



Miranda Returns

Miranda Brown, Tom Stone Carlson, and David Epston

tom.carlson@ndsu.edu

Readers of the first release of JNFT will recall “Miranda: A Fighting Spirit’s Journey to Self-Compassion” whereby Miranda transformed her life as a result of her experience with Insider Witnessing Practices. At the time of the publication of the first three papers on Insider Witnessing practices, two years had passed since Miranda’s Act Two interview (Jan. 25, 2015) where she watched the portrayal of her life by her therapist Emily Corturillo. During those two years, David and I met regularly with Miranda to catch up with her on the consequential unfolding of her life and to learn more about the possibilities of this practice from her unique position as the first person to have experienced an Insider Witnessing interview. While we scheduled co-research interviews with Miranda every three to six months during that period of time, Miranda would often excitedly reach out to us requesting a meeting to tell us about surprising new developments in her life. The third paper on Insider Witnessing Practices that appeared in the last release of JNFT represents an account of the interviews and experiences that transpired during those two years. One matter that Miranda would inform of us time and time again was that after her experience in the Act 2 interview, changes in her life seemingly started happening spontaneously. During one meeting, Miranda told us how puzzled she was by changes that took place without her having done anything she was aware of to bring the about. As we explored with Miranda how this could be possible, she concluded that it was as if she was changed so dramatically in the Act 2 interview that it took time for her to catch up to all of the ways that she had *already* changed. Or as Miranda often quipped: “My IWP experience is like a gift that just keeps on giving.”

The following represents another telling of another dramatic transformation in Miranda’s life that took place almost three years after her first experience with Insider Witnessing Practices. Miranda contacted me (Tom) after doing a final edit of her paper that we had written together for first release of JNFT. While reading the paper, Miranda had the odd experience of not recognizing herself in the story anymore. It no longer represented the Miranda she had become. She recognized her current self quite well but she no longer recognized the Miranda of the past. It was as if her life had changed so dramatically that she could not ‘read’ herself

After learning of this, I asked Miranda if perhaps she might need a new story of her past that was worthy of the story of her present. She immediately agreed that this was the case and said that it was as if “a light of compassion is pouring into my past. I am seeing things about me that





I never knew existed before.” At that very moment, we agreed that we would embark on a project to find her a new story worthy of her which we dubbed, ‘the light of compassion’ project. What follows is the first and last interview of this project. As you will discover in reading the interview, a dramatic retelling of Miranda’s life takes place in such a way that no further interviews were required.

Rather than simply presenting an unedited transcript of the interview, we have decided to prepare what we are calling a *rendered* version of these interviews. Given that spoken word is so different than written text and can often only be understood in the context of the conversation itself, we have recently taken to rendering transcripts so that they are more accessible as a written text. Spoken word within conversation is filled with stops and starts and partially finished sentences. In the midst of the conversation itself, these stops and starts are hardly noticeable to those involved. When put into text, these stops and starts that appear normal within conversation itself become terribly distracting to the reader who expect a particular level of flow in the written word. In an effort to address the readability of transcripts, we have recently begun to take up the practice of rendering them into a format that more closely resembles what you might expect from a written text at the same time as preserving the ‘feel’ of the conversation itself. In order to do so we carefully edit the transcripts to improve the flow by deleting the stops and starts, partially completed sentences, and any redundancies that might be present in the original spoken version of the transcript.

Throughout this process, we are guided by two principles. Firstly, we are committed to staying as close as possible to the original wording and intent of the speaker. Secondly, we are committed to presenting speakers’ words in a way that is respectful of their intelligence. We consider that if they had known that their words were going to end up in text, they would have paid far more attention to the precision and flow of their words. The result of this process is a text that is not only much easier to follow but it also enhances the reader’s Apprehension of the significance of the conversation that took place between the therapist and her or his conversational partners. In addition, this was returned to Miranda for editing. She had no qualms about assuming such a role in regard to the rendered transcript. As an aside, the literal meaning of ‘to render’ is ‘to reproduce or re-present something in an artistic form.’ For our purposes, we see the rendering of transcripts as the art of transforming the spoken word into story form.

Rendered Transcript of Miranda Returns

Tom, I want to tell you something important that happened to me over the summer. I was shopping for groceries in my home town in August. It happened to be the same store where I first confronted the man who abused me. Do you remember that? I was 18 years old then and you’ll remember I managed to stand my ground. I didn’t run away. Whenever I’ve shopped





there since, I would always be looking over my shoulder and trying to plan an escape route just in case he showed up. Well, this time, I was just minding my own business. I was just shopping. I wasn't even thinking about where the exits were or what my escape route might be. I wasn't even thinking about him at all.

As I was standing in line to pay for my groceries, all of a sudden I heard a familiar voice. A feeling of panic came over me as I looked up to find him standing right in front of me. I quickly looked to see if I might escape to the next available line but then, for a reason I still can't explain, a wave of calmness came over me. I told myself, "You're not going anywhere" and placed my groceries on the conveyor belt. I still can't believe it even as I am telling you now but once again, I stood my ground.

Somehow realizing I was right behind him, he turned and addressed me, "How are you doing Ms. Brown?" I couldn't believe his audacity. Who did he think he was to believe that he had the right to even utter my name? With all of the courage that I could muster, I declared, "I AM FINE THANK YOU!" The strength and power of my words surprised me. But they surprised him even more. The jovial and confident man who had been charming everyone around him in the store fell completely silent. As he turned away from me his head hung down as if ashamed and walked slowly out of the store.

While I was still in awe that this had really happened, the woman at the register commented, "Isn't he just the kindest and funniest man?" Her comment shocked the awe right out of me. Before I could even decide whether I should respond, these words jumped out of my mouth, "Well, he wasn't kind to me when I was 13!" Immediately afterwards, the sense of awe quickly returned. Had this really happened? Not only had I stood my ground and declared I was now free from the grasp of his abuse, I actually had spoken out against him in public. No wonder I was in awe of myself. It was like I had awoken from a dream that had finally come true.

Later that evening as I was reflecting on the events of the day, a fleeting feeling of worry came over me. As the worry settled in, I wondered how long the anxiety of running into him again would continue to trouble me. In the past, whenever I would see him, even if from a distance, the feelings of fear, worry and self-blame would stay with me for weeks. It was like each encounter would ruin me all over again. Somehow these thoughts of worry faded as the evening passed and before I knew it I had opened my eyes to a new day. As I took my first breath that morning, I realized that I had awoken to find that this was just another normal day. There were no feelings of fear, worry, or self-blame. It was just a normal day. The first normal day of the rest of my life. The thoughts in my mind fell silent contemplating this prospect.

It truly feels like you could never understand this unless you had gone through it. It's this feeling I cannot put into words. I just remember breathing in the first time and nothing was





holding me back that day. In response to your question, “If there aren’t words for it which I can completely understand, then might there be an image for this feeling?”

Well, I remember opening my eyes and just inhaling. I can’t put it into words but my body can still feel it. It was a breath that I had never taken before. Sometime later in the day it hit me, “Wow, this didn’t carry over to the next day.” You asked me “if it was a breath that took my breath away”. I guess my smile confirmed it.

For this one moment in time, I don’t think my breathing had ever mattered to me so much ever before.

When you asked, “Are you saying your lungs filled with life when you had your first breath the next day?” I replied: “It was crazy because before that I never knew how I used to breath. But now that I have had this experience, I can understand how my breathing wasn’t normal. So after this cool experience the next day, I knew that nothing could hold me back. It made me think about all the times it had been holding me back. Before when I would see him, it literally felt like the fear would hold on to me for days and days. It would be a really, really, really tight grip. Even in my sleep it was still always there. This process has shown me how different I am. Hey Tom, this stuff is really weird to try put into words.

Let me try. I’ll trace the timeline on your table. Here’s the day I woke up and had my first breathe and everything was okay, nothing had carried over and from this point on all of this over here is just... I am running out of words again. When you asked me, “Are you saying that as you look back into the past you can’t find yourself there?” I marveled that it really can’t and that’s really weird because for years this is how I lived.

“Is it an okay thing that it’s not your life anymore?”

It’s an amazing thing because that’s why I feel free. This is just another example of how free I feel because I never knew I wasn’t free. I never knew what life was until this whole IWP thing.

I am remembering that you told me not so long ago, that the light of compassion was pouring in to your past. Have I got that right? I’ll take your enthusiastic nod for confirmation. And how this has taken you into a new life which promised a very different future. Do you think you might need a new story of the past that is worthy of how your present has been illuminated? As you shine this light of compassion in to your past, what can you now see that you couldn’t see before when you were in the darkness of those years?

Well, I definitely look back at my experience during middle and high school as more of a victory than I previously had. But let me go back to the grocery store first and how it didn’t carry over the next day. It’s still blowing my mind.





How can I explain this? It felt as if I had an incredible insight about- let's just call it abuse –how much the abuse had affected me in ways I hadn't understood before.

Let me explain it to you Tom. After having the experience at the grocery store and how I felt the next morning, I felt like a normal person. Not only that, I now believed that I could go through my life as a normal person rather than constantly being held back by this dark force that was always there. I never realized how powerful it had been nor thought it would ever leave me. Until that day when I exhaled all the darkness, I couldn't possibly have known anything different. After all, for the last seven years, I had never lived life without it. Now I have the privilege of being free from the past as if it were a merely a memory; I wake to find that every day is literally a brand new day and there is nothing from my past holding me back.

Miranda, is it possible that your new past is holding you up instead of holding you back?

Tom, you ask the wildest questions. Where do you possibly get them from?

Well, how about this one... Did you come away from this experience a bit in awe of yourself like you did before?

I'm finally free. I'm finally free! It's mind blowing. But I want you to know that it definitely feels like a different level of freedom. What I keep learning from this experience is that I keep becoming more free and I don't know how that is possible. You think there is an absolute to it but I keep learning that there isn't. But I'm fine with that!

Are you becoming open to the idea or the possibility that there may be more surprises ahead?

Yeah. I can't think of what could possibly be as life altering as the things I've already experienced. I didn't expect anything to happen last summer and something did that was very, very meaningful to me. I keep asking myself, 'what will life bring next'? And I think it's something I have to allow to happen at its own pace. I suppose these new ways of being free will happen whenever they are going to happen. But I'm not going to question its methods because it's working. And it's funny that I can now laugh about it. Look, I am as free as I've ever been.

Are you open to the possibility of being even more free than the freedom you know now?

Yeah! It will be really crazy to see what will happen next. It will be mind blowing but at the same time I have how many years left in my life? I mean I am only 21 years old. I've got a lifetime ahead of me.

When I think about it, up until now Emily and I have been your companions on your travels but over the summer when you were back home you were on your own...





Yeah. Yeah. I think it really speaks to how much this abuse doesn't have a hold on me. And how I can truly wake up the next morning and just go on with my life rather than being destroyed because that's how I used to feel. It's like I went through this thing, I felt feelings about what was happening and I was sad afterwards but now I no longer feel shame when I think about what happened to me. I no longer need to hide from myself what happened to me. I can now just allow my life to happen. I don't think I've ever let myself feel this way or deal with my emotions for what they were. Actually I think I did an incredible job! Way to go Miranda!

In an earlier interview you were talking how you were able to see yourself as another person and have compassion for yourself, would you say in that moment when you woke up that morning and breathed in the first breath of the rest of your life [or was it after you confronted him in the store? Miranda, which one of the two is the reference for this question], that you somehow allowed yourself to be there for yourself?

Yeah because it was as if I'm sending compassion to myself by allowing myself to be sad about it for a little bit. Cry about it if I need to but then after that emotional expression I was okay; then the next day I was fine and ready to move on. And it was really interesting because I keep learning about how I used to live. It almost feels like an outside point of view. I get to look at my life as a "normal person" would. Wow! It's just really interesting to see the difference when I think about it.

Given everything that you have suffered and lived through, would you consider your ability to now live your life as a normal person an ordinary achievement, extra-ordinary achievement, or somewhere in between?

Extra-ordinary! That's just crazy because I always felt like I had to be separate from everyone because I wasn't normal. There was something wrong with me and I was worried that they would find out. But now I'm not constantly feeling like I'm a bad person all of the time. So this kind of fell off and so did this feeling of having to be separate from everybody else.

Is it possible that there's nothing ordinary about your 'normal' Miranda?

I think that I've gotten to this place of normalness in a way that's extraordinary.

Off all the achievements that someone could accomplish in their life, where does this rank in your life?

One of the biggest! And I know about people who have gone through something similar to me and spent their whole lives just self-destructing and in fact, more or less stopped living even if they are still alive. And I could very well have been someone like that. To be free of something that could have held on to me for the rest of my life is one of my greatest achievements.





Given that you consider this one of your greatest achievements, does this suggest to you as it does to me that there is something about your enduring moral character that built the momentum necessary for these extraordinary events to take place? When you look back on your life as a younger person, does anything come to mind about your character that you are now seeing a little bit differently than you did before?

Yes. I definitely think that fighting spirit is even more true than it was when it was revealed to me in the Act 2 interview. Again that seems crazy.

When you think about it now, does this fighting spirit go back in to your past a longer way than you had previously thought?

I can't believe I am about to say this but 'yes.' I did a lot back then to try to deal with the abuse and I realized that I did a better job dealing with my situation than I have given myself credit for. There were so many times I thought to myself that I was crazy for feeling the way I did. I was embarrassed by what had happened and how I was feeling about it, but now I think I did a pretty darn good job with what I had to go through.

And you know, Miranda, you did it on your own didn't you?

Yeah, my 13 year old self did quite a good job dealing with this negative event that happened back then and also dealing with all other aspects of being a young teenager. There has to be something good about who I am as a person to have gotten me past all of that suffering.

Even though you felt at times sad, defeated, and perhaps without much hope for your future, did you somehow or other manage to keep pushing along, keep fighting along?

Your question reminds me of when Emily's Miranda talked about that little voice. You know I think that even when I felt there was really no hope for me when I was a teenager, there must have been this little voice that just kept saying "keep moving, keep going" because if I didn't have one shred of hope for myself then why would I have even tried so hard. Tom, I am so happy to be thinking about this. That voice was always there and that is so crazy to think about!

How 'little' do you think your little voice really was if you managed to make it where you are today?

I think it had to be a big voice. How I deceived myself was making my situation into the whole game idea. I needed to beat these people rather than thinking to myself, 'You're a person that can accomplish something.' After all, this whole incident made me feel like I was nothing. 'You need to do something to show them that they didn't break you.' Rather I should have just believed in myself. Perhaps it was my way of believing in myself but not in a way that was really good for me.





As you were playing this game, is it possible that at the same time you were also nurturing a belief in your own worth? Your smile tells me to ask another question. So here it goes. Are you ready? Given all of the weight and pressure that you have to suffer through, how 'big' do you think that this voice must have been in order to make it through it all?

It must have been an everyday reminder because if on any given day the voice wasn't there I would have just given up. Any hope I had would have crumbled into dust.

As you are looking back now with this light of compassion, how 'big' do you guess that voice was before this all happened to you when you were 13 years old?

So like when I was really, really young? I would have to say normal level. Before this all happened, I had a belief that I could accomplish anything and make all of my dreams come true. So I think that I had a normal self-esteem before all of this happened. Wait a second Tom. When I think about it right here and now, the voice was much louder and bigger than I ever imagined.

Given how hard it is to come back from something like the abuse and the suffering that you endured, what might you have already been armed with in order to make it through all that darkness?

Self-confidence, it was always there. I have no doubt about it now.

In order to make it through, was the voice of your confidence and your worth ordinary, extraordinary, or somewhere in the middle?

Extraordinary! I never thought I would ever hear myself say that out loud. That feels really good.

Do you remember in your mom's letter to us she said that 'my Miranda was full of life... She was a fighter...She was someone who believed that anything was possible.' Do you remember your mother's Miranda? If your mom was here with us right now and we were to ask her just how 'big' this voice might have been, what do you think she might say?

She would say that it was very, very loud. It is so interesting. It's like I am a different person... I'm evolving in to a new person. I am reconnecting with the youth that I once was, Miranda at her core.

Miranda, do you think it's possible that the Miranda that was here at age 13 through age 19 was just as 'big', just as full of life but you just didn't know it because it took so much energy for you just to survive? How full of life and a fighting spirit would you have





needed to have in order to come through all of this and not to just survive but to actually go free?

More than the average person.

Have you been full of life and alive all along Miranda?

Oh my gosh... I mean...

Miranda, is that possible?

It is possible! And I would have to think that is true. Which would be crazy because you said that we are rewriting my history. And we really are! Because three years ago, I would never have looked at my life in this way. I think that I'm learning that it's okay to not look at the abuse and its effect in a negative way as I had for the last six years. I really did. I was holding on to all of the sadness. I thought the sadness would never leave me.

Miranda, in this new version of your past that is now filled with the light of compassion, what might you have been holding on to all along even if you didn't know it at the time?

THE LIGHT! YES!!! What would have guided me through the darkness if it wasn't for that light?

Miranda, had the abuse unfairly convinced you that it had stolen six years of your life from you when in fact that was not the case?

At this point when Tom asked me this question, I was overcome by emotion and collapsed into my own arms sobbing in ways that I never have before. I have no idea how long this lasted but it seemed to me forever. I have never cried in front of anyone like this, even my adorable mother.

I am sorry I never cry. It really did feel like that. It really did.

Miranda, as you are looking back now was that fair at all?

No!! It was my life to live! It felt like he took it from me.

When I asked the question about abuse trying to convince you that it had stolen six years of your life when it actually hadn't, can you give any words to the tears and the physical response of your body as you folded yourself into your arms?

Whew! Let me catch my breath. Tom, what did you just ask me?

The question that seemed to bring up these tears was that we were talking about the fact that there was what we thought was a little voice that must have been as big as the world to survive all of this darkness. And this voice was so loud and so clear that you could hear it all along even in the darkest tunnel. Because of that, we came to the





conclusion that perhaps you had been full of life all along even during those dark six years because otherwise how could you have made it to where you are now? In response to this, I asked this question, 'Miranda, had the abuse unfairly convinced you that it had stolen six years of your life from you when in fact that was not the case?'

Wow! That was one of the most truthful statements that I think I have ever heard. When you said that it just hit me. It hit me right here in my heart.

Miranda, were the tears witnesses to the truth?

Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

Miranda, is it now time for you to reclaim those six years of your life back from the lost and found?

Yes! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Hang on Tom. I need to catch my breath.

Miranda, without wishing in any way to diminish how hard and dark those years were for you, how else could you have survived unless you were so full of life in the first place?

It's such an incredible way to look at it and it's very powerful. It really is me taking back my life. Just by simply seeing it differently, I am really taking it back and freeing myself from it. It's so crazy because it truly felt like he had taken that away from me, and with that came all the frustration and anger that I think always held me back.

It certainly wouldn't be fair to say that he didn't do something horrible to you. Did the abuse also somehow or other blind you to both your courage and your fighting spirit that you were well known for from your earliest years?

Wow! Yeah!

Miranda do you think it is time to pay you respects to your fighting spirit that somehow lived on during those six years of darkness?

Yeah! It really is Tom.

How should we go about honoring it?

I don't know but I think that we were honoring it with the play in Vancouver and the plans to take my story even further with a play for my family. I want Chelsea to add this interview to the play because if something made me cry like I just did—I told you I never cry in front of people- I think it's something that other people would be able to understand and also value along with everything else that's already in the play. As much as I have felt that I have had a hard time explaining what's happened in my life as a result of my IWP experience to my family and friends, people aren't having a hard time understanding the play. [On May 3rd a private





performance of the play was held at NDSU Walsh Theater for Miranda's family and partner at her request]

There is something I want to ask you about the tears. Do you mind? You told me that the tears that came to you so forcibly were like witnesses to the truthfulness of your life never really having been stolen from you. So far we have been calling this your 'fighting spirit', can you think of another word or description of the character of that 'big' voice that you kept alive and well all those years? Or are you satisfied with Emily's Miranda's 'fighting spirit'?

Yes but I feel like there's more. The ability to get through it. My core. The person who I am deep down. Wow. Tom, that's a big question. I don't have anything that immediately comes to me but I definitely agree there is something more to my character. I just don't know how to define it yet.

Miranda, would it be okay if we consulted your mom here? She referred to her Miranda as someone who was "an unstoppable and fearless young girl". In the conversation we had in the Act 2, you had dated the start of this 'fighting spirit' back to when you were 19 when you confronted your abuser. Given your mother's Miranda and everything else that we have discovered so far today, would you say that there is a much longer history to this 'fighting spirit' than you have ever considered?

Absolutely! It goes all the way back. Because now I know it's always been there. It just had to take a different form.

If it had to take the form of fighting supported by training yourself in mixed martial arts in order to survive, what form did it have when you were 'an unstoppable, fearless and carefree little girl'?

Wow! I guess I was just living. I was just living my life.

Miranda, was it possible that the spirit that was with you as a little girl was a 'full of life spirit'?

Yeah. Yup. Absolutely! Wow!

The purpose of our conversation today has been to find a new story for your past that is worthy of your present. Would you say that this description of yourself as always having a 'full of life spirit' is up to the task?

Full of life spirit. Because that's where I'm at in my life.

Miranda, would you like to be reacquainted with your 'full of life spirit' that you now realize has always been with you?





Yeah. It feels like I already have.

Did you have to transform your 'full of life spirit' into a 'fighting spirit' to get through those years of suffering?

It's crazy how much I just adapted to get through it. I keep thinking how easy it would have been just to give up. But I never did. There was something about me that just wanted to keep living and just wanted to show them they were wrong. That I'm not broken. The 'full of life spirit' just had to disguise itself but it was definitely there.

Would you say that the abuse was hoping that it could keep you from remembering just how full of life you were?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Let me just breathe this all in. It did everything in its power to do that.

Even after you have virtually turned your life right side up over the last two years, had it managed to hide just enough to keep it in the realm of a 'fighting spirit' rather than a 'full of life spirit'?

Holy shit Tom! It's still just so crazy to think about this! It's such an empowering thing to say. And I think that I was holding on to everything because I believed... I somehow believed that I would come through all this. And that is crazy to think about too!

Miranda, do you think that we should press pause now and you can just relish the idea of reclaiming these six years of your life and 'full of life' spirit and see where it takes you until we meet again? How does that sound to you?

Yeah. This is more than enough to think about. I think there's more to come.

