



**Enchanting our Practices: A Narrative Approach with Children<sup>1</sup>**  
**“Trame Narrative Practice”, Sion, Switzerland**  
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What if we were to dive into the white rabbit’s burrow  
to meet the children we work with and to gather their stories of wonderfulness  
in order to tame the ferocious Problems that seize the best of them.  
Let’s imagine how we can co-create magical, inspiring, creative conversations  
with families, which can contribute to restoring their dignity.  
Welcome to Wonderland!

Introduction

The ability of children to navigate a world inhabited by imaginary creatures that they create themselves, has always fascinated me.

On the playground, the playhouse attached to a slide becomes a pirate ship, and the rubber tiles on the ground to cushion falls become dolphins and whales swimming alongside the ship.

At home, the space behind the sofa in the family room becomes the cave of the wolf who lurks in the shadows ready to jump on one of the little pigs played by a willing sibling. The grandfather's slippers can magically transform a child into a giant or Tom Thumb in the ogre's boots.

We are invited to listen to stories of our young wizards and enchanters about the possibilities that they can imagine, the way they can transform reality. There is no end to the stories they can tell.

Yet, in our professional practice, we do not often make use of this talent when we start working with a child and his/her<sup>2</sup> family. When we meet a family for the first time, we open the door of the waiting room and find an almost tangible unease in the room: the child’s head is down, his/her gaze looks up beneath his/her eyebrows or from the corner of an eye, he/she refuses to say hello despite the parents’ insistence, or to stand up and accompany the parents out of the room. When we are sitting together in the consulting room and start the conversation addressing the child, he/she often does not want to explain to the professional why he/she is here today. So we turn to the parents and address them, and the session begins.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the address I gave during the 3rd French-speaking Days of Narrative Practices in Bordeaux (France) on June 4, 2018. Thanks a lot to Kate Lindley for the translation from French to English and to Peggy Sax for your kind revision.

<sup>2</sup> This article gives pride of place to the epicene language, a true way, in my opinion, to inspire more choice and respect!





Let me invite you to look at the situation from the child's eyes, from the other side of the mirror. Let us imagine the following description, told by a child. We will call him/her Charlie.

*Daddy and Mommy told me that we were going to meet someone, even though I did not really understand why or what exactly we were going to do with that person. Perhaps I had been told that we have to go. Because things just can't go on any longer the way they are, that my parents feel helpless in changing the course of things, and that because of this or that behavior, the whole family is suffering.*

*I am therefore well aware that it is my fault that we are going and my parents are not looking forward to going. I know that my parents are making an enormous effort to go, at least that is what I have heard them saying.*

*When we get there it looks pretty nice, even slightly welcoming. There are books and games for children. It looks strangely familiar, similar to the pediatrician's waiting room, but I know that trips there are not always very nice. On top of it my parents have that serious look that says "this is not going to be much fun".*

*The person we are coming to see, this person I don't know, comes into the waiting room. She/he looks pretty friendly. But what if it is a trap? I think I should be suspicious and careful.*

*The stranger invites me to go into another room that is not like the pediatrician's and to choose a chair or a place on the sofa. I am impressed by this room. There are big books and plants like at Granny's that we have to be careful not to knock over. The lady/man sits in front of us, legs crossed, with a file in his/her hands.*

*Oh goody, I-spy games and paper and pencils to draw! I'm saved! I want to start straight away. "Not so fast," says Mom, "we're here to talk. Come back and explain what's going on."*

*I can see that I cannot run away, so I go as far as I can to get away from the stranger. I climb up on Mom or Dad's knees with my face against their shoulder. Or I sink into a big chair, which is too big, but comfy. I pull my legs up against my tummy and put my face down on my knees.*

*My parents are nervous. I know because Mom has that strange silly smile on her face and she is playing with her hands. Dad pouts and looks out the window as if he was pretending he were outside, anywhere but here.*





*The stranger asks me if I know why I am here. I might, but I'm not sure if I want to explain it to him/her. In any case, I'm not sure I understand correctly what has happened and whether it is because of that, that we have to be here.*

*The stranger seems to lose interest in me and speaks to my parents. I am left alone! But what I hear them saying is not nice. It is really not nice at all! I am being described by my parents in ways that make me feel bad. They are telling this stranger about everything that has gone wrong lately. She/he asks them what it was like when I was younger, whether things have changed or not. She/he asks them about what they have already tried with me and whether it worked. They look at me, judge me, blame me. They wonder what's wrong with me. I feel very small and I would like to disappear.*

Isn't that a terrifying story? We are far from the pirate ship race, the wolf's cave or the boots of seven leagues. Where is Charlie's creative potential, his/her talent for imagining things? Is it hidden from our sight, lurking somewhere waiting to be discovered? What if we were to start all over again and differently? What if we were to discover Charlie's wonderfulnesses before we address the Problem?

#### The "Wonderfulnesses" of Children

Freeman, Epston and Lobovits (1997) propose that we "get to know the child outside of the problem" (p.34). They suggest to not let the problem define the identity of a child, or impose the way of approaching the situation through a problem. They question the practice of looking at the child and describing him/her through the filter of the Problem.

In their recent book *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland* (2016), David Marsten, David Epston and Laurie Markham propose that we start the first session with a "Wonderfulness Interview". These interviews invite us to inquire about the "wonderfulnesses" of the child in order to give a different tone to the conversation. The intention is to get to know the child through his/her unique, individual and wonderful interests, passions, talents, strengths, etc. Often it turns out these "wonderfulnesses" will be of great help to face the problem when it is finally invited to make an appearance.

But it is often not enough to have the intention of seeking out a child's wonderfulnesses to put in to practice with a family. Problems seem to come up quickly, and families are quick to remind us of them, constantly talking them up (and talking the child down). This means we will need to make our intention and practice explicit, clearly informing the family about this approach.

"We are here to discuss a difficulty that is really bothering you right now. I am interested in hearing about that difficulty, but before I do that I would like to propose that I find out more about you. I'd like to leave the Problem to the side. Is that ok with you?"





This exercise can be quite difficult to follow through on because the Problem tends to dominate all conversation and is brought up again and again. It may be useful to suggest that we move decisively away from talk of the Problem, that we lose interest in the Problem for the time being. Here are some ways of proposing that:

- "Would you agree to take a vacation away from the Problem and bring some fresh air into our discussion?" (Freeman et al., 1997, p.36)
- "I hear that the Crises are very present at this point in time. Would you agree to put them on that empty chair and we will come back to them later? In the meantime, I can get to know Charlie a little better away from these Crises."
- "Fears have taken up a big place in Charlie's life and make you very worried about him. Could we imagine putting the Fears in a box while I find out about something else?"

Kay Ingamells, a family therapist in New Zealand, advises her clients that the first session will be entirely devoted to getting to know each other and that the Problem will not be addressed in the first session.

Here are some other ways to initiate this "Wonderfulness Interview" (Marsten et al., 2016):

- Invite parents to introduce their child based on what is unique, fabulous, wonderful about him/her. As they describe their child's important abilities, propose names for them, such as: "the right dose of courage", "contagious generosity", or "overflowing imagination"
- Ask them to illustrate these wonderfulnesses with a story for each one (i.e Landscape of Action questions: Bruner, 2002; White, 2007)
- Ask them how long these marvels have been around, "When did you notice this in your child for the first time?"
- Ask them if there are other people who have witnessed this wonderfulness, "Do his/her friends see this too? Who else is aware that this is important to her/him? If this or that person (alive or dead) was here with us today, what would they think / tell about it? (i.e Re-remembering questions: White, 2007; Crettenand & Soulignac, 2014; Crettenand, 2018)
- Ask them to trace the genealogy of this wonderfulness, "Does this quality come from his/her mother, father, grandparents, an uncle or an aunt?"
- Inquire whether they are inspired to be like their child, "How does your daughter/son inspire you to live your life differently? Could you tell a story where you used your child as a role model to help you out in a situation? When does your child surprise you so much that you want to be like him/her?"



Sometimes, the Problem has taken up so much place in the family's life and caused so much suffering and conflict that it is difficult for parents to remember what is wonderful about their child. In cases like that, it may be useful to think of a person who knows the child very well and looks lovingly on him/her, someone who can "linger over the particularity of the other " to use an expression of Bakhtin (as cited in Freeman et al., 1997, p.64,). I am reminded of Marilyn Frye's famous "loving eye" quoted by Epston (2014, p.7):

"The 'loving eye' knows the independence of the other. It is an eye of one who knows that to see the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests. Under the 'loving eye', people who lay claim to certain kinds of knowledges aren't unauthorized or de-legitimated because they are not regarded to be in a position to know".

You could also ask the child, "If your pet, your cuddly toy, your lucky charm could talk, what would they say about what is most enjoyable about you? (Choose a characteristic) What story could he/she tell about it?"

In conclusion, I invite you to try this approach out. Imagine finding out what is wonderful about the child you meet and being enchanted<sup>3</sup> by him/her and the family.

#### A Problem Child or a Family Facing a Problem?

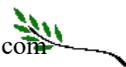
Aside from those first decisive moments of meeting a family, we can look at other moments when we might set a different tone that can "change everything" for the work we do. I want to talk about the narrative way of looking at our approach and the families, beset by difficulties, who consult us. We are aware of our responsibility in the way we approach our work, how we engage with others in conversation, and what it would mean to propose a different and uncommon perspective.

The child is often "pathologized" in the speech of those around him. He/she can be seen as the source of the suffering and hardships of the family. In other words, they are a "problematic child". The time of the typologies is not over yet since every few years the general public is informed and invited by many popular psychology books to flush out the "manipulators", the "narcissists" and other "toxic" people whether they be their parents, siblings or partners in their everyday surroundings.

The systemic approach offers a broader perspective. It invites us to consider the family as a whole, which has adopted certain dysfunctional behaviors or ways of communicating. These symptoms are acted out by the child in service of the family.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, in the original French version of this article, there is a play on words about the word "Enchanted". In French, "Enchanté-e" means "Nice to meet you" and "Enchanted"





The narrative approach proposes an epistemological turn, if you like, a further step. It is neither the child nor the family who are the Problem. "The Problem is the Problem," according to Michael White's term.

We have moved from the Problematic Child, to the Problematic Family, to the Problematic Problem (Crettenand, 2017).

In the next part, I propose that we invite children into conversations that encourage his/her imagination and creativity. We can help families to engage differently with the Problem and find ingenious ways of dealing with it. I will draw on a type of knowledge, Carnival Knowledge, and then illustrate it with a story of my own.

### Carnival Knowledge

In a recent lecture in San Diego, David Epston (2018) explained what characterized his and Michael White's intention in their first lecture on the Narrative approach that they gave in 1985. He said they were attracted by a particular type of knowledge. They drew on the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin's term, "Carnival Knowledge."

Do you know the Carnival? In the Valais, where I come from, it is an ancestral tradition. We spend a lot of time, each year, carefully preparing our costumes, the floats for the street processions and the particular type of music, "Guggenmusik", played by the costumed bands. In Sion, Switzerland, the Carnival begins with an official ceremony, where the mayor hands over the keys of the town to the Carnival, and therefore to the people, and is relieved of his official functions for the week.

Bakhtin describes the time of Carnival during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as:

"The triumph of a sort of provisional liberation from the dominant truth and the existing regime, from the one-off abolition of all hierarchical relations, privileges, rules and taboos. It was the authentic feast of time, that of becoming, alternation and renewal... [All people] were considered equal, and there was a particular form of free, familiar contact between individuals separated in normal life by the insurmountable barriers of their condition, their wealth, their employment, their age and family status" (as cited in Shaw, 2007, pp.5-6).

It is a way of dethroning official power, or the dominant discourses, and shaking up the taken-for-granted truths. I wonder, who more than a child deserves to be crowned King or Queen of the Carnival?

While in interaction with a child, one realizes more than ever the performative side of language, or "when to say is to do" to borrow the expression of British linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin (as cited in Lambrette, 2017). It is also one of the goals pursued by therapeutic questioning in



different therapeutic approaches (strategic, narrative, etc.).

Let me tell you a story about my daughter Olive and her friend, Grinchy (in French: Grinchouille), and how we live together.

First of all, let me introduce you to Grinchy. He entered our family life when my daughter, Olive, was about two years old and "NO!" was extremely popular word in our house. When Olive was close to frustration, Grinchy would make her explode. We learned quickly when he was about to make an appearance and what to do to curb his appetite. Many a frustrating situation for Olive has been escalated, with the help of Grinchy, into a full-blown scene. However, thanks to our training in outwitting him, many such situations have been avoided. Grinchy has grown up with Olive and continues to accompany us. We talk about him frequently and our relationship has evolved, as do his ruses as well as our ability to deal with him.

As Grinchy is such a part of our lives, and I wanted to know more about Olive's pal, I recently asked her what Grinchy looked like. At four and a half years of age, Olive told me he was pink, her favorite color, and then mimed his gestures and facial expression (arms crossed, pout, frown, gaze looking up from underneath his eyebrows). She explained to me what he says, for example, "when the parents say we will go out to do something, he says, "no! I want to stay home!" When I asked Olive if he looked more like a character out of a cartoon or an animal, she said an animal. It was impressive to watch her look around in the room to pick up cues and details, which she then included in her description. Listening to her and talking with her, I was convinced that Grinchy looked like his description that she was constructing in that moment. He had three arms and six legs, rather like a pink ant. He lived in one of her ears. Sometimes he lived in the right ear, sometimes the left. She never knew in advance on which side he would pop up.

A recent appearance of Grinchy was on a rainy day in March. It was late afternoon and I went to the nursery to pick up my three children: Olive, Léon (two and a half years old) and Eglantine (8 months old). Something told me that Grinchy was around that day. I took the children's rubber boots and the biggest umbrellas. Olive and Léon had fun with the umbrellas at the bus stop while we waited. The bus was very late. When it finally arrived, we climbed on and got off at the bus stop closest to home, but a fifteen-minute walk up a hill. I put Léon and Eglantine in the stroller, protected from the rain. It was late and I knew that Eglantine was getting hungry. With Olive walking beside me, I was tense, knowing that this was an ideal time for Grinchy to make his presence felt. Our walk, a gentle climb up the hill, is long for a small person.

And then Olive tells me, "I don't want to walk anymore."

I try to encourage her, but I can feel that resistance is growing stronger. She tells me, "my legs hurt." If Grinchy were to appear now, he will have her rolling in the puddles on the ground, screaming. I imagine Olive soaked to her skin, cold and shivering. I check the time, knowing that





quickly, very quickly, I must think of something. I tell her, "I sense that Grinchy is with us. If you want, why don't we invite him for supper when we get home? We can have a slumber party, like we did with Noemie. We can listen to music and dance and tell stories, how about that?" Olive looks at me amazed and then begins to tell me about her day at the nursery while we finish our walk home. Carnavalesque knowledge, turn-arounds and role-plays have a bright future ahead of them!

### Concluding remarks

In line with the theme of this article, let me propose an alternative conclusion which, I hope, will resonate with you and prolong our conversation. First of all, I'd like to hear what Charlie, whom we met earlier, has to say:

*My path is hard, the slope is steep. I remember the way it used to be. I remember having fun, laughing and looking forward to doing things. I remember my parents' gaze upon me. They looked at me, proudly, with love and reassurance.*

*Today, I feel saddled with this incredible weight upon my shoulders, a weight I can't get rid of. I no longer have my parents' gaze which illuminated my path. I walk in the dark, not knowing how to move ahead at my age. I feel alone and as if a part of me has been ripped away from what my parents used to see in me.*

*"But I am still here," I shout, "I am still myself!"*

*I am stuck behind this luggage, which is too heavy and too big, and hides me. Today I am no longer that laugh that rings out. I am no longer that spontaneity that jumps up. I am this heavy burden.*

*Will I perhaps forget my own name at some point? What name will I then take? Surely the name of my burden. And from then on, when I am called by that name, I won't be me anymore.*

*Unless...*

*Unless someone notices what I can see in the clouds that dot the sky, or can hear what the wind in the branches of my tree whispers to me, or remembers that once upon a time, I was able to make my parents proud and happy.*

*Perhaps one day, we will meet and I may smile at you. I will tell you about myself. I will tell you the story about the kingdom at the bottom of my garden and the inhabitants who only I*



*can see. I will let you hear my laughter, and you will see, that it will make you want to laugh with me. And I will tell you where I was hoping to go when I took this path.*

*What comes next remains to be written<sup>4</sup>.*

I would like to end with a poem<sup>5</sup> which was inspired by writing this article, and tells of some of my intentions, dreams and wishes for working with children and their families.

*Once upon a time there was a child  
Who was he/she really?  
Intriguing, investigative, intrepid?  
To find him/her  
Slip down  
Into the burrow of the  
Fast white rabbit  
A child in Wonderland  
In his/her search, all his/her senses awake  
Where is he/she hiding?  
This happy child stuck  
Behind the Problem  
Which sticks to his/her skin  
Giving him/her such a pale look  
Child in Suffering  
Under influence  
Listen to his/her cuddly toy  
Who remembers  
How this child is a wonder!  
Weave with these golden threads  
The plot of a story  
Fresh. Rosy smile.  
Rich with his/her wonderfulnesses  
Let's leave the Problem behind!  
Give us space! Give us oxygen!  
Child, will you be my guide?  
Allow me to follow you  
As if enchanted  
Let us take up your story  
With your own words, at your own pace*

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Nicolas Pirson, my enchanting accomplice, for inspiring this text.

<sup>5</sup> To know more about poetic tradition in narrative approach, see Christopher Behan, 2003, [Rescued Speech Poems](#); Sanni Paljakka, 2018, [A House of Good Words](#)



As you wish

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