



Professional Autobiography

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I am sitting in a medium-sized meeting room in Tulsa, Oklahoma, next to Gail Lapidus, the director of a Family Service agency that I consult with, and surrounded by the staff of that agency, gathered behind desks in a square that was open to one side. It is 1984... I think...OMG that is almost 40 years ago. We are awaiting an interview that is about to be conducted by some family therapist named Michael White from Adelaide Australia, who Karl Tomm had brought to the agency to show off the work that Karl claimed he had recently, “fallen in love with.” Karl had recently given a workshop to this agency and had asked if he could return with Michael, which would be Michael’s first US gig. I had recently completed an externship in Calgary and had met Karl during this process. And I had been supervising a therapist in Oklahoma City, Janet Adams-Westcott, in the Milan Family Systems approach. She was affiliated with this agency and had encouraged them, with my encouragement, to engage Karl in the first place.

Backstory

I had done a Post-Doc internship in Pediatric Psychology at the University of Oklahoma Health Science Center, a strange place for an East Coast boy, but they had one of the best Pediatric Psychology programs in the country. Indeed, the Psychiatry Department was dominated by psychologists for good old Oklahoma reasons (the daughter of a prominent politician would sit on the lap of the Governor when she was little, and she became a psychologist). Anyway, I was encouraged to apply for a faculty position (which I received) and became their family therapy “expert.” I was fortunate to receive family therapy training in graduate school, as at the time the systems thinking/family therapy thing was in its early days.

The agency had selected a client for Michael to interview. This woman, who was likely much younger than she looked, had an old-fashioned “Chinese restaurant menu” of diagnoses; you know pick one from Column A, one from column B, one from column C, etc. She had been at this agency for many, many years and had worked with a multitude of therapists over time. She was considered an agency lifer (a “teaching case” for interns), with a dismal prognosis; any attempt by her



to suggest any motivation to change was met with a roll of the eyes and a high level of exasperation.

She is now wheeling herself into the room followed by Michael. I can hear the staff whispering amongst themselves something like, “I can't wait to see this.” I turn to Gail and share a knowing look, as we have discussed this client with the staff on more than one occasion. Michael asks her something about her wishes for her life; she responds with something about wanting to leave her Problems behind and move forward in her life. We are all rolling our eyes now. Michael is taking her very seriously and asking her questions that reflect both interest in her and his own genuine belief that she could do exactly what she is saying. I am watching this, and it seems clear, by her body language and affect, that she is beginning to believe she could do it as well. It was a life-changing moment for me.

That weekend began a relationship between Michael and Cheryl White with both Gail and with me. Humorously, after Michael gained some notoriety, people would wonder what it was about Tulsa, Oklahoma, of all places, that had Michael returning there with great frequency. At that time, it was all about relationships for Cheryl. Michael and Cheryl had made strong connections in a few places in the US, and in the early days, these were the places that they returned to (Chicago-Jill Freedman and Gene Coombs, Boston-Bill Madsen, Sally-Ann Roth and Kathy Weingarten, Mississippi-Melissa and Griff Griffin). I remember Cheryl giving me lessons on how to watch over Michael, anticipating that she would not be accompanying him on every trip. Watching over meant, in particular, paying attention for both of us when we were crossing streets, as Michael was colorblind.

I then began reading everything that Michael had written. My work had evolved from, what I referred to as Strategic–Structural therapy, to Milan work. I had been intrigued by Strategic ideas, and how they usefully undermined the traditional therapeutic approaches of the day. I was not, however, enamored with the amount of use of therapist directives in the work. After going to Calgary, I was introduced to the Milan world of complex questions, although I was left wondering if the work did enough to move things forward efficiently. After seeing Michael work, talking with him throughout the weekend, and then doing the reading (which was sparse at the time as far as things he had written), I became convinced that his approach



(not yet called narrative) both embodied what I believed to be the best of all the approaches I had been exposed to, and left behind what I did not think was useful. Primarily, his work left behind the pathologizing of persons, and the implicit endorsement by the therapeutic community of dominant specifications for personhood (although I did not have this language yet). Growing up, I was a shy adolescent whose ways did not fit into dominant ideas for how young men should be... and as a college-aged person in the early 70's, I was an anti-war protester (as was Michael), and very supportive of the suddenly evolving ideas of how gender influenced identity. Narrative ideas were a really good fit for my developing perspectives that were concerned with oppressive hierarchies and oppression of people. Not only the ideas, but also the way Michael interacted with me and with the others also fit my "preferred values" (these were new words as well at that point).

I spent some time with Michael and with Cheryl separately during that time. With Michael, I would try to pick his brain and discuss approaches. Michael was always careful not to accept invitations from me to define the relationship in a hierarchical manner. For example, when I asked Michael what he was reading, his response would be to ask me what I was reading. I also remember being in a bookstore with Cheryl and looking through books together and Cheryl saying to me, "When are you going to write a book Jeff?" and I thought something like, "yeah, right."

Cheryl seemed to enjoy finding "prospects" like me and propelling them forward in their careers; I reckon that she did the same thing at an earlier time for Michael and David. I will always be grateful to Cheryl for her pushes in the direction of me taking myself seriously and the effects that had on my development.

A Calgary MOMENT

Sometime in the next couple years, I traveled back to Calgary to attend a workshop that Michael was giving. I had no idea that it would lead to perhaps the most surreal moment in my therapeutic career. As part of one of Michael's live interviews, I was on the reflecting team, watching the pre-session discussion from behind a one-way mirror. A woman burst into the room and started yelling at the staff members; she was not a client of theirs nor related to the client they were about to interview. She picked up the clipboard and threw it... and Michael,



trying to be protective, unfortunately intercepted it with his head. From behind the mirror, it seemed to occur in slow motion and brought with it a great deal of shock for those in the room and behind the mirror.

One early misconception about Michael's work was that he would be accepting of anything, and so when he asked to file assault charges, we were all shocked. But Michael was all about accountability, and in fact was clear that instead of "anything goes," it was more about "nothing goes," at least without seeking accountability for the real effects of what had occurred. Lesson learned.

Fast forward to 1989

After teaching and supervising narrative work for several years in Oklahoma, I moved to San Francisco in 1988. In order to circulate locally, and to make connections, I called agencies, talked narrative, and offered to give talks and even do live interviews for free (I often joked that if you were willing to do interviews in front of an agency's staff, they immediately assumed you knew what you were doing). I became known as the local "narrative" person...well, actually, the only narrative person. In my "tours" of agencies, the name Vicki Dickerson kept coming up as a local Family Therapy teacher. Now, I knew that name as she was in the Calgary Externship with me one of the years I attended; we were in the "outlier" faction together (what a surprise as Vicki was prone to saying). So, I rang her up and we started getting together, with me sharing my excitement with her about these new narrative ideas. Vicki got it right away, and a decade long partnership was born.

Anyway, the AAMFT convention was in San Francisco in 1989, as was the infamous big earthquake during the World Series between our 2 local teams, the Giants and the Athletics. Michael would later joke that whenever he came to present in the Bay Area disaster would strike, as on a subsequent trip the Berkeley fires were going on.

Michael had been invited to do a live interview at the conference. As an AAMFT member, and being the local narrative person in SF, Mary Herget (who later joined several of my groups, and sadly died recently) reached out to me as she was involved in local conference planning. She wanted to discuss several possible "cases" for Michael's interview; it seemed to me that AAMFT wanted to select situations that were unusual and filled with as many Problems as possible (it made for better sales of video recordings). I kept assuring Mary that it really



wouldn't matter to Michael as he will do what he will do, a concept that seemed to me to be foreign to the way AAMFT thought about things at that time.

I was asked to be a member of the reflecting team, as was David Epston, who I believe I met for the first time (he was also presenting at the conference). Other team members included Karl Tomm, Jill Freedman, Irene Esler (who my kids also enjoyed having as a houseguest) and Margie Lim, a therapist who was working with me at the time. This was one of narrative's and Michael's biggest stages so far.

As I suspect that most of you have seen this classic video, you know that the interview worked out quite well. What I remember most, though, was how nervous we all were beforehand. I can even vividly picture the scene in the stairwell area where we were waiting to be called to come in. It was a big stage for all of us as well!

(OK, I can't resist. Our brains tend to remember most events that are the most emotionally evocative to us. It often represents them in pictures, as the part of the brain that mediates affective arousal tends to operate in images and not words. This seems to occur unless the event is too traumatic, and then instead gets locked up in special synapses and outside of conscious awareness, while unfortunately still retaining its influence).

BAFTTA

Vicki and I formed Bay Area Family Therapy Training Associates in September of 1990, becoming the first narrative therapy Center in North America. We offered therapy, ongoing training, consultation, and internships in the schools. We also gave workshops, and offered a program of guest workshops. Michael was, of course, a regular presenter.

Some little stories here:

Michael would stay with my family, and not surprisingly, he and his famous jellybean briefcase were an instant hit with my young children. Michael would always take time to interact with them, showing interest in their thoughts and ideas in a way few adults did. My older daughter, Stephanie, when given a Thanksgiving assignment to share her experience of a person in their life to be written on the body of a turkey that they drew...picked Michael, her favorite



turkey if you will. We were a bit aghast, but, of course, Michael loved it and put it up on the door of his office of his therapy room at Dulwich. Later, when they were teenagers and worked at the neighborhood recreation center giving swimming lessons, they would take Michael over there so he could swim laps. My daughter, Meg, who would later play water polo in high school and college, was once spontaneously “interviewed” at home by Michael after her swim team practice as to her swimming knowledges and practices (water polo players were not always fond of the swim team portion of their training program).

Once, when Vicki and I were watching a World Series game with him during one of his visits, Michael, with a smile and an innocent air, asked, “What countries play in the World Series?” I also took Michael to a baseball game when Barry Bonds was chasing the home run title and, despite his usual diet, he wanted a hot dog, and would repeat the 'Barry, Barry, Barry,' chant for the rest of his visit.

Vicki and I eventually gathered up the courage to ask Michael if we could co-present with him at one of these workshops. Deep down I was terrified as I knew what would happen. Michael would want one of us to do the interview and I knew it would end up being me doing the interview. It was one thing to teach with Michael, it was another thing doing an interview with him watching. At first, I apparently asked the same sort of question several times before settling down, but I learned so much from reviewing the interview with Michael. He was so artful in acknowledging the useful things I did while subtly opening space for me to see other possibilities. This experience not only helped me with my therapeutic work, but also offered up a model for “narrative supervision.”

I traveled to “Mecca,” aka Dulwich Centre, in 1991 to give a workshop in couples therapy and to see clients with Michael. The work I was doing with couples would be the basis of two articles on couples therapy that I would publish with Vicki in 1993. I was so tense that when I went swimming in the ocean with Michael the day before I strained my back, a timing that couldn’t be worse. I also remember outlining my ideas on couples work to Michael, who said, “That’s a really good way to do it.” I was pleased, but I also heard him say that there were many possibilities in this work.

Vicki and I, along with John Neal, taught a 9-month externship at MRI in Palo Alto in narrative therapy, from 1989-1997. This externship co-existed with the one given by some of Family Therapies founding fathers on their version of “brief



therapy.” Early on, I was asked to give a narrative teaching to them and their staff. OMG, I am now in the room with the legends whose work I grew up reading in graduate school...more terror. In attendance were the founders of the Brief Therapy Institute, Dick Fisch, John Weakland, and Paul Watzlawick. Art Bodin was there as well, and I believe a before EMDR Francine Shapiro was also there. When I sat at the head of the large table, I was struck by the fact that the men sat on one side and the women on the other side, and my finely honed by Cheryl White gender issues radar was beeping loudly. I was thankfully pre-warned that Paul Watzlawick did not look at presenters when they were talking, and so I didn’t take it as a bad sign when he didn’t. But imagine the sinking feeling in my stomach when, during my discussion of the importance of gender (and other dominant social constructions) in the work, he turned to me and said in his Austrian accent, “I am reminded of a quote by Gregory Bateson that ‘the name is not the thing,’” quickly turning away again after he spoke. I may have had a lot of anxiety to manage in those days, but I was pretty good conceptually and so was able to respond with something like, gender may be a construction, but it was one that had very real effects on all of us.

What happened next was fascinating. The women, all to my right, mumbled loudly enough to be barely audible, but not loud enough to be commented on (this group was the outgrowth of the “communication school” spearheaded by Watzlawick after all), something to the effect that these men don’t really allow us to be in any position of power and authority.

Conference time

Vicki and I also gave workshops/trainings together outside of BAFTTA from about 1990-1999. Often these were at conferences, both non-narrative (e.g., AAMFT, AFTA) and narrative/post structural (e.g., Narrative Ideas and Therapeutic Practices, Therapeutic Conversations).

In the mid-nineties, Vicki and I, sometimes with various combinations of colleagues, including Bill Lax, Stephen Madigan, Bill Madsen, Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, and Janet Adams Westcott, gave workshops together, primarily at AAMFT. We were often met with a great deal of resistance by the audience, who generally worked from a systemic model. We even did a 2 full days block introducing narrative therapy at AAMFT. It was mostly great fun for our merry band of rebels despite all the contrary comments and questions we received.



Most of us preferred the position of being on the outside, given our lives and histories. I also remember a “participants workshop” that Vicki and I organized at BAFTTA, attended by some local AFTA members, where one such person wanted to know why we used such new and complicated terminology in our work. This was amusing to me as systems/cybernetics language was a whole lot more complicated in my opinion.

Stepping outside the box...

But now that we are in the 90’s, it’s time to step out of this narrative and talk to you, the audience.

A number of times in this story you have read that I experienced terror, nervousness, tension, etc. These occurred during events where it was not unusual to have these feelings; events that offer the potential for evaluation to create a context where Fear has an easy time grabbing hold of us. In those days, for me, however, the situations that were fraught with “real danger” and, consequently, that I had a hard time managing, were the social ones. I remember being with some of the group of people referenced above (and others) at a conference in the early 90’s, (before I got to know anyone, it might have been a Therapeutic Conversations conference). I can picture a big table in a restaurant and being overwhelmed with Anxiety, noticeably, as I found out later, and wanting to run out the door.

This was not an unusual experience for me then, but I was usually able to avoid being in that sort of spot. Here I could not, as my goals for myself kept me hanging in there, and at least coming to a stalemate with Anxiety. Still, I couldn’t wait to escape.

Actually, this Problem had a hold of me most of my life up to that point. In contexts where I was very familiar with people, I would be gregarious, a leader/organizer, but when in unfamiliar interpersonal territory I was the kid in school who knew all the answers but was too uncomfortable to raise my hand.

I worked at a summer camp yearly starting at age 16 and was always great with the kids and did lots of cool stuff, but when it came to socializing with the other counselors...at some point someone told me people thought I was arrogant; I would have killed to feel that way. What I felt was the Anxiety that kept me apart from others.



I share this with you to give you a taste of what the Problem was, and I apologize to anyone that felt I was uninterested in them. Situations where people were consuming anti-anxiety agents were, understandably, more comfortable for me. Starting to practice what I thought of as “self-narrative therapy” had helpful effects; I lessened the grip of extreme self-evaluation by noticing my “victories” (including the fact that despite the “bigness” of the Problem I was able to make things happen), and by cutting myself a bit more slack when things did not go as well. But the Problem still often had the upper hand until...well, we will get there later in this story...

I’m going back to the timeline now...

In 1993, I presented at Stephen Madigan’s first Narrative Ideas and Therapeutic Practices conference. On the boat ride that Stephen had arranged for the presenters (where I was predictably uncomfortable) I wandered out on the deck and found a group of people who are dear friends to this day. I can picture this scene as well (our brain also remembers events laden with positive affect, it just takes more of it to have the effect that negative affect does). How did this happen so easily for me? We bonded around my then current non-professional obsession, the Grateful Dead. It turned out that Bill Lax, Colin Sanders, and Stephen were all Grateful Dead enthusiasts, and that made for an easy, actually passionate conversation. These boys have remained among the most lasting friendships in my life.

As an aside, it would be impossible for me to communicate just how important going to Grateful Dead shows had become at that point in my life. It was a refuge from the context of self-induced pressures and demands...a no evaluation zone...and provided me with an expanded sense of community. A funny Michael/Cheryl story here. One time in SF they met someone who “made” them listen to the Grateful Dead and danced/jumped around while doing so. They didn’t know quite what to make of this. Maybe they were even a bit aghast. When they shared this story with me, I just smiled and didn’t tell them that I had been to over 100 shows. The Grateful Dead was an acquired taste that one could only acquire by attending live performances. Michael would later be taken to a post-Jerry Dead show in DC and said to me afterwards that he got it “a bit,” and appreciated that there was little “body-discipline” among attendees.

Some of us were a bit wild in those days partying wise; we worked hard,



were passionate about these ideas, and then liked to blow it out.

These were the heydays of narrative therapy as far as I was concerned. The crowds got bigger, and Michael was in great demand. Our work was all of a sudden bordering on mainstream, at least as far as the larger group of outliers of traditional psychotherapy practice were concerned. I used to say we were the left wing of the left wing of the therapy world. I presented at Stephen's conference through 1997 with many of the same presenters and have so many beautiful memories of both the teaching and the not teaching times during those days. For example, I have a vivid memory from a Therapeutic Conversations conference in Denver in 1996. A large group of presenters were having drinks around a very large table, telling stories and joking around. At some point we all started singing together, including songs from Broadway shows. Kiwi Tamasese, I think Charles Waldegrave, and maybe Wally, were there (the Family Center from New Zealand had so much to do with shaping narrative ethics during those times). David Marsten, who had attended trainings from Vicki and I, was also there, and it turned out he had a great stage voice. Some of the others in attendance were Dave (the Rock) Nylund who also had learned some narrative from me, Stephen Madigan, my dear friend Liz Colt, and my wife D'Ann who has always been so supportive of me. I share this story as an example of one of the many beautiful moments of camaraderie I had working and playing with this group.

As the nineties went on and we became more mainstream (you know this story I'm sure, as soon as you become more established and less at war with the outside world, then the infighting begins), I became more and more concerned with the hierarchy battles that were beginning to brew, naively imagining it wouldn't happen to us. For me professionally, the real turning point came at the first Dulwich conference in Adelaide in 1999. There was trouble in Camelot it seemed. I was already disenchanted with what was happening and this made it all the worse. I can picture myself sitting at a table (here I go again) having lunch with other presenters, all of us going "what is going on here?" (And yes I'm leaving out the specifics).

Personally, I was also in a quandary. My children, with whom I was very involved, wanted me at home more and not traveling around the world to present. I was tired of dealing with all the pressures and anxieties (although I was better at this point as I knew people) and tired of seeing clients (I started taking film writing and directing courses) and dreamed of a different work life. I wanted to grow



more on a personal level as well. I tried being half in and half out of my usual role to see if I could do what I was doing and try evolving personally, but it wasn't working...

My last presentation with Vicki was in New Zealand in 1999...and I would go on to present at the second Dulwich conference in Atlanta in 2002, but at that point I was pretty out of, as I jokingly called it, the "famous family therapist" business. I would not present again for 5 years.

I had settled into a slightly different life that was family, friends, and self-focused (I was still seeing clients but had made my peace with that). I was also going to a lot of live music and attending festivals. But my main project at this point was becoming a better husband, father, friend, person, and being kinder to myself. I still wasn't, however, able to get past Anxiety enough to be connected to myself and others in the way I preferred.

In narrative therapy, we talk about following our client's experience. I always followed maps really well and was really good at maintaining and articulating conceptual frameworks. Michael used to kid me that I taught Michael better than he did; my retort was that it was because I had a simpler understanding. But following the client's experience as we thought of it in narrative was one thing and being able to be emotionally inside a client's experience and inside my own emotional experience at the same time was another thing for me. At that point in time, I didn't have the words to describe what I was looking for (but now I do, and it's PRESENCE).

Back to the future

A couple of years or so down the pike, I became thirsty again for learning something new. I started asking around, and doing some general reading, and discovered that the two hot topics of the day were attachment theory and neurobiology. I knew a fair amount about attachment theory as Mary Ainsworth was on my school's faculty both in college and graduate school. I actually almost did my dissertation in attachment theory, but I decided I preferred to get out of graduate school in a timely manner instead. At that point in time, I didn't really like how mainstream psychology was using attachment ideas, more as criteria for pathologizing and specifying personhood than as a developmental metaphor, which often resulted in taking a corrective approach. I was, however, taken with neurobiology (I was a biology major for a while in college) and the more I read



the more I was fascinated with the way that neurobiology surprisingly supported a lot of the ideas in narrative therapy (except, of course, the immense importance emotional systems play in neuroscience thinking).

The truly important development for me in my life, however, was the beginning of a meditation practice. Living in California, I knew a number of people who engaged in meditation. And my dear friend Bill Lax had written a paper on Buddhism and Narrative Therapy, a seminal work in that literature. Foolishly, I had chalked meditation mostly up to California sensibilities. However, I became struck with the number of neurobiologists who were engaged in meditation practices. I was very influenced by the work of Daniel Siegel and was taken with his Wheel of Awareness practice (I later did an intensive with Dan and was impressed with the loving way he approached all of us and the importance to him of trying to make a difference in the world). So, I began meditating. At first, I complained to the meditators in the groups I led that I felt like it made my mind buzz worse. They laughed, and said I was just noticing it more. I said "no, it's worse." Of course, they were indeed correct. What I was not prepared for was the real effects of meditating on my connection to myself and others. It was like I was suddenly and almost magically opened up. I couldn't believe that this kind of practice had effects that you didn't see with sometimes years of psychotherapy, including narrative therapy. I was starting to get a handle on presence, something I was reading about in the neurobiology literature. Amazingly, one effect for me was that I was significantly more comfortable with other people and with social situations. One year, when my wife asked me what I wanted for my birthday I told her it was for her to start a meditation practice. This opened her up more and opened the door to increased closeness for us as a couple.

I began discussing these neurobiology ideas with both of the ongoing groups I led in the East Bay. The participants were very interested in what I was saying as they had done some neurobiology reading as well and were enthusiastic to hear about how I was combining these ideas with the narrative ones that we had been discussing. After about a year or so of doing this, I began to discuss some of these ideas with my intern training group at BAFTTA. Marie Natalie Beaudoin, who I had hired to be our training director (Vicki had long left our center at that point), eventually became interested in my new focus, and began doing some reading herself.

So, in 2007, when Rick Maisel (another Deadhead) told me that he was



presenting in Cuba at the invitation of David Epston and wanted to know if I would like to present with him, I told him, borrowing a line from the movie Jerry Maguire, "You had me at Cuba." I thought this was a good test for my newfound ability to manage Anxiety and hold onto my own presence. It all went shockingly well for me, and I felt it was a major turning point in my life. While our presentation was not focused on the exciting new neurobiology ideas I had been teaching and letting influence my practice, I gained some enthusiasm for maybe presenting them in the future.

Neuro-narrative therapy

The next few years found me continuing to do a ton of reading and beginning to do presentations on what I would eventually call Neuro-Narrative therapy. Marie-Nathalie was taking notes at these presentations and eventually began doing some writing herself. I, however, was still reluctant to get back into the writing game. I had written a book with Vicki (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996, *If Problems Talked: Narrative therapy in Action*), and I/we had been involved with another 15 articles on narrative therapy (see bibliography). I had even done some writing prior to that as well but, unlike teaching, writing comes hard to me, and I wasn't sure I wanted to get back to doing it again. Nevertheless, when Marie-Nathalie approached me with a draft of an article that covered some of the basics of my work and asked if I wanted to be involved, I agreed, and that would become the basis of an article we published in 2011. We also presented at the Dulwich conference in Brazil in 2011. We would write another article (Zimmerman & Beaudoin, 2015, *Neurobiology for your narrative: How brain science can influence narrative work*). I eventually wrote another article on my own (Zimmerman, 2017, *Neuro-narrative therapy: Brain Science, narrative therapy, poststructuralism, and preferred identities*). So, I then had the courage to say yes when Norton approached me about writing a book. In my heart, I knew it would be a different kind of torture.

I agreed to write the book for several reasons, some good and some bad. In doing workshops at Therapeutic Conversations 10 (2012) and 11 (2014), I was met by very enthusiastic audiences, many of whom were into narrative as well as the neurobiology they were reading or learning in school. Many came up to me after these presentations and whispered, "Is it ok to experiment with this? Can we



speaking about this out loud? What about the ‘narrative police’?”¹ This was also true after my 2014 presentation in Adelaide at the Dulwich conference, although the people there who were interested in my work had to be much more discreet about their interest given the local atmosphere towards anything not officially sanctioned. I thought, “Wow, has narrative therapy become subject to such a harsh a set of rigid specifications, that students have become so fearful and subjugated?” I have a lot more to say about the operations of power behind this, and its real effects on the future of narrative therapy...

Back to the book. So, one reason that I wrote it was for all those who attended my workshops and wanted more, specifically something to read. I was also encouraged by several colleagues whose work I impacted. For example, the South African narrative contingent was very interested in what I was doing...Elise Morkel in Capetown, as well as Chene Swart in the Johannesburg area, who has become a treasured friend. I was invited by them to do a couple of workshops there in 2015.

The bad reason for agreeing to do the book, however, was pride and hubris. These Problems got in my way from saying no to a project that I was not sure I wanted to take on at that point in my life.

Working on the book, as I suspected it would, had a huge and not so good impact on me. I put on weight, had meltdowns, and was moody. All of this was complicated by an increasing but unrelated visual disturbance I was experiencing that made reading and writing more difficult and was opening the door to a lot of fear about my future. These were not ideal book writing conditions. Lots of coffee and more frequent and longer meditations eventually got me through it. The book was published in 2018.

There were a few more presentations/workshops before and after this but the one constant was that I maintained my priority of privileging my personal life over my work one, and so I said no often. This stance seemed perplexing to some, but I have been clear to myself (and others) about my own preferences.

¹ To diverge: For the sake of transparency, I must admit I was once a member of the “narrative police,” encouraging the orthodoxy that I believed in back in the day. But that was then, and this had long become now; I had been opened up to a multi-verse of possibilities. I was also saddened by the real effects of the oppressive practices of narrative orthodoxy that had come to light. Little did I imagine they would eventually be turned on me.



Back to the past?

In early 2019, I was contacted by Cheryl White who wondered if I was interested in being part of a discussion around neurobiology and narrative therapy. She said that they were planning a journal with "...a range of papers coming at this from a few different angles." It was insinuated to me that this was to be part of a larger effort to address the lack of respectful conversations that had been occurring around differences in the field. I was enthusiastic at first, particularly about the latter part, as I had been long concerned about the divisiveness I had been witnessing. A very long story (and a lot of emails) made short, it eventually became clear to me that this was not really going to be a discussion. Indeed, Cheryl was, "...with people wanting to talk about the departure from such ideas." Once I escaped naivety, I respectfully said no thanks. I had heard from students and senior practitioners alike that if you don't do what Cheryl wants, she can walk away from you. To my great loss, I fear I have been added to that list. For me, the decision was an ethical one; I didn't want to legitimize a process that I was (and am) strongly against...the use of the power and authority of a dominant institution to de-legitimize new points of view that are challenges to their orthodoxy.

When I last presented in Adelaide, I was taken to a private dinner with the "Other Ones," those who had split off with Michael before he died, partly to protest the oppression of narrative orthodoxy. I also met up with some others at the conference I had gotten to know on earlier visits, who said that they had previously been made to feel unwelcome, given that the ideas they had that weren't in accord with dominant Dulwich teachings. Many of these wonderful folks were part of the original think tank that I had met on my first visit to Adelaide. As Cheryl said to me, "The beginning of this narrative practice work came from fierce and bold speaking." So, so, so sad to me that in the end the tolerance for this had changed so much.

Is narrative therapy coming to its end? Most forms of psychotherapy evolve in the cultural context in which its ideas and practices make sense. After the culture evolves, usually the not so current anymore forms of therapy retreat into a much smaller niche. In order for that to be different, the therapy must evolve in a way that makes it relevant to current times. Whether narrative therapy meets this fate or not, is dependent on young people's willingness to protest the ways it does not fit for them, and to question all "truths" they are being sold on. For



example, we upended a lot of truths in the Vietnam war protest days and created change; cultural change usually starts with the young people of the day.

Interestingly, before he died, Michael was studying the neurobiology of memory, and we are only left to imagine what new ideas and practices would have emerged in this process. While Michael was not prone to discussing affect directly, I've never seen anyone better at following the affect in a conversation; studies of memory are very tied to affect, as what we remember, as I said earlier, is related to the affect invited out by the situation. I mention this to address the affective turn in today's therapy world, a turn I understand to be related to the way technology has taken over our lives and its real effects on our brain. A therapy in our current context must somehow address how technology has taken us away from the important role affect has in our lives.

Anyway, Michael was no fan of orthodoxy, and before he died, he and David were planning to develop new approaches to narrative work. How I wish we could have spent hours talking about these new ideas, both Michael's and mine...

The end of the story?

D'Ann and I grew tired of the scene in San Francisco, too much entitlement and unfriendliness since the Tech crowd took over the city. So we planned a move to Denver (where our daughter Meg lives), and found a house there in February 2020. Well, you know what happened next... We've been living there since the end of April 2020 and love it, but, like everyone else, we are trying to navigate these difficult times, all the while trying to figure out our lives here, both personal and professional.

So, at this time, I'm not sure what the future will hold for me professionally. I've been (virtually) presenting in VSNT's advanced training, and I so appreciate Stephen Madigan's ongoing support of my work. My presentations have always been fun, full of video, music and pictures...but the virtual thing is so far unsatisfying to me, given my dependence on "feeling" a connection to the audience. Is it time to reinvent the wheel?

I will soon have a reckoning with my eye issues; if they break bad it will be life changing. Stay tuned...thanks for reading...



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