



## What is a good story and how do we tell one? Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling practice

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When we set out to develop Insider Witnessing Practices, it was born of an urgency to do more in our work. An urgency to do more in our work with people whose lives were under the influence of particularly gripping problem stories. People who had suffered from the terrible effects of violence and abuse; whose lives were also filled with beauty and triumph and a fierceness that left us in awe but whose aweness somehow escaped their own view and our own abilities to offer much more than a life preserver when what they needed was the safety of a boat. I am sure that you are all familiar with the challenges of finding yourselves standing in presence of such gripping and unrelenting stories. At times, cracks in the problem story appear and the person finds some respite from its grip, but then the crack quickly slams closed and the person finds herself back in the clutches of the problem story. Perhaps this is particularly familiar to those of us who work primarily with people who have suffered from violence and abuse and find themselves experiencing a sort of ever-presentness of the trauma that came to them as a result. In our desire to find ways for this work to do more; ways of working that might do right by the people who consulted us; ways of working that just might answer the question “What is the sensation of justice being done?;” we realized, that in such circumstances it is not enough to let others tell their stories on their own behalf. Sometimes, as Michael White said in his writings about definitional ceremonies, we need others to tell our stories on our own behalf (White, Narrative ways of working with trauma) and do so in a way that positions the person concerned as a witness, an outsider listening in, an audience member, to the telling of a story of the events of their lives. If we were going to take up Michael’s invitation to tell stories on another’s behalf, we quickly realized that we needed to know a whole lot more about what it means to tell a good story.



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And so, reader, I thought I would tell you a story about how we can appreciate the importance of telling a good story in narrative therapy.

I first attended a workshop by David in the spring of 2014. The workshop was entitled, “What is a good story?” and he began by asking a provocative question. “How is it that we call ourselves narrative therapists and, yet, we know so very little about what a good story is?” In fact, David has lamented at just how little has been written on the topic of stories in narrative therapy, given that stories are, after all, the crux of the matter when it comes to this work. His question seemed to stop me in my tracks. Here I was working with people to construct alternative stories without any idea about what a good story was; without any idea of what makes for a compelling story; a story that has the capacity to win the day; or in the words of Michael White, a story that has the capacity “to eradicate a problem story.” All I had ever learned about story in narrative therapy was that a story has a past, present, and a future and that development of an alternative story in therapy involved the linking of events across time; events that had gone unnoticed due to the influence of the problem story. But this is a rather thin description of what a story is. What David was trying to impress on us that spring day in 2014 and every day since then, to anyone who will hear, is that is essential for us, as narrative therapists, to understand the elements that make a story a good story. For we certainly shouldn’t be okay with telling just any story. When faced with gripping problem stories, stories that just won’t seem to relent, stories that mar and dirty and damage, not just any story will do. We need to learn to tell stories in our conversations with others that have the capacity to counter damaged and spoiled identities, stories that rise above stock plots, stories that have literary merit; stories that are filled with drama; stories that are filled with mystery and surprise; stories that are filled with suspense; stories that are filled with imagination and beauty.

David’s insistence of our learning the craft of this work to do more on behalf of the lives of the people who consult us. If narrative therapy is said to have a tradition, it is that the fostering of new ideas and practices comes through



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searching untraditional writings outside of narrative therapy itself. And so, we have spent the past several years reading anything that we could get our hands on (or more accurately anything that David has happened to stumble upon in some random library) related to the characteristics and aesthetics of good stories. We have found the writings of Cheryl Mattingly particularly helpful.

### What Makes a Story a Good Story?

While we are still, in many ways, novices in our study of literary theories related to good storytelling, our brief study of writers like Cheryl Mattingly, have pointed to three areas of good storytelling that seem to be most relevant to us in our work. Good stories, stories that have literary merit, are stories that are filled with drama; stories that are filled with mystery and surprise; stories that are filled with suspense; stories that are filled with imagination and beauty. Each of these elements work in concert with each other, allowing a particular narrative arc to appear that drives the story forward while at the same time revealing throughlines running backward and forward in ways that give the story, as Geertz (1986) might say, a “graspable form” (p. 373), give it a substance, or in the words of one our most recent IWP co-researchers, give the story “purchase.” Rather than getting into a detailed discussion of each of these four elements of a good story, we thought we would provide readers with some of the quotes from our studies that have been most meaningful to us in our effort to learn how to tell compelling stories in our work.

#### *Stories Filled with Drama*

Before sharing quotes about the need for drama in good storying telling, I feel compelled to tell a story that brought the point of drama home for me in ways that I will never forget.

I still remember the moment I sent my first transcript to David Epston to review as we prepared to do our first IWP interview. I had conducted what I thought was




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a fairly good narrative interview and felt good enough sending it to him. At least so I thought until I was about to hit the send button. “Holy shit!” I thought. “You are about to send your work to David Epston. Are you sure you want to do this?” Against the onslaught of growing voices of doubt, I decided to hit the send button knowing that I couldn’t pass up an opportunity like this to be mentored by David Epston. I set my doubts and anxieties aside thinking that it would be a few days before David responded. “He is busy after all.” Just two hours later, to my great surprise, an email from David appeared on my computer screen.

I opened the email with an anxious excitement. “What would he think of my interview? Had I done enough to encourage him to want to continue our project together?” While David was kind enough to be complementary of some aspects of my interview, there was one resounding theme that ran through his comments like an unmistakable plot, “MORE DRAMA TOM!!!,” written in all caps (as anyone who has had the pleasure of communicating with David via email knows well). I don’t remember how many times his plea for more drama appeared but the message was clear.

My first response to David’s urging was “But I am not a dramatic person. I am quiet and speak in a soft and gentle tone.” I have to admit that I felt an initial sense of discouragement, wondering if I had what it takes to do this work in the way that David had hoped. And for a very brief moment I even thought about giving up. Fortunately, I quickly realized that David was not talking about drama in the personality sense of the word, but drama in the literary sense of the word; a drama that involved the painting of dramatic scenes and images that showed the person as a moral agent actively shaping the events of their life against the odds of what they have been up against in life. In that moment of realization, I decided right then and there that I would study David’s questions to see how he invoked drama in his work. I also asked him for any readings that he might recommend on the topic of narrative and drama and good storytelling and I will never forget his response. “Please read Cheryl Mattingly’s “Healing Dramas Clinical Plots. If I were stranded on a desert island and only had one book, it would be this one. I have





learned more about being a narrative therapist from her than from any other narrative therapist.” When David Epston, who has read countless books and who has visited more libraries around the world most anyone, says that if he only had one book, perhaps we should listen. The interesting thing about David’s recommendation is that Cheryl Mattingly is not a narrative therapist. She is a sociologist who uses narrative theory as a guiding metaphor in her studies of parents of children who have a terminal illness. However, after reading *Healing Dramas*, and Mattingly’s other two books “*The Paradox of Hope*” and “*Moral Laboratories*, I would have to agree with David, that I learned more about what it means to be a narrative therapist from Mattingly than from any other author.

So, what does Mattingly have to say about the relationship between narrative and drama that we have found so compelling?

For starters, Mattingly takes the rather curious position that narrative and drama are interlinked and interchangeable terms. According to Mattingly, a good narrative is a good drama and vice versa.

*It should be very evident that within the dramatistic tradition and the narrative phenomenology I am proposing; the term narrative is not used in its ordinary sense...Storytelling and the reception of cultural texts represent one small part of how narrative infuses practical actions and lived experience. It is in part to underscore this expansion of “narrative” that I link it so closely to “drama.” In drawing from multiple disciplines, I use the closely interlinked terms drama and narrative almost interchangeably. (Mattingly, 2010, p.44)*

Before I get too far ahead of myself, I guess we need to know what the word drama means. The origin of the word drama is literally “action” or “to act.” Typically, a drama in literature is referred to as “a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance” (Meriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2018). The word drama also refers





to “any situation or series of events having vivid, emotional, conflicting, or striking interest or results” (Meriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2018). In this sense, drama is particularly well-suited for the task of narrative therapy as its express purpose is to portray the life of a character in ways that highlight the conflict or danger that actors face and the actions that they take up to resolve the danger in vivid detail and often with striking or surprising results.

Mattingly reminds us that a narrative as a drama is much more than a chronology; a mere linking of events across sequences of time. A chronology is “structured as a series. It recounts events in such a truncated way that it obscures rather than illuminates what is central to the way actions are linked to motives as well as to consequences” (Mattingly, 2010, p.104) For Mattingly, narratives represent a “dramatic transformation of lived experience” (Mattingly, 1998, p.34) and in their dramatic form “offer moral arguments” (Mattingly, 2010, p.104) about the ways in which people have gone about living their lives in the face of what they have been up against in life.

As a way of clarifying what she means by narrative as drama, Mattingly often uses the term “poetic narrative.” Here Mattingly is saying that she is not interested in just any kind of narrative but a narrative that dwells in the world of poetics and art. According to Mattingly,

*a poetic narrative imitates action and experience through clarification and condensation, revealing causal connections between motive, deed, and consequence which also allows a moral reading of events. The purpose of a narrative is not simply to tell what happened but to provide a moral perspective on past events (Mattingly, 1998, p. 29).*

By using the terms “moral reading” and “moral perspective” Mattingly is not calling for some top-down or normalizing judgement of morals from some outside authority, but rather that the re-presentation of a person’s life through a dramatic/poetic narrative allows persons to engage in their own moral and just reading of how their actions, throughout the course of their lives, and especially





in the face of their greatest dangers, were indeed guided by their own intentions, purposes, and desires for living.

Poetic narratives (good stories) have a way of identifying, locating, and highlighting moments that could be otherwise seen as routine or ordinary and imbuing them with dramatic quality. A moment becomes a dramatic moment through the use of vivid particularity, heightened emotional significance and attention to what it is that has been at stake in a life.

*Events take their meaningful shape (are lived experiences) for actors depending upon what they bring to the encounter and what is at stake for them personally.” (Mattingly, 2010, p.48)*

### *Drama in Practice*

Earlier, I told the story of my first act one interview and David’s encouraging insistence that my questions needed MORE DRAMA! We thought it might be interesting to use my first attempt at an IWP interview and show you some of my actual “drama-light” questions and offer some alternative questions that attempt to present them in a more dramatic form.

### Context

The questions that will be presented here are based on an act one interview where Megan portrayed her client Jennifer. Jennifer had suffered from the effects of terrible migraines and other physical pain since she was 6 years old. At the age of 6, due to the fact that no one believed her complaints about her physical health, she devised some rather unique strategies to deal with the pain. She created imaginary worlds to escape to; worlds where she was a doctor of sorts to animals and used imaginary spells and incantations to heal them of their pain. At home her physical pain was labeled as make believe and interpreted as attention seeking and trying to avoid going to school. At the age of 12, she decided that she was ‘tired of’ living with the effects of pain and took ‘drastic measures’ to find some relief from the pain. Those efforts involved being an advocate for her own



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experience in relationship with her parents and doctors. As a result of her self-advocacy efforts, Jennifer was eventually able to get the medical and emotional support that she needed and was able to find significant relief from the effects of pain in her life. Unfortunately, anxiety entered her life shortly thereafter, as a result of being bullied at school and a return of surveillance practices by her parents. This cocktail of bullying and surveillance led Jennifer to withdraw from friends, engage in self-harming actions, and eventually to make threats against her life. Jennifer and Megan had been meeting for 6 months at the time of the act one interview and Jennifer had already made significant strides in taking her life back from anxiety.

### Initial Question #1

The following question was in response by Megan's Jennifer that appeared to make some implicit connections between her triumphs against the effects of anxiety with the 'very mature and serious' way that she handled her physical health struggles when she was 12.

- Can you tell me a little bit about how the history of being tired of your physical health struggles may have been a help to you in changing your relationship with anxiety?

### Revised Question #1

In looking at the transcript now, it is clear to me why this was a question that David had nominated as a candidate for MORE DRAMA. First of all, my question did very little to bring to light the rather remarkable context of a 12 year old young woman who was somehow able to become her own advocate in the face of repeated dismissals of the reality of her pain from her parents and school teachers. Let me offer a revised sequence of questions here that might add some needed drama to heighten the significance of Jennifer's current efforts and situate it in a long history of acting on her own behalf in quite remarkable ways.



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- Jennifer, when I asked you the question, “How was it that you were able to take your life back from anxiety in a timeframe that you would consider “ahead of anything I expected,” you wondered whether it had something to do with learning to be an advocate for yourself when you were just 12 years old. If we were to take a moment to look back on the efforts of your 12 year-old-self at the time, what do you think it might take for a 12 year old young woman to hold on to her own experience and convictions, *even in the face of a 6 year denial* by the adults around you?
- Did this ‘moral strength’ of your own convictions just suddenly appear when you were 12 or might it have a much longer history?
- If I remember correctly Jennifer, your 6 year-old-self created imaginary worlds where you somehow managed to *escape the prison of your physical pain* and in those worlds you were a healer who used special spells and incantations to provide animals with relief from suffering. Do you think that it is possible that the imaginary worlds that your 6 year-old-self imagined into being somehow served as a training ground for your moral strength?
- And is it at all possible that the *spells and incantations* that you offered your animal friends, when you were the tender age of 6, somehow made their way forward to you when you needed them most so that you could be a *healer for yourself* like you were for your animal friends?

Okay, I am getting a bit carried away here. But, hopefully you can see how these questions build upon each other, using the rich imagery from her life history to heighten and dramatize the significance of the actions of her 12 year-old-self and extend the history of those actions far back into her past.

### *Stories Filled with Suspense and Surprise*

Another important quality of a good story/poetic narrative is a sense of suspenseful surprisingness. Anyone who has read a good novel knows what it feels



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like to be on the edge of their seats swept up in the suspense of what will happen next. At David's encouragement, I have tried to see my work as akin to reading/writing a good novel. Does the story portray a character who acts on the scene and is capable of surprise? I have found E.M. Forster's idea of round and flat characters helpful here.

*The distinction in literary theory between "flat" characters and round ones is helpful here. E.M. Forster tells us that "Flat characters, in their purest form, are constructed round a single idea or quality. Once they are identified, flat characters never surprise us, never waiver. They do exactly what they are supposed to do, no more and no less. Round characters, by contrast, possess multiple qualities, shadowy ambiguities, and outright contradictions. Most important, they are capable of change" (As quoted in Mattingly, 2010, p. 108).*

Forster's idea of a round character has been helpful to me as I think about how I go about telling a story of a character that is at the center of the unfolding drama. If my questions lack drama, suspense, and surprise, if they fall flat, the character in the story will very likely come off as a flat character that lacks the capacity to capture the imagination of the person in a way that, as Michael was fond of saying, might 'fascinate' them.

*Another Detour on the Topic of Dictionaries.* While we are on the topic of characters, I want to draw your attention to a term that David has been attempting to introduce into his new dictionary for narrative therapy. You might be asking yourselves, "There is a new dictionary for narrative therapy? Why? And how come I didn't know this?" For the past four or five years, David has been traveling the world introducing new words to complement and reimagine the narrative therapy terms that we have become accustomed to. Why, you might be asking, would David want to come up with new words for the very terms that he and Michael created to describe narrative therapy in the first place? As David tells the story, there is a shelf life to words and phrases just as there is for food (with





the exception of Twinkies it appears). According to lexicographer Kory Sampler (2018), the shelf life of most words is dated at 10-20 years. Once words have been sitting on the shelf for too long, they blend into the background; become part of the everyday scenery and lose their capacity to inspire. According to David, if the start date of narrative therapy was 1985, then the narrative therapy dictionary has exceeded its expiration date. David is not calling for a wholesale burning of the lexicon of narrative therapy, not by any means, but what he is advocating for is the introduction of new words, terms, and phrases that might have the capacity to re-inspire, re-enliven, and re-imagine the spirits of narrative practice (Epston, 2019).

Back to the topic of characters then... One of the terms that David has nominated for this new dictionary of narrative therapy is “Moral Character.” When thinking about good stories in literature, one of the most common questions that we are introduced to as readers is, “What is the moral of the story?” Each story has an intention to teach some kind of virtue or moral that comes with particular invitations that ask us to consider what it means to live a good life. As we borrow the notion of a good story for the purpose of therapy, the question becomes “What is the moral of the character that has been driving this story along?” You might think of the moral character of a person as an ‘against all odds’ longing, desire, spirit that has been the driving force behind all of their efforts and labors on behalf of their own living. This, then, begs us to ask other questions, such as:

- Given what we know about what this person has been up against in life, and all that they have been striving for against these odds, just who is this person standing before us?
- What is it about the substance of this person that has allowed them to stare down the particular dangers of their life and somehow, against all odds, live out a life for themselves?
- What word, image, or phrase might capture the moral or spirit of this character that has made all of this possible?





To complete this particular detour, it is critical that the stories that we tell in our work put the moral character of the person, in all of their roundness, on full display. And suspense and surprise matter when it comes to revealing a person as a round character in the stories of their lives. Mattingly argues that the stories we tell need to take place in what she refers to as “narrative time;” a time that is “marked by suspense and surprise” (Mattingly, 2010, 85).

*After all, in dramatic time, some kind of transformation occurs or at least seems possible. This is what makes a drama suspenseful. When desires are strong and there is some chance that they could be realized, even if trouble looms large, participants are willing to take risks. Out of this risky action, transformation may occur and time becomes unpredictable. (Mattingly, 2010, p.136)*

According to Mattingly, narrative time is different than the chronological account that is often the basis for most narrative theorists. In contrast to story time, that seeks to present events linked across time in a chronological fashion, Mattingly (1998) argues that narrative time actually seeks to distort time, “prolonging a few precious moments, skimming a month at a time, entire years, intimating the ending in the beginning, blithely shifting scenes and times and sequences in order to further the plot” (p.35). To further this distinction between narrative time and chronological time in storytelling, Mattingly (1998) further comments that,

*Life is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart (p.45).*

Mattingly’s distinction between story time and narrative time has encouraged us to shift our thinking away from the mere telling of stories and toward the telling of poetic narratives, narratives that offer “meaning through evocation, image, the mystery of the unsaid, unfolding events in a suspense-laden time in which one





wonders what will happen next” (p.8). This ‘what will happen next,’ ‘sitting on the edge of your seat’ quality to a good story is something that any reader of a good novel knows well. It is what keeps us up late into the night because we simply can’t put the book down. We have to turn the page. We all know what this is like in our experience of readers of a good story. The question for us as narrative therapists is, “How can we tell a story in such a way that the reader of the story, the client, experiences this same ‘sitting on the edge of their seats’ suspensefulness that begs them to ask not only ‘what will happen next’ but more importantly, ‘what will I do next?’”

Mattingly again offers important wisdom here, suggesting that suspense and surprise in stories about human lives require a “certain breathless questioning...a continual and what then? And what then? puzzling... In this puzzlement, the audience share with the characters a stance of openness toward the future which stretches before them unknown and still potentially shapeable” (Mattingly, 1998, p.38). In the case of Insider Witnessing Practices, since we are intending to tell a story on behalf of another person, with that very person as its witness, the audience and the character is one and the same, leaving them open toward their own future in all of its now potentially shapeable possibility.

It might be obvious to you, reader, that it is impossible to disentangle drama from suspense and suspense from drama. Drama requires suspense and suspense requires drama. And the key ingredient to it all is the production of desire. Here again we turn to Mattingly (Mattingly, 1998),

*A therapeutic (narrative) plot only seduces to the extent that it emerges in an unfolding life story, gives some hope for life that is still to be lived...A therapeutic (narrative) plot occurs in a kind of gap, a space of desire created by the distance between where the protagonist is and where she wants to be. A narrative possibility cannot be within easy reach. Narratives involve confronting obstacles, taking risks, facing enemies, overcoming dangers and the like...There must be something worth doing. A gap, in other words, is*





*only of narrative import if there is suspense about the outcome and that means some hope for success, some reason to take a risk. Of course, to hope at all means taking a risk, making oneself vulnerable to desire (p. 70).*

I recently sent this quote to David Epston and he commented “That is quite remarkable! Nowhere has it been better said than this. Every student of narrative therapy should have this in **bold print** over their desks/computers.”

### *Suspense and Surprise in Practice*

In order to offer you an example of bringing suspense and surprise into practice, let’s return to my very first IWP interview with Megan’s Jennifer and another of my somewhat flat, drama and now suspense-less, questions.

#### *Initial Question #2*

The following question is in response to a comment by Megan’s Jennifer about indicating her desire to ‘continue the forward motion’ of the conversation and the growing anticipation that she was experiencing regarding ‘the many things that I still want to do and experience in life that might just be possible now.’

- We’ve been looking back a little bit on the history of your determination and strength and ability to be the kind of person who arrives at her destination ahead of schedule without turning back. As you look forward in your life, maybe the next year or two years, what do you think might come into your life as a result of your commitment to look forward and your skills and ability to not look back and to arrive ahead of schedule?

#### *Revised Question #2*

This is a fairly common question that I would have asked prior to apprenticing myself to David’s questions and this emerging new dictionary of narrative therapy. In fact, I remember being quite pleased with this particular question when I transcribed the interview and sent it off to David. But, you guessed it, this too was a question that David nominated for MORE DRAMA, or in this case,




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suspense. While my initial question was looking for the ‘what will happen next’ in the story, it was clearly lacking in suspense and surprise, or as David might say, ‘narrative drive.’ “Where is the drama? The suspense? The excitement? The sense of beginning, middle, and end?” (Mattingly, 1998, p.63). Let me, again provide a sequence of revised questions that might do more to heighten a sense of suspense, surprise, and wonderment about what just might be around the corner.

- Jennifer, in our conversation today we have charted a history of a person who has somehow managed to trust her own knowing and wisdom about what is best for her life and her body, even in the face of denials by parents and experts. And not only that but, you became your own health advocate at the age of 12 and were somehow able to convince the doctors to listen to your counsel. And now, even in the most difficult of times, your moral strength and conviction has once again come to your aid and allowed you to take your life back from the grips of anxiety ahead of any time frame that anyone could have predicted. Is it at all possible that all of your efforts and labors on your own behalf, that extend all the way back to your 6-year-old self, have created a momentum that is now propelling you forward in ways you could never have predicted?
- As you are standing here today, on the edge of tomorrow, with all of the energy and momentum of your history stored up, what surprises might be waiting for you and your life just on the horizon?

Hopefully these revised questions are an improvement over my first attempt. Although that is up for you, reader, to decide. You may have noticed the extensive summary before introducing the first revised question. My hope is to use the events of the past and present to tell a story of ever increasing momentum; an open story that beckons a person to live into the near future; a story that begs the question, “And just what will I do next?”





### *Setting the Scene: Of Agents, Place, Detail, and Vivid Particularity*

*“Narrative form is based on the vividness of events in themselves as well as on their contributions to the plot “(Mattingly, 1998, p.85)*

At a workshop in Fargo, North Dakota several years back, David Epston shared a transcript of a conversation with a young woman who had been removed from her home due to mistreatment and neglect on the part of her parents. As is not uncommon in such circumstances, this young woman had serious struggles at school and her future looked bleak. Somehow, during her time in the treatment home, she found her way and developed a particular love for working with children. At the age of 18, when David met her, she had already graduated with a certificate in early childhood education. This, of course, seemed remarkable to David and he quickly engaged the young woman in a conversation about the history of this unanticipated and against the odds achievement. After the history of her achievements had been brought into light, David asked her to revisit the exact moment when she received her certificate with considerable detail. He even asked her to describe what the certificate looked and felt like in her hands. And then he asked “And was it a sunny day?” A bit perplexed, one of the members of the audience asked, “A sunny day? Why does it matter if it was a sunny day?” And, as now become common place for me, David’s response had me sitting in wonderment. “Narrative has been great with time but terrible with place.” David went on to talk about the importance of setting the scene with sufficient detail that people can imagine into the scene, to see themselves acting on it and to bring the sensations of the moment into present.

Setting the scene through a vivid description of the details and then putting that scene into motion is critical to good storytelling because it creates a “heightened attention to the moment” (Mattingly, 2010, p. 144). And from this place of heightened attention to the moment, “human actors take center stage” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 109). Mattingly continues,



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*Stories always show what happens as action, so that even if fate seems to prescribe a certain direction of the plot, the specific events which occur are always linked to the intentional actions of the characters (p.109).*

And from this action-focused place, the person at the center of the story is put in particular circumstances that show the person as a moral agent actively shaping the events as they unfold across time. Again, Mattingly (2010) is helpful here,

*Characters confront situations that call for action; they are key shapers of story event, and their responses to what happens are the focal point of narrative attention. Characters reveal who they are and the motives they have in and through their action and suffering (p.179-180).*

Given the importance of detail in setting scene and place, we might need to learn to slow down the rush to meaning in our work with clients. If we jump too quickly to meaning, for example, asking people to name the values and intentions that might inform a particular unique outcome, before we have sufficient detail to set the scene in motion through its vivid particularity, action is lost. And when action is lost, so too is the opportunity to reveal a heightened sense of motive, agency, and desire (Mattingly, 1998). Here is an example of the power of vivid detail in setting a scene in motion in ways that reveal a person as a moral agent actively shaping the events of her life. In preparing for an IWP interview about a year ago, as my colleagues and I at the Calgary Narrative Collective, were gathering information about the person had been up against in life, the therapist told a story about a time when the client was dropped off in a field by her parents as a form of punishment to teach her a lesson about the consequences of disobedience. But what if the therapist didn't inquire further? What if the therapist didn't ask for the details of the scene? What time of year was it? Where did they drop you off? How deep was the snow? What did you see when you looked up? What time of day was it? What did you do? And what did you do next?

As we inquired further about the details surrounding this moment, here is what we found out. We learned that the child was only six years old at the time, that it





was in the middle of winter after a recent storm that left her standing in waist deep snow. All of these details matter greatly if we were to tell this story in a way that would allow the client to engage in a moral reading of this particular event and to reveal her motives and desires that informed her remarkable and surprising response. Fortunately, the therapist knew to ask for even more. And what did this 6-year-old child do in the face of being abandoned in waist deep snow in the middle of a winter's night? After the slightest of pauses to assess the situation, this 6-year-old child stood up, scanned the horizon and upon seeing a row of lighted houses asked herself, "Maybe someone in one of those houses will love me?" And immediately started making her way to find out.

And now, with the scene and place gathered in vivid detail we can ask a question that sets the scene in motion and displays Patricia as a moral agent moving through the scene with desire, purpose, and hope, doing something that a 6-year-old probably has no business doing. Against the dramatic backdrop that sets this scene in motion, heightened levels of significance become possible for Patricia.

Here is how the scene played out in the act one interview with Loree, Patricia's therapist, playing the part of Patricia for the purpose of allowing Patricia to become a compassionate witness to her own story.

Tom: When you were 6, in that field, and you saw the insult clearly: "Oh, I guess they don't want me" and you looked out and saw the lights and thought "maybe someone else will" what did you do?

Loree's Patricia: In that moment?

Tom: Yeah, what did you do? Did you just imagine it, did you sit there?

Loree's Patricia: No! I decided I would go find out; and started walking towards the houses that I could see. Yeah, I started walking and





thinking "yeah, one of those houses might want me and I'm going to go see" I guess. I know I didn't stand there. I just kept going.

Tom: Did you somehow will—willing your little 6-year old's feet and legs to go find... what were you wanting to go find? What were you willing yourself toward?

Loree's Patricia: Probably finding a home. A family that wanted me...that could see me, at home I was totally invisible, and ironically, totally scrutinized—so I was either invisible or scrutinized at. For every action or nonaction. So, I thought there might be a place where I could just be. Not scrutinized but seen.

Tom: I'm still stuck on you being in this field. Just because, it seems to me from the retelling that you didn't say—well as most 6-year-old might say "I must be the terriblest person to be left here" but you, you somehow said: "They must not want me. Maybe someone will there in those lighted houses". What kind of a knowing is this that you as a 6-year-old maybe had no business knowing? That got yourself up, and your feet moving. What kind of a knowing was this? Knowing about yourself?

Loree's Patricia: Yeah, I think it might surprise me too. That sometimes that stopped—how did I make it? But when you say that—as long as I can remember I had this sense that I could rely on myself. I could rely on myself, and when you say that it feels like even then I had that sense; but somehow—yeah, that I wasn't bad. I wasn't dropped off because I was bad...

After watching the interview and seeing her actions set in motion in this way Patricia said...



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*You know actually I've never put that together before—those two stories about the lights in the distance. It hadn't occurred to me that there was a throughline in that. That a philosophical thought developed around it, went all the way back, you know to see those lights in the distance. So, it's interesting...I became very philosophical, at the age of 6, in the most profound sort of experience sitting in the middle of a wintery field, and seeing the lights in the distance...I didn't hesitate. I set out in waist high snow, to find a place where someone would see me and love me. My vision was clear. The throughline goes all the way back.*

I return to Mattingly once again here, “A dramatic moment commonly involves agents acting in ways that are at odds with the scene, generating all sorts of Trouble that must then be resolved in some fashion” (Mattingly, 2010, p.45).

Certainly, Patricia, at the tender age of 6, was acting in ways that were at odds with the scene and because of the careful attention to detail on the part of her therapist Loree, we were able to generate all sorts of trouble with the Problem Story and the unfair conclusions that it led her to draw about her identity as a person. Clearly, she was a moral agent in her life whose actions were full of a knowing and desire that were well beyond her years.

Two weeks after the interview took place Patricia had this to say about the effect of seeing her life played out in such vivid and dramatic detail.

*It offered me a bit of distance and allowed me to think as an adult about the child I was. When I was watching the story of my life unfold, especially about the circumstances of my childhood and the snowy field, it was if I had feelings filtered through feelings. Hearing about the child in the story, who was me, and all that she had been through...the unfairness shone through!*

*There was an arc to the interview. A story that unfolded and it painted a picture of the unfairness of it all and I could see the innocence. THIS CHILD*





*WAS INNOCENT...just trying to grow, to develop, to find a place to belong, to be loved.*

So, reader, this is where the story, the story about learning to tell a good story, ends. Or perhaps it is more of a beginning. A beginning look at how to re-center good storytelling at the heart of narrative practice and some of the ways that it has required me to reimagine the ways that I ask questions, and in particular, to take the time to set scenes in motion, through a vivid particularity of the moment, in ways that offer people a sense of themselves as moral agents actively shaping the unfolding events of their lives. Creating an image of a person as an active moral agent is, after all, the purpose of narrative therapy in the first place. In the words of Michael White, narrative therapy seeks to provide a “historical account of the person’s ability to intervene in her/his life... an account of **personal agency**, an account of what could be called **the person’s agentive self**. It includes details about what the person has been up against in the performance of this personal agency, and against this background, it emphasizes the significance of...the steps the person has taken toward having more say about how their life goes” (White, 1995, p. 143).

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