



## Insider Witnessing Practice: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Two

Tom Stone Carlson and David Epston

[tom.carlson@ndsu.edu](mailto:tom.carlson@ndsu.edu)

---

### Insider Witness Practices

This paper intends to introduce the history, theory, and practice surrounding a performative narrative practice which we are calling Insider Witnessing Practices (IWP). IWPs have been 25 years in the making. A precursor to what we are describing was a version of supervision and training known as 'prismatic dialogues' (Bird, 2006), which Johnella Bird and I invented in the late 1980s and early 1990s<sup>1</sup>. This name was chosen for the same reason that a prism divides light into seven independent colors, but here the client's thoughts, actions, aspirations and feelings are divided into at least two distinct versions, the problem's story and its counter-story as told by the therapist. Johnella and I practiced and demonstrated this throughout New Zealand, Australia, and overseas. Over the years, a majority of my training at post-graduate programs was conducted in a similar manner to what we are now referring to as an Act 1.

I have now chosen to refer to the particularities of Tom's and my version of this practice as 'insider witnessing practice' to bring it alongside another performative practice that Michael adapted from Barbara Myerhoff (Myerhoff, 1982) and the performative anthropology of Victor Turner (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1986) and he referred to as 'outsider witnessing practices' (White, 1995).

We take this name, 'insider witnessing practice' (IWP), as the obverse or counterpoint to Michael White's 'outsider witnessing practices' (OWP) (White, 1995). It is our belief that the purposes of OWP and IWP are very similar (Epston, in press). How do we find ways for clients to apprehend and appreciate our respect for them? How does one dignify the other? Here clients, in a manner of speaking, take into their own custody the regard of another. In the case of OWPs, the regard is conveyed by strangers or outsiders; in the case of IWPs, the regard is conveyed by an intimate other (e.g., their therapist) (Bakhtin, 1993; Carlson & Haire, 2014; Levinas, 1981). Both OWPs and IWPs are descendants in a long line of similar performative narrative practices (e.g., consulting your consultant, co-research, the articulation and archiving of insider knowledges, performative letter writing, collective practices, relational accountability in couples, etc.).

---

<sup>1</sup> Elize Morkel(1999-to the present) has also taken this up in the western cape of South Africa.





## Thanks to Kirsten Hastrup<sup>2</sup>

In 1995, I (David) chanced upon a chapter in a book of Hastrup's entitled "Passage to Anthropology." I vividly remember the very moment and circumstances where and when I first read it. Somehow I presciently realized that I had before me, in my hands, the wherewithal to extend what we are now calling Act 1 into a performative ritual that we dubbed an Act 2 in 2015 (Emily Corturillo). Let me tell the reader why I carried around this book for the next 15 years on every trip I took, which often afforded me spare time to study.

Hastrup tells how, in 1987, the Copenhagen theatre group 'Odin Teatret,' led by Eugenio Barba, approached her with the unusual proposal, not unlike that of an Act 1 of IWP, to create a theatrical performance "of my history" (Hastrup, 1995, p. 127). Not surprisingly, she was taken aback. He wanted to stage a play about an anthropologist who encountered the 'unreal' during fieldwork, which Hastrup had published about (Hastrup, 1998). He told her he had chosen her 'as a central character' of this proposed play. "It was not until much later that I understood what it meant to be a central character" (p. 127). What had caught Barba's eye was what she described as, "my shift between separate realities" during her fieldwork in Iceland where she met "the hidden people of the Icelandic landscape" (p. 127). Barba was aware of the risk Hastrup had taken by reporting "my experience as experience" (p. 127) in a scholarly text. Barba also began to enquire how Hastrup had become an anthropologist in the first place. She soon came to realize that his request that she provide their company with her autobiography, "provided a dramatic pretext for inventing myself" (p. 129).

She then started meeting with the entire cast of the theatre company. They asked varied and diverse questions of her such as, "What did you sing as a child? How do you call cows in Iceland?...took extensive notes and created a common language." Barba then requested that during the meetings with the company members that Hastrup tell them "the 21 most important events in my life" (p. 131). She found that "the events poured out in no obvious pattern, and I saw how my life had indeed been a process and not only a series of sequences...Writing myself produced me both as a text and as a person" (p. 131-133).

She remembered that "as the group became increasingly focused on the performance, I experienced an increasing degree of off-centeredness and could not see what role Kirsten was going to play. I was not given any clues about the actual performance...I had a feeling 'Kirsten' was taking on a life of her own." She was finally invited after some months to a rehearsal at which, "I watched, laughed and cried...Seeing Kirsten in all too familiar situations freed a set of feelings I would not normally allow myself to indulge...Familiarity was belied...because the context was alien, and because the dramatic effects used to stress particular points transcended my imagination. Most important I was represented by another woman" (p. 134).

---

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kirsten Hastrup is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. Dr. Hastrup is the author or editor of over 40 book and 250 journal articles. She specializes in the area of anthropological fieldwork in Iceland and Greenland.





What might very well be pertinent to consider in IWPs was that her first response to seeing this representation of herself came as a surprise to her: "As it happened, when I first saw 'Kirsten' on stage, she was no longer me. She was not-me" (p. 134). After watching more rehearsals Kirsten wrote,

As the tears in my eyes would reveal, I was overwhelmed with the precision with which the group had grasped the essence of my stories. They had told the 'truth' about 'Kirsten' but it was not-me...It made me see myself more clearly than before. Through the selective fiction of not-me, my reality became focused. But there was a crack in the mirror allowing a separate reality to be seen: a reality of not-me. I was enchanted by it. The presence of other spectators entailed an astonishing reorientation to my view of Kirsten on stage: she was no longer not-me, but had become not-not-me. It is a general truth about performances that they catch their audiences by being not-real and not-not-real at the same time (p. 136).

Hastrup quoted the performative anthropologist Victor Turner to great effect, "The explicit focus on performances emphasizes the inherent reflexivity of the event. The performance arouses people's consciousness of themselves; it reveals them not only to the world but also to themselves" (Turner, 1982, p. 75). Hastrup continues, "I could neither identify with nor distance myself from Kirsten on stage. She was neither my double nor another. She restored my biography in an original way, being not-me and not-not-me at the same time. I was not represented, I was performed" (p. 141).

As a result of her viewing of her performed life, Hastrup concluded, "I became an invention to myself...Barba extended and challenged my identity in ways that are barely knowable, but which surely led me to courses of action that I would not otherwise have considered possible. Possibly I had actually become more of a character" (p. 144).

### Thanks to Sara Lawrence Lightfoot<sup>3</sup>

Lawrence Lightfoot is a distinguished Harvard sociologist of education and pioneer of a qualitative methodology called the 'art and science of portraiture' (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1997). For me (David) her most distinguished titles are: *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture* and *respect: An exploration*. My debt to her extended metaphor of portraiture and portrayal on which she based her methodology is equivalent to that of Hastrup.

From these two experiences of sitting for portraits...I learned, for example, that these portraits did not capture me as I saw myself, that they were not like looking at the mirror at my reflection. Instead, they seemed to capture my 'essence': qualities of character and history, some of which I was unaware, some of which I resisted mightily,

---

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot is a professor of education at Harvard University. She has authored 10 books and been awarded 28 honorary doctorate degrees which should give some evidence of the high regard for her scholarship.





some of which felt deeply familiar. But the translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered and interpretive. In addition to portraying my image, the piece expressed the perspective of the artist and was shaped by the evolving relationship between the artist and me. I was never treated or seen as an object but as a person of strength and vulnerability, beauty and imperfection, mystery and openness. The artist needs to be vigilant in capturing the image but always watchful of my feelings, perspective, and experience (p. 5).

I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words...I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom and perspective of the 'subjects'; but I wanted them to feel as I had felt, that the portrait did not look like them but somehow managed to reveal their essence. I wanted them to experience the portraits as both familiar and exotic so that in reading them, they would be introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before. And finally I wanted the subjects to feel 'seen' like I had felt seen- fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected and scrutinized. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation" (p. 6).

Although narrative therapy is not entirely unfamiliar with the sheer grace and generosity by means of which Lawrence Lightfoot portrays "the character of the character" (Frank, 2010) in her various writings, she has inspired us to aspire to such respectful characterizations of those that we portray in IWPs. I can only hope that she might welcome such attempts at emulating her ethnographies of the person (See Lawrence Lightfoot, 1998, *Respect: An exploration*; See also Bochner & Ellis, 2016, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* for another qualitative methodology- auto-ethnography- worthy of similar emulation by narrative therapists).

I (Tom) first encountered IWPs at a day long workshop of David's, sponsored by the Kenwood Center in Minneapolis in May 2014. On my three and a half hour ride home to Fargo after the workshop had ended, I remember the distinct feelings of wonderment at what had been presented that day, the recordings that David had shown and the demonstration Act 1 interview he had conducted. Something told me that I had stumbled upon something that I had long since been longing for.

I have always believed that the practice of therapy was capable of so much more than what it proposes, which has often put me at odds with my professional advisors (Carlson, Corturillo, & Freedman, in press). I have been told that I was either a 'naïf' or a 'pollyanna'; nevertheless I persisted to swim against the tide of my professional trainings. As I was sitting in the audience at David's workshop, I could immediately feel the potential of IWPs, as far as David and Johnella had developed them, to provide a format for the realization of my yearnings. Despite my best intentions to grasp what was possible here, what was to come was still beyond my reach. Somehow, after a series of chance events in December of 2014, David invited me to join him in collaborating on the fulfillment of the invention of the Act 2, which would complete the IWP.





### A Theoretical Discussion: Thanks Also to Gary Saul Morson<sup>4</sup>

Given the bedazzling and consistent results from our attempts at a completed IWP (Acts 1 and 2) from day one, which were entirely unanticipated, we sought refuge in many diverse literatures trying to figure out what in the world was going on here. How could these dramatic outcomes happen when we were such rank amateurs? We would have expected that we would have required an extensive trial period before we could achieve such results. We turned to the literature on performance studies, a longstanding interest, which we shared in Bakhtin and in particular, his translator/commentator, Gary Saul Morson (1994).

In the midst of our intense study, we discovered something that we were not quite prepared for. And that is that a therapy that purports to be a 're-authoring therapy' (White, 1995) must take place outside of a person's own story and that it needs to invoke what Morson refers to as 'narrative art.' Typically, in the daily living of our lives, we live 'inside' our stories. From the inside of our stories, we experience ourselves not as authors but as characters of "an already finalized script" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). As characters inside our stories, we have a limited capacity for freedom and agency beyond the freedom and agency that is already afforded us by the author of the story. Morson argues that 'narrative art' is required in order for people to move beyond the constraints of being an already finalized character and experience what he refers to as "authorial agency" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). He claims that for characters in a story to have freedom they must become their own authors. Similarly, the Nobel Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee confirm this in his debate with the psychoanalytic colleague, Arabella Kurtz:

I would agree and might even be persuaded to go further: to say that the therapist might aim to foster in the patient a freedom to be master of their own life-narrative; that the sense of freedom or mastery, and what can be achieved with it, may turn out to be more important than the story itself (Kurtz & Coetzee, 2015, p. 14).

In 'narrative art' (a novel, a performance, a dream, etc.), "I do not and cannot see myself as finished as I can sense another person. I experience myself as unfinalized, as able to make choices that will render untrue previous definitions of myself" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). In narrative art, as "in dreams or fantasy...I live into the yet-to-come world...I sense myself in the process of acting and making choices. I cannot be a mere character in my own dream...As the author of the story, I am freely shaping it, but as character I am on the same plane as other characters." Narrative art resembles "not a dream but a story about a dream. It depends on the author's outsideness" (p. 89). This notion of outsideness became a key concept for our theorizing of IWPs. Morson continues, "The author makes the world, a character dwells in it, the author is located outside the world...The author alone can *mean directly*" (p. 94; emphasis

---

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Gary Saul Morson is a Professor of Arts and Humanities at Northwestern University. He is an interpreter and translator of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Morson has published 11 books and has received several awards for his writing.





added). By *mean directly* Morson is intending to make the point that only an author has the authorial agency to give direct meaning to the events that take place in the story.

The importance of achieving the status of an author of one's story cannot be underestimated when it comes to a therapy that proposes to be a therapy that re-authors lives. Morson further references the author in time; "the author exists in a different kind of time, one that makes the whole of the character's life subject to contemplation as it could never be in the character's own time. Once there is such a whole, then each moment of my life figures in advance.... Life in an artwork, but not as we experience it in reality" (p. 89-90). Our reading of Morson led us to conclude something that we had yet to consider: that only when life is experienced as an artwork, as a dream, from a place of outsidership, can a person achieve the status of an author of the story of their own life.

How then can we turn therapy into a work of art where the client becomes more than a mere character of her story, where she engages with her "yet to be storied world" (Adrian Montesanto, Personal Communication 2016), into open time and a place of outsidership where she can see the whole of her life as if in a moment?

For this to occur in a meaningful way, the client somehow needs to simultaneously be both an author of and a character in her own story. She needs to somehow occupy the same temporal space as both an insider and an outsider to her own lived experience. To accomplish this rather unusual task, IWPs draws heavily on the rituals of performance.

According to Schechner, "A person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting others- by entering a social field. By engaging in performance... the performer and the thing to be performed are transformed" (1985, p. 111-112). Ethnographers who use performance to present their data to an audience argue that by engaging an audience in a performance of the real lives and experiences of others, the audience members are able "to experience a way of deeply sensing the other and that the audience is pulled into a sense of the other in a compelling way" (Conquergood, 1985, p. 3). Those in the audience themselves are transformed as they become witnesses to a performance of the lives of others and are brought into relationship with them. They are moved emotionally; they are brought to tears, become angry and called to some response.

Imagine the exponential effect of the above when the audience and the performed are one and the same? For example, Alice, who participated in an IWP, summarized her experience in this way,

The next week after the Act 2 when my therapist Ana and I met and she gave me a copy of the Act 2 transcript I took it home and read right away. Nothing could have made me put it down. As I was reading, I found myself in awe of the person I was reading about. I was moved to tears as I read about the life of the person in the transcript. Later, I





realized that it was me who I was reading about and came to the conclusion that I had moved my own self to tears.

### **The Practice of IWP: Act 1**

To assist you in envisioning an IWP, can you close your eyes for a moment and imagine that someone very close to you has planned a very special event for you to attend. The purpose of this event is for you to be honored although it is intended as a surprise. All you know is that something very special is about to take place. Your friend, partner, or parent picks you up and takes you to a very well appointed theater for the performing arts. To your surprise, someone comes to open your door and greets you as if you were an honored guest. At the entrance of the theater, you can't help but notice that people seem to recognize you and gaze upon you with genuine respect and admiration. You are greeted with an even greater number of acknowledgements of welcome all the while referring to you by name. "We have a special seat reserved just for you, sir or madam" says the usher, who kindly escorts you to a seat in the first row. A seat you are aware that is usually reserved for highly esteemed guests.

As the play begins, the events that are portrayed in the performance have a strange but uncanny familiarity. Soon, you become fully aware that the life that is being performed is your own. And the main actor in this performance is in fact impersonating you, once again, in a strangely familiar way. It is you but not you at the same time. A few more minutes pass and it has become clear that the performance you are watching is not just a summary of your life from inside your own story of yourself but rather it is a story that is being told from the perspective of someone who holds you in the highest regard; who intimately knows your struggles and what you have been up against in your life. At the same time, you are startled that the actor somehow is so familiar with your moral character and virtues.

And yet, because you are watching a performance that is both you and not you at the same time, you are able to 'see' and relate to your 'self' as if you were another person. Paradoxically being that person, you experience what Schechner refers to as "not me but not not me" you become a witness to your own life but from the outside. As an audience member to the performance of your life, you find yourself being pulled into the story and you are moved to laughter and tears by the life that has been courageously lived by its main character, who is simultaneously 'not you' but 'not not you.' As the performance comes to an end, the audience rises in applause of a life well lived. At first the applause is directed at the performers and then slowly, the audience turns its applause to you in acknowledgement and recognition of the person whose life was performed on the stage- your impersonated life.

What you have just imagined is what IWPs intend to do for the person portrayed<sup>5</sup> in the Act 1 by inviting them to become an audience member of a portrayal of their life as performed by the

---

<sup>5</sup> From here on, we will refer to 'the client' as 'portrayed person' or PP for short. This description is credited to our co-researcher and colleague Ítalo Latorre-Gentoso who came up with this apt term during our research of IWPs.







portraying therapist (PT) who is unashamedly biased by the promise that she/he holds for the near future of the portrayed person (PP).

IWPs are made up of two acts. In Act 1, the therapist<sup>6</sup> is interviewed by a veteran narrative therapist/supervisor 'as if' they were the client. However, this is not in any way intended to be a role play where the therapist tries to 'get it right' by xeroxing the client. Rather, this interview is meant to be narrative art and akin to Lawrence-Lightfoot's 'portraiture' whereby the therapist 'paints a portrait' that is biased by their promise of their hopes and is intended to reveal the essence of the moral character of the PP by entering into novel storylines within a dramatic context of the PP's life. In the words of Cheryl Mattingly, the Act 1 is "poetic imitation (the drama)...not a simple copy of events." (Mattingly, 1998, p. 28)

As a work of art or poetic imitation, the therapist portraitist (TP) has the freedom to respond in surprising and novel ways and it is wish of the interviewer to take the portrait to places where the TP and PP have not very likely gone before. As a work of art, the interview is also intended to be dramatic so as to recast the PP's story in compelling ways that capture their imaginations and invite them into a relationship with their own self that is informed by grace, generosity, dignity, self-endorsement, and promise. The Act 1 is performed with the PP's explicit consent but without their presence and is recorded to be shown as soon as possible, preferably within two weeks, in the presence of the TP and interviewer. The Act 1 is usually 45 minutes in length.<sup>7</sup>

Before we proceed with a detailed discussion of the Act 2, we will discuss some of what we consider to be crucial to IWP practice that distinguishes it from a typical narrative therapy interview. My (Tom) first attempt at an Act 1 was reviewed in an 'engaged supervision' (Ingamells, Epston & Carlson, in preparation) format by David. This meant he redid the interview, question by question, as well as offering additional guidance and encouragement. I still remember feeling some trepidation as I hit the button to send the transcript of my first Act 1 to David. However, I was pretty satisfied with what I considered to be a fairly competent narrative therapy interview. To my surprise, David returned it to me the following day. I anxiously opened his email wondering what grade he would give me. After comparing and contrasting our questions and reading his comments, I must admit that I had the distinct impression that I had a long way to go in learning the difference between a typical NT interview and one appropriate to IWPs. The most general impression that I had was that his questions were much more vivid and painterly than my own. Throughout my transcript, David offered the following encouragement over and over again, "More dramatic please, Tom!" After bandaging up my injured pride, I began to wrestle with what David intended by his call for the dramatic. At first I wondered if I was a dramatic enough person for the task ahead as I am reserved by nature. Then, I decided to consult my dictionary to take a closer look at what the word dramatic means. Here is what I discovered: "of drama, sudden and exciting or unexpected, vividly

---

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the therapist will be referred to as 'therapist portraitist' or TP for short, throughout the remainder of the paper. Again, we credit this term to Ítalo Latorre-Gentoso.

<sup>7</sup> We should mention we spend approximately 30 minutes in what we call a 'pre-act one' interview to prepare the therapist and interview for the portrait. An example of the pre-interview will be provided in paper three.







striking, theatrical” (Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 1996). I soon realized that David’s critique was intended to be an aide for my practice rather a personality assessment. I decided I would re-read Hastrup and Lawrence-Lightfoot but now searching for how I might express the dramatic through my questions. As a consequence, I resolved to be a ‘portrait painter’ who would substitute questions for the painter’s brush. I decided to limit myself to and exclusively focus on the characterization of the moral character of the person whose life was being portrayed in the Act 1. I forsook any intention to problem solve. That was to be left for the subsequent therapy. This transition from narrative therapist to narrative artist/portraitist was critical for me in rethinking my practice.

Because the Act 1 is intended to be narrative art, it is unashamedly performative in regard to drama. As such, the questions that we use tend to be bold and colorful, propositional, prospective, and in the realms of ‘what could have been or what is yet to come’ (Morson, 1994). In general, these questions implicate a sense that something is afoot. Because IWP interviewing exists in the realm of performance, it frees the interviewer to be more wide ranging and freewheeling in their inquiries. The questions are meant to implicate both ‘surprisingness’ (Morson, 1994) and suspensefulness. Michael White’s most common references to what constitutes a good story were mystery and suspense. Similarly, Cheryl Mattingly (1998), a highly regarded scholar of narrative ethnography, highlights the importance of drama and suspense in the development of a compelling narrative,

It does so by dramatizing the gap between a protagonist’s expectations and the events that transpire, by keeping the reader [client] breathlessly suspended as she wonders what will happen next (and therefore experiencing not-knowing in an emotionally charged and entertaining way) (p.17).

The questions endeavor to have people consider matters that they have very likely never considered before. Because the purpose of the interview is to be speculative and that any response resides entirely with the client, the questions can afford to be both daring and somewhat reckless. Because these are one time only interviews, such unusual circumstances call for audacity.

In addition, in order for the PP to have a vision of the entirety of their life, the Act 1 must yield an emergent counter-history. To accomplish this, we use questions that extend the history beyond the ‘so far known’ in an effort to create a compelling history of the counter-story. Such counter-stories are best when they welcome people to take up residence in them almost as if they have lived there before (Compare sideshadowing of Morson, 1994). In fact, they may find they have very well been squatting there without title. Once again, there is something strangely familiar about a counter-story that wins the allegiance of the PP.





## The Practice of IWP: Act 2

The showing of the Act 1 becomes the starting point for the second act of the performance. During the Act 2, the PP is invited to be a witness to the hope-biased portrayal that was performed on their behalf in the Act 1. Rather than showing the entire performance, the interviewer, depending on his/her prescience, pauses the recorded performance (either visual or auditory) time and time again at key points. The purposes of such pauses are two-fold: firstly, it allows for the meaning-making processes of the PP to be slowed down sufficiently to permit them to catch up to the novel storylines that the TP introduced in the Act 1, guided by the interviewer's queries. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the interviewer pays special attention to possible discordances between the TP's portrayal and PP's emerging story. Such discordant storylines, where the emerging counter-story of the TP and the problem's story of the PP are juxtaposed, represent fertile grounds for drama and heightened meaning making. Once again, Mattingly is helpful here, "Narrative drama is heightened through disparity between the narrator's point of view and that of any character. Narratives are built on a difference of understanding" (Mattingly, 1998, p. 38). Pausing at these disparate and dramatic moments allow the PP to attempt to resolve or reconcile the portrait contrived by their TP. Mattingly (2010) makes another critical point that is worthy of our attention, "A dramatic moment commonly involves agents acting in ways that are at odds with the scene, generating all sorts of trouble that must then be resolved in some fashion" (p. 45). Taking time to resolve these dramatic moments allows the PP to take the portrait over, make it their own and perhaps, even to start living in to it. In this way, the Act 2 is a dramatic co-performance where the PP is simultaneously the audience as well as an actor who actively revises the ongoing portrait of their life. In fact, all authority is ceded back to the PP. After all, whose life is it?

Metaphorically, the PP, at certain crucial points of the interview, is invited up on the stage adding their own lines and worrying over contested matters to the ongoing performance of their life, in which the discrepancies may now require some adjudication leading to some sort of settlement. On the other hand, such reconciliation may have to wait on time and the living of one's life. This is how the PP becomes both an insider and an outsider to their own story and the impersonated performance in the Act 1 becomes a real-life performance in Act 2. As a consequence, the PP is no longer a mere character in an already written story; the PP becomes the author of a story that is yet to be told, one that has the potential of the possibilities of the yet to come and is shepherded by the promising counter-story performed in the Act 1.

Let us take this opportunity to offer several reiterations given the reader's unfamiliarity with IWP practice. At the beginning of the Act 2, the PP is at first downstage as she 'sits' before a performed recording of the Act 1. As it progresses, she more and more, thanks to the guidance of the interviewer's queries, upstages the TP who is only too happy to go downstage. By the end of the Act 2, the PP has taken center stage whereas the TP has retired entirely from the stage. In fact, by the end of the Act 2, the TP and the interviewer have become the PP's audience and the PP is now again the performer of her life.





The Act 2 is by no means a mere showing or repetition of the Act 1: it is prospective in that it takes the portrayal as far as the imaginations of all concerned can envision. In the Act 2, the PP is 'primus inter pares' (first amongst equals). The PP is the adjudicator of the therapist's portrayal which she had authorized her therapist to proceed with in the first place in the Act 1. Considerable care is taken to gain such consent given that the therapist admits to relative ignorance regarding the practice of IWPs. The PP is guaranteed that the portrayal will be shown to them as soon as can be arranged and hopefully no later than two weeks. In summary, the PP authorizes the Act 1 and adjudicates the Act 2. As a consequence, the PP has the final word and reconciles any discrepancies between the two versions of herself. It may be that these divergent portrayals are irreconcilable for the time being. We are finding such reconciliations can take some months as not surprisingly the two versions- the Problem's story vs. the counter-story- can be very contradictory. The two versions can become juxtaposed as the PP takes actions in her life that are more consistent with and ratifying of the portrayed counter-story. On the other hand, we have known of such reconciliations taking place before our very eyes during the Act 2. No matter when this occurs, we have noticed that the PP's choose between the two judiciously.

### **Our Speculations So Far**

What is it that becomes possible for clients as they occupy this unusual site of being simultaneously an insider and outsider of the ongoing story of their lives? While we are still immersed in studying these possibilities, there are three preliminary discoveries that we now wish to highlight. We want to emphasize that this does not in any way intend to be comprehensive as there are far more to come.

### **Heightened Experiences of Self-Endearment Due to Distancing Effect**

Returning to the work of Schechner and Conquergood, one of the unique effects of performance is that it creates for the audience an experience of suspended disbelief. When witnessing a performance, audience members know that the performance is not real; that the events are not actually happening in the here and now. At the same time, however, audience members allow themselves to feel and respond to the not real performance as if it were real. Due to their willingness to suspend their disbelief, audience members often find themselves relating to the characters in the performance in ways that bring forth genuine expressions of compassion, care, anger, sadness, and affiliation. This is precisely the reason why scholar practitioners like Conquergood believe that performance is such a critical research methodology for the re-presentation of data, especially when it involves issues of justice and marginalization (2003).

What makes Insider Witnessing Practices of particular interest is that it draws upon the power of performance and multiplies its effect for the PP by locating her simultaneously as an outsider and insider. Because of the conundrum of 'not me' and 'not not me,' the distancing effect of this practice allows the PP to feel and experience levels of self-endearment and self-love that





are usually reserved only for respected others. After witnessing just the first few minutes of her Act 1, Sarah experienced something that she had never known nor felt before. She was struggling to find words that were adequate for the puzzling feelings that had overwhelmed her.

Sarah: [Sounding bewildered] It was really weird to hear the beginning part (of the Act 1), especially the stuff that I've shared with Ana. It's weird to hear that part.

Tom: Would you mind helping me to understand what kind of a weird it was that you were feeling as you were listening to what Ana had told us about you and your life?

Sarah: I think it just makes me sad [tears start to well up in Sarah's eyes]

Tom: Do you have any guesses about the direction of your sadness? Was it for anything in particular?

Sarah: Yeah. I think it was good to hear it.

Tom: Can you help me understand why you came to the conclusion that 'it was good to hear it'?

Sarah: I don't know. I think just thinking that that happened to somebody. I mean it really happened! It's just sad. [Tears are now freely flowing down her face]

Tom: As you were listening to us talk about Ana's knowing about your struggles, all that you have been up against in life and all that you have overcome, is it possible that you were able to relate to yourself and your life with new eyes?

Sarah: Yeah. It's as if I heard that about somebody else. It makes me really sad to think that... But it actually happened to me... I guess? Because I've always been so good at putting up those walls, you know?

Tom: Were you having some feelings for yourself in that moment as you were listening to Ana's knowing of your struggles and triumphs that you may not have known before right now?

Sarah: Yeah, I think so.

Tom: What would you call those feelings that you might have been having for yourself?

Sarah: [Searching for words] I don't know. I guess... I guess just, I feel bad for myself. Not for myself, but perhaps sad.





Tom: Are there any others words that come to mind that might capture this feeling sad for yourself rather than bad for yourself?

Sarah: [Long pause to catch her breath. Tears still flowing freely] Yeah, compassion [said with a quiet but sure voice]. There it is. Yep. Yeah, definitely.

Tom: How was it that these feelings of self-compassion came to you? Did it have something to do with you watching and listening to Ana's telling about all that you have been up against in life?

Sarah: Yep. Definitely!

Tom: Would you say that to feel some compassion for yourself would be a good development in your life?

Sarah: Yeah, I think it's pretty big!

Tom: Pretty big?

Sarah: Yeah!

Tom: Do you think it might suggest something about where you've got to in life that you're now able to feel some compassion for yourself?

Sarah: Definitely. That's huge! I didn't have any when I first started this therapy. Absolutely none! Nope!

Tom: Is it possible that your capacity to feel compassion for yourself is part of the courageous and brave road that you have been committing yourself to that Ana mentioned to us?

Sarah: Mhm. [chuckles, crying and smiling at the same time as if a light has just turned on in her mind]

Tom: Is this capacity to feel compassion for yourself something that you would like to take a closer look at in your work with Ana? Would you be in favor of exploring the history of such compassion for yourself?

Sarah: [Smiling through her tears] Yeah. I guess I never... Yeah. This is the first time in my life that I've really felt that way. So yeah, definitely.





How was it possible that Sarah could experience such heightened levels of self-endearment after such a brief encounter with her portrayal? As a result of being an audience member and main character of a performance of her life, Sarah was able to achieve a certain level of 'outsideness' from the normal constraints of living 'inside' one's story. This distancing effect that IWPs make possible allows people to see and relate to themselves as if they were seeing and relating to themselves as an 'other' who is strangely but endearingly familiar.

Our client/co-researchers have been instrumental in helping us appreciate just how critical this distancing effect is in the dramatic outcomes that we have seen so far in the practice of IWPs. In a follow up interview, three months after her Act 2 interview, Miranda described two versions of herself, 'Emily's Miranda' (the counter-story produced in the Act 1) and 'Miranda's Miranda' (the Problem's Story of Miranda's life). The following represents a summary of Miranda's comments regarding the significance of the distancing effect that she experienced in the Act 2.

During the Act 2, I felt that a level of detachment occurred for me. I was looking at someone else's story. I felt differently about my own story because it didn't feel like it was me. Seeing myself this way allowed me to feel compassion for myself even though it wasn't me. It was my story, so how can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me.

For me it was like- this is your life right here in front of you but it's almost like it's so separated that I was another human being. I think it's that visual trick of the Act 2. It's like you're seeing someone else. It's so weird to think about it that way, but that's exactly how it felt. And I think that's the power behind it. It's just so mind-blowing! I wasn't looking at my adult life rather a little girl's life. And I'm not going to sit there and tell some 13-year-old that sexual abuse was her fault. The detachment was so important because I could feel for myself, the way I would for anyone else- sympathy! I allowed myself to feel things that I had not yet felt for myself because it wasn't me. I strongly believe it is never a young girls fault for being sexually abused in any way. No matter what she has done. I have always felt that way. But in my mind, I felt like I deserved to be blamed for what was done to me. The separation from myself and the story of me being told by my therapist Emily, allowed me to be compassionate to myself without it being me. During the Act 2, I allowed myself to be accepting of Emily's Miranda so how could I not be accepting of Miranda's Miranda.

Nicki, another client/co-researcher, also offers some key comments related to the significance of the distancing effect achieved in IWPs. She commented:

When Sara (the therapist) told me about the Act 2, I envisioned seeing a video of 'us' and watching it, but I hadn't envisioned Sara being so much like us. It was as if she was portraying us like an actress instead of a third person. When I watched Sara being me and being Payton, it was really strange because I thought, "That's really me" and "That's





really Payton.” At the same time, I knew that it wasn’t me and I was free from my usual self-criticism. I didn’t worry about what I looked like or whether I said things the wrong way. Because it wasn’t me, I could just soak it all in. As I was sitting there watching Sara portray us, I didn’t realize just how much I liked both of us. We thought she really captured our spirit.

### Becoming More of a Character

Harking back to Hastrup who considered that her Act 2, if we can call it that, led to her having ‘more character’ we are reminded of Richard Sennett’s (2004) definition of character- “the capacity to move another.” Here, the PP moves oneself as well as the TP and the interviewer. How often have we all found one another in tears- tears of being overjoyed perhaps- at times in the Act 2? We have we all been moved by what Sennett refers to as ‘expressive exchange’:

Still I don’t believe mutual respect is merely a tool to grease the gears of society. This art has consequences for the people who practice it; exchange turns people outward- a stance which is necessary for the development of character (p. 226).

Is this an example of a ‘gift exchange’ (Mauss, 1990)? Except in the rather unusual circumstances of an Act 2, the mutuality of respect is given abundant expression by the therapist’s portrayal and in return, the portrayed person reciprocates by doing something similar for themselves?

For example, during Lisa’s Act 2 interview, she came to the conclusion that rather than being a failure in life, as she had always believed herself to be, she instead was a person who had never giving up in life. As her failures were recast in a counter-story of never giving up in the face of almost lifelong abuse, Lisa powerfully and tearfully whispered, “I never knew that I was never giving up.” I, Tom, was moved to tears by Lisa’s beautiful achievement. Ashley, during her co-research interview three months after she portrayed Lisa commented:

During our session the week following her Act 2 interview, Lisa said that there was something that she couldn’t stop thinking about all week. She can’t remember what it was that she said, but she very vividly remembers that she had said something that brought Tom to tears. I remember her saying, “There’s something in me- something about me- I have the ability to move someone to tears!” She said that is something she will never forget. She really had to ask herself, “What is it about me that can move another person to tears?” I think it was very powerful for Lisa to realize that she had the capacity and the heart to bring someone to tears. And I think it is worth noting that in this case that it was a man who happened to be a full professor with many years of experience as a therapist. She said that it was a physical representation of how far she had come.







Again, IWPs offer an exponential effect of Sennett's experience of being 'more of a character' for having moved an 'other.' Remember, Alice's experience of having come to the conclusion that she had moved her own self to tears. In that instance, she experienced what we might call being doubly moved; first by the moral character of the performed other with whom she was in "awe" and then by her realization that the performed other was in fact her own self. It is on such occasions that everyone seems to experience what Samuel refers to as being "re-storied by beauty...beautiful not only in their artistic qualities...but also in the eruption...of an inspiring and reconciling truth...a sense of wonder and awe" (Samuel, 2015).

### **Experience to Time Travel Due to the Suspension of Time.**

When people are engaged in performance, it often has the effect of the suspension of time. When a person is both an audience and central character of that performance, the effect can be exponential. Most of our PPs have used various metaphors of time during the Act 2 such as: "time traveling," "having traveled a great distance," "I seemed to have leapt through time," "It seemed as if I was propelled forward through time," and "It was rocket-speed change. Like traveling at the speed of light". One reason this experience of traveling great distances is heightened in the Act 2 is due to the fact that the PP is afforded a view of her life from the outside and can now see and experience her life story in its entirety, as if it were happening only in the present. We are referring to this as a "simultaneous looking back and looking forwards present" (Private Correspondence, 2016). Schiff (2012) makes a similar point regarding "reading the past backward" (p. 40).

Toward the end of her Act 2, Lisa commented how such a looking back and forward present occurred for her when she said, 'When I used to look back on my life, I used to think that I was failing in life. That all of my struggles and hurts were evidence of my failure. But now, looking back, I can see that I was never giving up on life. I never knew that I was never giving up. Now, knowing that I was never giving up on life gives me an entirely new view of my life and what is possible for me. I can see things that I never imagined were possible for me.'

Similarly, Sarah at the end of her Act 2 interview commented, "Thank you. I guess my expectations of my future were nothing like this. If I were to have tried to dream a positive future for myself before coming here today, [crying] I would've let myself down."

### **Concluding Reminiscences**

In 1973, I (David) recall attending a play in Vancouver directed by Richard Schechner whereby the traditional distinction between audience and actor was breached and the audience was inadvertently required to join the performers as there was only a 'stage' on this occasion at this theatre. I had no idea at the time how prophetic this experience would be for me. I cannot wait to send this paper to Schechner along with others by way of appreciation. Victor Turner and his performative anthropology was perhaps one of Michael's and my most significant sources. Narrative therapy is indebted to Turner and his *Anthropology of Experience (1986)*. How many times did Michael and I read and re-read it? I now wonder what would have happened if





Michael and I had read Schechner's *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985) with a forward by Turner himself which documented and theorized the collaboration between Turner's performative anthropology and Schechner's performance studies (Schechner, 2013). It is worthwhile attempting a genealogy of some of the pertinent sources for IWPs. Barbara Myerhoff was the Ph.D. student of Victor Turner and went on to co-author *Secular Ritual* with Sally Falk Moore. Eugenio Barba called his practice anthropological theatre and was deeply influenced by both Turner and Schechner. Kirsten Hastrup has had a lifelong interest in theatre and has published a book on Shakespeare (Hastrup, K. 2004, *Action: Anthropology in the Company of Shakespeare*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press). Denzin and Conquergood translated the anthropology of Turner into performative sociology (Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (4th ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage Publications; Conquergood, D. (2013). *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography and Praxis*, 2013, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.)

In my introduction to Michael's (2011) posthumous book entitled, "Narrative Practice: Extending the Conversation" I asked him,

Does this remind you of our fascination with performative ritual and your carefully crafted re-working of Myheroff's definitional ceremony and outsider witnessing? When we were planning to meet again, you alluded to some matters we had read in the past that we should review. Did you have van Gennep's 'liminal phase' and Turner's 'anti-structure' on your mind? I know I had Norman Denzin (2003), *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* on my list to read with you and see what relevance it might have (Epston Introduction in White, 2011).

The last papers that I emailed to Michael to prepare ourselves for our first meeting to 'start all over again,' (Epston, 2016) which sadly turned out to be scheduled for three weeks after he had died, was my complete collection of Gary Saul Morson's published papers. I am so glad to take these ideas up now with Tom but regret that Michael is not here to have participated in the invention and exploration of IWPs with us. Tom has often mentioned to me that perhaps IWPs are anything but an invention: they merely have brought us back to the beginnings of narrative therapy, something that Michael had suggested we should do on the grounds that we had by no means exhausted our sources.





## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1993). *Toward a philosophy of the act*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. (Trans.) Vadim Liapunov. Austin: U of Texas Press.
- Bird, J. (2006). *Constructing the narrative in super-vision*. New Zealand: Edge Press.
- Bochner, A. & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. NY: Routledge.
- Carlson, T. S., Corturillo, E. M., & Freedman, J. (in press). A story about a story about a story: There's always a puppy (and sometimes a bunny). *Journal of Systemic Therapies*.
- Carlson, T. S. & Haire, A. R. (2014). Toward a theory of relational accountability: An invitational approach to living narrative ethics in couple relationships. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, 3, 1-16.
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and life course. In P. Balts, and O.G., Brim (Eds). *Life-span development and behavior*, 4, 205-241. NY: Academic Press.
- Conquergood, D. (1985). Performing as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance. *Literature in Performance*, 5(2)
- Conquergood, D. (2013). *Cultural struggles: Performance, ethnography and praxis*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press
- Denzin, N. (2003). *Performance ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2011) (4th ed.) *The sage handbook of qualitative research*, London: Sage Publications.
- Epston, D. (2016) Re-imagining narrative therapy: A history for the future, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 35(1), 79-87.
- Frank, A. (2010). *Letting stories breathe: A socio-narratology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hastrup, K. (1995). *A passage to anthropology: Between experience and theory*. NY: Routledge.
- Hastrup, K. (1998). *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World* (Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology). Oxford: Clarendon Press.





- Hastrup, K. (2004). *Action: Anthropology in the company of Shakespeare*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Kurtz, A. & Coetzee, J. M. (2015). *The good story: Exchanges on truth, fiction and psychotherapy*, London: Harvill Seeker.
- Levinas, E. (1981). *Otherwise than being, or beyond essence*. (Trans.) Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Lawrence Lightfoot, S. (1993). *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture*. NY: Basic Books.
- Lawrence Lightfoot, S. & Hoffman Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. NY: Jossey-Bass.
- Lawrence Lightfoot, S. (1998). *Respect: An exploration*. NY: Basic Books.
- Mattingly, C. (2010). *The paradox of hope: Journeys through a clinical borderland*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Mattingly, C. (1998). *Healing dramas and clinical plots: The narrative structure of experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mauss, M. (1990). (Trans. W.D. Halls). *The Gift*. London: Routledge.
- Myerhoff, B. (1982). Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility, and remembering. In J. Ruby, (Ed). *A crack in the mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Morson, G. S. (1994). *Narrative and freedom: The shadows of time*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Samuel, N. (2015). Re-storied by beauty: On self-understanding in the Ricouer-Carr discussion on narrative. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. Online.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theater and anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schechner, R. (2013). *Performance studies: An introduction*. NY: Routledge Press.
- Schiff, B. (2012). The function of narrative: Toward a narrative psychology of meaning. *Narrative Works: Issues, investigations, and interventions*, 2(1); 33-47.
- Sennett, R. (2004). *Respect in a world of inequality*. NY: W.W. Norton.





Turner, V. (1986). Dewey, Dilthey, and drama: An essay in the anthropology of experience. In V. Turner & E. Bruner (Eds.), *The anthropology of experience*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Turner, V. (1974). *Drama, fields, and metaphor*. New York: Cornell University Press.

White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2011). *Narrative practice: Continuing the conversation*. NY: W.W. Norton.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. NY: W.W. Norton.

