



Exposing perfectionism: Part two of a co-research story conversation by Victoria, Chloe, Lona & David Epston

Chapter 6: The beauty of the song that accompanied it

David and Victoria explore ideas of family through co-research identities, Victoria shares a surprised reflection on how perfection dulls joyful memory, and David pauses to consider the importance of unmonitored expression

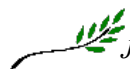
DAVID: Victoria, in a previous e-mail, you made the comment “The league has become like a family to me”. Do you mind for the sake of the league to provide some sort of rough and ready history of how the league became ‘like a family’ to you? I find that very interesting.

VICTORIA: Some of this feeling of family-ness is that the league is where I go when I feel like no one else will understand. When I first started conversing with yourself and Chloe, my contributions centred around my routines and difficulties around eating and weight etc. But fortunately for me, now I feel like Chloe is somewhat of a sister to me, as I can talk with her about anything and she is often the person to whom I talk when I cannot talk to anyone else. I feel very lucky about this, as I know that Chloe is there for me even when I feel really bad. I guess this is what I thought it might be like within a family. With Chloe, I feel some sense of connection that goes beyond two people who met through co-research projects.

The league is also a family to me in that I feel like anything I say will be heard with compassionate and non-judgmental ears. I often can’t get in touch with this knowing, as anorexia/perfectionism block it from me, but I am aware of it being there. The family sense also comes in when I think about how those in the league are working together for a common goal – to outwit and destroy the hold anorexia has over us and others it seduces.

For most of my life, I have believed that a ‘family’ is not necessarily a group of people who are linked by blood ties. I have had the privilege of being welcomed into a number of different families in my life and really value the strong bond that can exist between people who have common beliefs and ideas. I guess some would call the league a community, though this word does not convey the extent to which it is part of my life and how important it is to me.

DAVID: Victoria, if hearing the Tibetan bowl touched you in ‘deep places’, I am wondering if perfection keeps you in the wader’s end of the pool in terms of how you experience your life? Does perfection allow you to be touched at all?





VICTORIA: Perfectionism does not allow me to be ‘touched’ by much at all. It demands I maintain this staunch apathetic exterior, in case someone might think I was ‘touched’ by something or someone. Perfectionism never wants me to let on that I have been moved by anything because it would then look like I am not strong enough to resist all temptation to ‘live’ in any way. And if anyone was to know, I would have to become a professional at whatever it was I was moved by anyway. Therefore, it maintains that I can watch from a distance but must disregard anything that might move me, because I would not be able to be a professional when I tried it for the first time, so I shouldn’t bother at all.

On the other hand, perfectionism may allow me to be ‘touched’ by something, but then use this as further proof of my uselessness and inadequacy for not being as good as this person or thing that I was moved by.

DAVID: You spoke of the playing the Tibetan bowl yourself during a break in the workshop. I am wondering what you had to say to yourself and perfection in order for you to go and ‘play’? ‘Play’ is certainly a word I have never associated with perfection... have you?

VICTORIA: I think part of what made it possible for me to ‘play’ was the extent to which the leader’s words and expression had moved me. I find it hard to let go of the power of these words and the way she just expressed herself, with what appeared to be, little or no boundaries. (I am aware that this may actually not have been the case – having no boundaries, but she certainly exhibited a way of being that is much freer than I ever imagine being able to be).

Now that I have said this, I actually meant in my original comment that I ‘played’ the Tibetan bowl during the lunch break. I did get abused by perfectionism for not being able to play it ‘properly’ or as well as the other people who were sitting with me, but the sound just totally captivated me

DAVID: Would you say ‘hard labour’ and perfection go together?

VICTORIA: For me, definitely.

DAVID: What goes with anti-perfection? Play I know, but what else do you think?

VICTORIA: Relaxing. I say this because this has been virtually impossible for me over the past little while. And taking a holiday. I struggle with perfectionism’s claims that unless I am working towards something, a degree or trying to save the world for



example, then I am not doing anything worthwhile. That I am not entitled to do anything for simple pleasure or relaxation because I am not a good enough person, – I'm sure you've heard this all before David. Perfectionism seems to sell people the same lines.

DAVID: You say perfectionism 'jumped in' when you were playing the bowl, but how did you reject its allegations that if you could not play it as well as the leader did, you were some sort of 'loser'?

VICTORIA: I think this had to do with how moved I was by the pure and magnificent sound the bowl gives out, the beauty of the song that accompanied it.

DAVID: Why didn't you invidiously compare yourself to the leader playing the bowl, as perfection would certainly have enjoyed you being deprived of this relationship, wouldn't it have?

VICTORIA: David, I did and still do compare my playing to that of the leader... to the point where I was too shy to really say anything to her during the workshop. Even though I would really like to talk more with her about her musical therapeutic journey, I don't feel confident enough to do so, so I won't.

David, upon reflection, I have my suspicions that perfectionism has dulled my recollections of the day because I did enjoy it so much. Perfectionism seems to have this effect on my memories; it makes sure I only remember (and frequently re-live) experiences that confirm my place in this world as a loser.

DAVID: Victoria, you spoke of an experience after the workshop of playing your guitar in the form of 'unmonitored expression'. I am wondering what you meant by this.

VICTORIA: During the workshop, the instructor showed us some techniques to use with the guitar and with our voice that allowed pure unmonitored expression of emotion through sound. This involved just strumming on the guitar and opening your mouth and letting whatever sound was there out. This is what I was referring to when I was referring to 'unmonitored expression'.

DAVID: Would you say that 'unmonitored expression' embodies everything perfection hates? After all, doesn't perfection have you 'watch yourself' and every expression you make? Isn't perfection a form of surveillance that never ceases, even when you are asleep?

VICTORIA: It does monitor (and judge inadequate) absolutely everything I do. I even dream





that I can't do anything well enough and that others are laughing at me when I try out new things. Perfectionism certainly has its teeth sunk well in when it invades my subconscious while I am sleeping.

DAVID: Can you describe for us what it was like for you to utter a 'pure unmonitored expression of emotion'? Wouldn't have perfectionism had assessed it as 'good', 'bad' or 'medium'?

VICTORIA: Well, I went away, down the bottom of my garden so no one could hear me, and yes, perfectionism did have me monitor/grade my attempts at expression. But I think that my interest and curiosity in this area/field was too intense to be overruled by perfectionism entirely.

This is an interesting observation. I wonder if the degree to which I am interested/curious about a topic, influences how much room perfectionism has to slip into my experiencing of it. Maybe if something speaks to my spirit – as this music did – then it is more difficult for perfectionism to poison the experience for me.

DAVID: When playing your guitar without heeding to perfectionism's rules and performance requirements Victoria, did you have a sense, however fleeting, of what living your life uncommonly might be like?

VICTORIA: I wouldn't go as far as to call this living life 'uncommonly' David, but it did make me curious to explore this further. In fact, the whole workshop strengthened my longing for a life without perfectionism's crippling input.

Interestingly, I find yoga often has this impact on me as well. Unfortunately, perfectionism/anorexia have convinced me that I am too fat to go to classes, so this is an avenue that I am not able to explore further right now. I would like for this to be different, so I may try and work on it when I have the energy to (but again I can hear perfectionism laughing at this suggestion, as it does not believe I'll be any good at it since I have not been for so long. Perfectionism never misses a beat, does it?)

Chapter 7: Able to recognize the horrors

David returns to questions about living a 'life uncommon' in resisting perfection, and Victoria shares the significance of witnessing Chloe's struggles and heroics against anorexia

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned meeting a number of people at this workshop who are "as crazy and as passionate about things as I am". I am wondering if it might be





possible that those others out there are not 'as crazy' but as 'uncommon' as you?

VICTORIA: This is an intriguing point David. I do find myself drawn to people who are a bit 'crazy/uncommon'. It is interesting though in that there probably are quite a few 'crazy' people out there in the world, but not many have with this craziness, a depth of compassion and ability to appreciate the important things in life. Having said this, I feel very lucky to have a number of these 'uncommon' people in my life.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say that it is perfection's ambition that you look like, sound like, be like everyone else – to be a kind of common denominator of a person?

VICTORIA: I find this an interesting question also David, as it does not fit with the role perfectionism has taken in my life in the past; it has focused mostly on strengthening the hold of anorexia in my life. In my experience, perfectionism and anorexia go hand in hand and I sometimes wonder if anorexia is, in fact, another way that perfectionism can wreck havoc on my mind and body (and vice versa). Anorexia has never wanted me to be 'common'. It has always wanted me to be the best at everything – especially at dying. Perfectionism always wants me to be the best at everything too, but I must also remain invisible to some degree, as drawing attention to myself is not at all approved of by perfectionism or anorexia.

There seem to be so many contradictions, which in itself makes me want to give up trying anything at all and just believe what perfectionism/anorexia tell me. Maybe this is the aim of the lose-lose situations perfectionism/anorexia keep presenting me with.

DAVID: Do you think you might be more at home out there at the slim edge of all the bell curves around norms?

VICTORIA: David, my reaction to this comment was, "I hate bell curves! These are just devices created to make 50% of all who are involved in anything fail!" Who wants to have anything to do with this? Not me! I feel the same way about norms. I want to create my own norms (!), and if this means they break the mould that I was made in... good job!

DAVID: Victoria, in relation to previous comments about norms, would you say that you have your vision when there are very obvious standards and expectations about things (e.g. 'the right way to do something')? This suggests to me that you are





creating your own visions rather than trying to see yourself through other's eyes? What do you think about this?

VICTORIA: I recall having a conversation with someone a while ago in relation to having my own 'visions'. I was talking about how I always feel like I am the person who 'rocks the boat' and who always has something to say. Also that you can pretty much guarantee that I will disagree with a lot of things that are said when I am in a workshop situation. The person's response to my concerns was, "So what?" I didn't really have an answer for this. I responded, "Well I don't want to be the one who is always making waves in professional development situations – the one who always has a different opinion". She said, "Why not?" I really couldn't answer that one either. I still can't really, which is why I'm still speaking up when I have ideas that differ from the ones presented.

DAVID: Victoria, can I ask you what you mean when you say "in my opinion, Chloe already lives 'a life uncommon'? I am pretty sure Chloe will be baffled by your assertion, but I want you to know that I am not.

VICTORIA: Wow David, where can I start? Chloe lives by what she believes in and for me, this is the essence of a 'life uncommon'. She fights for justice and against the evils of anorexia with so much passion and wisdom that it can often bring me to tears. Chloe has fought anorexia tooth and nail to claim back some of the life it has robbed her of, and this must have been a courageous and exhausting struggle. But still she makes time for others around her. She is an anti-anorexic warrior of the highest rank, and to me, this is the ultimate 'life uncommon'.

DAVID: Victoria, in an earlier email, you said "I am getting better at recognising (acts that defy perfectionism) myself" why do you think that is?

VICTORIA: Perhaps due to other people around me, pointing them out to me. Also I can now more easily identify perfectionism's voice in my life than before. Perfectionism used to be so much a part of me that I could not tell where I stopped and it began. Now I would say that I am learning to take more of my life back from it and therefore can recognise its presence more easily as this happens.

DAVID: Do you guess there would be any advantage to you and your sisters for refining this ability to recognise perfection-defying acts as time goes by?

VICTORIA: I can. Although I would say that even though I have a better awareness of perfectionism's acidic tongue in my mind, when I am not feeling very strong or





am under stress I find it almost impossible to differentiate between perfectionism's expectations of me and my own expectations me.

DAVID: Victoria, has there been a time very recently that you responded in a somewhat different way to these "blaring neon signs" that show the presence of perfectionism when you find yourself in a 'lose-lose' situation?

VICTORIA: I cannot think of a particular time. Generally, I try to think about what I want in the situation and if I can do, I will take this route. But more often than not, I have to ride the rip tide out because fighting it is too hard. I guess I will gain swimming strength as time goes on, but for now, it is ok to strategically retreat sometimes.

DAVID: Victoria, you said "I believe had I not been witness to the destruction and torture anorexia inflicted on Chloe, I would not have been able to recognize the horrors it was putting me through". Is this the 'secret weapon of narrative therapy' that you have referred to in the past? Is this why anorexia/perfection always try to cut you off from others so you will never find this out?

VICTORIA: In my experience, this is definitely one of anorexia's most powerful weapons. It makes sure I have a really low self-esteem too, so if anything happens in my life that could be taken to mean something negative about myself (even if this connection is an extremely precarious one), then it can use this with great success against me.

DAVID: Victoria, could the sisters be considered to be 'canaries in the mines', singing to warn themselves and others at the same time? Or singing to the others to warn them at the same time as being sung to, to be warned? Is this how the league works, do you think?

VICTORIA: I do think the league acts in this way. More perhaps in the second suggestion – the canaries "singing to the others to warn them at the same time as being sung to, to be warned". I say this because it is rare that anorexia/perfectionism allows an individual to place enough worth in themselves to be thought of as worthy of being warned of anything. And also, anorexia is at its most lethal when it is working away at an individual's spirit, mind and body, undetected by the victim her/himself.





Chapter 8: I think my spirit was moved

Victoria considers how sharing intimately with others through online co-research has impacted her, David inquires how Victoria parses her voice from the voice of perfection, and both arrive at a place of beauty

DAVID: Victoria, when you talked of having gained a closer relationship with Chloe over the time we have been corresponding, I am wondering if you would say that the ‘virtuality’ of the league has become realer than ‘real’?

VICTORIA: If you mean has the league taken on more meaning for me than a virtual community – yes. Chloe has become a dear friend.

DAVID: Can you see any advantages in having joined such a ‘family’ if we had met first in other circumstances e.g. a therapy group?

VICTORIA: To be honest David, if we had met in a therapy group, I would not be talking to you today. In my experience, therapy groups have been a compulsory ordeal if I wished to remain in my university program, and I don’t agree with the idea of compulsory therapy. I also disagree with forced disclosure or disclosure encouraged under pressure. I have little doubt I would have backed away very quickly if this had not been started on the net. With e-mail, I have the ability to step away if I choose, to take time out and come back when I wish.

It is important to mention that I have felt challenged at times, but this challenging seemed to be respectful and responses were never demanded. If we had met in a therapeutic group environment, I don’t think I would have been around long enough for you to remember my name (unless of course I was trying to tell the other participants that they only had to participate if they wanted to, not because the therapist asked them to)!

During our conversations, I have also been able to take comfort in the idea that these conversations between yourself, Chloe, Lona and me have been in a co-research manner, and not a personal therapeutic one. As you know, I have gained a lot of support and a significant amount of therapeutic input through these conversations, but I think that these were unexpected bonuses. I still would not call our conversations therapeutic in a formal sense. Unfortunately, put ‘group therapy’ in front of any group title, and I am out of there before the roll is called. I acknowledge that my stubbornness probably comes into play here, but this is how I react to group therapeutic situations.



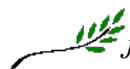


- DAVID: Victoria, you also mentioned going to the league when ‘no one else understands’. Can you say what specifically the league has the capacity to ‘understand’ that others in your life do not possess?
- VICTORIA: League members understand what it is like living through anorexia’s hell and the confusion of having to cope in life without it. They understand how absolutely everything can and is used by anorexia to make me feel like I am enormous, and regardless of how bad it is for my body and mind, that I crave the toxic high I get from starvation. And that I miss being a skeleton. They understand how I miss feeling faint and I long for the feeling of invincibility I get from not eating.
- The league members, particularly Chloe, also understand that although I crave this anorexia-driven life with everything I have, that I must choose not to do all of these things every day... and just how hard this choice is to make.
- DAVID: Victoria, I am wondering if you were able to establish a trusting connection with Chloe because you first ‘knew’ each other through anti-anorexia? And would it be fair to say that if you can know a person anti-anorexically, other ways of knowing one another comes easy after that? Just speculating here...
- VICTORIA: I would hesitate to say that I ‘know’ Chloe, David. But I can say that it was through anti-anorexia that I was given the privilege of being witness to her strength and courage and her overwhelming compassion for other people.
- DAVID: Victoria, when referring to the league, do you think the metaphor of ‘family’ is more apt than the more literal term ‘family’, either by blood or design?
- VICTORIA: Personally, the metaphorical meaning of this term is the one that I chose to value. This is probably not so for many other people though.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said that perfectionism demands you must immediately become a ‘professional’ at whatever you attempt, to justify attempting it. Do you think that this argues then for cherishing the status of an amateur-to (and in-) life?
- VICTORIA: I guess an amateur is able to have more fun and make more mistakes! But I think that through anorexia’s games and perfectionism’s mazes, I would not say I live life as an amateur, but perhaps try to live it more haphazardly than perfectionism/anorexia would like. I still feel like I have a lot of knowledge behind me that I have gained on the battlefield up until now. In addition to this, I have little doubt that there will be many more confrontations to come.





- DAVID: Would you say that perfectionism has you live your life from a distance? As if your life didn't belong to you but is the property of someone else?
- VICTORIA: Yes, this is the case for me. However, I do get to 'live' all of the hard stuff like pain, tears, grief, despair, depression, etc – but most of the fun stuff is watched from a distance. Perfectionism tells me that I am deserving of the hard stuff, but not of the fun stuff, therefore I cannot enjoy it.
- DAVID: Thinking back to your experience of hearing the Tibetan bowl 'sing', Victoria, how significant do you think it was for the exercise of your creativity that the sound of the singing bowl captivated you? In saying you were captivated, this implies to me that perfection was no longer capturing of you?
- VICTORIA: I think it was that the sound was so pure that it was able to touch my heart and soul before perfectionism had a chance to stop it. This may have been because I did not approach this workshop with a lot of enthusiasm. I have always struggled with forced creativity'. Because of this, perfectionism was already so confident that I would hate this workshop, regardless of what took place during the day, that it let it's guard down just long enough for my spirit to be awakened.
- DAVID: How is this aesthetic experience linked to the aesthetic experience you had on the pier overlooking the lake so long ago? (Reference to an earlier conversation).
- VICTORIA: On the lake, I think my spirit was moved so deeply by the beauty and the peacefulness of what surrounded me that perfectionism never got a look in. But also, I was truly exhausted and under threat of hospital admission upon my return to my hometown that I also felt like I didn't have much left. It may have been having access to this sense of desperation that allowed the experience to speak to my spirit – this may have been the last time I would have been able to sit on the jetty for a long time – forever if anorexia had its way.
- DAVID: Would you say that these were 'epiphanies' whereby you 'touched' the sublime and the sublime touched you? Victoria, does this suggest to you how the 'creative' opposes the 'rigidity(ies) of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I would say that beauty and purity definitely oppose the rigidities of perfectionism for me. And the awesome-ness of mother earth. If these come under the umbrella of 'creative', then yes, I agree.
- DAVID: Victoria, I am still very interested in how perfectionism was 'silenced' as you listened to the Tibetan bowl. How did you speak back to perfection when you





- WERE CAPTIVATED BY THE SONG OF THE BOWL?
- VICTORIA: Actually David, the sound was so pure and wonderful that I didn't have to speak back to perfectionism. It was kind of like perfectionism was on a cigarette break and the bowl started singing and was able to wrap my heart and spirit in a blanket of warm light. When perfectionism returned from its break, it was furious, but it was too late – I had already been warmed by the song.
- DAVID: Victoria, you wondered... "If the degree to which I am interested/curious about a topic influences how much room perfectionism has to slip into my experiencing of it." Are you saying the more you are engaged spiritually, this acts like an antidote to the poison of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I was saying this. But I would choose the word 'buffer', rather than 'antidote'. I say this because an antidote is necessary when someone is already infected or ill. When my spirit is engaged, like at this time, perfectionism was not able to poison my experience of the Tibetan bowl— perhaps due to the buffer.
- DAVID: Victoria, when talking about this experience, you mentioned how this acting outside of perfectionism "strengthened longing for a life without its crippling input" and that yoga also often has this effect on you.
- I have heard this said about yoga, time and time again by anti-anorexic women but do not think I have ever 'put it together'. Victoria, what is there about yoga and its classes that are antidotal to the poison of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I haven't really thought about this in the past. But off the top of my head: it may have something to do with the gentle way in which yoga allows me to treat my body. The conversations around building strength so my body will serve me for a long time and so I will be healthy, also help. And the way this form of exercise feels so good – I have never found anything that my body enjoys as much as stretching. I also love the complicated balance moves and poses that are involved. These moves/positions allow me to feel some sort of pride around the flexibility/strength of my body, a feeling I rarely get. Most of the other exercise I engage in is hard, fast and sometimes painful. Yoga can be exhausting, but it is gentle and respectful. I really enjoy the music and the mediation that is involved in yoga too – I find both of these extremely calming.
- DAVID: Victoria, would you say you are finding as time goes by and no matter how demanding it is of you, that when you detect perfectionism/anorexia's presence, you are beginning to make your protests known to them? If so, I am sure we would like to hear about each and every occasion. Isn't that how we will 'build'





- VICTORIA: an anti-perfection 'life style'?
- VICTORIA: David, I think that as anti-anorexia is a very individual thing, an anti-perfection lifestyle is also. I fear that if I was to try and convey/describe an anti-perfectionist lifestyle, perfectionism would snatch it up and use it to torment others for not being 'perfect' anti-perfectionists and following this recipe to a 'T'. So my response to this is... freestyle it up girls!
- DAVID: Victoria, you talked about being able to recognise perfectionism's voice more easily in your life. How would you describe to a younger woman seeking your counsel, how can you tell perfectionism's voice from yours? What would you suggest she look out for? By what means would you suggest she discern one from the other?
- VICTORIA: A very quick response to this: any phrases that start with "what a loser...", "you can't even..." and almost all other comparative sentences will be the voice of perfectionism speaking.
- Other than that, anything that is derogatory seems, for me, to be rooted in perfectionism (and its good pal anorexia).

Chapter 9: A more apt expression

Chloe returns to the dialogue, the team wrestles with important ideas on how experience of co-research and group therapy differ, Victoria gives voice to epiphanies while watching the water

- CHLOE: Dear Victoria and David,
- I'm not feeling like I have much to say at the moment, but just wanted to chime in to let you know that I'm following this conversation with great interest even if I have yet to jump on in and join it. I'm not sure what is going on that is preventing me from having anything to say, but please know that as soon as I find the words I will join you in discussion.
- Sorry,
Chloe
- VICTORIA: Chloe, you never need to apologise for not feeling able to contribute to any conversations that involve me. You already are contributing because I can feel you standing beside me. I wanted also to congratulate you for giving voice to the difficulty you are feeling around joining in, even if you can't quite put your finger on exactly what this is.





This is a powerful anti-anorexic skill – not letting it convince you that you have nothing to say. Sending all my strength.

DAVID: Victoria, is it important that you can come and go from our conversations as both of you wish and your circumstances dictate?

VICTORIA: Absolutely. This allows me to participate as much as I am comfortable with and to the extent to which I am able at any point in my life. This really works for me. As I have started to gain more of a 'life', I appreciate the freedom I have with this kind of conversing in terms of when I contribute, along with the opportunity to still be as involved as I wish to be.

CHLOE: My experiences with therapeutic groups have been similar to Victoria's. This form of 'virtual community' has definitely provided me with more of a sense of 'safety' than any of compulsory therapy groups I have ever attended (and believe me, I've been to a lot of them and I was always the sullen one, head down with my hair over my face and curled up in the corner!). The virtual nature of this community has given me the opportunity to tentatively experiment with allowing myself to speak in ways that I would never have been able to face-to-face. Another great thing about a virtual community is that you aren't put 'on the spot' or forced to be a part of it if you aren't feeling up to it, as is the case with therapy groups.

DAVID: Those times in our conversations that you have felt challenged, were you able to bring them to our/my attention?

VICTORIA: I can honestly say that I am getting better at this. I recall a time when I could not talk with you at all David, as I felt so challenged and disregarded – which was in fact the work of anorexia. These days I am better at exposing 'difficulties' with yourself and other contributors before they get out of hand.

Also I try not to buy into anorexia/perfectionism's degrading conclusions that it draws if I read something as challenging in a negative way. I really put in a big effort to ask what the person was meaning before I form a response, because so often anorexia has led me so far off track with its translation of the comment that it would be laughable, if not so destructive.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say that over time you are feeling less or more challenged?

VICTORIA: Over time it has become easier to trust you David and Chloe, and I can usually tell if anorexia/perfectionism is involved in a translation of what either of have





- said, as it does not fit with what I know of the speaker.
- CHLOE: I have experienced this as well. For me, as I have come to know you both, it has not so much lessened anorexia's ability to translate your words (I still find that anorexia does the first interpretation, what comes most 'naturally', and then my anti-anorexic counter-translation comes second), but rather it has enabled me to strengthen my counter-translation so that it is better able to withstand anorexia's counter-argument to my counter-translation.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said that you do not consider "our conversations as therapeutic in a formal sense". Do you consider that a good thing or a bad thing? How do you think we have steered around the ever-present hazard of co-research slipping into 'therapy'? How do we keep the distinction between the two? I am very interested in your thoughts here.
- VICTORIA: David, I think that your generous way of referring to me as a co-researcher and colleague has been part of what has helped differentiate between therapy and our conversations. I have always found you to be inquisitive and curious, but never 'preachy' – which is how a lot of therapy can be.
- I think for me too though is the material I chose to disclose in our conversations helps to keep the distinction apparent also. There are many things that I discuss in therapy that I would never discuss in this environment, and I think that this is a good thing. It is not that I don't trust you or anyone else who joins our conversations, I just know that some things are not to be shared. Also, a lot of the things I talk about in our conversations come from ideas that are shaped in therapy. Many times I have brought up a topic for conversation or linked in an issue that I have discussed at length in therapy and due to this, feel ok to bring it up in this more public arena. I guess I rarely bring up topics I am really struggling with in this co-research forum.
- CHLOE: I was very interested in reading your response here Victoria because although the differences between co-research and 'conventional therapy' have always been blatantly obvious to me, I have sometimes wondered how co-research differs from narrative therapy. Since I have never experienced narrative therapy first hand, I have often wondered what the difference is between these type of co-research conversations and narrative therapy conversations. I'd be very interested in hearing your experiences David if/how you delineate a clear distinction between the two (and more you might have to add, Victoria, given that you have experienced both narrative therapy and co-research).
- DAVID: Victoria, in relation to pro-anorexic websites and virtual communities, as odd as





it may sound to you knowing your opinions on these websites, is it possible to consider in some ways those sites provide something of the same kind of understanding? Although of course at the same time they sponsor anorexia? Can you bear considering this?

VICTORIA: My gut reaction to this was to grit my teeth, and with my stomach muscles going into a serious clench, shout an emphatic *NO!* I can see your point here David, but the difference I think is that anti-anorexic sites give others support, where as pro-anorexic sites are for recruitment. I will never believe that anorexia is a 'lifestyle choice' and that pro-anorexia-anything is a forum for support.

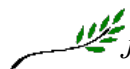
CHLOE: This is an interesting thought...I tend to think that 'pro-anorexia' sites might actually be experienced as providing a similar kind (although different in many respects) of understanding, a sense of community and solidarity, that others such as myself experience in anti-anorexia and the league.

DAVID: Victoria, you talked of being an amateur at something as allowing you to "have more fun and make more mistakes". If that is so, should we consider ourselves amateurs rather than professionals and revel in that decision? When both you and Chloe become 'professionals' after your university studies, will you make it your business to do so as 'amateurs'?

VICTORIA: If I make it that far! I do hope to venture out into the therapeutic world as a learner and not as 'one who has learnt', and I guess that this could be referred to as taking the position of an amateur, rather than a professional. I know that I will never claim to be an expert on anything, that is for sure. I see our conversations as maybe exploring uncharted territory and because this territory is new, we then must be amateurs. But this is ok too. At least we are creating a path for others to follow, and this is more than ok with me.

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned the sound of the Tibetan bowl "touching your heart and soul before perfectionism had a chance to stop it". Would you say that this is the essence of anti-anorexia – having your heart and soul touched? By the same token, does that imply anorexia/perfectionism are heart-less and soul-less? Does anti-anorexia implicate the 'awakening of one's spirit'?

VICTORIA: Yes, I do feel this way. If my spirit is 'awakened', I feel so deeply that sometimes anorexia/perfectionism cannot touch these feelings – to start with anyway. Of course it may succeed in penetrating and poisoning my awakened spirit at some point later on, but at least I have experienced the joy and awesomeness of what awakened my spirit to start with.





- CHLOE: For me, anti-anorexia most definitely involves the awakening of my spirit, while anorexia involves the very opposite — the deadening, numbing or suffocating of my spirit.
- DAVID: Victoria, when you spoke of how “having access to this sense of desperation allowed the experience of sitting on the pier looking over the lake to speak to my spirit”, would you say that it was that your ‘leap of faith’ that broke the stranglehold anorexia had over your spirit?
- VICTORIA: I am not quite sure what you mean here David. My thoughts were around the fact that at that moment, maybe because I was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the place, I was able to see clearly the deathbed to which anorexia was leading me. I was not able to hold on to this clarity for too long, but having had this insight allowed me to make the decision that I needed to start fighting for my life. Before this point, I do not know if I had realised with such intensity that I needed to fight with everything I had to stop my downward spiral.
- DAVID: Victoria, during such an ‘epiphany’ (e.g. at the lake hearing the Tibetan bowl sing to you), when you review those experiences, do you have any sense of ‘going somewhere else’ e.g. taking leave of anorexia/perfection?
- VICTORIA: Only afterward might I realise that I have been somewhere other than my usual perfectionism-saturated mindset. At that moment, I am more swept up in the feeling of the experience to be able to consider this. It is as if my heart takes on the rhythm of the beating drum and my spirit sings with the Tibetan bowl. As if my stomach calms to the peacefulness of the lake and my mind clears to be able to experience the stillness of sitting on the end of the jetty.
- CHLOE: I just wanted to add that I found what you wrote – of only realising that you have “been somewhere else” until after the experience is gone – very interesting as it resonated with my own experiences. For example, sometimes when I am reading a book I become so absorbed in the story that I am transported from my usual awareness of myself (which is dominated by anorexia and perfection) into the storyline.
- However, I only ever notice that this has happened afterwards when something causes me to revert back to my normal awareness. As anorexia/perfection invade my thoughts once more it is then that I realise I have been ‘gone’ for a while. The same thing happens in other situations where, on rare occasions, I am transported somewhere else.





VICTORIA: I actually had a similar ‘transportation’ experience today at the waterfalls not far from where I live. When I last discussed these falls with a friend, she told me of a pool at the top of the falls that can be swum in, so today I went on an adventure to find it. I took a very steep track that involved a lot of climbing (which I really enjoyed) and ended up at the foot of a beautiful, very deep pool that ended on the lip of the big falls. I really, really wanted to swim there, but was with someone else. As this person was not a confident climber, I went back to get her and we swum further up.

However, I felt very drawn to this pool so decided to climb down a bit further from the pool in which we swum, to see if I could catch sight of the pool I first saw from the top. I managed to sit right next to the water as it was tumbling over the falls, watch it drop into this pool I wanted to swim in. I felt such a connection to the water and relished closing my eyes and hearing the roar of the water and feeling the spray on my face.

When I think about it now, it was a very powerful experience for me – even more than I realised when I was sitting there. The reason for this is that some unexpected/unwanted changes are taking place in my life, but on the edge of the waterfall I was able to let all of that stress go and fully take part in the feeling of this moment.

CHLOE: I always relish your descriptions Victoria. They capture for me so much of the kind of spiritual awakening I have felt at times when I am surrounded by the natural world, but find so hard to put into words.

DAVID: If during these experiences you had some sense of ‘taking leave of perfectionism’, can you consider who and what your epiphany-Victoria becomes? Admittedly hard questions...just respond if they now resonate with your epiphany-experiences in some way or other?

VICTORIA: I don’t really know if I have an answer to this. Maybe that I am able to get more in touch with ‘Victoria’, rather than ‘perfectionist-Victoria’ that I usually live as.

DAVID: Victoria, when you responded to my suggestion of the purity of the sound of the Tibetan bowl acting as a kind of antidote to perfectionism, you spoke of it instead being more like a buffer. Is buffer a more apt expression than antidote? If so, can you help me understand why that is so for you?

VICTORIA: I used ‘buffer’ because to require an antidote, I had to already have been



poisoned by perfectionism. This was not so in this case. I was able to experience the song of the bowl without perfectionism's negative input, due to the power of the sound and how it immediately spoke to my spirit. Because of its purity, I believe it managed to speak directly to my spirit, that perfectionism did not even have an opportunity to try and poison my hearing if it.

CHLOE: I just wanted to say that I found your distinction here between a 'buffer' and 'antidote' very powerful and thought provoking Victoria. It was something I had never thought about before.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say in general that yoga inspires anti-anorexic/perfectionistic practices of the mind-in-the-body and the body-in-the-mind? Does that have anything to do with the fact that yoga does not split the mind and body into two and pit one against the other?

VICTORIA: This is an interesting point David. Upon brief reflection, it may have to do with the Buddhist traditions from where it is partly rooted. This lifestyle is one of such respect of all living things, including one's own mind and body. To me, this is very anti-perfectionist.

DAVID: Victoria am I seeing things... Did you write that your body enjoys yoga (takes pleasure in yoga)?

VICTORIA: I did write this! I feel so alive and so strong and healthy when I am taking regular yoga classes. One day I hope to take them again.

DAVID: Victoria, in our last email, you listed a number of phrases that perfectionism seems to use when tormenting its victims. Do you think it would be useful to catalogue a glossary of perfection practices, all the better to smell them out?

VICTORIA: I don't think all the time in the world would be long enough to do this David. I also think that perfectionism tailors itself to each individual's fears and past experiences. Because of this, I do not know if such a list would be that useful. Chloe might disagree, but this is what I thought when I first read this question.

CHLOE: I feel much the same way. Somehow lists always seem to have an association with anorexia to me, but perhaps when you speak of a glossary David, you are meaning something quite different? I agree that any list/glossary would be very difficult to compile for the same reasons Victoria outlined. However, then I recall how helpful Victoria found what Piper (Jane) had compiled about her anti-anorexic acts in 'living an anti-anorexic lifestyle', so perhaps lists of sorts can be





useful after all?

Chapter 10: A come and go ethic of participation

David writes Chloe a letter on the distinctions he sees between co-research and narrative conversations

DAVID: Dear Chloe,

I wanted to respond to a wondering you proposed in your last e-mail. You said: "I have often wondered what the difference is between these types of 'co-research conversations' and narrative 'therapeutic conversations'. I'd be very interested in hearing your experiences David if/how you delineate a clear distinction between the two..."

Chloe, in some ways, there might not appear much of a difference, however, I suspect there is and Victoria confirms that. It seems to me the distinction lies in the 'scope' of the conversation rather than the conversation itself. As Victoria points out, there are some inherent limits to a 'co-research conversation' compared to a 'therapeutic conversation' which in no ways operates under such limitations. Another way of putting it would be that a co-researching conversation is so much more focused and its intended outcome has to do with the construction of 'insider knowledges'. Now I would like to think that such 'knowledges' are anti-problematic.

In addition, as a co-researcher I do not assume the same ethical responsibilities that a therapist assumes in a contract. Co-research has a 'come and go' ethic of participation, something which you have suggested has particular merit. However, in saying all this, I suspect our conversation has blurred the boundaries between the two and we have had to be on 'our toes' to keep it separate.

I think we all took risks here but goodness knows, your life was worth any sort of risk and I would do the same thing without a moment's thought.

Yours anti-anorexically,
David

Chapter 11: Stepping outside of it

Victoria shares her tool for counter-translating perfectionism, anti-anorexia is cast as spiritual awakening, and the conversation comes to a close (for the time being)

DAVID: Victoria, you said: "Over time it has become easier to trust you and Chloe and I can usually tell if anorexia/perfectionism is involved in a translation of





what either of you have said, as it does not fit with what I know of the speaker.” What would you say substantiates your counter-translation over anorexia’s translation of what I/Chloe might say?

VICTORIA: The most obvious way that I can tell if anorexia/perfectionism has translated comments made by yourself and/or Chloe is that they are really negative and nasty. When I read comments such as these in the way that anorexia/perfectionism wants me to, I try to make myself stop and think “would David or Chloe really say something like this about me? Does this comment fit with what I know of either of these two people?” And I often think “maybe but I am not 100% sure”, so I use a tool that has helped me a lot over the past couple of years – verification.

I can recall many times when I have asked you David if your intended message was the one I got. At this point, I always struggle with “well, what if you/Chloe are not being honest with me?”, but it does not take long for me to remember all of the times when you both have been of such immense support to me. I usually then am able to take your reassurances to be true.

DAVID: For example, what do you need to know about a speaker to ensure that anorexia cannot translate them and their intentions, purposes, motives, etc?

VICTORIA: The main thing for me is that I trust them. Since trust is not an easy area for me, it usually takes a bit of time. During this time, the person will have shown that they are trustworthy and I will know a bit about who they are. This is quite important, as I really need to know about a person’s beliefs and values and how they work with other people in terms of relationships, before I feel confident enough to question their comments or conversations. Prior to this, unfortunately anorexia/perfectionism have free reign. Perhaps this may shed some light on why I do not have that many friends – anorexia/perfectionism tries its hardest to kill any signs of friendship before they have even begun to grow.

DAVID: Victoria, you made the comment: “...I just know that some things are not to be shared.” I suspect you have said a great deal in the few words in the above. Do you mind if I try to ‘unpack’ this conclusion you have reached? Firstly, what things do you know are not to be shared?

VICTORIA: David, if I answered this question, I would be sharing the things I am choosing not to!

DAVID: How do you think you learned what to share and what not to share?



VICTORIA: It centres around safety for me. If I do not feel safe with any topics, then I do not enter into any conversations around them. This is a practice that I undertake in the outside world also. If I know that I could be terribly upset, angry or unsettled by a topic that arises or that I feel really, really strongly about something to the point where I do not know if I could be respectful of opinions that differ from mine, then I do not share them. There are many things I do not share in therapy either and this is my choice. I know that I have the right to make these choices and regularly exercise it. I firmly believe that what is in my mind and in my memories can be shared if I chose to do so. Under no circumstances will I be forced to share them regardless of the consequences of not doing so. I am very protective of my mind and my spirit, because few other people in this world are.

Basically if I am in doubt about sharing something, then I will remain silent about it. (I am aware that black and white thinking may be around here, but I am also conscious that I do not have to bare my soul in any circumstances just because of this.)

DAVID: Victoria, you spoke of your spirit being awakened when you feel something deeply. Would you say that anti-anorexia (or an anti-anorexic life style) is, in essence, 'the awakening' of one's spirit? Is it a kind of turning away from the material world?

VICTORIA: For me it is like being so touched by something that I am almost carried away by it. I can lose touch with everything else in my life for a while and truly feel the experience as it is happening – for example, hearing the Tibetan bowl, or sitting on the edge of (or under) a waterfall.

DAVID: Victoria, can you think of any more experiences that have awakened your spirit so we can start musing over what is common to them? Or perhaps 'uncommon' to them?

VICTORIA: Another experience that comes to mind is when I was with wild dolphins in the Bay of Islands. I was so captivated by these amazing creatures that I had to hold on with all of my might to stop myself from jumping right out of the boat and joining them!

DAVID: Victoria, what do you think this experience at the waterfall – of being able to forget all that was happening in your life and "fully take part in the feeling of this moment" – foretells? What is all this symbolic of in the life you are leading and are about to lead in the near future?





- VICTORIA: I had not thought about this, but I guess it could reflect how I am learning not to get so overwhelmed by difficult parts of my life. It also makes me think of how experiencing the raw and awesome beauty that can be found in the bush and at the beach is kind of like a natural drug for me. After an amazing experience like swimming at the falls or climbing cliff faces in the bush, I often feel so much stronger than beforehand. It is interesting actually how many of these experiences that touch my spirit are undertaken when I am alone. It makes me wonder about some kind of resilience within people that may be triggered by 'going bush', as they say.
- DAVID: Victoria, again would you say that anorexia is 'materialist' and anti-spiritual? For example, it tries to reduce the marvelousness of the body to calories and body fat % ? It tries to reduce 'embodiment' to looking at yourself in a mirror and on a weigh scale?
- VICTORIA: I would say this. I would also say that it ties very nicely into our materialist world – everything is reduced to success or failure. This is not a lifestyle I am interested in, and hopefully will not be ensnared by in the future. I am still surprised at the number of people who do not yet dream of stepping outside of it.

End note

This conversation drew to a close here due to other commitments from all parties. However, it does not signal the end of our thinking about and challenging of perfectionism.

Instead, it is a record of our findings up until now.