



What's So Narrative About Narrative Therapy?

By Sanni Paljakka

In honour of Alicia, Nena and her dad, Alyssa and her dad, May and her mom, Margaret and her daughter and son, Sofia and Shirley, Shannon and her grandmother, Ayia and her daughter, and many others who remain unnamed but present.

Prologue: How a Stutter Supervised Me Into a Story

It was my first session on my first day of my first job as a Narrative therapist. Much was on the line, as the psychologizing ideas of treating people that I had been trained in had left me with a stutter and a suspicion that perhaps I should be a florist instead of attempting to speak to people. But here I was, after earnest negotiations seeking permissions from my superiors to practice "all-out Narratively" or, not at all. Out of fear of the return of my stutter that would surely bring this dream job to an end, I had practiced Narrative questions for months, first recording myself speaking them, and then listening to these recordings during car-rides and my kids' naps. I will never forget what happened next, and it is timely for me to return to the story of this session now as it proposes an important question: what is so Narrative about Narrative therapy?

Her name was Alicia and she was as nervous as I was that evening (we later confirmed that). I asked Alicia what was so important to her as to wish to come to speak to someone like me that night and watched her slump forward in her chair: "I have depression," she confessed. Before she continued, I asked (while picking my words very carefully so as to be able to form them without stuttering), "forgive me, this will make me sound like an idiot, which maybe I am, but: what exactly is depression?" Alicia laughed a little. Relieved and slightly fortified that I had gotten the words out, I continued, "like what is that for you, in your life?" Alicia accepted the question and went on to describe a "lack of motivation" and a "stuckness." I didn't know much about those words either, so I inquired, "what do you mean, stuckness, - when does such a thing happen to you?" Before long, there were questions like: "What are you stuck in front of? What do you see?" and as all my fears of stuttering abated, Alicia and I stepped inside a story: she told me of the rain coming down on some days ("tell me of those days when this happens to you?"), and her standing in front of a muddy, overflowing river (in response to: "what kind of a river?"), and her wish to move, and cross the river, but not knowing how. "Why do you wish to cross it, why not just stay over here?" I asked, "what's on the other side, what do you see?" Alicia cried: "my sister. My grandmother."

"Why is it so important to you to get to them?" I asked quietly. "Because I need to tell my grandmother something important before she dies. I am afraid she won't understand me though, she is very Catholic, and I am afraid how she'll respond." "Are your sister and





grandmother wishing for you to cross, willing you on, or are they not aware of your efforts?”, I asked. Alicia replied: “No they are not exactly aware, - I am just, I don’t know I’m just stuck, I don’t know where to begin.”

At this point in the conversation, my remembrance of where we were and what we were doing came over me like a flash of panic: I am a beginning Narrative therapist, and this is my person and this was supposed to be Narrative therapy. I realized I had not asked any of the questions I had so thoroughly practiced and prepared to ask. We may have been exploring an “experience-near description of the problem” with questions I quickly swore I would hide and deny I ever asked. And then we had veered off deep into the river-lands prior to finding out about the “effects” of the problem or the person’s “evaluation of them.” Determined and earnest to “do Narrative therapy,” I stopped and asked Alicia what I had practiced: “when the stuckness is around, what does it try to convince you of about what’s possible in life?” Alicia paused. “What does the stuckness tell you about who you are as a person?” “What?” Alicia asked me in response, “I don’t understand.” – which surely she didn’t as we had just been walking together inside her story and I had panicked and stepped outside of her story to ask questions that didn’t fit with the story arc. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I hastened in realization of the breach of how we had been speaking, and took a breath – “never mind that. That didn’t make any sense at all. Can we go back to the muddy river together? To your sister and grandmother and your wish to get across to them? I have 2 questions for you to choose from: do you wish to say what it is that you want to tell your grandmother, or do you wish to speak about ways of crossing the river?”

“Both. But the second option first,” Alicia smiled.

“How to get across, I see.” I smiled as well. “Well: can you swim?” I asked, in response to which Alicia couldn’t help laughing out loud.

On that night, Alicia and I spoke of swimming and boats and of roped ziplines across the river, of secrets between generations and of shame. Alicia told me of her grandmother’s eyes, and how they were trained in Catholic faith, and of Alicia’s fear that this would keep her from accepting Alicia’s queerness. She told me of the feel of her desire to be close to her grandmother again, as she had been when young. In this first session, I sure learned fast to never take for granted all that might lie beyond the word “depression.”

Despite the compelling intimacy of this conversation, I remained convinced that I had betrayed every ethic of Narrative therapy by not asking the Narrative questions I had practiced and resolved to ask. I told myself that I could be excused this one time, as I had been too busy trying to speak at all and resolved to try harder next time around. Only the “next time” proved elusive in its coming - the damn stories the clients told me kept “distracting” me! It took formidable encouragement by Narrative therapists I respected to finally turn my attention from my perceived failure in asking proper questions towards studying what I had done instead. It took this encouragement, seven years of meeting hundreds and hundreds of clients, a practice of





poetry-writing to these clients, and additional powerful doses of anti-venom in the form of anti-misogyny training for me to take my own practice seriously and say what I am about to say:

I am a Narrative therapist. I have been taught, over these years with my clients, to not work primarily in landscapes of identity or landscapes of action, but in landscapes of landscape: the scenes, the settings, the characters, the dilemmas, the mysteries, the feelings, the words of the story that a person is telling me in our conversations. In other words, I work in stories. I have learned that my intimacy, my faithfulness, my compelled-forward-ness, and my next question ought not come to me from outside a story like a “deus-ex-machina.” I ought not turn a concentrated focus of attention on myself like a navel-gazing shock of panic, but every ounce of my focus deserves to be on a client’s story. A client put it this way to me: “I promise to listen, and not in a way that is waiting my turn to speak, but in a way that I dissolve into nothing but my ears and heart.”

Michael White writes, “I do appreciate the fact that not everyone will relate to the “map” and “journey” metaphors and that there is a whole world of metaphors that can be used to characterize therapeutic practices. I welcome efforts to translate the practices into terms associated with alternative metaphors.” (Michael White, 2007, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, p. 6). So what is so Narrative about Narrative therapy? It is, as the name suggests to me, the story.

For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to highlight a few ideas I have learned about taking the story metaphor very seriously by drawing on examples of “botched remembering conversations” from my therapy sessions. This choice is slightly arbitrary – it could have been “botched externalizing conversations” or “botched reauthoring conversations.” In each realm, the botchery is remarkably similar as it is always in favor to find the means, not for identity stories, but for stories to live by.

Introduction: From “Unstories” to Stories

In my storying practices with my clients over the years, I have come to learn that clients come to me, not so much with a “problem story” but “no story” at all. Or perhaps more specifically, clients and I most often begin our conversations in a place of “unstories” or “anti-stories”, both concepts which I owe to Kai Cheng Thom. Consider Alicia’s “depression” – the word “depression” is not a story, and neither are the descriptors of “lack of motivation” and “stuckness.” A “story” has memorable characters, a setting in the person’s every-day life, a plotline in which grave and substantial matters are at stake to all involved, and a protagonist who is puzzling over it all in a unique voice and full of feeling and questions. All our lives are full of such stories, - they may be otherwise called “lived experience,” but where have these stories gone in our exchanges with each other and ourselves? When was the last time you told a story of your ordinary life, one of suffering or of joy, complete with a setting and characters and rich in the suspense of moral dilemmas, to a captivated listener? And if you did so, who taught you





to do such a thing? -Run to them and thank them now! Do this, because I am convinced that in the current nexus of neoliberal, white-supremacist, life-coached, twittered, tindered, busy and hateful world, we have slowly been colonized out of our own companioning storytelling to a life of setting-less, character-less, plot-less and vague rhetoric that characterizes “unstories.”

At this juncture, Narrative therapists can usually rally behind me in easy camaraderie: of course, “depressed” is not a story. However, when I venture in the same vein that “courageous” is not a story either, the discomfort begins. Nevertheless, this is the crux of my work: it does not matter whether the descriptors that follow clients’ feet to our therapy spaces are “positive” or “negative” in connotation. In fact, too often descriptors are labeled and categorized as “positive” (and therefore amplified) or “negative” (and therefore subsumed and treated under the “problem story” category) by good and aspiring Narrative therapists (who are also whipped forward by the same success-worshiping injunctions to our lives as our clients). Just as “depressed” or “borderline” or “eating disordered” or “co-dependent” etc. are not stories, neither are the descriptors “brave,” or “caring” or “loyal” or “empath” etc. (substitute any other descriptive labels here). Descriptors, labels, identity conclusions, whether they be sparkly or dirty, are not stories. I have become convinced that the insistence on the practice of “meaning making,” and driving rich stories toward one-word identity conclusions by way of the question “and what does this say about you?” is a distraction from the most “powerful practice” (White, 2004) there is to know: that of “rich story development” (which is surely one of the most-often quoted Michael White phrases).

Consider the following description from an intake conversation:

...All I know is I have a feeling of not belonging, no sense of purpose, dread, (except when I am in nature, with my boys, or in a place where I feel comfortable). It is a fundamental lack of sense of self being ok and lovable. It is probably rooted in lack of coherent and safe attachment to my Mom who primarily raised me.

Maybe happiness is the wrong term, but from the bit of Buddhist reading I have been doing, I think that one can learn to be more calm, peaceful, contentedness through mindfulness and being present- rather than spiraling from all the shit that seems to be what life mostly throws at us. I certainly get that vibe from certain people, like many of the yoga instructors, and you also gave me that sense.

I don't want to keep wondering what this is meant to be about, I need to find a sense of purpose, I need to find connection, and I need to make good choices in relationships, and value what I have to offer...

This description exemplifies what I mean by “beginning in a place of unstories.” What is a story of “belonging” for this person? Tell me of “dread.” What is the feel of “dread” in your veins, where does it happen to you, in response to what? What of the word “purpose?” Where and





when did you ever walk with your steps full of purpose? Who was there to see it? Or maybe you only felt it, and hid it in your heart? What are the stories of “the boys,” and “mom” and what on earth happened between mom and daughter, in a thousand looks exchanged, I imagine? And what, then, of the “boys” eyes on you and how do they spell comfort? What are these stories of what happens to your soul, your body, your mind between “comfort” and “dread?” What do you mean, “nature” – where on this earth is a place in “nature” that surrounds you with comfort? Can any stories be found with yoga teachers or Buddhist readings and can the words spoken here come to life: “calm,” “peaceful,” “contented” – or do they serve as placeholders for other longings? Tell me, my dear, who spoke you into being as “unlovable?” Why? And what on earth happened next? I hope that in our first meeting we will litter the place with your stories, and such stories as no one else has ever told.

Since the inception of Narrative therapy as one of the anti-therapies to the medical model, the master colonizer—the vernacular of the unstories of the DSM— has been on a relentless march forward and has had unprecedented success in ripping up our diverse languages for our own experiences, of diminishing our bodies and our thoughts and those of our ancestors, and sound-proofing our visions of our own worlds to sound generic, disposable, and replaceable.

During my seven years of working in the midst of a non-profit agency, among the halting, stuttering, and at times fierce and bold stories of people who were not born into privilege, of women, queer folk, poor women and women of colour, of chronically ill women, and of the stories of what happened to them in their lives, in their families, communities, workplaces, bedrooms, drug houses, backs of cars, and hospitals, I have become convinced that the master colonizer’s vernacular, the DSM, combined with the sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, and ableism of our world have particularly attempted to steal their rights to positions of authorship and roles as protagonists of their own life stories. To be an author, and simultaneously a protagonist of one’s own stories, are claims of moral substance, belonging, authority, shaping rights and interesting-ness in one’s own right. Put another way, those who have been relegated to the sidelines of history by dominant, privileged and powerful others also have a history of being relegated to the roles of minor characters of more privileged protagonist’s stories. In my meetings with clients, it has always been my mission to return their own stories into their hands from the prejudice and murder of the unstorying attempts on their lives.

As Narrative therapists, our questions in our meetings with those who suffer, are only as good as the stories they elicit. In my supervision and training of students at our agency, I have stopped caring about my students’ knowledge of Narrative therapy and have invested in the education of their talent and attention to elicit and witness stories, the stories of a radical other.





If ever you have had the experience of a person listening to a story of your life with rapt attention, someone who didn't have any place better to be in that moment and willed you on to keep talking, because they reveled in the beauty, wildness and danger of all of life in your story – look upon such a person kindly tonight. Both the capacities for storytelling as well as for the witnessing of stories have become a spare and strange rarities in our times, but ones that we would do well to look to in our efforts at healing.

Chapter 1: Sweetheart, I could get drunk just watching you perform this life

I met Nena and her dad a year later after that first conversation with Alicia. As with Alicia, I had a similar moment of panic of not quite being able to remember the steps of “re-remembering conversations” when Nena mentioned in her first remarks that her dad had died two years prior and that she wished to speak with me about this. As with Alicia, the conversation that followed is etched in my mind for its aliveness, - and as with Alicia, I am now breaking my vow of the time to never show how I had, in my mind, “gotten away” with yet another botched practice, in this case, a remembering conversation. I will weave in and out between transcript excerpts of the conversation with Nena and commentaries to facilitate the study of my failures.

Nena and I began our conversation with the retrieval of her own experience of life after her father's death from the clutches of the unstory of grief:

Nena: I'm here because I am not coping well (crying). I do this, (pointing at her tears), a lot. My dad died 2 years ago, and I just haven't been coping. Well, I have been coping by drinking, I guess. Whenever I haven't been helping my mom solve the financial mess he left behind, or working, I have been drinking. But even my friends are telling me now that it's not healthy... so I need to learn to cope with my grief.

Sanni: (softly) I'm sorry Nena, when you say “cope” – I wonder what that means...or who's putting this on you. I wonder how crying and drinking and helping your mom find a solution qualify as “not coping?”

Nena: What?

Sanni: (softly) Who is to say what it means “to cope” when your dad dies – or whether you even want to – “cope” in particular...

Nena: My friends have started saying that I'm not healthy... like I am avoiding the grieving process. I have been so busy with my mom and stuff, I haven't really allowed myself to grieve properly...

Sanni: (softly) Are your friends somehow proposing to you that there's a proper way to grieve - and also that you're failing at it?





Nena: Yes!

Sanni: (softly) Do you agree that there is such a thing, a “proper way” to live after your dad dies? And who owns the rights to talk of such a “proper way” of living?

Nena: I don’t know... that’s interesting. None of my friends have lost their parents, they don’t know what it’s like....

Sanni: Huh, ... Shall we then shush their talking about this a little and look at your actual experience of living these last 2 years and let that do some strong talking?

Nena: I never thought about it this way. Okay, but the one thing I know for sure is that the drinking has to stop.

Sanni: Okay, I’ll take your word for it! I might guess at some answers to this, but – why? Why does it have to stop?

Nena: (crying) – because drinking and coping is all he knew too, - my dad. But it’s not... good for me, and it wasn’t for him either. In some ways, he drank himself to death, you know. It has to stop. I can’t drink my life away...

Sanni: Nena, are you saying you came here tonight because you want to see about some goodness... goodness beyond drinking and coping?

Nena: Yes! I am going to do this the hard way! (smiling)

The above transcript excerpt is meant to show but one way I might attempt to demote the matter-of-fact confidence of the psychologizing ideas that have the power to colonize people right out of the stories of their lives. Whether it was done well in this case with Nena or not is up for debate, but my commitment is to signal an irreverence toward pompous ideas of how one ought to live in one’s life (in this case, the sanctimonious, culturally enshrined ideas of “proper” and “improper grief” and the disciplining of women to “cope” and not discomfort other people with unladylike ideas of drinking or inconvenient tearfulness etc.).

At the same time, I wished to intimate to Nena that here, in this conversation, her lived experiences and her discernments would be sought to take center stage in our considerations.

I have come to learn that these preparations in regard to the thin unstories (that are but labels) are vital to set the scene for the means to tell a rich story. In my experience, the counterweight to “non-stories” (thin identity conclusions) are not identity conclusions of one’s preference, but rich compelling stories that are beseeching of new life and agency. In the continuing excerpt for Nena, we begin to tell such a story:





- Sanni: The hard way, eh. I wonder if you would introduce me to your dad, - but before I ask you about that, - what would he say about your announcement that you're going to do this "the hard way?"
- Nena: He... wouldn't say it, but ... he'd be proud.
- Sanni: He wouldn't be one to wax all poetic about it, hey?
- Nena: (laughter) No. He wasn't one to talk much. But he was a kind man.
- Sanni: I'm intrigued! There are so many different kinds of "kind..." What kind is the kindness of your dad, besides on the quiet side?
- Nena: Well, he had a kind soul, but he ...didn't wear it on his sleeve.
- Sanni: Wait until I ask you about the man's sleeves. (Nena laughs). No, I know what you mean. What is something he might have done, or been with you to convincingly express to you that he's proud or thinks of you kindly?
- Nena: He... he listened to me. He wouldn't say much but he always listened to me, - like he'd stop what he was doing, the chores, we lived on a farm, and he was always working, but you could tell that he was really taking in what I was saying. He would sometimes make a totally deadpan joke. Or he'd think about going fishing. (laughter)
- Sanni: Like: "I'd rather be fishing?" (Nena laughs) How did you know about the man's kindness from his jokes or from his quietness?
- Nena: I don't know, I saw it.
- Sanni: Where were you two when you saw it?
- Nena: I went fishing with him. We rode our motorcycles there together –
- Sanni: You two were riding motorcycles to go fishing? Was it just the two of you?
- Nena: Yeah. My mom never came, and neither did my sister. It was always just the 2 of us. My mom and sister aren't interested in those things, but he would invite me along.
- Sanni: Like: "let's go fishing this weekend Nena?"
- Nena: Yeah. He would phone me during the week and ask when I'm coming out again. That's all he'd ask, but I knew what he meant.
- Sanni: What did he mean?
- Nena: He meant... that he wanted to spend time with me. It was special to both of us.





Sanni: So: “when are you coming out again, Nena” meant “daughter of mine, come spend time with your old man, - he loves it so?!”

Nena: Yeah. He really did. He always wanted to spend time with me. I wish I had done it more. I was so busy the last few years, finishing school, I couldn’t always go.

Sanni: Did he fault you, like guilt you in some way?

Nena: No, you know, me leaving home to come to the city and going to university was hard for him at first. I think he had hoped that maybe I’d take over the farm. So he was really quiet there for a while. But then he started to phone me to come out and visit. And when I visited, he’d ask me to tell him what I was learning. He could listen for hours. I think one time he even said, “I’m so glad that you get to see more than this.”

Sanni: “More than this?” What did he mean by that?

Nena: More than the farm, I think. I think he kind of pointed at the landscape. I know he loved it, and so did I, but in the end, he was glad that I could see more of the world. And he wanted to know everything I was learning.

Sanni: I could ask you a million things now. Correct me, if I am not asking what you are wanting to tell... you know my mind is drawn to the motorcycle, and you two riding motorcycles to go fishing... what was that like? Tell me of a time when you did this...? Help me step into that moment with the two of you... Is that an interesting question?

And so it came to pass that Nena told me of riding the motorcycle in the lead, of taking breaks and sitting in ditches on the prairie to pour over maps and argue about speed, of mocking her dad about the necessity of two tarps in the place of one (“in case it rains, Nena” he would smile), and of days spent quietly fishing and evenings spent debating ways of living. Nena told me that her dad was set in his ways, and wouldn’t easily accept others’ opinions, but that if she spoke to him, he would sometimes lay down his initial resistance and cede to listening to her point of view at length. However much he disagreed with her opinions at first, he would end up regarding her with pride. “Good thing I raised a daughter who is comfortable around heavy equipment,” or “good thing I raised a daughter with her own mind” etc. were expressions of such pride. It was important to me in this conversation to speak to the spirit of debate and stubbornness between Nena and her dad, and story the details of the feel and ways of their disagreements. There is nothing that can make a person quite as dead as treating them with a sanctimony and reverence that weren’t part of the relationship when they were alive, such as insisting on eulogizing ways of one-word descriptors like “kind.” Nena spoke animatedly about how much her dad annoyed her with his conservative opinions, and how endearing he was as he slowly warmed to listening to his impassioned daughter.

Nena also told me that her motorcycle had been kept covered in plastic in her garage for the past two years, and that every time Nena returned home in the evenings, a glimpse of its shape





out of the corner of her eyes struck her heart and made tears come to her. It had become a way of living to pour a drink before dinner to ease the pain of the sight of the motorcycle and her strength of feeling in response. She spoke of her despair at her father's life being cut short by drinking and of him not having time and space to invent another way of living in response to his perceived failures at "manhood," his disappointment with his lack of success at farming. At this point, I told Nena that this description of the covered-up motorcycle and her tearfulness as she stepped out of her car would remain forever etched in my mind as a lived experience of whatever gets called "grief."

Towards the end of our session, our conversation ended in an imagined and felt "argument" and lively engagement between Nena and her dad:

Sanni: Nena, if you two were now sitting at the river, maybe on the second tarp he brought along, both of you bathed in the orange light of the sunset, and with the quiet of the prairie all around you, what would you tell him about what you are trying for in life right now, even if he was being a little annoying and not wanting to understand at first, what would you insist on him understanding about your life right now?

Nena: (crying)... that I need to do this the hard way. I can't just cope anymore.

Sanni: You'd say to him, "I need to do this the hard way, dad. Life isn't just about coping, dad..."

Nena: Yeah...(crying)... "you didn't know how to do this dad."

Sanni: (choked up, tearful) You'd tell him, "dad you dumbass, you didn't know how to do this. So now I gotta show you."

Nena: (laughing through tears) yeah. Yeah.

Sanni: And would he argue with you Nena? Would he talk back at you now? What would he say?

Nena: (crying) ... he'd look over the river. With that look of his. He'd take a long while. Then he'd say something sweet like "good thing I raised a daughter..."

Sanni: (tearful) Good thing I raised a daughter who can find her way around the heavy equipment of life?

Nena: (crying through tears) Yes. Yes.

Sanni: Nena, are you doing this, setting out on this particular new adventure of life, quitting drinking, and I don't even know yet what all else, are you doing this for the both of you?





Nena: Yeah. I am doing this for the both of us.

Sanni: Dad, I am doing this for the both of us. I'm walking where you didn't know how. Is he going to want to know everything about this walking? Is he holding his breath? What is he saying?

Nena: (crying), He is saying, yes, Nena, yes.

Sanni: (choking) yes, Nena, yes. I'll raise my bloody glass to that, watching you do that, sweetheart?

Nena: Yes. Except we're done drinking now, dad! (laughing through tears).

In looking back over this conversation and forgetting to worry about not asking the right questions and worrying instead about how we did come to speak, I would propose the urgent importance of placing people back into a conversation with their dead loved one. If remembering conversations are "conversations" then they can center around the idea of how people continue conversing, debating, and drawing loved ones into the current moral dilemmas and predicaments of their lives as real companions, or witnesses baiting their breath to see what this person, the client will do next. In an effort to place people into such conversations, one of the ways that helps is to find their loved one's embodied voice such that they can bear witness to this story of a life unfolding, much as they did when they were alive. Dialogue, finding the ways in which people have spoken to each other, and therefore can be imagined to still speak, is one of the best ways to counter the story of death. Someone who argues, decides, witnesses, converses, and is currently capable of changing their minds is very much alive.

And perhaps the story of what happened next to Nena is all I need to tell. Nena came back to my office 2 weeks later and told me how it had come to be that she spontaneously got out of her car in one of those evenings in her garage, and walked over to the covered motorcycle in the corner, uncovered it, ran her fingers softly over its surface, and said, in her mind, "okay, dad. Let's go on an adventure." She took a fishing trip on the motorcycle with her boyfriend a few weeks later, and did, indeed have a spare second tarp among her gear, "in case it rains, Nena."

Chapter 2: He Has Made A Record in My Heart

I met Alyssa a few months after the above conversation with Nena. I was reminded of Nena's stories when Alyssa tearfully told me that her dad had died 6 months prior. Alyssa was telling me of her conviction that she was on the verge of going "crazy" between her "waves" of tearfulness and "feeling nothing at all for days."

Sanni: I'm interested in "crazy." What's the craziest thing about the last 6 months?





Alyssa: Well, I... I ride my bike to work, and actually everywhere. I love riding my bike (pointing to the bike helmet beside her on the couch). But I have caught myself, well, I caught myself talking out loud to my dad on my way to work. That's crazy, isn't it. I was just talking out loud... I passed by these people who thought I was crazy.

Sanni: I don't know... What were you saying? What were you telling your dad?

Alyssa: What? I don't know, I was talking about how nervous I am about the project and that I'm for sure going to get fired.

Sanni: Is that something you used to do with your dad? Talk through work problems with him?

Alyssa: Yeah, we did do that. I used to call him from work. He always picked up the phone and always took time to listen to me. (crying)

Sanni: Did he mostly listen quietly, or did he weigh in somehow?

Alyssa: No, he weighed in too.

Sanni: Like how? What would he say?

Alyssa: He always told me not to take any crap, to say no, and to be strong and stuff. He... encouraged me. I don't know. I didn't really end up doing what he advised me to, but it always made me feel better somehow.

Sanni: Did he really. Like, "Alyssa, don't take any crap, you go in there and tell them!"

Alyssa: (laughing a little) yeah.

Sanni: And you're like, "okay dad, it doesn't quite work like that, - but thank you dad..."

Alyssa: Yeah. If I had done what he told me I would have gotten fired ages ago. (laughing a little)

Sanni: What? You know I almost never hear stories of dads like this, encouraging their daughters to raise some hell! (Alyssa laughs) Really. Like what the hell was your dad hoping for for your life when he was all "don't take any crap Alyssa?"

Alyssa: Well he knew that I was working with all dudes. He was often super mad at them for trying to get out of work and blame me, or how they didn't listen to me.

At this point Alyssa and I stepped deep into the most surprising conversation of how Alyssa's dad had not treated her "like a girl," meaning "pretty and silent" when Alyssa was growing up. Alyssa described her dad's ways of seeking out her mind, by coming to her room and sitting on





the edge of her bed and laughing and talking to her about whatever she was up to at the time. Alyssa remembered the sound of her dad's laughter in particular, and how its sound stood as part of his refusal to participate in "worry and concern" about her decisions and her future, whether in relation to her grades, success at work, her boyfriends, her dress, her staying out late etc. Alyssa described how her dad had said that he saw "a part of himself in her," in a "sixth sense" about all things funny and bright and worth living for in the world and how this was exchanged between them as sarcastic remarks and jokes. Alyssa thought that her sense of "feeling better" after talking to her dad about her dismissal at work had to do with feeling reconnected to this "sixth sense" that reminded her what was worth living for even in moments of grave anxiety. We returned to the ideas of "craziness" towards the end of this conversation:

Alyssa: (tearfully)...but he's not here anymore. I can't keep doing this. I can't rely on him anymore, I have to move on and say goodbye. I have to stop this craziness.

Sanni: (quietly) the craziness of continuing to talk to him, out loud, on your ways to and from work?

Alyssa: yes. People are starting to think I'm crazy.

Sanni: Can I share something with you about another woman, a young woman like you in this city, who was talking to me recently about how her dad died 2 years ago?

Alyssa: (looking up at me with surprise) Yes!

Sanni: You know, she got similar advice from people around her, her friends even. They told her she needed to learn to cope with his death or something like that. But you know what, her and her dad used to ride motorcycles together and go fishing. She hadn't ridden the motorcycle for 2 years because it was so bloody hard to even look at it, she would just cry and cry when she saw it, and she was continuously telling herself, she just has to learn to deal with it and move on. Like move on already! But you know what she did this one day? This is what she told me. One day, she went to the motorcycle and uncovered it and said, "fuck it dad, let's do this. Let's go on a ride together, because I don't fucking want to do it without you." (Alyssa crying). And then she took the motorcycle for a ride and I swear, the whole time, she was conversing with her dad, about the weather, and the road, and whether she had packed the right things, and then they argued whether her boyfriend was a good guy or not. She told me all of that! Now, what do you think Alyssa, do you think she should quit? Should she whip herself into shape and stop talking to her dad like a crazy person, and say goodbye to him? Because maybe she should, you know. Her boyfriend was only sort of half in favour of them going on a ride with her dead dad, you know.

Alyssa: (laughs knowingly) Yeah

Sanni: Would you tell her to quit this craziness immediately?





Alyssa: What??? NO! No!

Sanni: What would you tell her?

Alyssa: I'd tell her to never stop (tearful). If her boyfriend has a problem with that, then fuck him. (laughing through tears)

Sanni: (tearful) Never stop talking to your dad. Don't ever stop, hey. How come, Alyssa. Why do you say this so formidably?

Alyssa: ...Because if she stops, it would be like he...never was. Like he'd be forgotten...

Sanni: (quietly) Why is it important that she never forget?

Alyssa: Because... because he's a part of her! It would be like... killing a part of her!

What I learned in these conversations with Nena and Alyssa is that flesh-and-blood stories, or, in this case, stories of (motor)bikes and the sound and feel and words of dads and daughters are not only important to contest and counter unstories but because stories *propose* things to us. As effortlessly, unintentionally and joyfully as happened to no therapist ever, the telling of stories has had the effect of proposing action, steps, gestures, visions, imaginations, dreams into the near future. The efforts of living up to identity conclusions can fail us, but our living stories cannot fail. Not once did I suggest to Nena to change her relation to the motorcycle, for I could not have dreamt such a thing if I tried, - Nena's *story* proposed this to her in my absence. I did not propose any advice of what Alyssa ought to do next in relation to the judgment of her "craziness," but nevertheless, the above conversation continued in following sessions as a joyous celebration and continued consultation of her "sixth sense" and its riotous and humorous meddling in her life and work affairs. At no point have I undertaken labour to "translate" stories of my clients into organized distillations of meaning –the workings of their own stories in my clients' near future have always taken me by surprise. And perhaps this is no accident: once our own "voice-over" to the living of our lives has been given a trustworthy position over and above colonizing voices of powerful others, and once we experience a glimpse of the Narrative power of "authorial agency" as protagonists in rare and spare circumstances, - perhaps the story then invariably asks of each of us "well, then, what say you? What will you do next?"

Chapter 3: Ana's Paradise of The Not Lost But Found

If stories can propose a life to live into, I would like to turn a tender attention to the many moms who have walked in and out of conversations with me over the years who have "lost" children and babies. Their supervision of remembering conversations is one that has changed my life. I will never forget meeting Margaret for the first time after a psychiatrist proposed to





her to finally consider her children dead to her after 20 years of the embodied absence of their laughter and their words and their growing bodies in her life. Margaret said, “if this is how it is, if I am to consider my children dead to me, I will kill myself tomorrow.” There is nothing quite like the quiet steadiness of her voice that I have taken to every remembering conversation with me since, as the best mentor to any efforts to reach for the aliveness and utter indispensability of the voices of my clients’ loved ones. If we wish to be supervised into Narrative therapy, or in this case, into remembering conversations, what more do we require than the seriousness of Margaret’s words to guide us?

Margaret’s voice was with me when I met with Ayia, on the eve of what would have been her baby girl’s 17th birthday:

Ayia: (sighing) I want to talk about tomorrow and what to do about Ana’s birthday.

Sanni: What do you mean “what to do?” How do you “do” Ana’s birthday? Is there something you usually do on her birthday?

Ayia: Yeah, we get together with her brother and her sisters and have cake and look at pictures...

Sanni: You do? What kinds of pictures?

Ayia: Just pictures of her.

Sanni: Like in a photo album or on the phone or computer?

Ayia: Yeah, both.

Sanni: I was just going to ask you about Ana, and to maybe be introduced to her a little, if you would like to spend some time that way... Do you have one of these pictures of her on your phone?

Ayia: Yeah. But I hate it when people die and then they become a picture! Ana is not a picture!

Sanni: I’m sorry. Of course. I’m sorry Ayia. (Ayia crying) I won’t forget, I promise, see, I wrote it down, “ANA is NOT a picture.”

Ayia: Yeah. Everyone always asks for a picture and I am tired of it. I know you mean well. But I need people to understand that she is not a picture. Not to me. She was 7 years, 7 months and 7 days old when she died. But she is not lost. She is not lost! I want to keep her alive to feel her presence, she gives me strength and power, she is NOT LOST! And my role is to keep her alive. And that’s what tomorrow is about, so if you could help me with that, I’d appreciate it.





Ayia and I spoke of Ana's aliveness that night, and indeed, almost every session since then. Ayia told me that a few days before her death, Ana had a dream. She woke up from her dream smiling and lovingly curling her small body into her mother's sleeping body beside her in the bed. Ayia wondered if she needed something, or was in pain, but Ana said brightly and with a beautiful smile, "mom, I saw it all. I saw heaven. It was so beautiful. It was so beautiful, I wish you could have seen it..." Trying to hide her tears, Ayia asked her about her dream, but mostly remembers Ana's smile and how her little face was aglow in that moment. At one point, Ana announced: "and I saw you too, mom. Mom, I see god's face in you. I wish you could see it too."

Ayia and I spoke of Ana's paradise, and how she had lived her life as if she had always known something about this dream. How Ana had seen beauty and goodness in all the people she had met, how tender and loving she was to her siblings even in moments of quarrel. Ayia did show me a picture then, a picture of Ana in the ocean in her homeland towards the end of her life, gathered tenderly in the arms of her elder sister, with both girls smiling and full of wonder. I began to understand something of the sacredness of this and could only haltingly attempt to do justice to it in this conversation.

Ayia: (tearfully) ...but Ana would be disappointed in me. She never wanted me to live this miserable life (crying). She didn't like it when I was strict with her siblings even then. I pray to her all the time. She wouldn't understand the vicious cycle of resentment that I live with...

Sanni: You pray to her, Ayia? And she is pushing back against the vicious cycle of misery and resentment, even now? Saying, "no mom, not like that...?" What does she say Ayia?

Ayia: She is telling me to be loving. To remember the goodness. But I am not loving like her.

Sanni: What is Ana's paradise most restlessly asking of you today Ayia? Can it be done? She is asking you to "remember the goodness?" Whose goodness? What goodness? If her paradise came true what goodness would there be? What would make Ana smile like that?

Ayia: If I stopped saying that I am a bad mom. (crying)

Sanni: (choked up) I see. Ana would tell us to start there. I see. Ayia, shall we step into Ana's paradise and speak words about the goodness of your mothering? Or is it too hard to do?

Ayia: No, I can do it.





After this first introduction to Ana's paradise, Ayia and I checked in with any ideas we were weighing after this conversation with whether they fit into this paradise or not. Most recently, as Ayia was debating and considering resigning from "martyrdom" in favour of "wise generosity," Ayia concluded that this was an idea truly befitting of Ana's paradise.

I hope that these few words from mothers will send your soul reeling as it did mine, to pound home the message that mourning is not ours to soothe. Not even I dare tell of how Nena feels when she runs her hands through the prairie grass in his absence, or how Ayia rages about the bunches of white roses when she wished for a body to cry on, or what it took for Sofia to take in a breath of the scent of pine on Shirley's grave. Who can dare tell what it is to know an acute "absence." Regardless of the arrogance of our profession, mourning is not ours to soothe. The stories of those whom we love and who are not walking this earth anymore, the aliveness of their voices, their remembered souls do not soothe mourning, they are not gratifying in the way just one day with the touch of a person would be. But their stories propose to us, restlessly, beseechingly and tearfully, and without coercion but a force all their own, a vision of life yet to be lived, a glimpse of paradise, even as it all has come to an end.

Chapter 4: My Mother's Suitcase Is Not Disposable

At this point in this essay, I can hear the question brewing: what of people who have died who were not dear to us in life, as those you described above? What of those who made powerful and disastrous appearances in our stories?

I used to worry a great deal about sorting clients' "remembered others" into some suspicious binary of the "good" and the "bad" at the outset of these conversations. However, if working in the midst of a busy non-profit practice has taught me anything, it is not to expect binaries of any kind, and not to cease to be surprised by the turns that stories take, in the midst of their telling, when it is far too late to do any sorting at all. But the secret is, focusing on storytelling practices frees me of such worry. I have been allowed to joyfully end all requirements on me to haggle out the detailed standings of memberships to life and to look to the ways in which no person can be or even ought to be rendered disposable quite that neatly. It isn't necessary for me or my clients to cancel, shun, deny, forget, or forgive, or otherwise de-member those who are powerful and powerfully contested members in their lives. The story can and will amplify the responses of the living author to their moral opposition of those who hurt them when they were living. The stories of that hurt are an attempt to author a response on purpose, and in no uncertain, but brave terms. Otherwise, de-membered fathers, mothers, grandfathers, uncles, partners etc. are all floating out there unaccounted for, and thereby often ghosting about in terrifying nightmares and burning shame. I have come to believe that it is essential for us as therapists to help those who lived through hurt to trace, landmark and touchstone the moral





opposition of their lives to the influence of those who have made grave trespasses against the living. I will tell one such story.

I met May when her mother was in palliative care. May was the sole caregiver to her mother at this time, a task that she undertook with an unprecedented grace and compassion for her mother's illness. But what broke forth from May in our conversations was the lifetime of meanness, harsh words, hitting, and abandonment that May had suffered at her mother's hands. May's mother had packed a suitcase on 3 separate occasions to leave her daughters to fend for themselves, and when May was raped by one of the teenage partiers at the house on one of these occasions of her mother's absence, her mother's sarcastic derision of her after the fact was one of the most difficult things to live through. May told me of the ways in which she had resisted her mother's ways of unloving her all throughout her life and most powerfully, in her relationship to her own daughter. Surprisingly or very much unsurprisingly, May's instructions to her daughter on the matter of consent and sex were a joy to behold. However, May was clear that her efforts in life represented an ongoing and deeply painful, and utterly purposeful "undoing" of her mother's ways. Every experience of a gesture or word of care by her partner and daughter continued to shake May to her core, as they stood in stark opposition to the coldness and indifference that May thought she deserved. These experiences of care undid May and caused riots in her soul, and distress in her worded responses which was difficult for her loved ones to understand. However, May was resolved in one matter: to live in moral opposition to the poverty of warmth that she herself had experienced at the hands of her mother and if it meant learning to accept acts of love herself, she was determined. May did not imagine speaking of any of these matters with her dying mother and the care for her mother's physical needs took precedence for May. However, one evening, as May's mother struggled to breathe and appeared frightened, May acted spontaneously. She climbed into the bed next to her mother guided by her sense that physical presence might ease her mother's suffering. As she laid there, her heart pounded with the physical closeness that she had not experienced with her mother in life as far as she could remember. Her mother turned a little towards May's body and seemed to be able to exhale a little better. May's eyes were fixed on the suitcase that was underneath the desk in May's line of sight, and that had been packed months before for the stay at the hospice. Quietly, May gestured to the suitcase and gathered her own breath to speak words she had never attempted before – the invitation to some manner of accountability for the effects of her mother's disregard of her in her life: "mom, see that suitcase. Do you remember how you packed it three times already? Mom, I am so angry with you that you did that, that you just left us, and left me that way. I've been so angry with you mom. But you know what, mom. It's okay now. I want you to know that I think I'm okay now. So it's okay for you to leave this time, mom." May told me that her mother, as if for the first time in her life, listened to May. May saw that her mother's eyes filled with tears, and she seemed to nod, in acceptance of May's hard-won words. No blame, no denial this time. But tears. For May, in her words, the world changed. When May's mom died a little while later, May felt calm and resolved. And after all worldly affairs had been settled with her difficult sisters, May came to





me, looking full of life for the first time of my knowing of her. With laughter, May told me that she had resolved to use the little bit of money that her mom had left to take a trip with her partner, something that May had never in her life had the funds to even imagine. She told me of the comedy of packing and unpacking and her uncertainty of what one was to bring for the first trip of a lifetime. And then she grew wistful and said, with a knowing in her eyes: "I am taking her suitcase, you know. That suitcase." Catching on, I wondered aloud why. I will never forget what May said next, her eyes full of light and tears: "Because. If I have learned anything at all, I have now learned this. If you are going to pack a suitcase, pack it for love. Pack it for taking a trip with someone you love, someone who is precious to you. Someone you want to share your life with. That's the only worthy reason to pack a suitcase. That's my truth and I'm sticking to it." May dissolved in laughter, and so did I. Hear, hear, all ye with ears to hear.

Conclusion: Listening Like a Writer

This last chapter is an experiment in attempted inspiration. As I mentioned, I took on a practice of document/letter/poetry-writing in response to all my conversations with clients from the outset of my learning to become a Narrative therapist. I am convinced that the lost art of writing thoughts to my clients after our conversations quietly supervised me into becoming the therapist I am today. Today, people call the notes I write "poems" but to this day, I don't care much about the form or name of the particular document and care a great deal about the concentrated focus of attention on clients' stories that these notes capture. I have printed, read, and shared these poems in my teaching and writing efforts before, and invariably, therapists tell me variations of two things: "I could never write something like that" and "your clients must be special, because my clients don't talk like that." Unfortunately, I have by now also supervised too many student therapists into the practice of document writing (or actually, more correctly, into a practice of a focused concentration of attention on clients' stories) to be stumped by such expressions. Today, I can confidently say that "yes, you can" and "yes, they do" after watching students with minimal training in therapy, let alone Narrative therapy, shyly read their first attempts of "documents" that, according to their own evaluations, they should have had no business in being able to write. This has turned into a veritable pedagogy of joy: ask, in all the ways only you know how, why your person is here tonight; resist the death of unstories with every charm and tenderness you have, and when people tell you and trust you with their living stories, treat these as sacred and holy. The irreplaceable details of scenes, settings, characters and companions to a life that is being lived are not disposable. People and their stories are not disposable. Find them, as this is your work. Do it like you mean it.

As part of an experiment in inspiration, I have printed one such poem that I wrote to Shannon after a remembering conversation about her grandmother. As you read the poem, ask yourself what one might have had to ask in order to be able to write such a thing after the conversation. Perhaps you will, as my students have, discover an imagination of strange questions that could make such a poem possible in your work with your next person as well. Your poem will then be





a proof of your work, and more importantly, a proof of life lived. A proof of those attentions that were spent, the questions that were asked, and those that fell by the wayside. Your clients will know and thank you for the difference.

*My grandmother
Of the clear lungs, the blunt words
And the quilted soul*

*My grandmother
Who lost 3 mothers before the age of 10
And came out west on the train all alone
Only to find that, at the end of her journey,
She had made a crew of 20.*

*My grandmother of the poached eggs
And the 50-year-old furniture
The Crime and Punishment
And the "are you good now, are you done crying already?" -charm.*

*Nan
I see you in your
Housecoat
With a smoke
In your perfect manicured backyard
And with a pellet gun
At the ready for the magpies*

*Turn around, nan
I have something to say
Now
And no, I'm not done crying:*

*Thank you for Xena the warrior princess
And the smell of cabbage rolls
Thank you for taking my crying phonecalls
And for yelling at that man
And sorry for always being a brat.*

*They say I look just like you, nan
So here I go, all tiny and black hair and bratty as all get out:
I'll try and turn my forehead high to life just like you did nan*





*I'll write a sequel to crime and punishment now.
But before I do
I'll end the lover's quarrel
You had with the magpies
In both our names.*

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