by the effect the Insider Witnessing interview had on her. It exceeded all of my expectations. I hoped it would be a moving experience and that it would provide me with the opportunity to show my care and regard for MC but I was amazed at the profundity of the experience and how the outside perspective of her life that was achieved in the Insider Witnessing interview served as an unveiling of her moral character as a person, someone who has fiercely loved her entire life. To hear her exclaim in delight: “And now I love myself!” was astonishing. We have been working so hard for so long, naming and mapping all of the problems enacting on her life but never quite able to release her from their grips. To witness her calling them out and shutting them down with such fierceness after the Insider Witnessing interview was beyond anything that I could have hoped.

When I attempted to embody MC in the Act I, I felt like I was in a trance of intense focus and presence. All my energy and attention were on Sanni and Tom’s words and doing right by MC. Immediately afterwards, I couldn’t remember much of what I had said, and I wondered if I had done enough to honor her life and the way that it has moved me all these years. The next day, watching the video with MC during the Act II, I was able to become a witness to MC’s experience of my attempt to retell her story. Even though I had been interviewed as Michelle’s MC, I was so moved by her life that it became clear to me that I had somehow taken on MC’s Michelle and her ethics and moral character in my own life. The Insider Witnessing experience was intensely moving for me and for days I struggled to find words that could do justice to what it had done for MC and me. I echo Tom





and his colleagues' earlier description of a "being in a wordless state." I feel very connected to Michelle's MC, like I made a friend as well. She's there, like a deep and powerful frequency that I'm tuning into. MC talked about not wanting the feeling to ever go away, and that got me thinking about what our next sessions would look like, and where we might be in six months. I know the intense emotions will naturally subside, but now we have shared this experience together, it cannot be erased. It's a part of our work together and how we make meaning. I did not expect how much I would carry Michelle's MC into my own life afterwards. Michelle's MC has shown up for me when I'm dealing with gendered and racial power dynamics and instead of doing what is expected of me, I hear her calling them out and telling me I can say 'yes' to a different way of being in the world. The intensity of emotions may be settling down but the ideas, practices and promise of Insider Witnessing are radiating more powerfully than ever.

"And on that note, I would like to end by giving MC the final say as the co-author of this paper, "I think it [the Insider Witnessing interview] was a gift to myself...almost like some part of me said, 'I've been waiting for you! You're here! You finally read the signs.'"

