



## In Pursuit of Goodness: Dignity and Moral Character in Narrative Therapy

David Epston

---

*The content of this paper was part of a plenary address given at the annual conference of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy Association: Indianapolis, July 29th, 2016.*

I am extremely grateful for this invitation to address you here today.

Before your invitation, I was wondering how I might celebrate this 40th year of my being a family therapist. Surely amongst your company, I will have no problem with that.

Michael White and I both embraced Family Therapy in the 1970s like many others here who were seeking a vision of practice that was in conversation with the radical politics of the time. I do consider too, that the bringing of practice in to view via the one-way screen, live interviews and video-taped sessions made Family Therapy come alive – the first truly reflective and ethically responsible practice. At long last, we were required to show our practice and could no longer get away with telling, often very cultivated, versions about it.

‘Down under’ and far away in Australia and New Zealand, Michael and I in the 1980’s came up with what I am now calling ‘Narrative Family and Community Therapy’. And what I have to say in this address may stand as one of the ‘histories for its future’. I also hope, very briefly to outline perhaps another version of Narrative Family and Community Therapy and ‘Insider Witnessing Practices’, claiming them to be in the same lineage or direct descendants of the conundrum.

Michael White and I have been puzzling over from day 1- the ‘dignification of the other’. This is a term Tom Carlson and I invented because we couldn’t find anything better to serve our purposes in the Oxford English Dictionary.

The philosopher Thomas Kuhn in his 1967 ‘structure of scientific revolutions’ bequeathed to the English language the term ‘paradigm shift’. Kuhn convincingly argued that essential to any such paradigm was what he referred to as a ‘puzzle’. By that he meant “a special category of problems that serve to test ingenuity or skill in solution”. I have been asking myself of late to see if I could articulate what our puzzle was that tested our ingenuity.

I think what troubled us more than anything else was the presumptuous arrogance of professional representations and descriptions of the other. Those ‘others’ were people who came seeking our service. We knew them well and liked them a lot. To us, they possessed a great deal of character rather than being ‘characterless’. We immediately grasped the significance of the anthropologist Garfinkel’s term ‘ritual of degradation’ to describe social events such as the psychiatric assessment. I invented the term ‘regrading’ to reference an intention we had to seek out ‘counter practices’, which would restore their honor and dignity and, more specifically, to capture their ‘moral character’.





We were only too aware how undignifying and dishonoring such pathologizing discourses were to those who suffered, which had begun to expand at that time and have done so exponentially ever since. Read Whitaker and Cosgrave's 2015 masterpiece, "Psychiatry Under the Influence: Institutional Corruption, Social Injury, and Prescriptions for Reform" if you have any doubts.

We also became aware of Arthur Kleinman, the Harvard anthropologist/psychiatrist and his notions of our practices leading to 'demoralization' or the converse, Arthur Frank's 'remoralization'.

Now let me turn to several stories that have haunted me most of my life. They have been the most friendly and benign of ghosts. I am reminded of Nick Thompson, a member of the Apache nation, telling the anthropologist Keith Basso (1996) about stories:

So, someone stalks you and tells you a story...it doesn't matter if other people are around- you are going to know he's aiming the story at you. All of a sudden it hits you. It's like an arrow they say. It goes in deep and starts working on your mind. (p. 59)

These are stories that have been working on my mind. I can assure you that no family therapist has been injured in listening to them. I suppose I think of them as secular parables for myself.

### **Tale 1: Auckland, New Zealand. April 5, 2013**

Let me tell of an uncanny incident that happened three years ago. But the story really begins in August 1984, when Michael visited me in Auckland.

He agreed to substitute for me in a series of classes I was giving to the trainees in psychiatry at the School of Medicine, University of Auckland. I suspected that my colleagues and their students would be extremely interested in his evolving practice with those who suffered 'psychotic experience'. I was curious how he would be received by Auckland psychiatry. Although it was only a two-hour long lecture, Michael presented video-tapes of his practice with his customary eloquence as well as theorizing it as he went along. The blend of the two strands of his presentation were to my way of thinking just about right. There was considerable interest expressed and the professor, Bob Large, then brought the session to an end by commenting at some length about how respectful Michael had been.

From there, we had to walk a block and then across Grafton Bridge to catch our homeward bound bus. Michael fell silent on leaving the medical school as if he were spellbound. I thought it unwise to interrupt him as it was clear to me he was deep in thought. I certainly was wondering why. Was he disappointed with his presentation? Had he felt injured by an innocent remark of one of the students? Or had something bothered him that I had entirely overlooked?

When he did break his silence, I was so aware of that very moment that I could return to the exact physical spot approximately six paces from the streetlights. He turned to me, pulling himself free of his reverie and





completed his private reflections on the generous comments about his respectfulness. I believe I am quoting him verbatim because Michael spoke in the manner of someone who had reached his final conclusion:

"It is not only a matter of us being 'respectful'. It is more a matter of our clients experiencing our respect for them'."

I cannot recall if we spoke further about this at the time. I think we just both fell silent, navigating the rush hour pedestrian traffic. But I can assure you I had cause over the years to return to and reconsider his statement time and time again:

How can our clients feel our respect for them?

I believe this is at the heart of many of the practices that distinguish Narrative Therapy practice.

That very night I had an evening meeting with a family and their ten-year-old daughter, Marie, a follow up to our only other meeting a month before. Michael, given his vast experience with young women and their families who had suffered from Anorexia Nervosa, willingly agreed to join us. He asked that he be an observer when I told him that Marie had gone from our first meeting, after starving for three years and immediately started to eat once again. Her parents had been overjoyed by this dramatic turn of events as a hospitalization had been imminent.

It is now 29 years later, on April 5, 2013. The events I am going to tell you about took place at Te Noko Kotahitanga 'Marae' on the grounds of Unitec Institute of Technology where I was then teaching. This translates as 'the house of the respectful heart'. A Marae is a sacred communal place that serves religious and social purposes in Polynesian societies.

I was invited to participate in a ritual that had been going on for some years in the undergraduate Bachelors of Social Practice program. Prior to their first placement, the entire contingent of 100+ 2nd year students spent two days and a night on the 'marae' ritually preparing themselves individually and collectively for what lay ahead of them as apprentices in their respective avocations. I was asked to do a live interview in a very specific format which would begin:

'Why are you so proud of the problem from the past that you overcame, somehow or other?'

My questions would be simultaneously typed up and projected on an overhead screen. After the interview was completed, I would then attempt to explain my practice and respond to any queries. This was something I looked forward to in order to demonstrate a 'respectful practice' that I hoped might live up to Michael's concerns expressed 29 years previously- to have another person experience our respect for them. In this instance, a class mate of the assembled students.

However, I had a great deal on my mind that was intruding on the pleasure I might have anticipated. That very day was the fifth anniversary of Michael's death in 2008. As always, he was very much on my mind, especially





how he affected the people he met. And, I was remembering Michael joining me in 1984 at the final interview with Marie and her family.

Marie's father had phoned soon afterwards to ask me what Michael's sport was. Somewhat baffled, I asked him why he wanted to know. "We thought so highly of him. We own a sports store and he looks so athletic. We were wondering if we might mail him some presents". I informed him that Michael was a swimmer but there was no need to post their gifts as I would be going over to Adelaide in a few weeks' time. I recall Michael receiving a very large package of towels and swimming goggles, probably enough to last him through a few swimming seasons. I was reminding myself of this as I cycled the twenty minutes from home to the campus.

The interview was to begin after lunch. I was approached by a woman, somewhat reticent, who asked me: "Do you live in Balmoral?"

"Yes!" I replied, wondering why she might ask such a question.

"I met you there 29 years ago when I was ten!"

I stared at her, but she was no longer that 10-year-old girl and was as such unrecognizable. "What is your name?"

"Marie."

Before she could continue, I interrupted her and proposed her surname.

She was stunned and we both fell silent momentarily. Marie then added: "My parents send their regards to you and want you to know they saved your and Michael's letters". I was also flummoxed when she went on to say: "It is because of meeting you and Michael then that I am now doing this degree!"

I realized that time was short, and the afternoon 'interview' was to begin in a few minutes. I explained the prospect of such an interview: "Would you be willing for me to interview you for this purpose? Unlike any of your classmates, I was a witness 29 years ago to you overcoming a considerable problem." Marie willingly consented.

I introduced Marie to her 100+ classmates and told them how we had met 29 years before and how she had overcome what would have been regarded as an impossible problem to overcome in a single session. I also informed everyone that this was the fifth anniversary of Michael White's death. I told my audience too that "you are going to find out how that meeting also changed the course of my life!"

### *Interview with Marie:*

**David:** Why are you so proud of the problem from the past that you overcame somehow or other?





- Marie:** I think the most important thing is that I feel I have a life now. I am really proud of that. And I have a family. And I am studying for this degree.
- David:** Do you consider if you hadn't overcome this problem from the past, it (Anorexia) would have taken over your life?
- Marie:** Yeah definitely!
- David:** Where do you guess it would have taken your life to if you hadn't overcome it?
- Marie:** I was thinking about that today and got so upset thinking that I wouldn't be here alive. (vigorously shaking her head).
- David:** Is the fact that you are here a testimony to you as a ten-year-old girl and your mother and father and the family you come from?
- Marie:** Definitely! (uttered with absolute confidence)
- David:** If you could acknowledge your ten-year-old self for overcoming a problem that could have taken your life away from you before you had hardly lived it, what would you acknowledge your ten-year-old self for?
- Marie:** Just to be thankful to that ten-year-old for overcoming it so that she went on to lead the life I have led so far. It makes me really appreciate my life.
- David:** Is there anything in particular that you would like to appreciate her for, now that you have 29 years to look back on her life?
- Marie:** Definitely the kids I've got today. They are the biggest things. And of course, meeting my partner.
- David:** You may not be aware that the problem you overcame as a ten-year-old would have been regarded at that time as almost impossible to overcome. What was so remarkable about you and the family you come from was that you did so in merely sixty minutes?
- Marie:** I definitely think having really strong parents and not putting me in hospital. Their will to keep me going was a big one and also the help from your therapy. It all actually happened when we met. It came about from that.
- David:** Can you trace the 'will' you speak of in your mother and father to your grandparents in any way?





- Marie:** I can because it was actually my grandfather who noticed and pushed it. And he kept telling my family that something wasn't right. And so, it was him who was very strong about not giving up. That was huge! And he phoned you.
- David:** By any chance, were you the apple of your grandfather's eye?
- Marie:** I think so...yes! (nodding her head in agreement and smiling generously)
- David:** Can you tell us a story that might convey that to us?
- Marie:** (looking skywards and laughing out loud) Yeah definitely.... him having to sit around and watching me dance around his living room for a half an hour. He definitely suffered through that.
- David:** Can you remember as a little girl the look in his eye when you were dancing around his living room?
- Marie:** (putting her fingers to her eyes) he always had a glitter in his eyes. He was always smiling!
- David:** Are there any stories that you know of from your paternal family that are told about how they don't give up when the going gets tough?
- Marie:** There were bad financial times and they just kept on going. Nothing gets them down and they do overcome it in time and just think of other ways. I've seen it. They can be very strong in that way.
- David:** Can you tell me something you have witnessed in this regard?
- Marie:** They lost completely everything, and they built another business up again to be even better. They were going through a lot of stress. (shaking head vigorously)
- David:** If your grandfather was here and i asked him this question, can you guess what he might have said: "Marie's grandfather, were you at all surprised when you learned that the apple of your eye- your ten-year-old granddaughter, Marie, overcame a problem thought to be almost impossible in no more than sixty minutes?" How do you guess he might have answered?
- Marie:** (smiling) I think he wouldn't be surprised. No! I'm sure he wouldn't be surprised.
- David:** Can I ask him another question: "Marie's grandfather, why were you not surprised, when to be honest I could not quite believe it when I learned what Marie and her family had gone and done immediately upon leaving my office?" What would you guess he might say in reply?





- Marie:** I think that he knows we are fighters. Yeah, fighters! He has seen that nothing actually will stop us.
- David:** Is that 'fighting spirit' reflected in the way your family has engaged in athletics?
- Marie:** absolutely...my father and brothers have excelled- they almost went to the Olympics and excelled in professional sports.
- David:** What are your recollections all those 29 years ago of meeting me in Balmoral?
- Marie:** I remember your house(smiling). And I remember some of those exercises you gave me. I also remember my older brothers moaning about having to come along. Yah, our whole family. I remember it. It's just so clear in my mind.
- David:** Do you by any chance remember the questions I asked you 29 years ago?
- Marie:** You asked a lot about my nana (grandmother). A lot of historical questions about my family. My nana was a giver and she would always give a lot. We touched on that a lot. And we touched on the problem- Anorexia. Yeah and we externalized it (she had learned this term in her undergraduate studies). And we touched on how if I managed to eat my lunch or not, I should do certain things. And you came up with some exercises. I had to have a plate and if I couldn't eat the food, I had to scrape it in the rubbish bin and pretend that it was Anorexia making me do it. And I was beating it. So, it wasn't beating me (grinning and we both break in to loud laughter). I just thought (acting as if she is scraping the remains of a dinner plate in to a rubbish bin) that I was dealing to it. 'Anorexia, you are not beating me; I am beating you'. Otherwise, I had my dad sitting next to me forcing me to eat and me vomiting.
- David:** Under those circumstances of forced feeding, did you feel that you had failed your family?
- Marie:** I did. I did. I felt like I let them down and that I couldn't fight it. But this way, I could see it. When the problem now occurred, I knew: "Oh no, here it comes again! (pushing her hands outwards against something invisible) I've got to try and fight it!"
- David:** You say- 'I could now see it'. Before that, was the problem invisible to you?
- Marie:** I was just known as the little girl with Anorexia. So, I was just like that. That was how I lived. Before I saw you, I had it for three years. Yeah! I remember that meeting and we all sat there (indicates with her hands the seating arrangements of her, her parents and two brothers). And my mum mentioned babies and you told me that when I was older that Anorexia would forbid me having children. And then I realized that, and we got on to that subject and dug down in to it deeper. I think that was a turning point.





- David:** Really?
- Marie:** Yes! I loved little kids!
- David:** When you look in to the eyes of your daughters, does that justify the choice you made 29 years ago to take your life back from Anorexia?
- Marie:** It does! I haven't really thought about it so deeply before. When I came in to university today, it really hit me. I realized I might not have been alive today and would not have my precious kids. It makes it real special that I did overcome it (Anorexia)! (nodding her head vigorously)
- David:** When they grow up to their late teens or early twenties and you want to send them off in to the world with the knowledge of your will and that of your family, might you tell them about this conversation we are having today?
- Marie:** Definitely (smiling)! I will tell them how precious they are. And how I really beat Anorexia was to have them as my children. And I will want them to know how special they are.
- David:** Do you think when they are older, they will cherish this loving of yours?
- Marie:** (softly) I hope they do...yeah! No, I think they will cherish my loving of them.
- David:** When we talked over lunch, you talked of your paternal grandmother as a giving person. Do you think some of that has passed down to you?
- Marie:** (nodding vigorously) Definitely! I am a lot like her.
- David:** Is she still alive?
- Marie:** No.
- David:** Did she live long enough for you to know her?
- Marie:** Yes definitely! (starts to cry)
- David:** As you know, this 'Marae' is called 'the house of the respectful heart'. Do you think your grandmother had the quality of a 'respectful heart'?
- Marie:** Definitely!







- David:** Do you think 'a respectful heart' will manifest itself in due course in your conversations with clients?
- Marie:** I certainly hope so.
- David:** Tell me if you will- after you started eating after our first meeting, what came next?
- Marie:** Hard times! It was very, very hard but I knew I had the skills and knowledge that was put in place. It was a long process. I can still say that today I have a little bit (of Anorexia) (raising her voice) but I know that it will never get to that stage (referring to when she was 7-10) again. I know how to stop it...so...yeah.
- David:** What contribution to you figure your mum and dad made over those hard times?
- Marie:** They would always be supporting me. They were always looking out when times were rough. They knew when anorexia was about and at those times they were aware of it. They comforted me at night when I couldn't sleep.
- David:** How do you see all these things are linked up with your decision to do a social work degree?
- Marie:** Just by me overcoming it- the Anorexia. I think it made me stronger in a way because I knew I could make a difference in people's lives if I could make such a difference in my own.
- David:** You started practicing (Social Work) on your own life at age...
- Marie:** (interrupting and finishing my question) Ten!
- David:** Say in several years' time you graduate and attend the graduation ceremony in the town hall. You walk across when your name is called to receive your degree and the director shakes your hand. When you walk down from the stage, who are you going to speak to first?
- Marie:** Myself (laughing). I'll say to myself: 'You've done it!' I'll be real happy (nodding head), doing what is finally wanted to do after so many years. It will be a great joy!
- David:** Say your grandmother was a witness and she could speak to you on this occasion, can you guess what she might say to you?
- Marie:** I just know she'd be really happy that I had done something I wanted to do.
- David:** If you said this to her: "Nana, I know you don't know this but in so many ways I believe I am living forward in to my professional life what you did as a volunteer". What do you guess she would say to you on this occasion?





- Marie:** She would agree. She would definitely agree. She was very kind hearted.
- David:** Do you think she would have tears in her eyes?
- Marie:** Oh definitely.
- David:** Do you have any questions you might like to ask me about our meetings and how this led me to develop anti-anorexia and 'biting the hand that starves you: inspiring resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia'?
- Marie:** How did your work go?
- David:** It went downhill after you. No one ever walked out after one session and freed their lives in due course of Anorexia.
- Marie:** At the time I only ate a pea but to go out that night after our meeting and eat some chicken. I made that stand. It was amazing!
- David:** That meeting led me to 20 years of this work. And it all began in such a modest way. It is unbelievable but so wonderful to meet you again on this very day.
- Marie:** Same for me. But I just wanted to thank you.
- David:** I wanted to thank you.
- Marie:** Yeah, but if you didn't do it, I wouldn't be here (alive) today!
- David:** I wouldn't be here either (laughter) even if for me if it wasn't a matter of my life or death when we met all those 29 years ago.

I recovered the letters Michael and I had written Marie and her parents separately. One paragraph of mine sticks out for me.

*This, of course, does not mean there may not be an odd hiccup in the future; that is to be expected. But I have supreme confidence in you both to deal with any that comes your way. Your daughter is fortunate to have such wonderful parents and it comes as no surprise to me that she, herself, is aware of this.*

*I am honored to have known you and to see your family tackle such a problem that can cost many young women all or part of their lives.*





*Yours respectfully,  
David.*

### **Tale 2: 1952, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.**

When I was about eight, I started stealing loose change from my father's pants pockets when he was asleep. I quickly realized this could be exchanged for candy at the local shop which increased my popularity amongst my class mates. On the occasion, I am going to relate to you, I had stolen exactly fifty cents in change. My father approached me soon afterwards:

"Son, I've lost fifty cents! Will you help me find it?"

I nervously replied: "oh, yeah...yeah. I'll help you...but how?"

He gave me detailed advice as to how the search should proceed.

"Right, you go look for it in the laundry room and I'll go for it in my workshop. Then we will meet back here in the kitchen and see if either of us has found the lost fifty cents".

How did he know it was exactly fifty cents that was missing? Still, I followed his instructions but, unsurprisingly, was unsuccessful in my search for it. Returning from his quest, he kindly inquired:

"Did you find it?"

"No!" I replied. "Did you?" Hoping against hope that he had so I would not have to confess to having stolen it.

"No, me neither". Before I could confess, he eagerly proposed the next step:

"Right, well you go and look around the back yard and I'll go and look in the front yard and we'll meet back here in the kitchen".

Perhaps he noticed my unease because he added:

"Don't worry, son. One of us has to find it somewhere!"

I dutifully went out to the back yard and renewed my search as did he. Returning, neither of us reported any better success than previously.

My father's enthusiasm for the task at hand was undiminished; by way of contrast, I was even more apprehensive that I would soon be found out as the culprit.





“Right! You look in your bedroom and I’ll look in your mother’s and my bedroom and then we’ll meet back here in the kitchen”.

There nestled dead center on my pillow was what looked like the very same coins adding up to the fifty cents that I had stolen. I was bewildered but excitedly raced back to the kitchen where he was waiting for me.

“Did you find it?”

I proclaimed: “I did” and handed it over to him. He accepted it appreciatively and thanked me more than once for finding the lost money.

The very next day, he came up to me and told me:

“Hey, you won’t believe this! I’ve done it again. I’ve lost some more money. Will you help me find it?”

We went through the same sequence as the day before and yet again, fifty cents in change was lodged on my pillow. Returning to our meeting place, I proudly announced: “look, I’ve found it!”

Shaking his head and smiling as if I had done something bordering on the remarkable, he replied:

“Look, you are getting so good at finding lost things, why don’t you keep the money?” I accepted it in good faith but was somewhat baffled by this unexpected turn of events. This happened every day for the rest of the week. He seemed more and more upset with himself for his carelessness as well as more and more approving of my new-found ability for ‘finding things’.

I had many more experiences like this growing up to become more and more convinced of what a dimwit my father was. He was such a loser, I arrogantly concluded. The only conversation I can remember having about such matters before he died in his late fifties was when he told me the reason he did such things was because “I wanted you to think for yourself.”

Ever since then, I have been haunted all my life by the marvelous way my humble and generous father found not only to preserve my dignity but to re-enchant my life.

It reminds me of how the famed Harvard sociologist, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, author of ‘Respect: An Exploration’ referred to her research methodology as ‘the pursuit of goodness’. Such a methodology has one “see the actors as knowledge bearers, as rich resources and as the best authorities on their own experience”. Accordingly, she considers that such a strategy of inquiry “allows for expression of vulnerabilities, weakness, prejudice and anxiety, qualities which are best expressed in counterpoint with the actor’s strengths.

By ‘goodness’ we do not mean an idealized portrayal of human experience, rather we mean an approach to inquiry that resists the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathologies and suggesting remedies...the nuanced search for goodness is really a search for a generous, balanced probing





perspective. It is a search for the truth- or for the complex and competing truths, that combine to shape a narrative” (Lightfoot, 1998, p. 110).

### Tale 3: 1976, Coventry, United Kingdom

I had travelled overseas to England to do my masters in Social Work and study Family Therapy the year after at the Family Institute in Cardiff, Wales. After a six-month period of class room teaching, I wildly anticipated my placement at Coventry Child Guidance where I was to now practice as a family therapist. By then, I had read every text written on Family Therapy; some twice. (That was possible in the mid-70s). Because the rural campus was fifteen miles from the city, I had bought a one speed bicycle. I arrived at my placement at a 19th century building in the grounds of a public hospital, raring to go, to find a referral awaiting me on my desk. It was from the emergency department. It read:

“15-year-old young woman...suicide attempt. Lacerated arms with razor slashes. No sutures. Discharged. Please follow up immediately.”

Whatever doubts I had about travelling so far from New Zealand for postgraduate studies were dispelled. I knew for a fact that in a matter of a few hours, I would save this damsel from her distress. After a few words with my supervisor, I rang and spoke to her mother who informed me her father, who worked in a car factory, would not be home until around 5:30 pm. Since I was a family therapist in the making, I agreed to arrive at their home around then. When I cycled to their home in a working-class area of the city, my zeal was such that I wondered at the time if I could have won a stage of the Tour de France, so fast was I pedaling my one speed bicycle. I was cycling towards what I considered to be my destiny. In ways other than I expected, that is perhaps how it turned out.

I boldly knocked on their door. Sheila, the fifteen-year-old, opened it, exposing bleeding razor slashes on her arm and loudly admonished me:

“You made me do this!”

I faint at the sight of blood, mine or anyone else’s. The next thing I recall was that I was dreaming that I was seeking entrance to heaven and I could hear very serious voices, standing over me, adjudicating the matter. I listened carefully to see how I was doing but heard some comments I couldn’t immediately fathom:

“Do you think we should call an ambulance?”

I wasn’t dreaming; instead I realized I was sitting in a chair with my head bowed between my legs, staring at their carpet. I concluded this was somewhat unprofessional. Summoning up all my zeal, I leapt to my feet, much to their surprise, and said authoritatively: “Let the family therapy begin” and directed them in to their own living room and ordered each person where to sit. Of course, I had no trouble knowing what to do next. Hadn’t I read every book going? With a veneer of my new professional mantle, I asked:





“Who would like to tell me what the problem is?”

I soon wished I hadn't as Sheila jumped to her feet, ran upstairs and started jumping up and down just above us while screaming blue murder. This led to the chandelier swinging wildly and plaster flakes started to fall like a snow storm on a film set. They looked at me perhaps hoping that I might have some way to save the day. This had not been included in any text I had yet read. I was bewildered, and they must have realized this as they ignored the ructions from above our heads and kindly turned to me:

“What are you studying at Warwick University?”

I had no trouble telling them about my Family Therapy studies and they seemed interested in what I had to say. We continued over a cup of tea and believe it or not, the noise from above abated and the plaster flakes no longer floated down from above. They then insisted that because I looked so pale, they were going to put my bicycle in the trunk of their car and drive me home. This was just one more humiliation I would have to bear. When we arrived at the campus, I was wondering how I would say goodbye when they asked:

“What are you doing next Monday?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why don't you come over at the same time next week and tell us more about Family Therapy”.

I did so for several months at their insistence. As I slowly recovered my dignity, I began to look forward to our meetings. As time went by, Sheila joined in our conversations which always began by them asking me:

“What have you been learning since we last talked together?”

However, now I cycled home without them having to deliver me. After one such meeting, they handed me a sealed card as I left. It turned out to be an invitation to their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary at a nearby community center.

How could I repay my debt to this family? I virtually starved myself between then and the date of their anniversary to save up to buy them an expensive bottle of French wine. I arrived somewhat late so as to be unobserved. Since my hair style clearly identified me as a stranger, everyone fell silent. I heard murmurs of- ‘Who the hell is that?’ the parents rushed to my rescue, both putting their arms around me and proudly introduced me:

“Everybody...meet David. He's our Social Worker! He's been helping our family. He's come all the way from New Zealand”





With that welcome, everyone seemed to want to have my ear and tell me that ‘she’s a little bitch’, ‘they’re too soft’, ‘she needs a good smacking’, etc. I realized I should leave soon. With this in mind, I asked if I could speak to the parents alone. I then reached in my backpack for my bottle of wine with my card which read:

“Thanks for your help with my studies”.

To my surprise, they had a bottle of French wine of similar vintage and when I read their card later, it read:

“Thanks for your help with our family”.

This made me realize that these meetings with those who consult us might well be considered what the French anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, writing in 1925 in his ‘essay on the gift’ called a ‘gift exchange’.

In 1985, Michael and I began the first paper we wrote to represent narrative therapy by a quote from Mauss:

To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become a minister...while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person. The thing is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and strives to bring its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place (p. 63).

#### Tale 4 April, 2015 Minneapolis/Fargo, North Dakota

This is a conversation between Ana Huerta-Lopez, her mother, Maria Guadalupe Huerta, Tom Carlson and myself. This took place several months in Fargo after Maria, at our invitation attended a daylong workshop on insider witnessing practices, presented by Tom Carlson, his colleague Amanda Haire, students Ana, Emily Corturillo and myself at a narrative therapy symposium held in Minneapolis.

**Ana:** But I’m thinking of my mom and her experience of being in Minneapolis and what words she would use to describe insider witnessing practices. I don’t know why but the word magical came to mind for me.

**David:** Ana, would you mind taking this up with your mom (Maria) to see how she might describe the ‘magic’ of this? I strongly believe such an inquiry will take us further in our making sense of IWPs than any other avenue we might pursue at the moment.

Ana asked her mother my question over the phone. She replied in Spanish which has been translated by Ana and Tom.

**María:** Descubriste la magia de la otra persona – conociste a tu cliente y pudiste expresar la magia que has sentido en su presencia. Pudiste reconocer la magia en tu cliente y te identificaste en la





magia que ella ha vivido. No asumiste cosas de tu cliente porque tomaste tiempo en estudiar y conocer tu cliente, y que era significativa en su vida. Tu aceptaste la persona que conociste y como era ella. La escuchaste sin rechazó. Pudiste encontrar y reconocer cosas en común entre ella y tú.

**English translation:** You discovered the magic of the other person. You came to an intimate knowing of your client and were able to express the magic that you felt in her presence. You were able to recognize (or more precisely translated as... Become intimately acquainted with) the magic in your client and the magic of her life. You didn't assume things about your client because you took the time to study her and come to intimately know her and what was significant in her life. You were able to accept her and come to know her as if you were her. You listened to her without judgment, rejection or shame. You were able to find and come to have a shared experience together.

**David:** To discover the magic of the other person- is there anything more fateful than to do so? And moreover "to express the magic that you felt in her presence" directly to her? Surely, this is the 'heart and soul' of what we are calling 'insider witnessing practices," is it not? Maria, no one could possibly have described this more precisely and acutely than you have. To you, we will always be grateful. I cannot thank you enough.

**Ana:** That's it! This is the heart and soul of this work – of these practices – this is how it comes to life and carries out such genuine transformations. I don't think there is anything more momentous and significant than to discover the magic of the other person and in return to express that magic directly to them – how incredibly astonishing! Is there anything more beautiful than this?

Let me take up what I am referring to as a 'history for the future' by way of a preliminary discussion of 'Insider Witnessing Practices' (See Carlson & Epston, 2017) which for me is another iteration of seeking a means to live up to the concern Michael stated to me in 1984: "It is not only a matter of us being 'respectful'. It is more a matter of our clients experiencing our respect for them."

Or let me restate that as a more general concern:

"How do we go about revealing the other's moral character to all concerned?"

As a counterpoint to Michael's 'Outsider Witnessing Practices' which engage strangers as witnesses, insider witnessing practices engage intimate others. In this case, the therapist when s/he feels they 'know' their client sufficiently well to portray their moral character.

Let me refer to the sociologist, Richard Sennett and his book: "Respect: The Formation of Character in an Age of Inequality" (2004) who states:

Respect is an expressive performance... that is, treating others with respect just doesn't happen, even with the best will in the world; to convey respect means finding the words and gestures which make it







feel real and convincing...These expressive acts.... reveal something about how character takes form: character as that aspect of self, capable of moving others (p. 207-8).

I know when I stumbled across this more or less aside, although it caught my eye, I didn't immediately 'get it'.

Sennett is, in fact, proposing a definition of moral character as having 'the capacity to move another'. Both witnessing practices allow the witnesses to show how they have been moved and by doing so register the 'moral character' of their client. I will refer to 'insider witnessing practices' only from hereon.

Let me describe this as simply as I can by way of metaphor. You have sought out a painter, whom you respect, to paint your portrait. You patiently sit for her, believing that she will represent your 'character' in paint on canvas. Once she is finished, she invites you to see it for the first time but hands the brush and her palette of paints to you and says:

"Now, you take this and finish the painting of your moral character off as you see fit!"

I do not have much more time here than to provide you with what Tom Carlson and I are referring to as 'preliminary results' of the first 16 'essays' of Insider Witnessing Practices, conducted at North Dakota State University since Jan. 25, 2015.

The clients who have participated in this practice have evaluated their experience of an average 90-minute interview to be equivalent in value to at least 15-20 sessions of the Narrative Family Therapy they have previously received.

However, they made two almost unanimous qualifications:

- 1) Firstly, almost everyone insisted that even this high number was likely an underestimate,
- 2) And secondly, they reported they would never have made the dramatic changes which occurred, no matter how many sessions they would eventually have had.

Even more surprising for us, since this took place within the context of a family therapy training program, were the student therapists' evaluations. They evaluated their participation in the IWP process, which for them lasted on average 3 hours, to be equivalent in value to one to two semesters of classroom training (For more information see Carlson & Epston, 2017).

Perhaps I am going to try to do the impossible in the time that remains to whet your appetite for perhaps a different version of Narrative Family Therapy that David Marsten, Laurie Markham and I outline in "Narrative Therapy in Wonderland: Connecting with Children's Imaginative Know-How (2016)."

### **Tale 5, Auckland, New Zealand. 2008**





Jan and Rob were beside themselves with concern that their ten-year-old daughter, Kelly had "an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder". They based this on the fact that she was spending hours on end in the toilet, requiring them to buy toilet paper by the case lot. All their efforts to talk her out of the problem, let alone out of the toilet, failed as she would become "hysterical" if they tried to interfere with what they referred to as "her rituals". Her parents were becoming extremely inconvenienced and had to get a bucket for their own use at such times. But this was a mere frustration compared to their dread for what was becoming of their "sweet hearted daughter".

They told of a recent occasion when Kelly's girlfriends came over on a Saturday afternoon to hang out together. For a shy girl, Kelly cherished these occasions when she was able to entertain her friends on her home ground. Jan, in particular, loved overhearing Kelly and her girlfriends having fun together. At such times, her fears about Kelly's future were allayed. This ended almost overnight. Even with her girlfriends on hand, Kelly was required to retire in to the toilet. Her girlfriends, after waiting several hours, called their parents to pick them up. Her girlfriends were now reluctant to return and Kelly was just as reluctant to invite them back. The parents felt they had exhausted every possible remedy that they could think of and others could recommend.

The meeting began with Jan dutifully informing me that I should not expect Kelly to say anything at all. "You don't speak to strangers, do you darling?" Kelly seemed relieved by her mother absolving her of any responsibility to speak for herself. That was in no way inconvenient as we began with the 'wonderfulnesses' inquiry in order to establish her 'moral character' and genealogically trace that back to her family, both immediate and extended, and her community and culture.

Emily will enact Kelly, and her mother Jan and Tom, her father Rob.

***Session 1: 45 minutes in to the meeting; transcript has been abridged.***

**David:** Kelly, what did you think of the problem shutting you away in the toilet and having your girlfriends miss out on the fun you usually have when you have a play-date together?

**Kelly:** (looking humiliated and speaking in a disconsolate tone) I don't know.

**David:** Say you were on your own playing with your girlfriends, what do you think would have happened?

**Kelly:** We would have had fun.

**David:** What kind of fun would you have? Play-fun, talk-fun, joking-fun, or just plain ten-year-old girl-fun?

**Kelly:** (she now appeared to be coming out of trance, especially when she smiled while responding) Ten-year-old girl-fun.





- David:** (giving Kelly a time-out, I turned to her parents) Jan, what kind of fun would you have expected Kelly and her girlfriends to have?
- Jan:** I can't tell you in words how much fun they might have had but they would be chirping away like a box of birds.
- David:** As Kelly's mum, did it do your heart good to overhear this 'box of birds' chirping away under your roof?
- Jan:** Boy, did it ever!
- David:** How about you Rob?
- Rob:** For me it was more than their chattering; it was their laughter. We don't hear Kelly laugh very often so it did my heart good to hear her and her mates laughing out loud.
- David:** Kelly, do you mind me asking you if this problem killed your joys with your girlfriends?
- Kelly:** What do you mean?
- David:** Do you not know what a 'killjoy' is? Jan and Rob, do you know what a 'killjoy' is?
- Rob:** (readily coming to my rescue) yeah, sure! A killjoy is someone who hates people having fun and I guess 'kills their joys'.
- David:** That sounds about right but should we look it up in the dictionary? (I consult the Oxford Concise Dictionary which I have handy for just such purposes) here it is- "One who spreads gloom over social enjoyment". What do you think, Kelly?
- Kelly:** (somewhat more engaged as this conversation has now taken an unexpected tack) Yeah, I suppose so.
- David:** (returning to the wonderfulness of 'caring for others' that was very elaborated earlier) Kelly, I know your mum and dad have just told me with such respect and regard about your 'wonderfulnesses', especially that you have the virtue of caring for others, including those younger than yourself and smaller than yourself like cats, dogs, goldfish right down to spiders despite the fact that so many people, even adults, are freaked out by spiders. And the story they told about how you went along with your young cousin, Amelia, when she had to go to the outdoor toilet when you were camping on the beach last summer and rescued all the spiders and freed them outside so no harm would come to them.





And I learned that your care and love for others have been passed down from your grannies on both your mum and dad's sides of the family. Both grannies are well known for lending anyone in need a helping hand at their churches and in their neighborhoods. Your mum and dad said you are an exact chip off your grannies' blocks.

Why I am mentioning this is I am feeling sorry for a 'killjoy' problem as it must be full of gloom and not have a clue about having any sort of fun. In fact, as your dad suggested, this problem seems to hate people having fun like you and your girlfriends. Can you imagine what it must be like for your problem to only know gloom and doom? Kelly, do you in any way feel sorry for this 'killjoy' problem?

**Kelly:** (now speaking with a newfound measure of authority) I guess so. No fun at all would be no fun. And to kill other people's joys isn't good.

**David:** That's for sure. Would you be willing to lend the 'killjoy' problem a hand and help it have some fun?

**Kelly:** I suppose so but how do you do that?

We had a lengthy discussion about how she and her parent's toilet-trained their dog, Martha, by showing her where to go and where not to go. And how she lent her younger cousin, who was staying over, a hand to make some chocolate-chip cookies.

From our 'wonderfulnesses' inquiry, I had also been informed that her Auntie Sarah was regarded "as a laugh a minute." Jan and Rob were sure that if she'd tried to have a career as a standup comedian, she could have made a go of it. When they were together, Sarah and Kelly would always be "falling about laughing." We investigated how that "Irish sense of humor" went back generations all the way to Kilkenny. Rob regaled us with some legendary tales, especially how a great-uncle went around after a night in the local pub and nailed all his neighbor's outdoor toilets shut.

On further jocular inquiry, we concluded that although the 'killjoy' problem did "get around", it mainly seemed to live in the toilet. And I suppose that told us where she might best undertake her mission to lend the problem a hand.

Now we began translating these 'wonderfulnesses' into a family practice, with Kelly obviously taking the lead.

**David:** Kelly, do you think we just have to go where the problem lives? That we can hardly expect it to come out to the living room for you to lend it a hand and show it how to have a good time?

**Kelly:** I suppose so.





- David:** Rob and Jan, how many people do you estimate could fit in to your toilet?
- Rob:** (getting the gist of this conversation and by now, the parents' pained expressions were long gone.) Three of us but it might be a tight fit.
- David:** Is it possible to invite Auntie Sarah and squeeze her in to the fun-making?
- Jan:** She actually lives a three-hour-drive away.
- David:** If she knew everything we had been talking about, do you think you could call her on the phone and she could tell some jokes to you three and the 'killjoy' problem. You could catch up with your auntie and laugh yourself silly and at the same time show the 'killjoy' problem that life is all not doom and gloom. Would you be willing to lend the problem a hand, so it doesn't have to go through its life as a kind of 'misery guts'?
- Jan:** (somewhat anxious awaiting Kelly's response) will you do it darling?
- Kelly:** (smiling with what i guessed was anticipation of the task ahead of them) okay!

Jan and Rob said they would have no problem making the arrangements and finding a suitable time for what they now referred to as 'comedy shows.'

### *Session 2 (a month later)*

They had had three such shows between sessions.

- David:** Kelly, can you guess if the 'killjoy' problem has lightened up a bit since you and your family are showing it your Irish humour? What do you think?
- Kelly:** I think so.
- David:** Why do you say that? Has the problem been able to go out of the toilet and get around a bit more and perhaps meet some other problems it could befriend? There are sure a lot of problems around these days, aren't there?
- Rob:** Sure are!
- Jan:** And you know, David, Kelly is having a lot more fun too.





**David:** Kelly, now that the problem isn't living in the toilet all the time and kill-joying your fun, do you find you don't have to spend so much time in there keeping the problem company? Have you heard the saying: "misery loves company"?

**Kelly:** No.

**David:** Jan or Rob, can you explain that saying to her?

**Jan:** What it means, I think, is misery doesn't like fun company, it just likes miserable company.

**David:** Kelly, have you been showing the problem how to be fun company by having some fun and showing it how you do it so it can follow in your footsteps?

Kelly was bemused as well as confused by my query but Jan and Rob were quick to point out a myriad of examples of their daughter getting out and around a lot more and regaining some of her old friends and indeed, making a few new ones. I could tell from the look on their faces that they were experiencing considerable relief from this turn of events.

Over sessions 3 and 4 the 'killjoy' problem got downgraded to 'worries'

#### *Session 4 (late in session)*

**Jan:** And the worries make you say, 'I can't do this!' all the time, don't they? We know you can."

**David:** Do you have any suspicions why the worries don't want Kelly to express all her abilities and talents to the full?

**Jan:** I think they are lying to her.

**David:** I don't know about you, but it looks to me like the worries are getting afraid of her. Can you see any signs of her worrying the worries?

**Rob:** The fact that she is playing tennis, having her friends around and stuff surely must mean the worries are getting worried.

**David:** Kelly, if there was 100% of your life, what percentage would you say was fun-filled and what percentage was worry-filled?

**Kelly:** Yeah, it's kind of half of the time its good and half of the time its bad so it is getting a lot better than it was. And when I get tired, they tell me I am not making any progress and I can't do this.





- David:** Say before you were going to bed one night, have you ever told your worries off? I remember your mum telling me you were very angry the worries were stopping you reading.
- Kelly:** Well with the reading, it's getting better because, 'oh no, I want to keep reading. This book is too exciting!' and that is the same when I am having fun. I want to have more fun.
- Jan:** Sweetie, tell David about Rosy's visit.
- Kelly:** My friend, Rosy and I were playing Pictionary and I went to the toilet and I got out pretty quickly. And then we just kept playing.
- David:** Did this have to do with your preference for fun and friendship? Or did this have to do with teaching the worries to have more fun? Or a bit of both.
- Kelly:** Maybe. I think it was more the fun because rosy and I were playing and having fun.
- David:** Did the worries still try to make you worry?
- Kelly:** Well, I think they tried. Even when I am having fun they still try to make me worry and not come out.
- David:** What did you do so they didn't kill the joys you were having with Rosy?
- Kelly:** I think I might be ignoring them a little bit. They were still telling me I should use more toilet paper. But I didn't listen to them because I just wanted to get out and play. Because that is what I want to do. I will be thinking what I can do when I get out kind of. So that it will be funnnnn when you get outside quickly.

At the end of my summary which everyone sanctioned as a fair record of events, I asked Kelly:

- David:** If the worries knew you like Auntie Sarah, your mum and dad know you, would it think it has got the wrong person, a possible case of mistaken identity? After all, it thinks you are a worry-wart, but your dad thinks of you "as full of life now" and your mum says you are "a sporty girl".
- Kelly:** Suppose so.
- David:** Who knows you best- the worries or them?
- Kelly:** They do!
- David:** Do you think you also might have to lend the problem a hand about being a loving friend and daughter?"





**Kelly:** (smiled, considering yet another humanitarian mission)

### **Session (final) 6**

**David:** Kelly, now that the 'killjoy' problem has retired from killing your joys and your family's joys, do you think you should tell the problem off for doing what it used to do? Or do you think you should forgive it.

**Kelly:** No, I want to forgive it.

**David:** Kelly, why do you want to forgive the problem. After all it spoiled a fair bit of your eight, nine and ten-year-old girl fun, had it not? At least that is what your mum and dad told me when we first met.

**Kelly:** It didn't know what it was doing. It didn't really mean it.

**David:** Really! You don't say! Jan and rob, have you heard that before.

**Jan/Rob:** (as bemused as I was) no!

**Kelly:** I have forgiven it. How could it have known any better? It just didn't know how to have fun.

**David:** Kelly, do you think a day will come when this retired problem will say thanks to you for lending it a hand?

**Kelly:** (grinning) Yeah, I suppose so!

### **Conclusion**

Yet again, allow me to have you consider something you would not have expected at this address. Please bear with me. Say in 20 or so years from now, you receive an urgent phone call from a client whom you know very well. She tells you that her life will soon to come to its end and appeals to you, not only to attend her funeral, but moreover to deliver her eulogy.

You demur but you cannot deny her request: 'you know me better than anyone else does'. At her funeral, you end up paying your respects to this person, not only richly describing her moral character but also telling how knowing your client has influenced you to have more 'character'.

Now consider this future eulogy and reflect again on Richard Sennett-

"These expressive acts...reveal something about how character takes form: character as that aspect of self, capable of moving others" (2004, p. 209).







You will reveal to her mourners her 'moral character' because knowing her 'moved you'. And by doing so, perhaps you will have responded to Michael's and my puzzle in ways similar to how Tom Carlson, David Marsten, Laurie Markham and I have tried to do so in our own ways.

### References

- Basso, K. (1996). *Wisdom sits in places: Landscape and language among the western apache*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press.
- Carlson, T. S., & Epston, D., H. (2017). Insider witnessing practices: A preliminary discussion: Part Two. *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*.
- Marsten, D., Epston, D., & Markham, L. (2016). *Narrative therapy in wonderland: Connecting with children's imaginative know-how*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mauss, M. (1925). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*.
- Sennett, R. (2004). *Respect: The formation of character in a world of inequality*. NY: W.W. Norton.

