



Norway IWP Team

Andreas Breden & Luna

The Story Begins...

My very first encounter with Insider Witness Practices (IWP) was when I met Tom Stone Carlson at a Narrative Therapy Conference in Trondheim, Norway, several years ago. Coincidentally, meeting Tom was also a “meeting” of our respective great great-grandmothers, as we came to discover a connection we had due to the fact that our great great-grandmothers were both born in the same rural village. I came to realize this connection during the workshop when Tom shared that his great great-grandmother was born in Trondheim and moved to Vestnes (about a 5-hour drive from Trondheim) shortly after her birth. During the presentation, I contacted a friend who lived in Vestnes, and was rapidly able to locate the family farm of Tom’s ancestors. I still remember the look of surprise on Tom’s face when I came up to him after the presentation to tell him this discovery. Long story short, I put Tom in touch with his second cousin who still lives on the farm and Tom immediately postponed his flight home so that he could make a sentimental journey to his Norwegian ‘home’. Needless to say, Tom and I have been fast friends ever since.

In addition to our friendship, I approached Tom with ideas and possibilities about narrative supervision for myself and my colleagues at my workplace. Subsequently, we met monthly for about a year, studying narrative therapy together through case stories using Tom’s pedagogy “Learning Narrative Therapy Backwards” (Carlson, et al., 2018). My colleagues at that time were quite unfamiliar with narrative therapy, but during this year of supervision, our overall understanding of narrative ideas and practices deepened at a speed I’ve never experienced before. None of us will ever forget reading and talking about Tom’s story “*There’s always a puppy (and sometimes a bunny)*” (Carlson, et al, 2018). In this story, Tom retells David Epston’s puppy story from ‘Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative Therapy with Children and their Families,’ and the influence that David Epston’s story had had on Tom over the course of his career.

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Somewhere during that time, we developed an interest in trying out IWPs at our agency and after some collective study, we decided to invite Tom and his colleague Sanni Paljakka to Trondheim to work with our team and to give a workshop for the other colleagues at my department. Tom and Sanni met with our IWP team over two days, during which I experienced first-hand the effects of Insider Witnessing Practices in my own life.

The first of these experiences took place at the workshop. On that day, about 15 of us met to help us prepare for IWP work. Tom and Sanni started out by introducing themselves before turning to the rest of us. Everyone was asked to remember and share a story when someone had acted as a witness to us in our own lives and had done so in manner that had raised our spirits.

The story I remembered on that day was about a ski trip I made in February some years ago with a friend of mine and his two dogs. We were on a two-week trip on Finnmarksvidda, which is a Norwegian prairie that is covered with snow, assailed by harsh winds and temperatures as low as -40°C . On this particular day, we started out in the morning in sunshine and -15°C . Both dogs were full of energy, as were we, after a good night's sleep in the tent. This day, I had Thule as my dog companion, and he was pulling a sled with some of our gear. We made good progress, having the wind behind us the whole day. As time passed, we noted that the wind had increased and it was getting harder and harder to see our tracks behind us as we ventured on into the vast white landscape. Our lunch consisted of a few slices of bread and cheese and a litre of water. We both insisted the other one drank the whole litre, since skiing during winter is very demanding and one easily becomes dehydrated, even in such a cold environment. After lunch we had to put on our hoods and goggles as the wind whipped up the snow and made it harder and harder to see. We had been walking for a few hours after lunch. Even though both Thule and Kangia were Greenland dogs and used to extreme winter temperatures, pulling a sled was tiring them. In fact, we all were becoming fatigued. The wind was now so strong that we had to yell to each other to hear. The dogs were trained to lay down and relax while they could, and at one of these short stops my friend and I considered whether we had to put up our tent or proceed to our proposed destination, which was a Sami 'gamme.' A





'gamme' is a small hut made of earth and wood. The 'gamme' we were aiming for had a stove and two beds, and after having slept in a tent and sleeping bag for a week, we were anticipating even the barest of comforts. Thule suddenly got scared of the howling wind gust and pulled himself out of his harness. We were then only a few hundred meters away from the forest trail on which the 'gamme' was located. I was almost exhausted myself after having walked the whole day on skis, and the daylight was fading. I mustered what remained of my energy and leaped forward, grabbing Thule by his collar, forcing him back into his harness. My friend said to me: *"I don't think we can make it to the 'gamme' tonight, Andreas."* But I was undeterred and declared, *"Yes, we can!"* I sturdily walked on into the forest while gently holding Thule by his collar. If Thule were to run away, it would have been critical, since we then would have to put up our tent in the open without any protection from the wind and the snow. The wind on Finnmarksvidda can be so strong that it can easily rip apart even the strongest expedition tent. And the wind had increased to a dangerous level. Needless to say, we made it to the 'gamme'. While my friend tended to the dogs, I lit the fire in the stove and started cooking dinner. Tom and Sanni helped me to make sense of my actions in a new light and tied it to my moral character as a person who persists when times get rough. A few weeks after this workshop, I understood why Tom very much wanted Sanni to come to Norway when I received an e-mail with a personal poem to each of us. Here is the poem Sanni wrote to me from my own words:

*First, I wrestled down the fear of my dog in the snow
 And then I heard the fear in my friend's voice.
 But into the fear all around, I said, walk, my friends, walk. We'll sit around a fire
 tonight.
 That evening
 Around the promised fire
 He said I am really glad it was you who was with me
 And his words were warmer to me than fire.*

I'll get back to this story after telling you about another experience. This other experience took part at a time in my life when I decided to go to therapy. The only therapist in a several mile's radius was a psychoanalytic psychologist. I liked my





therapist, which I think is necessary to have a good experience of therapy. If I hadn't been fond of talking myself, the therapy experience left something to be desired because my therapist almost didn't say a word. Another part of the therapy was to lay down on a couch, just like the one Freud had. Being afraid to lose control it took me five sessions before I even dared putting my left foot on the couch. My right one still very grounded on the floor. The focus of these sessions was to let me have time and space to talk and through this, gain new insight, and thus meaning, of earlier experiences in my life. I wondered about these practices at the time, as I questioned whether I could have done much better through talking with my mother, brother, or good friends.

Sanni's poetic words had another kind of therapeutic effect on me. They were warm, like the fire in the 'gamme.' And they filled my whole body, not just my brain and part of my heart. Reading the words was an experience of being lifted out of my body and thus getting an opportunity to look back at myself with new eyes. Admittedly still my own eyes, but not the eyes I usually see things with. Even though I knew what had happened on the ski trip, I now had the opportunity to look at myself and my actions in another light. I could rationally see what I had mastered before I received Sanni's poem. But after reading the poem I also could see my mastery on a meta level and an emotional one as well. The emotional level is hard to describe, but it feels like being able to look at myself through enhanced lenses of pride. And I refer to this level as emotional because it not only consisted of meaning but it also came with a bodily feeling. I can rationally see that I was brave and strong but hearing the poem I could also feel it in my bones. It was like Sanni's poem took this experience that was inside of me and turned it into a permanent site from which to see myself, perhaps through lenses biased by strength and bravery.

My second experience with Insider Witness Practices happened two days later. At that time, I was working with unassisted minor refugees and in the evening after the first day of the workshop, sadly, two of the minors were killed by one of their friends. As you can imagine, this terrible tragedy impacted everyone in the department. Despite all of the emotions that we were experiencing, a group of us still wanted to go through with the second day of focused IWP training with Tom





and Sanni. Because of the tragedy, and the lack of availability of office space, we had to meet on my balcony without any materials that we had planned to use for our workshop. We decided to improvise and we agreed to do a live Insider Witness Interview with me as the subject. Tom and Sanni interviewed me about my life, pausing from time to time to allow other team members to join in and contribute to the counterstory that was being developed about my life. It was surprisingly easy for me to step in and out of the two different positions that I was asked to occupy – that of the subject of the interview and a team member who contributed to the reflections on my own story. The two-hour interview flew by. To me it felt as if it had been merely a matter of minutes. It was a very strange feeling stepping in and out of the two positions; however, I suspect it afforded me to experience what I would call ‘extreme witnessing of oneself’. It was like peeling an onion layer by layer. Each layer brought tears to my eyes and yet I was to discover another layer beneath it.. The tears were not sorrowful, but rather tears of self-compassion. Having trustworthy and kind people around me made it a safe place for me to step in and out of the different possibilities and story threads of my life that we considered together. I was able to both witness myself, ask questions to myself and reflect upon my own experience at the same time. It was as if my inner and outer dialogue joined together in a way I’ve never experienced before. A few days after the workshop, Sanni sent me yet another poem about the story that emerged during the interview. The last part of the poem is below:

[...] I learned the ways of anger
 Only to find the steps to peace.
 I shouldered the call of protection
 Only to find it wasn’t a burden:
 It was all as light as the rare smile of a 4-year-old boy
 In all its innocence
 And wonder
 After all.

The Story Continues...

After changing jobs, I started working at the Family Therapy Office in Trondheim





in August 2018. In Norway, we have public and free Family Therapy Offices where people can seek help for all manner of relational and family concerns. Fortunately, there is still considerable autonomy for the therapists working there and I was permitted to continue exploring narrative ideas and witnessing practices in my new position. A year later in August 2019, Sanni and Tom returned to Norway to the Family Therapy Office where I work. It was a busy week of exciting work. We did three IWP interviews as well as a workshop regarding Sanni and Tom's couple's work for all of my colleagues at the agency. One of these IWP interviews was with a client of a colleague of mine, Magnhild Fiskvik. Before the IWP interview with Magnhild's client Luna, Sanni, Tom, and I met with Magnhild to prepare to tell a counterstory on behalf of Luna's life. We spent about 90 minutes together, getting to know Luna through Magnhild's eyes, paying close attention to Luna's own words and the details that had shaped her life so far. Our study of Luna's life was used as a backdrop for the videotaped interview in which Sanni and Tom interviewed Magnhild as Luna. The video was recorded in order to show it to Luna. With Luna's express consent, I would like to center and highlight Luna's account of this experience:

Luna's Story

I am a woman in my 30's and have been living in Trondheim, Norway for the past 10 years. The reason I moved here is because it's far away from where my family lives. As you will soon find out, this is a large part of my background. In addition, Trondheim is known as the place to receive one of the best IT educations in Norway. I was born and raised in Norway, but my family took long trips to Pakistan every year. My grandfather first came here in the 70's with his wife and my dad. My mom came to Norway when she married my dad and I was born a year later. Fast forward to today; I ran away from home when I was 19, because I didn't approve of their traditional ways of raising a daughter and the effects that these practices were having on me as a young woman.

I first heard about Narrative Therapy and Insider Witness Practices when my therapist asked if she could represent my story through a portrait of me to three other therapists. I must honestly say, at first, I wasn't sure about this practice as it





sounded far-fetched. To be honest it sounded a lot like alternative medicine to me since I studied Computer Science and am mainly rational in my ways. I would never have considered it or found out about this practice on my own. At the same time, I was starting to realize I needed help to get out of my “destructive ways” and at the time I didn’t have the right tools or the right way to acknowledge them. My “destructive ways” had much to do with what we in Norway call “Janteloven:” this term first appeared in 1933 and speaks of “the inherent evil within mankind and their power to make each other small” (Sandemose, 1933). No matter what I did, I felt as if it would never be good enough and I really never trusted myself. I felt under such pressure by my closest family, especially my mother, and their very particular expectations of me and I was failing miserably to measure up to them. I remember being a little nervous when I said yes to the interview, but I’m very glad I did, and the main reason for doing so was my trust in Magnhild.

Some weeks passed by and I had forgotten about the interview. In the meantime, I was able to get a psychologist through my work. What I didn’t realize was that this psychologist also used narrative therapy. He told me about how to detach myself from the problems and it became easier to analyze my problems from an outside perspective. This way of thinking was new to me and it made me understand narrative thinking and hence be able to fully embrace what lay ahead of me. When Magnhild contacted me again about the interview, I was excited, but also nervous for what was to come.

My IWP Experience- Luna

I was a few minutes late that day. I took the bus from work and usually it takes a little over 10 minutes to get to the city, but there was a lot of traffic that day. This made me very stressed as I value being on time or, in fact, showing up five minutes early before an appointment. Upon arriving at the office, I was greeted by four nice and talkative people, Magnhild, Andreas, Sanni and Tom, in the hallway. I was nervous in the beginning but after talking with all of them I was able to relax. The energy in the room was good; it was a light atmosphere and nobody was stressed by my arriving late. They all had a chemistry that gave good





energy to the room and made me relax and feel free to be more like how I want to be.

First, we got to know each other a little bit and I told them about my work and how I got here. I was surprised when they said that the interview they had with my therapist was over an hour long, but I quickly understood why. My therapist took her time and answered all their questions exactly as I would. It was a surreal feeling. Watching the video of my therapist portraying me, I was surprised by how often she used my own words and when asked to respond to questions that we had not considered together, I was even more surprised that she actually said things that I would have said if I had been asked that today. It felt like I was watching my life as a movie. Normally, when I think about my past, everything gets foggy and the memories race, like watching a movie at 'fast forward'. But during the IWP interview, everything was going in slow motion and I was able to see my life and my struggles from a different perspective. But this time, in the slow motion of it all, the memories of my life became much clearer, like I was able to see the events of my life unfold before me in vivid detail. My therapist, Magnhild, told me after the interview that at some points she wasn't sure about what I would have said but she used her intuition and answered as she thought I would have. The strange thing is that she hit the bull's eye every time.

Watching my therapist portray me helped me detach myself from the problems I was experiencing. From this outside perspective, it was easier to sift through the events and the feelings that had previously been attached to them. The interview also helped me to see that my rebellious spirit had a long history and had been there all along. I was able to connect the dots and to fill in the blanks that I didn't know were missing. It gave me a feeling that all my achievements hadn't only been because of luck, but also because of my gut feeling about what is right and wrong. During the interview, my convictions really shined through.

As we were watching the recorded interview, we paused the video multiple times to allow me to process it all and to add my own words and feelings to the experience. This was my first time talking about my past life without getting emotionally overwhelmed. We spent almost three hours talking and watching the video. It was both tiring and enlightening for me. Tiring in a good way. I felt at





peace somehow and the way we talked about me and my thought processes made me think about myself with a renewed sense of pride. While they were talking about me, it felt like to I got to know myself better.

This session made me think about myself as I think about others and their problems. Like I mentioned before, I was finally able to see my struggles and the ways that I had been mistreated in life without all the negative feelings attached to them or perhaps it was more like there were new feelings, feelings of compassion and pride, now attached to my life and my history. During the interview, Sanni and Tom often talked to each other about me as witnesses to my life. They wondered with awe about how I was able to see what was right and wrong and make moral judgments about my life at such a young age. Watching them talk about me in this way allowed me see myself with new eyes. I was able to see myself from a distance and I found myself agreeing with the choices I made throughout my life; those same choices that used to bring shame somehow brought a new sense of pride and conviction that I have always known what's right and wrong and this IWP experience actually confirmed it. I have a good moral compass in me and this helps when I have bad days.

Seeing my life portrayed by Magnhild was like meeting myself for the first time. It allowed me to see it all with a bit of distance and from a new vantage point. This was so important. Let me explain it this way. I am a gamer and my favourite types of games are all adventure-based. Often in these games, you can see the main character from behind. You can see the back of your head and how you interact with other characters. The IWP interview was like that for me. It felt like I was playing a third-person game, almost like seeing my life in the midst of my actions. I don't know how to explain this but it felt like I was somehow choosing my own actions as they played out before me. When Magnhild retold a specific event from my life, I was able to replay it in my head and I was able to evaluate my actions in surprisingly new ways, using my moral compass to revisit my life.

Since the interview, it seems like a new path was opened up for me. It seemed like I was living my life with new eyes and it was a bit overwhelming at first to feel like I now had more control over my life.





Some Thoughts about Theory- Andreas

Wittgenstein once remarked that philosophy “ought really to be written only as “poetic composition.” Both Luna and I decided to write about our experiences with witnessing in a story-telling format. It is my hope that both our “compositions” will reveal something about the “philosophy” of Insider Witnessing to the attentive reader. I (AB) strongly advise that Luna’s written composition about her experience be considered to speak substantively for itself. Her reflections offer the Insider Witnessing Team in Norway a rich supervision into our future endeavors with witnessing and a “reflecting surface” for us to continue to reach for the language to speak about our hopes and intentions regarding the “real effects” of our efforts with our clients.

I wish to highlight my beginning reflections about both my own and Luna’s experiences with the therapeutic venture of Insider Witnessing– I will do so with the contrast to the experience of the therapeutic venture of the Freudian couch on my mind.

I have been thinking about Luna’s words in the above reflection:

during the IWP interview, everything was going in slow motion and I was able to see my life and my struggles from a different perspective. But this time, in the slow motion of it all, the memories of my life became much clearer, like I was able to see the events of my life unfold before me in vivid detail.”

Luna’s remarks reminded me of a quote by John Shotter: “what Wittgenstein’s dramatic, poetic forms of talk achieve is to put certain moments in the spontaneous flow of our talk on ‘freeze frame,’ so to speak. They can create what, paradoxically, we call an ‘arresting’ moment or a ‘moving’ moment – moments that ‘strike’ us.” It is my sense that both Luna and I experienced a slowing down of the “spontaneous flow” of talk and our lives, and in these “freeze frames” were able to see significant moments in our lives from different angles. It was as if we were permitted to view them again and relate to them in ways we couldn’t if they were moving along with the rapidity moments normally pass us by. I believe that





this, above all, is what IWPs make possible. By situating the client as a witness to a dramatic telling of a counterstory of their life, it puts these moments inside a “freeze frame” and allows the client to view their lives in slow motion, and with what Pillow (2019) refers to as “*lenticular lenses*.”

Listen to these expressions of what that these “lenses” opened in front of Luna’s eyes:

- *It gave me a feeling that all my achievements hadn’t only been because of luck, but also because of my gut feeling about what is right and wrong. During the interview, my convictions really shined through.*
- *I was finally able to see my struggles and the ways that I had been mistreated in life without all the negative feelings attached to them or perhaps it was more like there were new feelings, feelings of compassion and pride, now attached to my life and my history.*
- *I was able to replay (significant moments in my life) in my head and I was able to evaluate my actions in surprisingly new ways, using my moral compass to revisit my life.*

In order to have hopes for such effects as above to come true in the witnessing work, I have come to appreciate and understand Tom’s insistence that as therapists, we have to know our clients well enough to be able to speak about their lives in a way that is recognizable to our clients. We have to be able to tell the stories of what our clients have suffered in sufficiently rich detail so they would see the telling themselves as a “righteous” portrait.

The requirements of therapists in Insider Witnessing interviews, namely, to know their clients well, to be able to speak recognizably and righteously about their clients’ lives, including their suffering and their convictions that “shone through”, are in contrast to the requirements that psychology has traditionally placed on therapists. I am reminded of William James’ critique of psychology in his *Principles of Psychology* from the end of the 19th century (as reprinted in Shotter, 2012): “

“The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of





nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even where the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook.”

Participating in an Insider Witnessing Interview means to strive to give the client the opportunity to see the whole river at once. And the feelings and thoughts that are about to emerge, but have been suppressed by current discourses, are given an opportunity to arise from the water and reveal themselves to the client. Luna could suddenly see the pressures she had been placed under, and the ideologies regarding the shaming and mistreatment of daughters that had come to surround her growing up. Against the current of these pressures, she could see the decisions she had made in favour of rebellion and freedom in a “different light.” Out of the river emerged her own moral code in these significant moments, and suddenly pride and compassion came to her as she revisited her own moral decisions in slow motion.

Insider Witness Practices are not a therapeutic way of assessing, diagnosing or reporting the client’s problems within the frame of the majority of the perceptions of how and what therapy should be. Insider Witnessing interviews don’t aim to explain, theorize or justify. They describe how things are from the viewpoint of yourself and the emerging telling is not dogmatic, but to be tested, to be weighed and. accepted or rejected by the client. According to Shotter (2012) Bakhtin said that each voice being uttered creates an anticipation of “*that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.*”

In a world in which therapists either say very little, or otherwise are expected to explain and theorize about clients’ lives the venture to “create stories” instead is unconventional. And in the end, as with any story, it is up to the audience members, in this case, our clients to complete the story themselves.

Having been trained in systemic therapy where one should try to be as neutral as possible this was one of the things that surprised me most when I first saw Tom





do an IWP interview. Perhaps I am connecting the therapist's posture and manner in such "hope biased interviews" with the manner I embodied in staking out the route to the game on a howling winter's night. Remaining neutral, instead of stepping into active hope-biased responses in that moment most certainly would have meant a very cold night for me and my companion. Shotter (2012) claims that "the thoughts we embody in counting, weighing, and measuring are only applicable to dead phenomena" since no living thing can be fragmented or broken into smaller pieces without dying. Explaining, theorizing, or justifying is perhaps just other words for counting, weighing and measuring." The language of psychology is a language that disconnects us from the very phenomena happening around us, the river in which we are flowing. We need a language that is relating us back to the world we experience every single moment. Insider Witnessing one means to such a language that might suggest a more living and fluid world than we sometimes are misled to think it is.

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