



Coming to Know Young People as Promising Characters

David Epston

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I want to say at the outset of this address that I do not intend this as some sort of Ted Talk. Rather I mean it as an acknowledgement of those engaged in the education of young people. And for that reason, when Linda Metcalf invited me, I agreed without any second thoughts. Over the last 40 years, I have engaged with many people reminiscing over the turning points in their lives, circumstances which they could readily identify. At first, I was surprised how often that was a conversation with a teacher.

Around twenty years ago, Kerry Jenner, a school counsellor at a central city high school in wellington, New Zealand and I organised a Teacher Appreciation Day. It was a gala occasion attended by the entire student body as well as many of their families. I vividly recall each teacher, carrying armloads of flowers and gifts, almost all of them weeping with a measure of pride, parading into the assembly to the tune of *Gaudeamus igitur* (So Let Us Rejoice). But here instead of students graduating, teachers were being honoured. What for? Various student groups took over the proceedings but the very first ‘act’ on stage was unforgettable. Five young women sang a rousing version of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” and immediately afterwards, a spokeswoman, surveying the seated teaching staff at the front of the assembly, pointed her finger towards them and proclaimed: “You respected us.”

The legendary Harvard professor of education, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot’s book “Respect: An Exploration” (2000) had inspired our thinking. Let me quote her:

“Usually respect is seen as involving some sort of debt due people because of their attained or inherent position, their age, gender, race, professional status, accomplishments, etc....by contrast, I focus on the way respect creates symmetry, empathy and connection in all kinds of relationships, such as teacher and student, doctor and patient, commonly seen as unequal....I see it arising from efforts to break with routine and imagine



other ways of giving and receiving trust, and in doing so, create relationships among equals....with that in mind, this book will examine how people work to dismantle hierarchies...in the situation of the healer and patient, teacher and student” (p. 23).

She described this pedagogy as ‘the offering of respect.’ But what exactly did she mean by this? How do you ‘offer respect’?

In the time allotted time, I want to background a practice I hope allows for the ‘offering of respect’ to a student which my colleagues David Marsten and Laurie Markham and I have called ‘wonderfulness interviewing’ of young people. My colleague, Sasha Pilkington, who works with people at the end of their lives in palliative care, refers to almost identical inquiries as ‘virtue inquiries.’

This is what I am proposing for what follows:

I decided to tell you about Natalie, aged 9 and her comparing our conversations to those between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller in the legendary book “Teacher.”

As well, I will tell you an abbreviated version of my second wonderfulness interview around 1993 or 1994. I was so surprised by the outcome that I wrote it up for publication.

David and Laurie have happily given their permission for me to provide you with the relevant chapter from our 2016 book “Narrative Therapy in Wonderland: Connecting with Children’s Imaginative Know-How.” It is called: “Getting to know the person ahead of the problem: the wonderfulness interview.” This will be emailed to you along with this address and any other relevant materials.

Before we meet Natalie and Helen Keller, allow me to propose a query which I very much doubt you might have anticipated considering when you woke up this morning. So here goes:

Imagine this if you will. You have lived a very long life- 80 or 90 years or more during which time you have achieved much of that which you had aspired to do



according to the purposes of your life. You know the time that remains to you is very short, although you are not experiencing any pain or suffering at all. You determine to advise those who will organise your funeral how you wish to be known and remembered by those whom you expect to be in attendance- immediate and extended family, close friends, former colleagues, etc. Let me put in another way- how you wish the life you have purposefully lived to be represented. You know only too well there are very distinct genres or modes of representation. Would you prefer that those you select to 'represent' how you have lived life do so according to your moral character...your moral virtues? Or would you prefer a post-mortem psychiatric assessment be read aloud as a representation of your life?

If you are like me, you will find this a very easy choice. You will want to be represented in terms of your moral character...your moral virtues. Why is it then so much of a professional's time is spent representing the people who consult us in a very particular and specific genre of representation, which has markedly grown in influence over the last 50 or so years; and these representations have little or no reference to such matters as moral character or moral virtues, the very terms you would have wished to be known by. From here on, I will refer to this mode as 'pathologising' and the one I assume you would have chosen for your funeral obituary as 'characterising.'

Writing in 2017, the Danish scholar, Svend Brinkmann reminds us that "as human beings, we do not simply suffer in a simple, physical way but are also capable of understanding our pains and miseries in and through languages and vocabularies we have. The most powerful tool to mediate our understanding of suffering has arguably become the psychiatric diagnoses, serving as a widespread 'language of suffering'...to the extent that psychiatry's 'language of suffering' permeates different parts of modern life, this specific understanding of mental illness and distress is likely to affect the ways we approach, treat and think about our problems."

I have no doubt that is so and with this in mind, I want to remind you of what I am calling 'characterising' and remind you of its languages and vocabularies and



histories that are far older and more inspiring than contemporary psychiatry. As well, I might refer to these as ‘languages of un-suffering.’

With this in mind, now let me tell you about Natalie.

In 1986, I met Natalie, who was almost ten at the time, along with her parents, Sally and Mike and her older sister, Jane, aged 11. She had what they described as an intractable soiling problem that had seemingly defied eight interventions- four medical, three psychiatric attempts including a hospitalisation, and family therapy. They informed me it had now been declared a lifelong chronic problem for young Natalie. However, Natalie would retire to her room every night, crying in pain and despair. Her mother could bear this no longer and had tried to take her own life. She survived and started working nights shifts as a nurse to save her sanity. Nevertheless, Natalie would leave notes on her pillow which she would discover on her return home. “Mum, what’s wrong with me? My tummy feels all squishy and watery. My knee feels like it has been cut in half. I can’t work properly, and I just feel sick all over. Please help me.” So, despite all the help they had received, they felt obliged to attempt yet another therapy, even though I suspected they felt pretty hopeless about achieving a different outcome than their previous eight attempts.

The following is an excerpt from the summary letter I wrote them following our first meeting:

Dear Sally, Mike, Jane and Natalie:

It didn’t take me long to understand what a mess sneaky poo was making of Natalie’s life in particular but you all in general. Sneaky poo has kept Natalie at a five-year-old level, made her have to hang around toilets instead of friends, and in fact, stopped her from visiting friends. It has even stopped her swimming in pools. Sneaky poo has started to stink her life up so that no one will have anything to do with her because of the smell. But what was most tragic was that it has caused her to switch off her mother and father 50% of the time. This means Sneaky poo has deprived her of 50% of the learning she might have learned from the two people who care about her most. Sally, no wonder you feel that “I can’t get through to her.”





It must be very depressing to lose 50% of your daughter. Jane, Sneaky poo has been getting through to you, too, by embarrassing you and making you reluctant to have friends around to stay.

I got pretty depressed myself, thinking what a mess sneaky poo was making of Natalie's life; what a mess Sneaky poo was making of her mother's and father's lives and their relationship; what a mess Sneaky poo was making of this family in general. However, my depression lifted when I realised, at long last, that Natalie was starting to clean up her life. Natalie, you mustn't have allowed Sneaky poo to grow you down anymore. Look what you went and did.

Last year, Sneaky poo made your poo sneak out three times a week. This year, you have started out-sneaking your Sneaky poo more and more and it only snuck out on you once a week. More importantly, Natalie, you have stopped Sneaky poo from messing up your school, even though there probably is still the smell of it around. When I asked you, Natalie, what your tactics were, you had this to say: "I work out when I usually go to the toilet and around that time, I usually put my mind on my stomach feelings. I start feeling a soreness in my stomach." Natalie, you are getting a few clues. The more clues you get, the less sneaky Sneaky poo will be. For some time, Sneaky poo must have thought you were clueless. When I asked you how you were able to do this, you told me you were more mature.... you said on the inside you were smiling and that you didn't feel sorry for Sneaky poo, as you no longer wanted to be its playmate.

When I asked you, Natalie, whether you wanted to out-sneak Sneaky poo, that seemed a good idea to you. And you thought you might do some 'detective work'. I guess you must be sick and tired of a messed-up life and want to clean it up. So, we came up with a lot of ideas to get back at Sneaky poo and the mess it had made of your life, your mum's life, your dad's life, your sister's life, your mum and dad's relationship with each other.

Yours against Sneaky poo,

David



We met a month later and Natalie announced that she had not done any 'detective work'; she had just stopped soiling once and for all. Three months later, we met for a review. This follow is extracted from the transcript of that interview:

DE: Before were you scared of Sneaky poo?

N: Sort of...because it was ruining my life. And I didn't have much control. I didn't think I could do it.

DE: What made you, on that particular day- the 12th day of February- what made you understand or realise you have heaps of control? Is there anything, in particular, that happened on that day....is there anything anyone said? Did you have a dream or a vision or anything?

N: I was reading these books. There's a series of values books. There's one about Helen Keller...about determination. And she was blind, and she learned. At first, she was a nasty, horrible person. And then Anne Sullivan started writing words on her hand and it made her understand her thoughts.

DE: When did you read that book?

N: I got them about two years ago. I got a whole series.

DE: So why now...on the 12th day of February-did it have an effect?

N: When I came to you, I realised what was in the book, what it meant.

DE: What the book meant? How's that?

N: Most of the people just thought I was another patient...

DE: What did I think of you?

N: You were more interested in my problem...you were like Anne Sullivan. You kept asking me questions.



- DE: Did those other people who thought you were a patient, didn't they ask you questions about yourself?
- N: They just asked how it had been. I went to them every six months.
- DE: Did you think I treated you more like a person than a patient?
- N: Yah...
- DE: How do you see it as different. Say I wanted to teach a person not to talk to a young person as a patient but as a person, how would you do that?
- N: You'd just understand and have faith.
- DE: Did you think I had faith in you?
- N: Yah.
- DE: I know I did, but I didn't say, "I've got faith in you." Or at least I didn't say it out loud. How did you know I believed in you? How could you tell?
- N: The sort of questions you were asking.....

Let me repeat that...the sort of questions you were asking...this seemed to be the crux of the matter for young Natalie...but let me go on...

- N: It (Sneaky poo) was sort of telling my mind, because sometimes my mum and dad smacked me for soiling and things. It sort of said in its own special way that they were blaming me. And it was good to have a problem like that.
- DE: Do you feel sort of angry that Sneaky poo lied to you like that?
- N: Yah.
- DE: Was there something I said or asked you that helped you undo this...and helped you figure out the trick?



N: You kept calling him Sneaky poo instead of the other name and that helped me understand that he was in the wrong?

DE: Did you think that you were in the wrong?

N: Yes.

DE: Oh, I see. That's sad because if you thought you were to blame that might have weakened your determination. Did you think that when you got free of the idea that it was your fault and it was really Sneaky poo's fault, you could determine your determination?

N: Yes...I could have done it all without anyone else. I just had to have faith in myself and believe I could do things.

Before I go any further, let me introduce you to Helen Keller if you are unfamiliar with her. Helen Keller, for the first half of the 20th century, was a living legend as well as an author, disability rights advocate, political activist and lecturer. She was born in 1880 and died in 1968.

When Helen was aged 19 months, an illness, now thought to be scarlet fever, rendered her both blind and deaf, and consequently incapable of speech or language.

In Helen Keller's last autobiography, written when she was 76, in a book suitably titled- "Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy: A tribute by the foster-child of her mind, Helen Keller" (1956), she writes about perhaps the most famous teaching moment in the history of education. It was made into the film, "The Miracle Worker" which was so compelling that the actors playing Anne and Helen were both awarded academy awards.

Helen describes herself as living in a 'no world' and the spark that brought her alive was the word 'water.' This is how she remembered that event.

"I prefer to call the little being [I was] 'phantom' governed only by animal impulses and not often those of a docile beast.



One morning phantom would not sit down to learn her words which meant nothing to her and kicked over the table. When Annie put the table back and insisted on continuing the lesson, phantom's fist flew like lightning and knocked out two of Annie's teeth" (p. 33).

"But at last, on April 5, 1880, almost exactly a month after her arrival, Annie reached phantom's consciousness with the word 'water.' This happened at the well-house. Phantom had a mug in her hand and while she held it under the spout Annie pumped water into it, and as it gushed over the hand that held the mug, she kept spelling w-a-t-e-r into the other hand. Suddenly phantom understood the meaning of the word, and her mind began to flutter tiny wings of flame. Caught up in the first joy she had felt since her illness, she reached eagerly to Annie's ever-ready hand, begging for new words to identify whatever objects she touched. Spark after spark of meaning flew through her mind until her heart was warmed, and affection was born. From the well-house there walked two enraptured beings calling each other 'Helen' and 'teacher.' Surely such moments of delight contain a fuller life than an eternity of darkness" (p. 37).

Joseph Lash writing in 1997 tells about the same events from Annie's perspective:

"In Annie's letter to Mrs. Hopkins about the 'miracle', she wrote: "she has learned that everything has a name and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know...Helen got up this morning like a radiant fairy. She flitted from object to object, asking the name of everything and kissing me for very gladness. Last night when I got into bed, she stole into my arms of her own accord and kissed me for the first time and I thought my heart would burst, so full was it of joy" (p. 35).

Might this famed 'teaching moment' both inspire and provoke us. Let me race ahead in time and tell you an abbreviated version- I will tell you the story of the second wonderfulness inquiry which took place as I mentioned in the mid 90s. If Natalie is right, there are some parallels and I only wish I had known more about Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan so I might have asked her at the time. But it is only recently I realised my shortcomings.





Marie had forewarned me over the telephone of what I might expect when I met her husband, Jim, and Billy, their eleven-year-old son. Billy was in trouble in just about every arena of his life. He had been kicked out of his school class, after his teacher had previously taken to shunning him by either having him face the back wall or turning his back to him on any other occasion. Jim, by the same token, had renounced Billy as his son and was now considering seeking legal advice to write him out of his will. The Auckland regional authority, which runs the public transport here, was also going to the extraordinary lengths of taking legal action against him to deny him the right to travel on their buses. How could a young person be in quite so much trouble? Marie was so perplexed and distressed by the very telling of Billy's 'troubles' that she began to sob inconsolably. I tried to reassure her as best I could that 'nothing was impossible' when at last she'd asked: 'do you think Billy is a hopeless case?'

Meeting them at my front door was odd. As Marie led her 'family' inside, Jim and Billy avoided each other as best they could, refusing to make eye contact with one another. I led them to my interview room. Jim rushed in ahead of everyone else and started scrutinizing the paintings on my wall. No one had ever deliberated over these paintings with such interest before. Marie followed, distressed and humiliated, taking her seat and then began to plead with Billy who was reluctant to enter my room. Finally, he did, sitting where his mother indicated by her side, but couldn't meet my eyes, or anyone else's. It was only after Billy had committed himself to his seat that Jim immediately turned away from examining the paintings and deliberately seated himself so Billy was concealed from his view.

As is my custom, I commenced our meeting with as much hospitality as I could, given the pall that had fallen over the room. "Look, I don't want you to think I don't consider Billy's trouble as a matter of great concern." I then turned towards Billy and said: "However, Billy, if I were you, I wouldn't want to meet a stranger my age through the trouble the 'trouble' has got you in. Jim and Marie, do you mind if I get to know your son through how you knew him before he got tangled up in all this trouble?" Billy, for the first time, raised his downcast eyes to meet mine and stared at me, somewhat bemused, through his Harry Potter glasses. Both Jim and Marie, not knowing quite what to expect, gave their consent for me



to proceed with my enquiries. What follows is a somewhat abbreviated version of that half hour long conversation.

I turned first to Marie, “Marie, what would you like me to know about Billy that proves to you that you are a wonderful mother, or at least the kind of mother you dreamed you would be when you were pregnant with Billy?” That caught Marie off guard and seemed to break her out of her dejection. Her response took some time and consideration. But when she did, she mentioned his kindness. “Could you tell me one story about Billy’s kindness that would be worth 100 stories? That from such a story I would really understand what you mean when you say he is kind.” She responded quickly, telling a story of how when some refugee children from the former Yugoslavia came to his school, he had gone out of his way to befriend a classmate, despite the barriers of language. And he had even gone so far as to invite this boy home to meet his family. Her disconsolation now gave way to some measure of pride.

I refused to leave the matter there. Turning to Jim, I asked: “Jim, is he by any chance a chip of Marie’s block?” His smile, tinged with pride, told me I had guessed right. Responding to my enquiries, he told of all “the lame dogs” she had cared for, including an elderly neighbour for whom she provided meals on a daily basis. When I asked Marie if it was an accident that Billy showed such kindnesses to his Kosovar classmate, she was willing to admit that that was unlikely. In fact, when I asked Jim, he said that it would have been entirely predictable that Billy should grow up showing such kindness, having witnessed his mother’s caring ways day in and day out.

It was early in the year and hot. Jim was wearing a very short sleeved t-shirt. Noticing a tattoo of a military regiment on Jim’s shoulder, I asked if he had been in the military. In fact, he had and took great pride in his current involvement with young people in the sea cadets.

“Jim, do you drink down at the returned Serviceman’s Club every now and again?” He did. “You know when your mates are bragging about their sons and it comes around to your turn, what would you brag about Billy before he got into so much trouble?” He thought for a moment and said: “his creativity!” “Jim, by any



chance did he inherit that from you?” Jim was pensive and then shook his head before some sort of gleam of recognition came to him. “Not from me, but from my brother. You won’t believe this, but he makes his living as a potter and sculptor selling ceramic sheep shit!” For those of you in the audience who are unfamiliar with sheep excrement, they are pellets about the size of olive pits and they are excreted in abundance on numerous occasions throughout any day.

“What?” I asked, but immediately considered the 30,000 million sheep in New Zealand, roughly how many sheep pellets a sheep produces per day and how the ministry of research and development might consider turning these into a very fast buck. I speculated about this, and everyone laughed. Jim brought me down to earth on this get rich quick scheme for New Zealand. “No, he lives in Yorkshire and people buy these ceramic sheep pellets as some sort of joke. And you know it brings in enough money for him to be a real sculptor.” Well, we all had to admit that this certainly bore all the hallmarks of creativity, and by now even Billy was joining in the fun. I then pursued the earlier matter regarding Billy, but once again referencing my questions to Jim. “Jim, how does Billy take after his uncle in terms of family creativity?” Jim no longer shunned Billy but spoke kindly of the storytelling and paintings that he had been doing since he was ‘just a toddler.’ “Have you saved any of his early works?” I asked. Jim looked momentarily regretful as he admitted that in his repudiation of Billy as his son, he had recently destroyed them.

Billy, for the first time, interjected and what he had to say first confused and then stunned us into a momentary silence. He said: “Let’s go home. This is over. I have just stopped all my trouble. There will be no more of it.” Marie and Jim both turned towards Billy, looking as if they were hearing things, and continued to gape at him. I tried to save the day by asking Billy what he could possibly mean by making such assertions. “Billy, are you trying to have your mother and father believe that you have renounced all the trouble? After all, Billy, there is not much more trouble an eleven-year-old could get into from what your mother told me over the phone. “What is the trouble?” I asked, “Screaming!” He told me. Marie nodded her head to reassure me that Billy could and did scream. Billy looked at me as if I wasn’t getting his point. “Yah, it’s over, I’m not going to do it anymore.” I turned to Jim and Marie: “Surely, Billy has got quite a job on his hands to prove



to both you and his school-teacher that he means it?" They agreed that this would be quite an undertaking on Billy's part. "Billy, do you think everyone will just take your word for it, or do you think you will have to prove it to them?" Billy admitted that it was certainly unlikely that either his father or his school-teacher would believe him, although he thought he had a better chance with his mother.

I then asked Billy if he was serious, would he be willing to write a letter to that effect to the teacher who had recently expelled him. I assured him that I would be only too happy to give him a hand preparing it. "Billy, I'll ask you questions and type up your letter. Marie and Jim, would you be willing to act as witnesses to such a document?" Billy willingly joined in such a project; his parents were still baffled, but agreed to go along with it letter to Mr. Smith

Dear Mr. Smith,

As you know, I, my mother and father went to meet David Epston.

At the beginning of the year when I met you, I thought this year was going to be really fun. You were a new teacher. I was at a new school.

And I believed I had left my reputation for being a class nuisance behind me.

I wasn't surprised though when the problem came with me to Brown's Bay Intermediate School. I tried to stop it but failed.

But now I am almost twelve and feel I am starting to grow up and I now want to get a good reputation and be a good student.

Don't worry, I have too good a sense of humour to become a nerd.

The kind of reputation I want is just not a kid who is always bad. Still, I don't want to be squeaky clean either. I started off good this year and I wish it had stayed that way, but it didn't.



I realise too my annoying habits look like they have made you give up on me. I didn't realise how bad they had got.

I woke up to it on that day when you sent me outside and came out and had a talk to me about how my behaviour has got to stop. That got through to me and I tried to improve, but it still didn't work.

Believe it or not, I need to put some pressure on myself to put pressure on the problem. And what's more it should be me who puts pressure on me, rather than you having to do that.

Here's what I am planning to do and wonder if you would lend me a hand here (that's all I ask!).

First of all, could you decide how many slip-ups you can put up with in a week and let me know the number? Please remember that I have a good sense of humour and lots to say so don't expect me to be perfect overnight. I believe that, although it won't happen overnight, it will happen!

Say I go over the limit you have for me slipping up (do you mind letting me know privately how I am doing and how many slip-ups I've done), I will donate 50 cents per slip-up to the class money jar from my allowance. At least if I am going to be a class nuisance, I can make amends by paying the class back. And if I can't face up to doing this myself, just contact my parents and they will send you my allowance.

After the 10th slip-up and my allowance is all gone, I will need to put even more pressure on myself to put pressure on the problem. I think it is far better to put pressure on myself than on you and the class. This pressure will need to be fierce! You know how much I hate running! Well, I want you to see to it that I run twice around the field for every slip-up. That should do it! And if not, I will apologise in front of the class.

My parents have more ideas, but I have told them I don't need them. I don't need them to put pressure on me; I'll do it myself.



Yours sincerely,

Billy.

P.S. Although David typed this letter and asked me most of the questions, the answers are all mine.

Witnessed by Jim and Marie on March 21, 1995, in Auckland, New Zealand.

Marie and Jim dutifully signed the document when I sent them a copy before Billy took it to school to give his teacher.

We met a month later as planned. This time the family entered my premises in concert with Billy who was flourishing a letter in his hand. He couldn't wait to hand it over to me. However, matters hadn't turned out exactly as I might have hoped. Mr. Smith refused to read Billy's letter and continued his shunning of Billy. However, Billy had been placed in an alternative classroom with Ms. Jones. And consequently, it was a letter from her that Billy was brandishing.

Still, we decided it was reasonable to address the letter that documented this meeting to them both. The letter was composed in the same manner as the first, although this time Jim and Marie played a far larger part and I authored it and subsequently signed it.

Dear Mr. Smith and Ms. Jones,

I met with Billy and his parents, Marie and Jim on April 19. I would like to thank you both for your respective contributions to Billy taking both himself and his reputation seriously, both at home and at school.

Mr. Smith, from what Billy had to say, he understands that he had worn out any welcome with you. He regrets that, but nevertheless, it seems a blessing in disguise. Why I say that is that I believe his wish to redeem himself in your eyes was behind what I take to have been quite a come-back, if your letter of April 15 is anything to go by, Ms. Jones.

I am quoting your report Ms. Jones.



“I have seen no evidence of 1) back chat to his teacher, 2) out of his desk distracting others and 3) arguments with other pupils. I am enjoying his company in room 15 and find his academic work well up to standards set here.”

I think you both have a right to know how this came about.

You might be interested to know that both Jim and Marie report a 50% improvement in his home behaviour and accordingly are quite delighted. They described him as “calmer and happier.” What really thrilled them is that once again they can reason with him and feel that he “has opened up.” You may not be aware of the fact that Jim had become somewhat desperate about his son and was considering severing his relationship with him for good. Marie wept, commenting that she felt she was getting Billy back. Jim and Billy seem to have reunited and are once again enjoying each other’s company. Billy had been aware that “Dad didn’t want to do much with me.”

I suspected that Billy was pretty determined to redeem his reputation when we met around a month ago, but I would not have predicted it would have shown up as quickly as Billy claims it did. He himself puts it down to: “It happened on the second day. I was trying to start off good and carry on being good. And I’ve done it so far.” I think the best explanation Billy had for this was his realization that “I was trying to fight my habit. I sometimes automatically did but when I was going to go off the deep end, I held myself back and it worked...at times I have been able to say no and walk off and go to the library. I have stopped screaming, because they know I can get into trouble if I scream. They are starting to lose interest and leaving me alone.”

According to Marie and Jim, what has impressed them most about the developments relating to their son is that he has opened up and talked. Billy confirmed this quite proudly: “I can now talk openly to my parents...with them I am trying to be good. This means I can open up to them more.” Marie commented that “It was lovely”; Jim concurred: “It was as if someone turned the light on!” Billy had the last word in our discussion,



and it certainly was a thoughtful one: “Turning twelve changed me. I said to myself, let’s try to make the most of the term, so I can leave a good reputation behind me when I go to high school next year.”

I would like to thank you both for your help in this matter, even though you both went about it in different ways. Mr. Smith, I believe taking Billy as seriously as you did woke him up; Ms. Jones, I believe your welcome made it possible for him to redeem his reputation, something that he had decided he wanted for himself.

Yours sincerely,

David Epston

The sociologist, Richard Sennett in his book “Respect in a World of Inequality” wrote:

“Respect is an expressive performance. That is, treating others with respect doesn’t just happen, even with the best will in the world; to convey respect means finding the words and gestures that make it feel convincing...the expressive acts, when they occur, reveal something about how character takes form: character as that aspect of self capable of moving others” (p. 207-208).

Michael White (personal communication) put in another way:

“We become fascinated with them; and they become fascinated with themselves.”

My intention in this address has been to hopefully provide you with a means, aside from your own, that has allowed me and colleagues to come to know young people as ‘characters’ or perhaps better put ‘promising characters’ given their ‘character’ has by no means been fully established.

Let me reiterate. Over the course of my career, I have spoken to many people as they reflect back over the sources of inspiration for their ‘moral character.’ It will



perhaps be no surprise to you that after parents and extended family, teachers come third. They usually begin: “If it wasn’t for my teacher at my high school, I would never have...”

I wish you all could be afforded a Teacher Appreciation Day at your schools like the one I described. I have no doubt so many of you deserve such recognition. And once again, I thank Linda Metcalf for providing me with this opportunity to speak with you today.

I myself thought back to my school days and fondly remembered ‘Red’ David, known as such for his brilliant red hair, the then principal at Peterborough Collegiate and High School in my hometown and Roger Green, my professor of Anthropology at the University of Auckland, two teachers who changed the course of my life.

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