



## Walking hope-lit paths to new doorways: A letter about my experience as an apprentice in narrative therapy.

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Dear David, Tom, and Kay,

I have been thinking for quite some time about what I might put together for the “final show,” finding myself fretting about the idea that after a year of your mentorship, guidance, education, and encouragement, I somehow do not have any new practices to share. I spent hours talking to (exceedingly patient) friends and loved ones about my worry that I might fail all of you in not coming up with some brilliant idea, wondering how it was that I could honour the gift of this opportunity without a shiny, clever, and well-articulated final project to offer at the end. (Surely after a year I could come up with something that warranted the use of even one of these adjectives!) As the anxiety grew and invited its friends (blame, shame, panic, and feelings of failure), I experienced a tidal wave of crushing familiarity: I have been here, in the dark, before.

I know this territory, and its damp air and sharp corners and cold, unforgiving surfaces.

In returning to this familiar place, I remembered that one of the things I was given in the apprenticeship was a candle. It was a light that not only illuminated a path through the dark, it also enabled me to see possibility in places that felt scary and uncertain before. For my final project, I would like to tell the story of how the apprenticeship taught me to ask new questions that invited me to experience myself and my work differently and re-introduced me to the ethics that drew me to narrative therapy to begin with. In doing this, the apprenticeship showed me the seeds of intention in my work that have been there all along, and how to nurture these into more generative, hope-informed questions.

### In Solidarity Against Assholes

In September of 2018, I submitted a transcript to the apprenticeship as I had every month since the previous March. In an effort to shine a bright light on all of my doubts about my ability to “do” therapy, I had challenged myself to primarily submit transcripts of sessions I found challenging or felt I had somehow failed in. I thought that this would be the best solution to a fear that breeds itself in the dark: push it into the light, let it be seen by others, and discover that it was not quite so menacing as it seemed when it had me alone. The dark though, is a slippery thing, and it found a way to seep between my best efforts to illuminate it, trying to disguise itself as humility, or candidness, or something vaguely virtuous. As a part of the introduction to my transcript, I wrote the following:

*I feel pretty flat-footed in our conversations, and re-listening to this session was uncomfortable as I felt like I could hear myself floundering and picking up on all the wrong things, keeping us going in a circle instead of somewhere new. I noticed myself doing a lot of parroting and ushering the story along rather than finding new doorways for us to walk through. I am at a loss for what a counter story might be here in terms of the relationship; with Rachel as an individual, we have explored her growing clarity around the wrongness of Joshua’s abusive behavior and her valuing family, honesty and openness, and living a happy, healthy life with her children. I*





*think I get stuck wondering where I am “supposed” to go without this man in the room (not that I would be even remotely comfortable with him being there!) I am feeling stuck in terms of how often our dialogue leads us to a “her versus him” kind of place, which, as Kay pointed out when I submitted a transcript of another conversation with Rachel, is not a helpful place to be if she is wanting the relationship to work. I am not sure how to reposition them (or us) in relation to the problem, perhaps in part because I am uncertain of what exactly we are calling the problem at this moment. I am muddled! I know Rachel finds our sessions helpful but I am increasingly feeling stuck with where we are right now...*

It felt honest. It was uncomfortable listening to the session. I *did* feel flat-footed, and stuck, and muddled, and uncertain. But writing this led me to travel in the same circles I felt I saw in the transcript. And it was still dark.

A few days later, Tom wrote me an email:

*Hi Bevan,*

*I wanted to touch base with you about our TTT meeting on Wednesday. I will actually be in Calgary on Wednesday so I was thinking that it might be nice to meet in person instead of over zoom. Let me know what you think.*

*I was reading over your transcript in preparation for the meeting and was really taken by something Bevan. As I was reading your introduction, I couldn't help but notice how most of what you wrote was focused on you and your struggles and perceived failures. I know that you have been struggling in your work lately, but I could definitely see, hear, and smell what seemed to be an asshole at work here. I think it might have been you who famously said, “If it looks like an asshole, and sounds like an asshole, and smells like an asshole, then we are probably dealing with an asshole.” The reason I was thinking this is that in my experience assholes tend to make us focus almost entirely on ourselves in hopes that it might induce feelings of shame and defeat. This self-focus can work both ways and results in a terrible loop of self-blame and recrimination. For example, if it can successfully get us to over focus on our failures in our work, it presents an equally problematic solution (supported by the entire positive psychology movement) to shift our focus to things like positive self-talk, self-care and the like. These efforts of course are doomed to fail and we are sent back into feelings of self-blame and recrimination and on it goes.*

*For me, narrative ethics has also been a critique of this self-focus way of thinking and being. It seeks to place others and our concerns for them squarely at the center. By focusing and centering on our thinking and writing on them and their lives, on our hopes for them, and what we admire about them, I believe it can reverse the effects of the asshole and the self-blame and defeat that comes with it. **So, I have an idea; an experiment of sorts. Would you be willing to re-write your introduction and focus entirely on the person, what she has been up against, what you admire about her because of that, what the problem story might be, possible counterstory lines (even if they are just guesses), and what your particular hopes are for this person's life? And anything that situates this particular session. Nothing else.***





*Would you be willing to do this before we meet on Wednesday? I am hopeful that it might reveal some of the tactics and effects of the asshole.*

*I look forward to our meeting Bevan.*

*In solidarity against all assholes,*

*Tom*

Initially this felt like a blow: I have failed at humility, I have failed at focusing on my client, I have failed at understanding or expressing narrative ethics. Darkness, again. But Tom's experiment offered a way through: it didn't matter if I had "failed" at any of these things, or even if I was still in the dark; it was entirely irrelevant. My "failure" was not the focus of this particular exercise, and besides, all of this failure talk did certainly seem like the work of an asshole. (As an aside, the story of recognizing a problem as an asshole is a bit of wisdom taught to me years ago by a client who was also followed by a problem that tried to dress itself up as something helpful). So I took Tom up on his invitation, and wrote the following (which I have shortened here for clarity):

*Rachel has been up against a lot in her life, much of it (in her words) making "the story all about [her]" – something being wrong with her, or not [X] enough [X shifting and morphing back and forth all the time between adequacy or thinness or intelligence], or being held to different standards than her siblings because she is the only one of the three of them who has children. She has also lived through a family legacy of sweeping things under the rug, particularly with regard to abuse.*

*In spite of what she has been up against, family is extraordinarily important to Rachel. In the time we have been speaking to one another, she has been resolute in her desire to have a happy, healthy life for herself and her children. She often speaks in terms of what she desires for them: to know they can talk to her about anything, to feel safe, to feel loved, to have special memories of their time together, and to remain children as long as they are able. She also deeply values honesty and fairness; while she will sometimes say she is "honest to a fault," or that it "gets her into trouble," I see it as a resolve to live a very different kind of life from the one she was introduced to growing up: one where nothing gets shoved under the rug, and instead is pulled out into plain sight, for better or for worse. When she discusses her challenges (particularly with Joshua), I always notice her efforts to be fair to him (e.g, the stress he is under, ways she may have been hurtful to him). She is thoughtful, spirited, and passionate. I so admire her commitment to a different kind of life, and her tenacity in finding a way to "fix" things.*

*My hopes for her are to have the life she imagines: one where she AND her children feel safe and loved and able to live out her values of honesty and openness with her partner (whether or not that continues to be her present fiancé).*

*Possible counterstory lines have to do with kindness, honesty, and safety in her relationship.*





This felt *different*. It had me looking somewhere else with such intensity and hope that I almost didn't notice I was no longer in the dark. I saw things that weren't visible before; the counterstory I thought I didn't see came into sharp relief. The question of whether or not I had failed dissolved in the face of my hopes for this person and my admiration of her. It was in this moment that I felt a lightness that I had first been introduced to by Michael White (1997) in his writing about the ethic of collaboration and decentred practice, "practice considerations that assist therapists to break from despair, and that are reinvigorating of their work and their lives" (p. 193). I returned to literature that drew me to narrative work to begin with, reminding myself (as Tom had) of how these ethics undermine and turn inside-out what White (1997) identified as the pitfalls of therapist-centred work ("fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout," p. 201) While White had been talking about therapist-centredness in the context of the risks of centring therapists' knowledge(s), I experienced those same pitfalls in what Tom referred to as "self focus," or tactics of an asshole hard at work.

In thinking of this experience, and what we have learned about counterstorying over the course of the apprenticeship, I became curious about whether or not I might see a throughline of this hope-guided-practice in my work dating to the beginning of the year. I wondered if the asshole had been working at something of a long-term cover-up, as my experience as a therapist so far and my learnings in the apprenticeship have taught me that problems have a vested interest in blinding us to the ways we may have been undermining them all along.

I searched my emails, remembering the sour, palpable anxiety I felt at submitting my first transcript last March, and my attempt to unseat the isolation the anxiety was feeding off of by sharing my transcript with colleagues. I sent it and shared the gnawing fear that the transcript was an embodiment of the "feeling of just throwing narrative spaghetti without an idea of what I'm trying to do." Anxiety labeled my work as random, intention-less, "narrative spaghetti." *Asshole*. My loving colleague, Sanni, in her reply, offered this:

"It is possible that this is much more than spaghetti my dear!!! You had hopes for her, followed them along and saw and celebrated her being able to say something so bloody surprising for herself."

*and*

"I was thinking in relation to this transcript whether you know more than the feeling allows you to know."

The first time I read this, I cried. I felt relieved and joined and seen, yanked out of the dark and landing softly into a place where the not-knowing felt more like evidence of curiosity than failure. Upon re-reading it for the purposes of writing this letter, I was astonished that the Asshole had hidden this moment from me so cleverly and so effectively that only six months later it was rendered nearly invisible, hidden in the dark again. I think of this now as a kind of field research – an embodied investigation of how problems can (and need to, for their survival,) work to cover up the portals we move through to more enlivening spaces, and the incredible importance of establishing the history of a counterstory that goes farther into the distance than the moment of "aha" - that without seeing a through-line that goes into the past, there is a short-cut available to problems: it's easier to cover up an "aha" than a history that stretches far out into the distance.





I have been following my hopes all along. The apprenticeship did not teach me how to do this, but it *did* teach me to do this more artfully, more carefully, and with increasingly more drama, carrying the story-so-far along in the hopes that the people who come to speak with me can step into the hope I have for them. The apprenticeship taught me that my work has *always* been more purposeful and intentional than the Asshole let me see, while providing me with ways to use this purpose more powerfully. The apprenticeship taught me the value of searching for history, and led me to experience firsthand what it is to challenge a gnawing, hungry problem with a story that goes back in time. The apprenticeship taught me ways that I might, through my hope-guided questions, “better story counter-stories into being” (Ingamells, 2016, p. 59), and provided me with concrete examples of what this might look like as I grow, learn, and develop in this craft.

With these ideas in mind, I pored through my transcripts throughout the apprenticeship, beginning with the very first one where Sanni saw me “follow my hopes along,” and plucked out examples of questions I saw as being informed by my hopes for the people speaking with me. These questions include several of the question practices we were taught over the last year (particular question practices, close questioning, gathering questions; for more on these practices, see Ingamells, 2016), and were ‘built up to’ in the context of the therapeutic conversation. In the interest of space and time I have listed them here removed from their conversational contexts in an effort to chart how the questions have changed over the course of the apprenticeship. These questions stood out to be because I believe that each one embodies the spirit of “following my hopes along,” inviting the people consulting with me to more keenly see themselves through the lens of my hopes for them. I see each question as an attempt to render visible the skills, hopes, beliefs, and values, and intentions that terrify and diminish problems. Following each question I will note what I was hoping for in the asking of it, and why it is that I feel proud of the particular question.

### **More Solidarity Against Assholes: Questions Informed by Hope(s)**

Example #1:

In response to a person saying that even though she does not like herself at times, she has an idea of her worth as a person and knows she is deserving of respect, and is angry for not having received it...

- Yeah! So how are you holding onto that, do you think? Or how is it that you’re keeping some of this stuff, that seems pretty ripe for the picking in terms of some of the problems that like to occupy your life and pick at your sense of worth...how do you keep it from grabbing onto this, and instead, hold onto being angry?

In this question I am inviting the young woman I am speaking with to see two things: first, that it is an accomplishment for a person with a problem that tells them they are worthless to be angry about the injustice of being mistreated. Second, that this anger may be testament to her having held onto a deep sense of her own worth in spite of the problem’s years-long efforts to the contrary. I am proud of this question because it creates a space for this young woman’s anger to be honoured, rather than allowing the problem an opportunity to twist her anger into evidence of any deficit.





#### Example #2:

In response to a person entertaining the idea that they have been strong their whole lives...

- Yeah! I am so curious about this idea that you've shared, that maybe you've always been such a strong person; maybe you've always been such a strong person. Is this wisdom that's feeling closer to your mouth, and maybe closer to all the organs that make you feel like you're in touch with it – is it showing you some of the all-alongness of your strength? Is that part of what this wisdom is doing? Or would you credit that to something else?

In this question I am trying to loiter in the space this woman has created for hope in wondering aloud with me if she has always been a strong person; this was of particular significance as the problem story had been one of weakness. I am proud of this question because it attempts to weave together threads she has offered in our conversation (of feeling strong, of feeling more in touch with her own wisdom) into a tapestry that tells a counterstory compelling enough to pull the rug out from under the problem.

#### Example #3:

In response to a person describing how she is continuously making a difficult decision to abstain from alcohol to care for her child...

- Yeah, yeah. Am I right in thinking that the decision comes less from a place of feeling guilty or hard on yourself, and more from a place of knowing what you want in your life?

In our dialogue leading up to this question, the problem in this woman's life had her focused solely on the guilt she felt over *wanting* to drink, reminding her often of the possible consequences and shaming her for her desire, without leaving any space for acknowledging the fact that she had successfully abstained for the duration of her pregnancy. I am proud of this question because of how it undermines the problem's version of this woman's decisions (one borne of recrimination and criticism) and invites her to see how, through her actions, she has been following her own hopes for herself and her child.

#### Example #4:

In response to a person who has described taking some significant stands against anxiety...

- I'm thinking, you were saying just a moment ago that part of what makes it scary to do these things by yourself is that in the past you've often had people holding your hand through it. And I'm wondering, when you're telling yourself things like, "You know what? You're scared, but it's always better for you, you might get more work," and even things like, "What if it *does* work?" Are you holding your own hand, a little bit?

In this question I am inviting the woman I am speaking with to see that she is doing for herself what Anxiety needs her to believe only other people can do: hold her hand, and, more pressingly, unseat Anxiety from her life. I am proud of this question not only because of its poetics, but because I was able





to share her own words in making a case against the problem's version of her, and a case for my hopes for her: that she sees how capable she is in pursuing and living the kind of life she wants.

These questions are not perfect by any means, and I see them as developing over a longer trajectory that stretches into the future as I learn to let my hopes, and all I have learned about counterstorying over the last year, guide my conversations. To me, they exemplify how the apprenticeship has provided me with the guidance to find doorways out of darkness and into brighter, more enlivening spaces.

At the outset of the apprenticeship, when I e-introduced myself to the group, I said:

*As a new therapist, I experience a lot of doubt about my practice and whether or not I am doing right by the people who come to share their lives with me. My hopes for the apprenticeship are to grow more intentional in my practice, to feel more purposeful and skilled in asking questions, and to diminish (or at least dial down the volume) on this doubt. I cannot think of a more fitting opportunity to pursue these endeavours.*

A year later, I see the wisdom in these words and realize more than ever that this journey has illuminated a pathway that has me purposefully (and sometimes poetically) following my hopes for others, only to realize that along the way I have come to meet many of my hopes for myself. For this, I cannot thank you enough.

In solidarity with walking hope-lit paths to new doorways,

Bevan Kovitz

### References

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