



On the Necessity of Adventure: Toward a Contemporary Narrative Therapy

by David Epston

We introduced the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy in 2017 with the express purpose of reimagining narrative therapy. Our collaborations with authors and contributors over the past three years have further charged us with urgent excitement to embrace the radical, that which has not been said yet, and ideas that are just in the making. We are excited to announce that we are changing the name of the journal to the **Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy**. For the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, we are committed to discover and highlight examples of practice that cannot be explained by the existing narrative therapy literature. We are seeking novel and alternative language to describe contemporary narrative practice and invite authors to speak/write in their own voices so that their 'thinking' comes through loud and clear.

The Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy especially welcomes writings informed by critical perspectives such as post-colonial theories, Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Indigenous Studies, Queer and Feminist theories, and more.

Shortly before Michael's death in 2008, Michael and I determined to reunite with the agreement to 'start all over again'. Both Michael (*Maps of Narrative Practice*, 2007) and I, along with my co-authors (*Biting the Hand that Starved You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia*, 2004) had completed projects that had required us to give a great deal of time and thought to distill our respective practices in order to make it available for publication. However, Michael and I were both aware that distillation requires a temporary setting aside of invention and expansion. Knowing this, we thought it time to take up a promise we had made to one another in the Introduction of *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (1992), in what was the closest we ever got to a manifesto. Perhaps it could be considered more a vow:

With regard to ideas and practices, we do not believe that we are in any one place at a particular point in time, and rarely in particular places for very long. In making this observation, we are not suggesting that developments in our work are sharply discontinuous- they are not. Nor are we suggesting that our values and our commitments are varying- they are not ... However, we are drawing attention to the fact that one of the aspects associated with this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure. We aim to preserve this spirit, and know that if we accomplish this our work will continue to evolve in ways that are enriching to our lives, and to the lives of those persons who seek our help.

What will be the direction of this evolution? It could be tempting to make pronouncements about this. But these would be hard to live by. And besides, our sense is that most of the 'discoveries' that have played a significant part in the development of our practices ... have been

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made after the fact (in response to unique outcomes in our work with families), with theoretical considerations assisting us to explore and extend the limits of these practices. (p. 9)

So, in 2008, I reinitiated my fishing expeditions but this time I was loading Michael's computer with pdfs of literary, anthropological, sociological, and performance studies. One of the questions of great importance to me was: 'what do we mean by rich story development'? Put another way, "How can you tell a 'rich' story from a 'poor' story? Or "Is it possible to enrich a poor story so that it achieves the status of a 'rich story'?" Shouldn't we concern ourselves with stories that endow the protagonist with more character? Might we consider anew the means to suspenseful, imaginative, and evocative storytelling. I wish Michael and I could have together considered the following by Rebecca Solnit (2014):

"What's your story about? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice...We tell ourselves stories that save us and stories that are the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown...Not a few stories are sinking ships, and many of us go down with these ships even when the lifeboats are bobbing all around us...We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories straddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning, The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them and then to become the storyteller" (p. 3-4).

This leads me to one final question: "How can we begin to find the means for a person to become the author of their own story?"

But this was only what was on my mind at that moment having read and re-read *Maps of Narrative Practice*. Michael reassured me that he had much he also wanted to review and revise and 'go further' than narrative therapy had gone.

Michael's untimely death meant that 'starting all over again' never took place in the way I had imagined and anticipated. Would it have been like the proverbial 'old days'? Could we 'poach' some more ideas to invigorate re-thinking the ideas in to our practice and have it lead to places we couldn't possibly have anticipated at the outset? For some time, you are just following your nose thrilled by the prospect of finding another 'good idea.' I am pretty sure that is how it would have turned out but now I will never know.

I am convinced that those therapies that persist are those that continually refresh themselves with ideas and are continually on the move. I certainly see this in some the recent developments away from the "heartland" of narrative therapy practice. Those current innovative developments I am thinking of include:

- De-colonizing of storytelling practices
- various forms of the re-invention of narrative therapy as it crosses cultural/linguistic boundaries
- Moral witnessing practices with those who suffer

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- Re-politicizing of injustice practices
- Re-enlivening document writing practices
- Collective creativity practices

I know there are other examples but I am not trying to be exhaustive here.

Alongside these heartening innovative developments, some events have been concerning. I had two papers reviewed for publication in two separate journals and the well-intentioned comments of the reviewers gave me pause for reflection. One reviewer asked me to give cause that what I had submitted was narrative therapy and not something else. Another reviewer was far more certain and stated that my manuscript could not possibly be narrative therapy because it failed to pass a certain criterion and was rejected. Interestingly enough, I had submitted both papers with the express desire not to be narrative therapy qua narrative therapy but to rather to extend it to places that as far as I knew it had not travelled to before. So, my reviewers' comments were well founded but what surprised me was the certainty of what 'is' or 'isn't' narrative therapy, a certainty I certainly don't share.

My interest is considering how narrative therapy can become other than what it has become so far. I see that as vital to its livelihood. And that depends on traveling beyond what has been mapped and to 'map' what now are considered unknown and unexplored. Admittedly it takes some nerve to travel to unmapped territory. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn in 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' (1962) challenged the taken-for-granted regarding the pursuit of discovery in science. He said that discovery did not arise in 'normal science' which concerned itself more with fixing its 'rules and regulations' and most of its research led to findings as he referred 'mopping up.' Most discoveries, he argued, occur through what he considered to be 'extraordinary research':

The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research. (p. 91)

This essay highlights our journal's commitment to open up a space for 'the willingness to try anything' irrespective if it is canonical practice or not. We would expect that most of the innovations will be outside the canon. What Kuhn found was that discoveries come about by prepared minds bumping in to accidents. I have also found that 'necessity is the mother of invention': when you find yourself in a pickle and no matter how hard you search the available literature or prevail upon colleagues and supervisors, no one can provide you with a map, you just have to find your way or else.

Our journal is committed to exploring and amplifying such innovations. We willingly accept innovations hot off the press. We are not expecting them to be packaged in traditional journal article format with literature reviews. We also are only too happy to review lengths of your own preference rather than the traditional 7000-word limit. We would like to think this will be a home for those who are thrilled by thinking and doing something they have never done and, as far as they know, no one else has either. The style in which we would prefer you to write is to indicate how you came to think/do what you did but more importantly to show your readers in the best way you can think of how you did it. Instead of

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preparing an academic paper, we ask you to imagine yourself excited by the very novelty of your innovation, sitting around a coffee table at work explaining your innovation to a group of valued colleagues, dying to hear about it...

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