



“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove- Intimate Witnessing in Narrative Couple’s Therapy

By Sanni Pajakka ¹and Tom Stone Carlson²

*I dare you
to decide this will not break me
I dare you
to decide to go where your dad couldn't go
I dare you
to want a life
out from under the rug
I dare you
for aliveness
so which will it be?
and will we be together
or apart in this dare?
tell me now,
the makings of your courage
to dare for a life of aliveness
with me
my love.*

This paper is about ideas. More specifically, this paper is an account of ideas-in-motion. These ideas were charged onto our minds and our expressions throughout our work by a back-and-forth grappling with an ethics-first position, and by our clients’ feedback about the effects of our positionings. The thrust of this paper is to show, in detail, the “go-betweening” of ethical stances and of our clients’ embodied feedback into explicit ideas and practices, much as it actually happened to us.

We will forego the temptation to tell suspiciously complete or conclusive “case-stories” of particular couples (“and then they lived happily ever after”) and instead describe, cite, and amplify particular “reaches” we undertook together with our couples in as rich and clear a

¹ Sanni Paljakka, M.Sc. R.Psych. is a co-director of the Calgary Narrative Collective

² Tom Stone Carlson is a Professor at North Dakota State University





manner of possible and document the messy embodied manner of said reaches by showing transcript excerpts from our actual sessions.

We will follow up each reach by highlighting the stated and visible effects on our clients. Thus, we hope to invite readers to be able to fully deliberate alongside us about the ethics, the usefulness, and the real effects of our work.

The couples whose words and excerpts appear in this paper are all living in significant intimate relationships. These relationships may be called “couple’s relationships.” Some of these “couples” are heterosexual, some married, some currently divorcing, some gay, some currently exploring open or polyamorous relationships, some inter-racial. The “urgent reasons” for seeking counselling were varied and included: arguing, disconnectedness, misery, inequality related to household chores or parenting responsibilities, betrayals like lies or secret relationships, scare tactics, threats of violence, disregard, and loneliness.

This paper lives in an ideological home of concepts of transformative justice and healing: we hope to propose possibilities for responding to violence and isolation in our every-day intimate relationships in ways that not only address the specific incidents between particular couples but refuse and transform the conditions that gave permission for such miseries to unfold. It is our impassioned commitment to promote thoughtfulness of the ways in which we as therapists can actively practice in realms of healing storytelling.

As part of our work with couples, we refuse the ideas and practices of making persons disposable by well-worn tactics of shame, blame, denial, dismissal, withdrawal, revenge, isolation etc. The time has come: we as therapists can no longer ethically shy away from accountability conversations regarding relational tragedies, but neither can we coerce such a spirit of accountability, as this remains a gift that can only be freely given. This paper represents our reach into conversations in which the presence of accountability for the purposes of relational healing was actively sought in sturdier conversations.

We believe that relationships can hold, - but do not have to hold. We invest less in couples “staying together” at all cost and care a great deal more about the possibility of inviting conversations that may be characterized as “events of love” – whether we happened to share a momentary space with a couple in the midst of a break-up or in the midst of a 20-year marriage.





Brief Story by Sanni

Fire and Ice

*Some say the world will end in fire,
some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

(Robert Frost)

I would like to situate my steps into an exploration of couple's work by highlighting the ideas that made my entrance possible.

Let me start out by saying that I was among the least likely candidates to entertain much hope for a possibility of enlivening couple's work at all. I work at a feminist and Narrative therapy agency serving mostly women and queer folk. Prior to entertaining any couple's work, I was accustomed to issuing invitations to my clients' partners, lovers, and members of their chosen or other family to our sessions from time to time when my clients and I were in need of a witness to their significant developments in their lives¹. In such cases, these beloved others in my clients' lives were asked to listen in and contribute to a conversation from an outsider witness position, complete with requests for them to take notes regarding the moving and surprising expressions of my clients in response to life events. I enjoyed such encounters, watched the note-taking with appreciation, and often felt inspired to hear the uniqueness and intimacy of the expressions by which these outsider witnesses backed up and willed on my clients in their discoveries. However, if the conversation was to center conflicts, frustrations or impasses in a particular relationship, I referred the clients to family or couple's therapists I trusted.

Over the course of my work, I could not avoid agreeing to sit in on or do co-therapy from time to time with some of the couple's therapists I kept referring my clients to. These were all memorable conversations, but not ones that I wished to keep pursuing in my own work. For example, once I was invited to join a colleague of mine with the express purpose to keep the yelling of expletives to a more palatable volume, as my colleague's office neighbors had already launched noise complaints against her whenever she met with this particular couple. Another



"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove



Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 43-93.



time, I was asked to step in and help phrase questions to a couple who sat on opposite edges of the couch and seemed to have nothing to say to each other but for stifled and polite expressions that were devoid of any life at all. I slipped and slid through both sets of conversations by the seat of my pants, mostly by practicing the art of interrupting-hand-gestures with the first couple and practicing the art of coming-up-with-lyrical-questions with the second – unfortunately, more for my own entertainment and to only questionable usefulness to anyone else in the room. Even though the couples were appreciative of my “help” and my person, I could not ignore the visceral after-effects of observing the distress they lived through right in front of me as their intimate partners spoke them into being in ways that twisted, dismissed and “missed” what was important to them entirely.² As I contemplated these experiences of conversing with these two couples it was clear to me that they represented the two (seemingly) opposite ends of the spectrum of relationship distress that my women clients had often characterized to me in their individual sessions:

- “un-love”³ by means of abuse (most often in the form of coercive or humiliating speech, threats and other scare tactics), and
- “un-love” by means of a quiet neglect (most often in the form of refusal to speak, to engage, to answer, to initiate, and other detachment tactics).

What I knew most clearly after these first steps is that any other steps needed to wait for a better and more strident idea to come along to wade into such realms of un-love. Such an idea would have to strike at the heart of the formidable invitations for each partner to take up therapy as an arena for the contestation of differences in their visions for living and continue to miss and dismiss the (often tearful and despairing) partner that was sitting right next to them. Such an idea would also have to impress me with the capacity to not just reproduce the stale power-relations which dictate that some partners (in the case of heterosexual couples, women) be more responsible for the experiences of “un-love” and which leaves these partners undertaking the full labor of seeking connection and re-connection while more privileged and powerful partners could feel permission to not join in such efforts equally. I longed for ways of speaking that would address the lopsided and hurtful ways that we treat each that would in favour of something more honest, honourable, and “at eye-level.” And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I longed for an ethic to couple’s work that would dare to speak of love. I appreciated the concepts of “relational abc’s”, like relational accountability, relational being, or relational commitments, but I wondered where in the world all mention of “love stories” had disappeared to. I wished to know how it came to be that great love stories would end up on opposite ends of the couch, caught in deadly disregard or attack. And I wished to know that, not by way of therapeutic theory, linguistic finery or poststructural philosophy, but from inside the landscape of these love stories themselves. For these important hesitations, I resolved to



try to keep ducking out of any necessities to see or speak to couples in my own work for the time being.

I have to thank David Epston's practice of "cross-referential questioning"⁴ that would later be re-named by Karl Tomm to "internalized-other questioning" as one of the major stepping stones to my participation in couple's work. I saw David Epston practice this way of interviewing a person "from the perspective" of another person a number of times and marveled at the ways in which this made epiphanies, claims and "reaches" into otherwise remote, unexpected and tender realms of experience possible. I began to wonder what manner of conversational turning points could become possible by way of a practice of focusing one's attention "into the experience of another." Could one address, or more appropriately, oppose even the experiences of "un-love" that women and queer folk had been crying about regarding their relationships in my office ever since I started working? Could the quality of tenderness I had witnessed when people were lingering over the experience of another be a way of love? Could one propose the means to "reach for" one's partner, the one sitting on the other end of the couch, in all that this particular person's anger, their desperation, their tears were saying? Could people tell accounts of lives and deeds done, *to* each other, *with* each other, and *on* each other's behalf?

This vision of a first possibility was further expanded to me by Tom Carlson⁵ in a presentation about couple's work in Calgary in 2017. In this presentation, Tom took Michael White's ideas of our responsibility as therapists to ponder and take responsibility for the "shaping effects" of our actions on our clients and extended it to intimate relationships. Tom spoke of finding the means to help "couples gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of their actions on the partner's stories of self in either impoverishing or enriching ways." He further spoke of a step into an "always accountable" position, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin: "we have no alibi."⁶ I sat back, and thought, what if it were true that my being, the words out of my mouth and my silences, my actions, and my inactions, the ways I look at people or avoid them, my gestures, my shows of affection, my writing, all of it – what if it were true that all of that can shape the story another person tells about not me, but themselves? Imagine if it were true that I can shape the way a person thinks and feels and experiences themselves, in short, about the story of their life?

I watched Tom phrase questions about these shaping effects to couples in transcripts and on the videos, for example, this: *"I might be asking some questions that are a bit unusual. For example, Dan, rather than asking you what living with these struggles has been like for you personally, I'm going to ask you to be a witness to what you think it has been like for Megan. To live with the feelings of resentment, the distance, and the coldness that you have been having towards her. Do you have any guesses as to what it's been like for Megan, as a person, to be living with this resentment and coldness over the past several months?"* Or: *"if you had to guess,*



knowing Megan as you do, what kind of effect or impact do you think it's had on Megan's sense of herself as a person, to not have you there as you've always been?"

I observed the partners in these exchanges grow thoughtful and tender, ironically even as they were asked to give meaning to their partner's experiences of events of un-love (which they themselves had helped to shape!). As they were asked about the kind of story that they had hoped to invite their intimate partner to enter into and to ponder their own shaping effects on the other's life in moments of unlove, I noticed again the familiar sense of appreciation that they could, in fact, do so, as observed in the witnessed partner's reaction. Perhaps the march of the neoliberal and individualist invitations to separation and disregard of the other had not been as successful as one would think? Tom further quoted Bakhtin: "love is the focused concentration of attention that enriches the beloved over time." I sat with this quote for a long time. Here it was, a notion of love that I couldn't immediately argue with. Furthermore, could such an attention indeed be invited into couple's conversation? Would this be experienced as an "event of love?" Could experiences, or events of un-love, then, conversely, be considered the concentration of inattention that impoverish a person over time? This certainly spoke to the pain I had witnessed with the couples described above, who were visibly flinching, wincing, or stoically steeling themselves in response to the unrecognizable and twisted accounts of themselves in their partner's stories.

With these ideas, I was shored up to think that there was a way not only to step into adversarial interactions, but to do so while contesting the rampant un-loving practices of detachment, denial and domination of the other while keeping a fingerhold on some shy hermeneutics of the thing called love.

My cautious considerations were put to the test rather immediately after Tom's presentation:

I received an urgent message from a client of mine, requesting my help with a break-up that had not been accepted by her partner of 2 years. In her message, she related to me the many letters, conversations, and phone calls she had already engaged in to explain to him that she wished to separate from him, which had been entirely dismissed by him as "just a phase" or by explaining back to her that she was "too depressed at the moment to really know what she wanted." He therefore gave himself permission to continue insisting on her presence in his life by showing up at her house, calling her at all hours, and if she did not pick up the phone, texting her through the night. My client was exhausted by the attempts to explain "the inexplicable" to him, that she had lost the vision of a future they once had and felt torn between the demands to care for his hurt, console him, and continue to go on dates with him and her anger about his ever more paternalistic dismissals of her wishes. I agreed to see both of them and promised my client that I would do "my best" to help her in this effort to make him understand. Even though this couple's conversation was to take place in the realm of a separation, the usual practices of





downgrading of (or deafness to) a woman-partner's experience and forcefully requiring her continued presence and care for his needs were familiar to me. I resolved to really do "my best."

We began with some introductions, and I relayed my understanding of the struggle each of them found themselves in, and the heart-wrenching hurt of the moment when love ends. My client filled in the story, and was clear yet again, that she hoped for the possibility friendship down the road, but for the surprise dates and lengthy painful conversations to pause for the time being. She turned to him and said tearfully, "I know this is so hard, I'm so sorry, I know this hurts you, but please, please accept my wish to be free for now and focus on something else in my life." He returned, "you've found someone else, haven't you, that's it, isn't it." Despairingly, she exclaimed, "no!" and then looked at me in tears, as if to say "see? It's no use."

Ever so slightly fortified by my recent explorations, I turned to him and said, "may I ask you something really difficult? It may be too difficult to even consider..." He encouraged me to continue, and I did: "could you tell me, from her perspective, from the perspective of this woman, whom you love and struggle so hard to even entertain the possibility of letting go of, what is it like for her when you insist, despite her requests, on staying in her life?" He shrugged and said, "I guess it's hard. It's hard for both of us though! I just don't believe that she is being rational about this, I think she's too depressed to be making any decisions right now, I mean wouldn't you agree with me, as a professional..." I interrupted this attempt at conspiring with my supposed professional expertise against her voice with a well-practiced hand gesture. "May I interrupt? She was just telling both of us that she longs to be free in her life right now, did you hear that too? Now I know this is so very difficult, but can you tell me, why she knows this to be right for her at this point in her life? Why is she asking for freedom right now? Can you tell me, from your best knowing of her?"

"I don't know, I know she says that, but I just don't think it's the right thing for her, I mean if she does this, she'll end up just isolating and that's not healthy at all..."

I interrupted again as I saw my client silently crying in frustration. "When have you ever observed her, this woman right here, to be making thoughtless and stupid decisions for her life? Now I know, because she's told me, that you have been witness to some of the most thoughtful and principled revolutions she has caused in her life as of late. Do you agree with me?" He nodded. "And am I right in thinking that her thoughtfulness and principled-ness is in part, why you admire and love her?" He nodded again and grew tearful. "So then, can you do something to honor her thoughtfulness? Can you tell me, in the most thoughtful version you can muster, even if it means speaking AGAINST what your heart most desires, and please know, I know, *I know* what I am asking of you, and still I am asking: can you love her even in this moment, and tell me why she has made a thoughtful and principled decision to leave this





relationship? Please make her case, why this would be the best thing for her right now, from all that you know she has told you in the past week, why is this the best thing for her? Please convince me.”

At this, he delivered a most honorable defense of her decision to leave him, leaving both my client and me in tears as he explained and described and veritably dreamed her future into being, the future that she was reaching for and had been trying to tell him about. I received the following email from my client the next day:

Good morning Sanni

Thank you so incredibly much for our appointment last night. It was perfect. Everything you said and asked was extremely helpful. I can't believe he finally understood me! Once we got back to his place, he agreed to let me be alone. We might hang out once in a while and are going to try our best to be normal at work. What means so much to me is that he told me again that he agreed that I know what's best for myself and that he trusts my judgement. Thank you so much. I really didn't think this was possible. What you asked him was everything that he needed to hear.”

I, for my part, was now encouraged to take another step into conversations that would oppose “un-love” at every turn and reach for the means for partners to focus their concentration of attention to the experience of the other, in a way that would also oppose the binding of lovers in a stale reproduction of traditional power relations: I had found myself “convinced.”

Brief Story by Tom

*“Her hair
Her feet
Dangling from the oak branch
As she talked to me.
I didn't say much
I rested my 7-year old chin in my hand.
15 feet high, suspended over
Hell
-And all I saw was her.”*

As Sanni mentioned, what had become important to me in my work with couples is inviting them to enter into an always accountable position for the shaping effects of their actions on their partners’ stories of self. Early on in my work with couples when I was trying out these ideas, I realized that it was important to not side step conversations that centered on couples shared experience of their struggles and the more painful and weighty conversations about the





ways that partners had shaped each other's stories in impoverishing ways. If, for example, I moved too quickly into exploring couples hopes and preferences for their relationship, I realized that I would be siding with the well-worn patriarchal wisdom that advises couples to "just move on" and "not dwell on the past." Of course, the burden of following this wisdom almost always falls squarely on women (in heterosexual relationships) who are required to "forgive and forget" and to move past whatever "trust issues" they might have. And so, in an effort to not side with the patriarchal wisdom of the day, I decided to dwell instead on the intimate details of their struggles and the actions that led their partners to feel unloved and helping partners experience the weight of intimate accountability.

When I first started presenting on these ideas to narrative therapists, this extended focus on the struggles and unloving actions in relationships was met with some concern. Here is a selection of some of these questions posed to me: "But isn't this too focused on the problem story?" "I am not sure if this fits with what I know about narrative therapy. Aren't we supposed to help ease people's suffering by offering a more hopeful or positive story of the relationship?" "It all feels too heavy for me. Don't these conversations just invite people to experience shame?" Nevertheless, in spite of these repeated concerns, I pressed on because of the surprising effects that such conversations were having in the lives and relationships of the couples that I worked with. Somehow by going directly into these more weighty and painful matters something quite other than shame emerged, something more akin to solidarity and perhaps a "softness" that can come with a sense of finally being witnessed and known.

Years later, when I came to Calgary to present on these ideas, I had come to fancy myself as someone who was skilled at delving into conversations about struggles and suffering in relationships. However, after just a few enthusiastic conversations with Sanni, it was immediately apparent that I had a long way to go in my venture into the realms of struggle and suffering in relationships. What intrigued me immediately about Sanni's work was the unabashed and bold manner in which she invited her clients to speak of their struggles and suffering and the richness of her language in doing so. For example, as a comparison to my limited vocabulary in the question of mine that was included above (What has it been like to be living with these struggles in their relationship?), here is Sanni's alternative: "Over the course of relationship, what has been the worst catastrophe (disaster, abyss, desertion, betrayal, heartbreak, ache/knife-in-the-back, swampy misery, despair, concrete, failure etc.) of love? What was the worst of it?"

In wondering about Sanni's languaging, I came to find out that her words were not just due to her interest in poetics but that she had been supervised by her clients into a feminist ethic that would not let her cede to glib dismissals and patriarchal denials of her (often marginalized) clients' experiences. She would not be tempted to minimize the ache and peril of her clients'

"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove

Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 43-93.



relational experiences that had been related to her over the years. Interestingly, I have come to understand this insistence as a promising and necessary lead into veritable “moral tragedies” that couples face in their everyday lives. Nussbaum writes, “Moral tragedies show good people acting in ways that they consciously knew were bad because they were caught in a tragic conflict between two incommensurable ethical claims. Tragedy tends, on the whole, to take such situations very seriously. It treats them as real cases of wrongdoing that are of relevance for an assessment for the agent’s ethical life. Tragedy also seems to think it valuable to dwell upon these situations, exploring them in many ways, asking repeatedly, what personal goodness, in such alarming complications, is.”⁷

I knew right then and there that I had found not only a co-conspirator but a mentor in the promising territories of struggle, misery, suffering, and unlove in couple relationships. Together, Sanni and I have been further intrigued by the idea of “co-creating languages of un-suffering”⁸ in our therapeutic conversations with couples that would stand against the medicalizing of their distress and the expert technologizing of the remedies to distress (in the form of steps toward “communication skills”⁹). It has been of utmost importance for both of us to consider the language that is offered, proposed, and used in our couple’s conversations for its capacity to story love and un-love in a substantiated manner that does justice to, and takes seriously the “alarming complications” that brought our couples to the opposite ends of the therapeutic couch, often in tears. For example, consider the implications of one of Sanni’s first questions posed to the husband of one of her client’s in our first couple’s session with them. The language was borrowed from a heartfelt letter that this client had written to her husband and shared with Sanni prior to the session, and that the husband had proceeded to respond to with more silence. Sanni asked, “Your wife said that ‘every night she roams the rooms in the house all by herself,’ she said that you two ‘own a beautiful house together but are more alone than ever in it.’ Speaking as your wife, can you tell me what it is like for you to roam those rooms at night? What ideas, thoughts come to you then, what does it sound like inside your mind or your body, what are your worst terrors of the night?” Consider this example as a preview to the responsibility in languaging our questions to couples and to the worlds we wish to invite them to step into, - depending on the language we choose. In contrast, in this case, the language that was also available to us (because it had been proposed by the husband) was that his wife struggled with issues of “co-dependence.” Resisting this psychologizing dismissal of her and centering her dictionary of suffering and her experiences was particularly important in light of this particular couple’s power dynamics of a white man living together with a woman of colour. Questions posed utilizing poetic languaging of moral dilemmas, quandaries, wrongdoings is one such proposal that Sanni and I have experimented with in our work and that you will find exemplified in this paper. We have encountered some questions regarding the term “morality” and would like to preface our thinking with this quote: “Taking morality seriously does not

“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove

Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 43-93.



presume that people are good, but rather that they are evaluative in moral terms about their own actions and those of others.”¹⁰ Sanni and I were ready to take our couples seriously, both as moral agents as well as authors of love stories.

A Shared First Story

*the slow rot
of our steady roles can't survive this
weather.
if we are to marry again
come spring
what are the colours of the seed packages
we will buy
for the hopes in our palms
to match our new selves*

Our first opportunity came by way of Paul who left a voicemail message inquiring about the possibility of couple's therapy for him and his wife. I, (Tom), returned Paul's call to make arrangements for our first meeting. During the call, Paul said that their relationship was "solid," but that there were some "issues from the past" that they needed to "resolve." In response to my questions, Paul haltingly told me about a "breach of trust" that had occurred two years previously. Paul stated that he didn't want to call it an "affair" but that it had been a relationship that developed over email and text with a former partner. Paul said that he had apologized profusely to his wife, Lisa, and has told her over and over again that it "didn't mean anything" but to no avail. Paul went on to say that he has concluded that Lisa is struggling with "trust issues stemming from her past" and expressed his hope that coming to couple's therapy might help her finally "let it go."

Sanni and I met together before our first meeting with Lisa and Paul to talk through ideas and possibilities for the session. After I recounted my phone conversation with Paul and his hopes for us to help Lisa with "trust and letting it go" issues, Sanni sighed heavily.

Sanni: Oh great. Here we go. So according to this idea, we are to therapize her out of her trust issues, is that it? I very much wonder what Lisa would make of this mission for their therapy...

Tom: Yeah, it's a pretty worn-out story that doesn't do justice to either Paul or Lisa and who they are as people...



- Sanni: (interrupting) Worn-out? I have heard it a hundred times over. "He does something or other but can she just please go to therapy to let it go." I don't want to participate in telling that story.
- Tom: Me either. We need some questions to invite Paul to reach for her and to tell this story in a way that seeks her... that seeks whatever she's been thinking and feeling over the past 2 years. On the phone, I tried to ask him, but he was pretty firm that the relationship is strong and that she needs help with these issues because they stem from her past.
- Sanni: Great. You see how the story of her problem comes complete with a past, a history now? I don't know how to ask the question to subvert this whole story line and step into another entirely. And, if we ask her, like "what has it been like for you these past two years" then we put the burden on her to defend her lack of trust - what comes out as the sum total is the idea that she ought to defend herself. That she owes a defense of her experience and maybe even owes him a letting it go. And it will all be set in the arena of those expectations of her. I don't like that at all. I want to subvert this whole trap.
- Tom: Yeah, it's like a she might feel pressed to defend her experience and justify her lack of trust. This is a story that can't afford to be repeated for either of their sakes. We need to find another way.
- Sanni: So what's the first question out, Tom?
- Tom: Well, we've talked about the witnessing...
- Sanni: (interrupting) What if we don't ask for his "explanation" of her experience? Tom, could we ask him as her? Rather inviting him to "mansplain" her problem, what if we asked him to put his weight behind her position, to ask him to tell this story anew in a way that makes her an interesting character in it? What would it do if we asked him as her? Could he do it? Would that change it?
- Tom: You mean set him up as intimate witness to her experience and speaking as her?
- Sanni: Yeah. What if for once it wasn't she who had do the emotional labor upfront and describe the situation, but it was, in fact, he who was asked to defend... you know, her experience, to amplify it, to feel his way into it?¹¹ What would that do to the story? Would he know more and say



more then? If he was asked to speak as her would he come to tell a different story?

Tom: I like the idea of asking him to defend her... That's a different take on defensiveness. Maybe getting around defensiveness? A defensiveness FOR something rather than against something.

Sanni: Yeah! And imagine what it would be like for Lisa to see him try?

In this conversation we resolved to give intimate witnessing a try. We were holding our breaths to find out whether any couple, and in this case, a couple at a two-year stalemate, could be invited to both: 1) tell a story that would amplify, favour, and love its protagonist, one's partner and 2) convincingly and substantially account for one's partner's experience of trespass and hurt. The intimate witnessing was proposed as the means to an ability to account (i.e. tell a particular kind of story, in this case, a love story).¹² We were prepared for our invitations to be met by considerable struggle, confusion, and defensiveness, as well as the need for us to be creative and gentle in redirection. As it turns out, nothing could have prepared us for the ease and the enjoyment of the conversation we were about to have. As a preview, Paul and Lisa sent us an email the day after this meeting that read: *"Dear Sanni, dear Tom! We wanted to send you a note to say just how much we enjoyed our meeting last night. It's a little hard to believe that it was SO MUCH FUN to talk about such serious issues. We didn't expect to be laughing quite so much! So thank you, both of you. We also forgot to book our next meeting, so when can we meet again?"*

Well, neither did we. Below is a brief transcript excerpt of the beginning of this conversation that captures the negotiation of the invitation to this witnessing conversation as well as the immediate surprising change on Paul's telling.

Paul and Lisa: An Invitation

When Paul and Lisa sat down with us after some introductions, I asked Tom to reflect on the phone call, and catch us all up on what he had understood from his conversation with Paul.

[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? Who is assigning speaking rights here? What might be some of our intentions in having Sanni open meetings, make introductions, and set the conversation in motion?]

As Tom summarized the phone conversation with Paul, Lisa grew very tearful and sat with us covering her eyes and wiping tears. Upon seeing Lisa's tears:

Sanni (to Paul): "I would really like to know, if it was possible, about Lisa's tears and what they might be saying..."





But before I do, I have another question for both of you. I wonder if you two are the take-it-slow kind of people who want to speak about this in a roundabout, inching-our-way there kind of way. Because the other option is to do this ON SPEED, Paul.” (Laughter)

“What I mean by speed is not to linger in the round-about but get to the heart of things rather immediately.” (Nodding in interest)

“I think I can safely promise, if we do it this way, you’ll get rid of us in about half the time, and can get back to spending your evenings with tea or wine or however you two like spending your evenings, rather than coming to this office to see us strange folks.” (Laughter)

“You know the roundabout way is the USUAL boring way, where I ask Lisa about her tears and then she works very hard at explaining her position to us, which in turn will inspire you Paul to work equally hard to explain your position to us, and then the two of you at some point will turn to me and Tom all expectantly, and as if to say: which position is the legitimate one? Which one of us is right? Which one of us is crazy?”

Paul: “Oh, I get it. You’ll kind of be the judges...”

Sanni: “Exactly. In this boring option, you two are defendants, each defending your position, and Tom and I are the judges. Now that’s how it is usually done, and after some time, we might get somewhere interesting that way too. But not very fast. So there is another option that is much less boring and faster, but it will require a lot of you two.”

Paul: “I choose the speed option.” (Lisa nods.)

Sanni: “okay. But this is going to be hard, Paul. I am going to ask you the strangest questions. Now if it’s too hard, we can take a break and reflect on the strangeness, but how about I just ask you the first question and you can see how you do.”

Paul (smiling): “you’re ON.”

Sanni: “Paul I am going to do something strange here, and call you Lisa, and ask you some questions AS LISA. Can you try to answer from her perspective?”

Paul: “I’m Lisa, got it.”



- Sanni (to Paul): "Okay so Lisa, why are you crying? You grew tearful during the re-telling of Paul's phone conversation with Tom. Did something move you in that? What are your tears saying?"
- Paul: "okay, Lisa's tears probably ..."
- Tom: (interrupting) "Paul, can you speak AS Lisa. Can you say "my tears are probably saying..."
- Paul: (smiling) "Okay, I'm her. I get it."
- Sanni: Yeah, no worries, I know this is strange. But Lisa, what are your tears saying?"
- Paul: "that he broke my trust. I always have put up some walls, but my walls are up to the moon now. I am so hurt."
- Tom: "And what was it that hurt the most, Lisa?"
- Paul: "Well, I've always had some doubt when it comes to relationships. I've been hurt before, by guys cheating, and my dad wasn't the greatest example of a gentleman either. So for Paul to do this to me of all things..."
- Sanni: "In this line-up of you meeting questionable men, was Paul different?"
- Paul: "Yeah. You know, when we first met, there were some red flags, with him being so outgoing..."
- Sanni: "Charming?"
- Paul: (laughs) "Yeah."
- Sanni: "So then in light of the red flags, how come you took your heart and your red flags in your hands and said yes to him anyway?"
- Paul: "Because he promised. He promised me that he would not hurt me..."
- Tom: "In the face of deep-down doubt, you listened to his promise, and then you decided to risk?"
- Paul: (tearful) "Yeah. I took a risk, I took the dive. And now my heart is broken."
- Tom: "What was it that broke your heart the most?"





- Paul: (after a pause) “Well, I was pregnant at the time this happened, when he was chatting with that woman. We had just gotten married! I can’t even believe looking back that that’s what he was doing!”
- Sanni: “You had just gotten married, and you were pregnant at the time. Do you remember your wedding vows?”
- Paul: “Till death do us part. It was the whole thing.”
- Sanni: “A promise?”
- Paul: (tearful) “Yeah. He promised me...”

[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? Who is speaking, to whom? Why is Paul asked to speak first? How does this help to undermine the gendered set-up in which women are expected to do the bulk of emotional labour? Why do we ask Paul to speak as Lisa? And why this question, in particular: “what are your tears saying, Lisa?” How might inviting Paul to consider his wife’s tears, from inside her experience, help to undermine the story that she needs to “just let it go” in favor of considering her distress very seriously? What does this set-up do to the common patriarchal practice entitled ‘the thousand ways of denial?’ What happened to Paul, as he was considering her tears? What was he able to say, to think, to feel in that moment? And what do you think it does to Lisa to have her tears elevated to a focus of discussion, not dispossessed as ‘women’s dismissible emotion?’ What might be the effect on her, as she is surprisingly relieved of the expectation to justify her distress?]

During the above conversation with Paul, Lisa listened and watched with nothing short of rapt attention. She appeared keenly interested in the questions posed to Paul, and often turned to watch Paul answer with an expression of grave curiosity. She also nodded with approval or enthusiasm in response to particular questions, as if to say “yes! Ask him that!” After about 40 minutes, we turned to Lisa, to ask her about her experience of listening to this conversation. In Lisa’s own words:

- Lisa: It was weird at first, because I felt like I should be answering the questions! But then hearing him tell it, it was so different, I just couldn’t get over how much he had understood! I just couldn’t believe it. He’s always been so defensive, for 2 years all he has done is defend himself, and just made it my problem. Like I need to let it go. That has made me so angry, that’s almost worse than what he did. Because I did let go. 100% let go. Fuck you Elsa. (Laughter)





Tom: Is it fair to say that you have trust issues, or have you been the recipient of untrustworthy actions by men in your life?

Sanni: Like dick moves? Trust issues or dick moves? (Laughter)

[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? How important was this story change for Lisa? Did you expect her to say “I just couldn’t get over how much he had understood!?” What gave Paul the means to account for “how much he had understood?” Why was it possible for him to sidestep “defending himself?” Why does Lisa say that “defending himself” for 2 years was “almost worse than what he did?” And why did Paul not struggle more to account for her experience, even as he had to speak against his own actions, why did it happen so easily in the above transcript?]

Poem for Paul and Lisa

As part of our interest in inviting and witnessing remarkable “love stories,” we have decided to document our conversations with couples by way of therapeutic poems¹³. Below is the poem that was written in response to this first conversation with Paul and Lisa and captures Paul’s reachings for Lisa’s despair of the past 2 years. The poem was read to Paul and Lisa at the outset of our second meeting, to a surprised tearfulness on both their parts as well as Paul’s exclamation that it’s “dead on.” Lisa smiled and commented thoughtfully that what moved her most was the effort to play with Paul’s description that “she has built walls up to the moon.”

POEM FOR PAUL AND LISA AFTER ABOVE INTERVIEW:

We are here
Amazingly still here
After a breach of trust.
And two and a half years of questions that followed.
We are each battling with unseen forces in lonely corners
She in her fortress, deep in conversation with the woman who didn’t matter
And I am everywhere
Back and forth
For each other
And for our daughter.

“Going through the motions”
“Constructing civility”
“Being a family”
They all are pale metaphors
For the laughter and the easy tenderness and the abounds of love



“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove





That used to be ours.

*We have grieved and hurt and fought ourselves just about too much
And so we are here
We want to be here
To see if another way of living is available to us
Still.*

*What if I didn't give you the rights to my phone
But gave you the rights to my heart instead?
What if we didn't talk about trust issues
But what happens to my heart when people make dick moves?
And how much effort has gone into understanding that which happened
And the hurt?*

*I have been here before
In deep down doubt about the red flags and the history of dick moves
But I took my heart and lifted it above
The doubts of devastation
Because he said "I promise"
I let it all go for his sweetness
I let him all in
And my hands were full of tenderness for him
Pregnant and in the midst of our wedding vows:
"I promise to hold your heart
I promise to lift my heart to yours
So fuck you Elsa, I did let it go."*

*What are her tears saying?
And how beautiful is the fortress she has built
With its walls up to the moon?
I see it at night
And I wonder.
I am the sea
Washing up to the walls of the fortress
Does she hear my waves crashing?
Each one says
I fight for you*



*I fight for the ring of your laughter
I fight for the vows you made
I fight for the tenderness of your hands
I fight for the baby you carried.*

*Each night I am here
Crashing against these walls
Wondering.*

Intimate Witnessing: Frequently Asked Questions

Viewers May Think That This Should Be So Simple

*If I didn't feel her heart sinking
If her heart didn't have a hold on me
If his words didn't matter to me
If I hadn't been up all night
If I had been able to work the next day
If I could have just laid down and given up
If hope didn't hold me
If I hadn't promised to never be afraid again
If I didn't know that he can't promise that
If I didn't love being around him
If he didn't feel me now
If I didn't feel his heart in my heart
If he didn't run with a pink shoe
If I didn't want him to keep his own shiny shoe
If his text didn't sweep me off my feet
If it wasn't a dream that came true then
If he weren't a broken master of empathy
If she weren't a hurt queen of resolve
If mine weren't a love of a life time
If he weren't a love of a life time*

Then This Would Be So Simple



In an effort to illuminate particular discoveries and epiphanies we stumbled upon in our conversations with couples, we would like to highlight some more transcript excerpts. We will situate these excerpts into responses to some interesting questions we have been posed by some of our couples, as well as by colleagues and students.

We hope that by centering such frequently asked questions and embedding transcript excerpts in our responses, we may be able satisfy the need for ideological discernments as well as the wish to see the actual words of the sessions. We are immensely grateful to each of the questioners for raising the means for our ability to account for our work.

1. *“But aren’t you asking one person, in this case, a man, to speak about the experiences of another, in this case, a woman? Isn’t this problematic? Don’t men speak for women enough?” Or: “I tried to do this with my couple, but he protested and said, “I shouldn’t speak for her!”*

Yes! This is at first glance really problematic! But the effort and achievement of a witnessing interview that is well-done is that it precisely aims to counter patriarchal, gendered, and hierarchical story lines and habits of speaking. We are purposefully trying to transform the conditions such as gender oppression, violence etc. by transforming the power dynamics that made them possible. Said another way, we are firmly resisting all manner of "man-splaining" in these conversations. For example, by asking Paul to put aside his theorizing about Lisa's problem (the initial explanation of the problem as “Lisa’s problem of trust”), and instead, to imagine and tell the story of what happened from her position, it becomes possible to invite him to enter into the adventure of considering her experience substantial, attention-worthy, and interesting in its own right .¹⁴ It is important to note that one of the grave conditions which help to give permission for acts of dismissal, betrayal, and hurt is the sense that our partners, those intimate people who live with us, are but side-characters in our own stories. Due to the dearth of invitations to attend to the living stories of the “radical others,” even those whom we profess to love, we “remember to forget” to consider their stories as substantial and full of lively context as our own.

It has been profoundly moving to us to witness women in heterosexual couples in particular, attend to the stories their partners tell about their experiences while listening with rapt attention. The most common responses of these women partners that have floored us have been surprised expressions like “I had no idea he knew all this,” or: “I just couldn’t get over how much he had understood,” “I feel like he really feels me now” etc. Below is one such transcript excerpt that makes these distinctions particularly visible. It is an example of a conversation in which a client protested the request to speak “for her,” and the effects of what happened next.

In this particular excerpt, Rob is trying to account for the effects on Michelle in the aftermath of his betrayal of her. Rob struggles to reach for the details of the story and tries to abandon his





story-telling efforts by evoking Michelle's story-telling rights ("you would have to ask the real Michelle"). Michelle, however, endorses his attempt to reach even further into an embodied understanding of her experience, even as it requires him to take guesses at some details. It is important to note that Rob and Michelle arrived at this session in a spirit of despair, having found themselves, in their words, back "at square 1" and Michelle expressing her frustration about Rob "not getting it, and not getting me." After Rob's telling, Michelle is invited to reflect on the effects of the below conversation and listening to Rob's account, and she says, at the end, "I feel like he really *feels* me now." Have a look at what may have contributed to this dramatic change:

- Sanni: After you discovered this lie, Michelle, how did you live on from that moment? What happened to you, Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): I was just very upset and mad and disappointed. We didn't really speak to each other for quite a while.
- Sanni: Was it night-time or day-time when you discovered the lie?
- Rob (as Michelle): It was right before bed. I think it was on a weekend and we didn't speak all week.
- Sanni: Right before bed... okay, Michelle, I know from speaking to many women how women sometimes... sometimes the worst of it is crying yourself to sleep at night by yourself. Is that what happened or did you roam around or fall asleep in exhaustion, or anger?
- Rob (as Michelle): I don't know. [soft chuckle] You would have to ask the real Michelle.
- Michelle: No, YOU went right to sleep. I was up all night.
- Sanni: Okay, I know this is tremendously hard to do, Rob. Please know that we will check in with Michelle and ask her. She'll get a say about how it really was. Is it okay Michelle, if I ask him some more questions to reach for how it was for you... even if he's guessing and even if he doesn't know exactly what you did, because he wasn't there that night with you? -That's why he's also protesting the questions because he wasn't there.
- Michelle: Yup. Please ask him!



- Tom: That was an enthusiastic yes! See, even if you don't know the details Rob, your guesses can come from your years of knowing and loving Michelle, and what matters to her...
- Sanni: Okay. Michelle says she was up all night, or you say, Michelle that you were up all night. How -
- Rob (as Michelle): (interrupting) I was just in disbelief.
- Tom: What were you up all night with, Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): Just everything was flooding back to me: "Why am I doing this? What's the point? What's the sense of it all?" If he's just going to do what he wants to do anyway.
- Tom: A flood of questions came to you?
- Rob (as Michelle): Oh, for sure. I can see that he's making progress, but it just doesn't matter. He misses the main point.
- Tom: Right, of all the things...
- Rob (as Michelle): (interrupting, finishing Tom's sentence) He HAS to be transparent. He has to like...
- Tom: Of all the things, is THIS not negotiable?
- Rob (as Michelle): Yes! Instead of being secretive, I just wish for him to have that conversation. That's the whole point of all this is so we can have these difficult conversations.
- Sanni: Were you tempted to kick him out of the house Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): No!
- Sanni: Were you tempted to do something else? What was the worst of it? What did you all... what... what ran through your mind? What were you going to do?
- Rob (as Michelle): No, I was just hurting and just needed for him to give me an honest reply.
- Sanni: And then you got up the next morning after not having slept very much being just flooded with questions and disbelief. What was your next day like? Did you have to go to work the next day?



- Rob (as Michelle): I did, but I couldn't concentrate and couldn't work. I work from home.
- Sanni: So it affected your work as well?
- Rob (as Michelle): Yeah it affected everything.
- Tom: Did you consider giving up?
- Rob (as Michelle): I don't know if the word would be giving up, but I definitely question what is it that were doing. Why are we... why are we putting all this time and energy into this if this is just what it's going to result in?
- Sanni: Did anything come to you Michelle? With you asking into the night and into the next day: "What's it all for? Why am I doing it?" Did the universe answer?
- Rob (as Michelle): Not that night but four days into it.
- Sanni: What did the universe say four days into it?
- Rob (as Michelle): He needs to go to Camp [laughter all around.] I need a break from him.
- Michelle: (laughing) Yep! Yes. And for the record, I WAS tempted to kick him out.

2. *"But can you ask couples to do this if they are really fighting and fiercely blaming each other? Don't you have to create some safe ground first?"*

Yes, we thought that too about "creating some safe ground!" But honestly, what we have discovered is that when couples come in fiercely fighting is the best time to invite a witnessing conversation. We have come to think that our couples, just like all of us, have to some extent internalized the "state" and its tactics of shame, blame, revenge, retribution, denial, trivializing, belittling, and all manner of accusatory and inflammatory remarks in times of grave stress. In speaking from the position of our beloved, what we have found to our great surprise is that these tactics become very difficult to sustain¹⁵. Instead, what we have witnessed in these tellings is that partners often readily and voluntarily indict their own actions in regard to their impoverishing shaping effects on their intimate partner's life. Take a look at how this happened here in the following transcript excerpt:



On this day, Adrian and Nadia came in, visibly frustrated. Nadia spoke about the need to get a "bit of a divorce" from their phones, pointedly speaking to Adrian about the time he spends on his phone in the evenings, letting her take care of the rest. Adrian was angry in response. The session from the get-go appeared to be a lost session, full of anger and resentment, and the two of them turning to each other and yelling. Tom and I looked at each other, and then

- Tom: Okay. We have an idea that we wanted to run by you. The idea is that we might be able to find a different way of speaking about all this...
- Adrian: (angrily interrupting) You are on your phone too, you know!"(addressed at Nadia)
- Sanni: The idea is that we might be able to actually speak of this in a fruitful way, and in a way that doesn't take as long as if we try to go about this this way, with both of you angrily defending your position. Would you be interested in trying? (They both look at me now).
- Adrian: (angrily) Sure
- Sanni: Adrian, this might be too difficult to do, I am not sure if it is even fair to ask of you. I wonder, Adrian, if you could reflect on the past month from Nadia's perspective, and help me understand what her month has been like for her, what her frustrations and joys might have been...
- Adrian: (interrupting) She is frustrated about EVERYTHING!
- Tom: Okay, could I ask this of you Adrian, can you try to answer AS Nadia, speaking from her position, literally saying "I" - Nadia, what has been your greatest moment of despairing frustration in the past month?
- Adrian as Nadia: (crossing his arms) I am frustrated about everything. Adrian does nothing, he hasn't done a single thing...
- Tom: (interrupting) Adrian, if you can, can you speak from her position in a way that honours her perspective. This idea that Adrian does nothing is probably not what she would say, in fact, she already said something quite different when we started...



- Adrian: No I can't. I can't! I don't know what she thinks or wants! Whatever I do, nothing is good enough for her, she still says I do nothing....
- Sanni: (interrupting, to Tom) Hey Tom, is the question too hard? Maybe it's too shitty to ask about the frustration. I don't know. Maybe if we asked him about the moment of her greatest joy in this past month. Would this make a difference?
- Tom: Yeah, maybe. Okay Adrian, could we try this. Speaking AS Nadia, Adrian, Nadia, is there a time in this past month that comes to mind when you felt unexpectedly joyful...
- Adrian as Nadia: Yeah, playing with Cara (their daughter).
- Sanni: (with relief!) Playing with Cara, okay. What did you all play?
- Adrian as Nadia: Well, I was chasing her around in the back yard, it was just after the snowfall on the weekend. I had gotten her from day care, and it was a good break for both of us to be outside for a while....
- Sanni: And this was a particularly joyful moment? Did you two laugh together, or what was it like?
- Adrian as Nadia: Yeah, Cara was kind of shrieking with laughter. She was yelling, come mommy come! She loves being chased around. And then she invented this game of catching the melting snow in a bucket. It was just a sweet moment. It felt so good to let loose, and just to play.
- Sanni: And it was evening time, like after day care, you said, right. So then what happened?
- Adrian as Nadia: Well yes. We were in the midst of the play, but then it got dark outside, and all of a sudden I remembered all the chores that are waiting for me inside. So I had had a moment of fun, but now it was done, and it felt wrong, and I needed to go inside to start dinner and clean up...
- Tom: Given your history, might there good reason why it might be sweet and at the same time really hard to just play and be free like that Nadia?





- Adrian as Nadia: Well yeah, in my family growing up play wasn't encouraged. I always carried a great bunch of responsibility. The responsibility for all the tasks has been ingrained in me, there wasn't a lot of freedom to just play.
- Tom: In light of this great bunch of responsibility that was always put on you Nadia, was this moment of freedom and joy with Cara an achievement, Nadia?
- Sanni: Yeah, I'm thinking about that too! After day care, in the darkening afternoon, on a bloody November day, you and Cara were out there shrieking and laughing in the snow melt, probably getting hysterically wet and dirty. Man, against all that they taught you Nadia, about what it means to be a proper woman, a proper little girl, and what you ought to be doing with your time, was this a great protest by you, a protest of your own training, and then a counter-idea of what a grown woman and her baby daughter REALLY ought to be doing on such a day?
- Adrian as Nadia: (tearful) Yeah. It really was. I want to play, I want to play and fool around. And I want Cara to see this. I don't want to pass on a life of all the expectations and responsibilities on to Cara. I think Cara deserves to play. A life of balance anyway, between responsibility and play.
- Tom: Is it quite a risk you are taking, is your achievement here quite daring, then Nadia, in light of all your proper woman training?
- Adrian as Nadia: Yes.
- Tom: And is it a risk worth taking, for both Cara's life and your life, Nadia?
- Adrian. Yes. But it is so hard to do. I feel my own stress levels, and I am struggling with this frustration. You know, Cara and I came in from outside that night and Adrian's just sitting there, on his phone again. What an asshole! (Laughter all around, Nadia reaching for Adrian's hand at this point)



3. Why are you showing so many transcript excerpts of interviews with men speaking from the position of their partners? Do you also ask women partners to speak for men partners (if it is a heterosexual couple)?

Yes, thank you for noticing, our choice of transcript excerpts to show Adrian, Rob, and Paul speaking so far is entirely purposeful. It is often the case that we start with interviews with men partners in heterosexual relationships and ask them to consider their women partner's experiences from their position. This is especially true when couples have come to therapy because of a trespass on the part of the man partner in heterosexual relationships, as it is important for men partners in those situations in particular to be able to account for what happened from their partner's position. However, not all our couples are heterosexual and not all our couples are in therapy because of a trespass of some sort, and power relations do not always follow neatly along the lines of identity categories in any relationships. In the absence of such clear "mandates" for assigning turns to speaking rights, we tend to ask whichever partner appears to "hold more power" in the current moment in the relationship to speak on behalf of their beloved first.

Take a look at how and why this decision was made with Sofia and Josh, a biracial couple, struggling with varying visions of love and relationships due to their different racial and cultural backgrounds:

Sanni: ...so what I'd like to do is tell you everything I know from Tom, about his phone call with you Josh, - just so we're all on the same page. Would that be okay? (people nodding)... okay the sum total I know is that you two have been married for 5 years and that you have a little girl who's 4. I know that your family Sofia is in Chile and that you miss them terribly, is that right. (Sofia smiles and nods). Josh also said that you two have recently been talking about an affair you had Sofia, - and Josh said that you two had "worked that out" - is that right, am I saying that right? ("yeah" from both). Is that an okay word, "affair" - or is there a better word?

Sofia: No that's what it was. It was a one-time thing...

Sanni: Alright, - Sofia, Josh said that it isn't really the affair that you two want to talk about with us, but more, how did he put it, "where to go from here" and "the problems" you two had before the affair and still now as we speak. Do you agree with that Sofia? Is that still the right idea, Josh?





- Josh: Yeah. We talked all about the affair, and I don't really want to talk about it anymore. What I want is to talk about us.
- Sanni: And you Sofia? How does this plan sound, "to talk about you two" – or would we be forgetting something important?
- Sofia: No, I'm good with that! That's what we decided.
- Sanni: Okay... just as an aside...I'm kind of strangely fortified that you two "worked it out" and made decisions together prior to talking to us... it makes me intrigued about what powers you two have to "work stuff out," stuff that would stump other couples... Can I keep this in the back of my mind, that you two have some "unidentified superpower to work shit out," in case we need to rely on it in this conversation? (Sofia and Josh nodding, smiling...)
- Sanni: Alright, but that's only sort of secretly up our sleeves now. I, am I right in thinking that we should get to the current shit in need of working out, and that you two are up for that challenge? ("yeah"). So Tom, what's our first dramatic question out?
- Tom: Okay, here goes, are you ready (said jokingly)? So what is the current shit that is in need of working out that has brought you here? (Josh and Sofia laugh)
- Sofia: Well the issue is this. And it was like this before the affair and it's gone right back to this. I feel all alone in this marriage, I mean I left my family to come here and be with him, and now he just ignores me. He comes home from work and goes straight to the basement to play videogames. He never takes me out anywhere, doesn't talk to me except about routines and the baby and that stuff. But this isn't what I imagined what a marriage is...
- Tom: What was it that you both imagined when Sofia you decided to leave your family and be with Josh. What did you imagine or hope your relationship to be like?
- Sanni: Yeah, what was the dream you had about your togetherness?
- Josh: Well, honestly, until the affair, we were living my dream.
- Tom: Tell me about that, what was the dream you were living?





- Josh: I always just wanted to have a relationship like my parents...
- Sofia: (rolling her eyes, scoffing) That is the LAST thing I want. Those two live completely separate lives, - I've talked to your mom, you know, and she's miserable.
- Josh: I didn't know that.

Exploration about the legacies of the visions of relationships and love of the 2 families... Josh talked about a traditional relationship in which his mom was serving his father and waiting for him in the evenings with dinner on hand, and no arguments were seen or heard and that his parents "kinda did their own thing." He expressed surprise that his mother had spoken of "misery" to Sofia. Sofia spoke of a similar traditional set-up for her parent's relationship, but also spoke of remembering how her father "adored" her mother, in words and gestures and attentiveness and interest in her. Here's where we get back to Sofia and Josh:

- Sofia: And our sex life is a whole other thing. I am not attracted to Josh, I don't like the way he touches me, and also, he's gained so much weight in the last couple of years, because he never does anything, except sitting on the couch and playing videogames. He's lazy and unmotivated, and it drives me crazy. I don't know that I can be attracted to him anymore, he's heavy, I don't like to look at him in bed. If he loved me he'd be motivated to exercise and lose the weight... like, I'm an active person and I had imagined that I'd have a partner who'd do things with me. And the way he dresses, like a teenage boy, I mean look at him –
- Sanni: (interrupting) okay. (to Josh) Hey how are you doing with this part of it, - can you bear it?
- Josh: (low) Yeah. I've heard it all before, it's nothing new.
- Sanni: Okay, could I... I wonder, Tom, can we... Josh would it be okay if I asked Sofia some weird questions about this. I am trying to tread lightly here. Could you bear it if I tried to ask some questions about this, and ... if I am not doing well, like not asking in a way that is interesting to you, or that you can't take anymore, would you let me know in some way, like "timeout" or "I've had enough of this!" or whatever you can say?
- Josh: Go for it.



- Sanni: Now I have to ask you Sofia, would it be alright if I asked you to do something very strange, and it might be way too difficult a task, and unfair to ask of you. I know Sofia, I did hear about the misery you've been going through. Would it be okay if I asked about the misery, but in a strange way. And don't worry I'm going to ask Josh to do the same thing in a little bit. But are you up for starting? I'd like to ask you to imagine and speak about Josh's misery here – and my hope in asking you to speak on behalf of Josh's misery is that we might figure out something completely new, something that we didn't know before. But it's hard to do, to leave our own experience behind and speak of someone else's experience. What do you say, do you think you would give it a try? We'll both help you – and like I said, afterwards, we're going to turn to Josh and ask him for an account of what all this has felt like for you! –
- Sofia: I'm up for that! Okay.
- Sanni: And then, at the end, we're going to assign grades about which one of you did better at this strange exercise, it's like a contest... (said humorously, everyone laughs)
- Tom: Yeah, she brings prizes to this, just so you know... (laughter)... just kidding.
- Sanni: Tom, your question.
- Tom: I love how she does that. Sets it all up and then turns it over to me. No pressure. Okay, Sofia, since you are up for it I am going to ask you some questions not as you but as Josh. When you answer can you try your best to speak from your best knowing of him? So Sofia, asking you as Josh, Josh, of all of the shit that you are currently in, what is the worst of it for you?
- Sofia: The worst of it for him?...
- Tom: Yeah, speaking as Josh, what is the worst of it for you Josh in this, in where you find yourself in this relationship?
- Sofia: Okay, he says that he feels like a failure as a man...
- Tom: I know this is so weird, but can I ask you can you speak as Josh, can you say "I feel..."
- Sofia as Josh: Right, sorry, I feel like a failure as a man.





- Sanni: Josh, what makes you feel like a damn failure? Is there a time you remember you felt like this, like a particular moment, a particular evening maybe when you cried or otherwise when you were just all low to the ground, like I suck in life, I just fucking suck?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, the whole week after she told me about sleeping with my best friend. You know she told me right away after, and I... wasn't mad, I just...got quiet...I did cry a little.
- Sanni: Cried on your own, like in bed, or in the car, or cried with Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: I cried when she kept talking about it. This guy, you know, he's everything I'm not –
- Sanni: (interrupting) If the tears weren't about this guy, but about Sofia in some way, or about your relationship, - nah... Tom I don't want to ask this. Tom maybe, something about – it wasn't always this way...
- Tom: Yeah right. Maybe: Josh, what do you most miss about how you used to feel around Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: I used to feel...(choking up) funny. I was confident... energetic.
- Sanni: Was there something Sofia did that brought out all the humour and energy in the world? Or was it separate from Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: No, I always said how full of life she was, she was warm, she looked at me like I was really someone...
- Tom: So what is it like for you Josh, to go from “really being someone” in Sophia's eyes to moments when she looks at you and judges you as unattractive, to now be called “fat and lazy?”
- Sofia as Josh: Well, it's true. I have gotten fat.
- Sanni: (quietly) And so what if you have. Is that it? Is there something, Josh,... your life force surely can't be contained and summarized in descriptors like fucking “fat” or bloody “lazy,” like where did your life force go, and who sees it still, what on earth are we all forgetting about you, about who you are in this world, and what you want to do in your time here on earth? Where is your life force quietly beating like a heart and taking you in life Josh?
- Sofia as Josh: Well I am a really good dad. I love our daughter, I'd do anything for her.



- Tom: Like what are you thinking of Josh, right now, did a moment with your daughter just come to you?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, I make her laugh like no one else. You know Sofia has to come in sometimes in the evening and put an end to it because it's sleep time, but the two of us are just giggling away. And then there was this one time... (looking smiling at Josh)
- Tom: This one time...?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, this one time when Sofia was out with her girlfriends all Saturday, and when she came back we had a little performance prepared for her... (smiling at Josh)
- Josh: Yeah (smiling)
- Sanni: Oh my god, Tom, do you see these two? Are you going to tell us or what? (said humorously)
- Sofia as Josh: It was, I don't even know how to describe this, it was this heavy metal version of Frozen, do you know that movie, like Elsa, ...
- Sanni: Yeah the "let it go" thing?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah that! Elsa is kind of Zoey's hero, and we must have watched that movie like a million times with her, so we're kind of over the song. But then this was the heavy metal version, - I don't even know how you FOUND that thing, and they were all dressed up, like in wigs, and she sang her little heart out, like she was screaming on the top of her lungs, she didn't even wait for her turn, and he was mostly laughing, but helping her, it was absolutely ridiculous, and I remember, I didn't even get through the door, I sat on the floor in the entrance in my coat, and couldn't even get any further, just laughing and then they came to me and hugged me, we were all there on the floor, and then Zoey took apart the shopping bags, because I had bought them these cakes. It was the best moment (choking up).
- Sanni: I see you all there, in the entry way, laughing and hugging and cake!...(softly) Was this what it was *for*, Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: What?





- Tom: Yeah, do you think that Josh had in mind for you to drop to the floor with laughter...?
- Sanni: With laughter and love...? Was this, in his best dream of dreaming this up on Saturday morning after you left the house, and then getting Zoey to conspire with him, was this what he was aiming for then?
- Josh: I kinda knew it would work, that she'd love it. But I didn't know it would work so well!
- Tom: Okay, - Sofia who were you to Josh on that day?
- Sofia: I was ...everything. (looking at Josh)
- Sanni: Everything. Man. And who was Josh to you that day, Sofia?
- Sofia: He was... well, we had sex that night is all I'm going to say. Like the good kind. (laughter all around)

4. How do you make decisions about when to ask partners to speak from the position of the other? Are there times when you ask people to speak as themselves?

Great question! It is important to note that even though we rely on witnessing a great deal to reach for the means for storytelling, we don't always do so. In fact, in some conversations, it is entirely vital that partners speak as themselves: for example, when partners are asked to reflect on the effects of these interviews, when they catch us up on important happenings (that we might later turn into a witnessing interview), or when we ask partners to tell particular love stories. In fact, we have been playing with a set of questions that can only be asked of partners speaking as themselves that have had really enlivening effects on our conversations. We are excited to elaborate on this point at another time, but as a preview, here are some of our initial expressions of questions that have had spellbinding effects on both our couples and us:

- Can you tell me of times in your ordinary life together when you look at your partner, and perhaps your partner isn't even aware that you are attending to them in that moment, and you are inexplicably and powerfully drawn to him/her/them? A time when you think, "god, she's amazing" or "damn he's cool" or "I just really, really LIKE this person" or "I am so lucky to be here with this person right now..."
- It is important to distinguish these moments from times when your partner is doing something *for you*, engaging in an act of service of some kind, like making you a sandwich, or cutting your hair or organizing a party or the taxes for you. It's





wonderful to appreciate those acts of service. But for this story, we are interested in times when your partner isn't doing anything for you at all, no serving or caring or tending to you for your benefit. Can you think of a time when your partner is engaged in life itself *apart from you* and you noticed them and all of a sudden a rush of warmth or love or wonder in your partner's amazingness swept you up?"

Some of the most moving love stories we have ever heard have been told in response to such questions and such stories can only be told from one's own perspective. It has been wondrous to observe the partner thus spoken about find out, sometimes for the first time in a long time, of how their ways of living have made such life-giving contributions to their intimate other. These questions propose another avenue of reaching for a "radical other," a person beloved but beyond the partner's reach, unfinalized,¹⁶ on the move, and with many ambitions, aims, arts, and pains that cannot be subsumed into anyone's telling or ownership.¹⁷ What we are asking a person to do is to tell a story that strongly proposes a main character who, above all else, is spellbindingly interesting, and endowed with moral agency (or the capacity to act in trustworthy and moving ways). This story matters only insofar as how well it shows off, favors, adores, and loves its protagonist, one's partner.

But, as we said, this and the vital reasons for distinguishing such moments from acts of service are a paper for the future.

To return to the question at hand with some manner of clarity, the times when we ask partners to forego speaking as themselves and reach for speaking from the position of their beloved are very specific:

- a. For matters of moral accountability
- b. For matters of moral agency
- c. For matters of moral zeal

We will discuss each of these ideas further in the following sections:

A. *A matter of moral accountability as an antidote to denial*

*my dear under-responder
my dear running-man,*

*the water is dripping
and the ground is softening
do you hear it too?
and instead of running now*





*say, will you stop and plant me a garden?
will you put your back in to break up the concrete of happiness
poured over our ground
and will you dare to let our garden
be blue, and red, and pink,
in honour of our sorrow, our anger, and our friendship?
and what colour is passion?
will you discover the life of these plants
and let me muck in the dirt with you
will you give me the rough and smooth textures
of your leaves
and the conflict of all the bees and ants
and tears
and warmth
as we dig together on our knees.*

*I promise, I will tend to the fireweed of worry!
and will there be a holy-Jesus-plant
that says "how are you, I noticed you, I saw you?"
will you plant me a garden
in this we-are-here-land
rather than disappearing into who-knows-where-land?
and if you have to pay a visit
will you build me a bridge
or a trail of breadcrumbs to follow?

and what do you think-
the wild roses we will just let run wild
is that right my love?*

When couples find their way to therapy because of a trespass, a wrongdoing, or a tragedy of some kind, it is of utmost importance to find the means to invite partners to engage in a storied account of events of un-love. These accounts, if they are to be fair, need to be represented with significant details, a unique context, and both in-the-moment effects as well as far-reaching effects of the particular actions of un-love on one's partner. In the above transcript excerpts, several questions posed to Paul, Rob and Adrian were seeking of such an account:

- What are your tears saying, Lisa?





- And what was it that hurt the most, Lisa?
- What was it that broke your heart the most?
- After you discovered this lie, Michelle, how did you live on from that moment? What happened to you, Michelle?
- Michelle, I know from speaking to many women how women sometimes... sometimes the worst of it is crying yourself to sleep at night by yourself. Is that what happened, or did you roam around or fall asleep in exhaustion, or anger? etc.

The questions of “the worst of it” and its details are exceedingly important to reach for the heart of what has mattered most to their partners in the experience of hurt. It has been moving to us to witness how convincingly those partners who initiated wrong-doing have been able to reach for their wronged partners’ experiences, once given an invitation to do so. It has been equally moving to witness the wronged partner’s rapt and tender attention to the unfolding of these stories.

We do not fancy ourselves to be in the business of “teaching” accountability or “holding” people accountable, but to simply facilitate the means for their ability to account – because if our couples have taught us anything, it is this: their ability to account clearly pre-existed our invitation, as evidenced by the great ease and speed with which couples stepped into such accounts. The great secret, that is hiding in plain sight, appears to be thus: the current cultural codes for relationship repair consist of reiterations of apologies or explanations (defenses) or denials of one’s actions but what the many expressions of “I’m sorry’s” and “it didn’t mean anything’s” or “I did it because’s” fail to provide partners with is a satisfying ground for trusting and intimate futures. The ability to deliver apologies seems to pale in comparison to the ability to deliver a storied account of the events of un-love and their intimate effects on one’s partner. When such an account is freely and voluntarily given, it has an inexplicable moving effect, on both partners.

Listen to the effects of the following interview on Matt:

Matt (as Kara): ...Matt and I were having an argument and it got pretty heated. There was some yelling, I guess.

Tom: Kara, would you say it’s fair to call it an argument? Was this more of a two-sided or a one-sided argument?

Matt (as Kara): It was more of a one-sided argument, I guess.

Tom: If it was more of a one-sided argument, who was it that was doing the arguing?





Matt (as Kara): It was Matt. He got so angry about the restaurant change. He was really blowing off steam.

Tom: Kara, what happened next?

Matt (as Kara): He was yelling. He was standing in the middle of the living room and just yelling. He said some ugly things... (trailing off)

Tom: Can you tell me some of the ugly things Matt was telling you when he was standing in the middle of the living room yelling at you?

Matt: (crying)

Tom: I know this might be hard to say but it's really important. Do you remember when we agreed that we wouldn't shy away from speaking the worst of it and that we would do so for Kara? Do you mind if I press a little further?

Matt: I know. It's important to me. Okay. What was the question?

Tom: Kara, of all the ugly things that Matt yelled at you that night, what was the worst of it?

Matt (as Kara): (quietly) At one point he looked at me, he was so angry, and he said if I don't help him he'll tip over the book shelf.

Tom: Kara, what was that like for you when Matt threatened to push the book shelf over?

Matt (as Kara): It was scary, I guess.

Tom: Just how scary was it, Kara, to be threatened like that?

Matt (as Kara): I don't know...

Tom: Were you scanning the exits then, were you thinking you need to get away, or were you maybe mad, or frozen, or what happened to you?

Matt (as Kara): I...was quiet. I.. I did back away.

Tom: Kara, were you afraid he would push the bookshelf over on you? Is that why you backed away?

Matt (as Kara): (crying) yeah. We were standing right in front of it. And he was so mad. I didn't know what he was going to do... (after a pause) Tom, can I talk to





you as me? I just, this is just really sinking in. I just, I can't believe I did that.

Tom: okay Matt. Thank you for asking! I know this is really hard, and you might be right in that we can talk about this from your heart as well. Shall we do that? (Matt nods) Can I ask you one more really hard question, but I'll ask it of you this time?

Matt (as Kara): yes please go ahead.

Tom: Matt, if you were to return to that moment when you were standing in the living room, yelling at Kara, and you threatened to push the bookshelf over on her, - if your threatening to push the bookshelf over on her had other words or warnings for Kara, what might those words be?

Matt: (quietly) that if she doesn't do what I want, I can hurt her. She better watch out or I might really do it next time... (crying) Tom, it's so horrible. I can't believe I would do this anyone, let alone to Kara.

Poem Read to Matt from Words Spoken by Kara in a Previous Meeting

*If he pretends that it didn't happen
If he doesn't admit to it
If he avoids apologies
If he gets mad enough to shut me up
If he blames me for bringing it up
If he says that I imagined it
If he pretends he is the victim of this stress
If he switches from shouting to "what-are-we-making-for-supper" even faster
If he bullies me into silence*

*What happens then
To that thing that happened?
Who remembers it?
Who learns from it?
Where is the memory stored?
And who can ever speak to it?*

*Do the things that happened
Find a way to live some place?*





*My body
My mind
My imagination
My idea of love?*

*I live between safety and threat
Between out-of-control screaming
And what's-for-dinner-honey?*

These words are my only witness

B. A matter of moral agency as an antidote to dismissal

*And Adrian knew Nadia his wife
I was born grew up I observed
I struggled grew bewildered I tried
I took a stand was exiled I moved
I fell into a bad dream lost my mind I suffered
I held on knew better I got clear
I wished wanted I dreamt
I saw my future took my life in my hands I rose
I made a home made a budget I worked
I loved was comforted I was loved
I fell pregnant gave birth I breastfed
I taught my daughter to speak studied her I nurtured
I heard advice grew silent I weighed it all
I dreamt on her behalf listened I made a heart
I made meals asked for help I asked to talk
I searched learnt I wrote
I spoke I cried I understood I knew
I claimed
My voice my life my courage my love.
And Adrian smiled at me and knew me.*

When couples find their way to therapy their imagination of their partner as a moral agent has often been significantly flattened or forgotten. The term moral agency denotes the capacity to





dream, to imagine, to originate, to initiate, and to otherwise be in the very midst of lively living, and each of these verbs signifies many moments of freedom of mind from repetitive and ongoing oppression to the defeat of one's dreams and original proposals for living. Couples are faced with many invitations to flatten their beloved into stock characters in uninteresting stories. Side-characters like the maid, the girl with the pearl earring, or Hamlet's Ophelia who aren't asked to speak their minds or change the unfolding in a substantial fashion.

It is our hope that the invitation to tell stories from the position of one's beloved resists the such flattenings and instead, reveals fully human protagonists with options, say, and agency in the matters that matter to all involved.

In the above transcript excerpts, a partner's moral agency was sought and amplified with questions such as these:

- So then in light of the red flags, how come you took your heart and your red flags in your hands and said yes to him anyway? In the face of deep-down doubt, you listened to his promise, and then you decided to risk?
- Did anything come to you Michelle? With you asking into the night and into the next day: What's it all for? Why am I doing it? Did the universe answer?
- Were you tempted to kick him out of the house Michelle?
- Were you scanning the exits then, were you thinking you need to get away, or were you maybe mad, or frozen, or what happened to you?

By asking questions that assume formidable moral agency, traditional gender and power relations can be resisted within the story, and not outside of it, in order to unshackle original action that resists one's dismissal at every turn.

Listen to this exchange of seeking and discovering a partner's moral agency from within the metaphor chosen by the clients:

- Sanni: But there was something.. (to Tom) Why were you scribbling notes just now?
- Tom: Well.. I had a thought, an idea, but I'm just not sure if we have time for the idea.
- Sanni: No, say it!
- Tom: I'm thinking about what they said about understanding their unique and particular swords and armor and I'm wondering if we could ask them about that as each of them as the other..





- Sanni: Do you have time? Cause I have time for this.
- Jen & Felicity: Yeah, we have time. Okay.
- Tom: So Felicity, can you be Jen?
- Felicity: Sure.
- Tom: Yeah? I'm really interested in this idea of you two maybe being drawn to each other's armor and swords, particularly, even though it's maybe infuriating sometimes. (all laugh) and I'm wondering Jen, why is it that you have come to have this particular sword and armor in your possession?
- Jen: You're sure taken 'er not easy today, eh?
- Tom: I'm going to ask you the same question.
- Jen: I know you are. (Tom laughs).
- Sanni: No, I'll take on Jen. (all laugh).
- Tom: So, Jen, for what you know about, I mean about your history, about your life, about how you've been treated and mistreated in life, Jen, how is it that this particular sword and armor have come to your possession?
- Felicity as Jen: It's almost like a sword of truth.
- Tom: Sword of truth?
- Felicity as Jen: And it cuts through bullshit.
- Sanni: Has there been a bunch of bullshit in your life, Jen, to cut through? Is that an absolute necessity?
- Felicity as Jen: I think it's or maybe it's something... cause I have, I have this desire to communicate and to express how I feel and I seem to be in a world of people that don't have ears or don't have voices.
- Jen: Wow. Hey, Sanni can I take you up on a pen and paper now? I know you offered before.
- Sanni: Sure! (getting notepad and pen for both Jen and Felicity). -It's going to get interesting here, hey. (laughter)





- Jen: Yeah. I need to write this down. I want to hear what she says. I need to hear what she says and my memory is shit.
- Tom: Okay. Jen, you were saying you have found yourself in a world of people who don't hear and don't speak... the truth?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah! So I need a sword. So my truth is needing to be said and I am bringing it always to the table and demanding it from other people.
- Sanni: Have you had the sword from the time you, you were born, Jen, or was it, was it gifted to you at a particular time in your life? Was it forged at a particular forge or was it always there? Like was it laid in your crib as one of the gifts of your ancestors or was it forged somewhere in life after a particular experience?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah, I think it was always there. I think it just became stronger.. A stronger material – it was built with stronger material maybe.
- Tom: Was the sword always there? And then did it turn into a sword of truth that can cut through bullshit?
- Felicity as Jen: Yes!
- Tom: Was that the forging?
- Felicity as Jen: I think maybe I was born with a sword, but then trained in how to use it.
- Tom: And did the sword develop particular edges so that it could cut particular things?
- Felicity as Jen: I think at first, like any person who's training, you're not skilled, so you learn, maybe make some mistakes, you cut yourself and then over time, you learn how to wield your weapon so it doesn't injure.
- Tom: More precise.
- Felicity as Jen: More precise.. More clean.
- Tom: Why, why was it so important for you, given what you've been through in life to develop mastery with a sword that can cut through bullshit?
- Felicity as Jen: Because I,... There was a moment in my life.. There was a very pivotal moment in my life when I realized there was a limit to the time I had to work on my craft.



Tom: Yeah. Was there a lot of bullshit thrown at you in life?

Felicity as Jen: I think so. I think so. Or at least a lot of people were dishonest without realizing that they were dishonest.

Tom: Is that the bullshit?

Felicity as Jen: Yeah.

Tom: Is that your particular bullshit?

Felicity as Jen: I think so. Honesty is important.

Sanni: So you were born with a sword, a gift, maybe that was laid there by, I don't know whom, who trusted you to maybe become that? But you could have still chosen in your life, Jen, to not do any training like the sword could have just stayed at home in some glass cabinet thing and be admired, but never used. But you chose this training. I wonder where would bullshit take your life if you didn't, if you hadn't made this commitment, this decision to cut through it. Like why do you cut through it? Why do you zero in on bullshit? What do you know? Like if you go with the bullshit and disavow any sword skills, where is bullshit gonna take your life? What will bullshit do to you if you stop fighting it? If you lay down arms, if you, if you didn't practice your art anymore, well where bullshit take you? What would it do to you? Why is bullshit particularly dangerous for you, Jen?

Felicity as Jen: (tearfully) It would kill me. It would kill me.

Jen: Say that one thing again, I should've heard the whole thing, but I'll listen to it later. Why would, what...?

Felicity: Bullshit. What would bullshit do if you don't..Like if you, if you were forced to lay down arms, like to never fight again, to never train. If you are to never develop the talent?

Felicity as Jen: Yeah. It would kill my spirit.

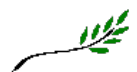
Jen: Quiet. I would go through life quiet.

Felicity as Jen: It would kill my uniqueness, my personality, my individuality, my soul, my being.





- Sanni: Did anyone ever try to tell you, Jen, powerfully, even, even though you'd already undertaken the training and you knew about the power of the sword and were quietly, humbly proud of it. Did anyone ever try and tell you give it here and be finished with that? Did anyone in your life ever try?
- Tom: Tried to take your sword away?
- Felicity as Jen: I think everyone has at some point or people that are important to me have.
- Sanni: Have demanded it?
- Felicity as Jen: Partners because they don't like the reality of what it can do.
- Tom: So then what is this sword of truth that can cut through bullshit, right. What is it on behalf of if it's not to cut people down, what is it? What is it on behalf of?
- Sanni: She said it's precise and clean and it doesn't cut Jen anymore. It doesn't injure. It's precise and clean.
- Tom: So what is it on behalf of?
- Felicity as Jen: It's to help. It's to show others..
- Jen: (Softly) A different way?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah, a different way. It's to heal.
- Tom: It's to heal?
- Felicity as Jen: It's to heal.
- Tom: It has like a surgical sharpness to it?
- Jen: Interesting...! A scalpel!
- Tom: Like a scalpel. Cutting to heal. Jen, if you had to say your greatest hope for using this sword of truth in your relationship with Felicity, what would it be? What would it be for?
- Felicity as Jen: It would be... To help Felicity see she can be free. And if she were to let go, what we could be together. Most of all, I want Felicity to be free of the bullshit about her that they fed her all her life. All the insults and the control and then the gaslighting, like "I don't remember saying that." I





want Felicity to be free, to listen and to argue with me. We don't need any bullshit.

Tom: Is it always first and foremost for the other person to be free, Jen? And then..

Felicity as Jen: Yeah.

Sanni: (In humor) You're on, boss.

Tom: Now, Jen.

Jen: Okay. But can I tell you one thing that I wrote down really quick?

Tom: Of course.

Jen: What I wrote down is that I don't want a sword that is flailing or cutting at shards. I want a sword that helps her but doesn't hurt me either. What I am realizing, is that ...I need to be sharp for us.

Tom: In all those ways, are you always sharpening your sword, for love, for the both of you?

Jen: Hmm (tearful)... fuck you. You made me cry now. (all Laugh)

C. *A matter of moral zeal as an antidote to shame*

*he is passing all points of connection with me
with flying colours
but he is cowering under some tree
when the monster roars
am I your number one?
do you remember Paris?
will you forsake all others?
where are you when my eardrums are shattering?*

*come to me
and put this monster
in its place
by telling me a story of love*





that will last me the next 18 years

Our main question throughout these conversations with couples has been: what does it do to both partners to be invited to tell a living story of their beloved as a protagonist in it?

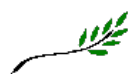
Perhaps most surprisingly, these stories that are told have a subversive and beseeching effect all their own: they seem to incite moral zeal. Instead of flat repetitions of “I’m sorry,” we have been more likely to discover impassioned expressions of “I don’t want to be that guy/person.” Instead of stuckness in shame, we have been more likely to witness folks suddenly “knowing what to do.”

The stories that our couples have been invited to tell, both stories of unlove and stories of love, exist outside of the vague and totalizing explanations of cultural un-stories. The stories we have been looking for have detail and richness to them that such un-stories cannot argue with. It is a formidable task to counter all of “misogyny” or “patriarchy” or “toxic masculinity” or “DSM speak” in a story, but asked to find the words and the embodied effects of “tipping over a bookshelf” or “placing my partner into a two year defeating conversation with an invisible woman” or “leaving my partner to roam the rooms of our house by herself” or “stabbing my partner in the back by making rude jokes about their lack of manliness” etc. – it becomes possible to both take a strongly felt position and find oneself convinced of the merits of inventing a counter-act to such tragedies.

Once couples are invited beyond the idea that “it just happened” and beyond ideas of dissecting faults and curtailing all freedom, the stories they tell seem to remove all alibis to unlove. Couples become answerable to love. Outside of the unsatisfying mercies of normativity, stock plots, dominant but impoverished ideologies, neoliberal incitements to selfishness and the permissions all the -isms give to consider our partner’s life and love experiences less significant than our own, their own living stories seem to supply lovers with explanations of what is happening between them as well as calls of how to respond to it. Love stories that are original and endowed with moral accountability and moral agency are compelling in both their particularity and their capacity to move.

Tom: Matt, I was just thinking back to our first conversations together and the commitment that we made to ‘get right to work’ and not shy away from having difficult conversations together and speak openly about the worst of your actions and their effects on Kara...

Matt: Yeah, I remember how awful and ashamed I felt for having treated Kara so horribly. At first it was really despairing. But one thing that I will always remember is how we talked about men’s culture and how we are





taught to over-focus on our own feelings of shame for having done wrong and how unfair that is because it shifted the focus back to me once again and made Kara take care of me when I was the one who hurt her. How terrible is that?

Tom: What was it that changed for you then Matt? Did it have something to do with being asked to story your actions while standing in Kara's shoes rather than your own?

Matt: Not, not as much putting myself in her shoes, but the accountability of saying it in her words to somebody else, to you. To actually speak of my darkest most of embarrassing moments that I'm most ashamed of to someone else.

Tom: To speak them into being?

Matt: To speak them into being to another witness.

Tom: And when you had to speak them into being to me, not as yourself, but as Kara, what happened to the shame?

Matt: All of the sudden it helped me realize that I am not the victim here...that this needs to be about Kara and her experience. Did speaking the very worst of my actions into being cause me pain? Yes! But it isn't shame that I feel anymore. It is more like motivation or conviction.

POEM FOR MATT AND KARA AFTER ABOVE INTERVIEW:

*this is the summer of
gripping angst on a wheel
a summer of endless packing and preparations
a summer of panic and attacks on Kara
a summer of bellowed rule
by the Lord Commander of us all
the almighty taskmaster
in front of whom we are but mice
on a wheel.*

Or

*this is the summer of travel
the summer when the world opens
to our dominion:*



"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove





*the tacos in Tijuana
the pool in San Diego
the theatre in Montreal
and the little restaurant in New York.
this is the summer of my remembrance of my*

*hopes for Kara
when we first met up:
her crossleggedness on the beach
the contentedness of her soul
the curiosity of her eyes in a good story.*

*Kara my love
this is the summer of my sacred step back:
I shall build you a shelter
May it span both our bodies
May it keep us
from the disaster of the taco truck that moved before our dinner
Or from the rain in New York
That wrecks all well-made plans.
Under this shelter
and in the New York rain
I would whisper a toast to you Kara
it's okay my love we'll go with the rain if it pleases you
because this shelter by my hands
will not just stop the wheel
but break it
all for the light in your eyes shimmering in the New York rain.*

Epilogue

Last summer, I (Sanni) was in a car with my mom and sister driving on windy backroads of rural Finland. We had a ways to travel, and so my mom and my sister – fresh after running out of all other chit-chat, sought more substantial entertainment for their curious minds and asked me, “so what’s new in your work, Sanni?” To avoid having to undertake lengthy explanations, I said evasively, “well, I’m doing some couple’s work now...”, hoping that this would end the conversation. It did not. My mom’s and sister’s eyes lit up with intrigue and they said, “with couples who are fighting? How do you do that?”

“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove

Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 43-93.



The images of Finnish countryside with its red wooden houses, fields, and gloomy pine forests running past my eyes, I searched for a way to explain without references to therapy vernacular or post-structural theory of power relations. Then I told them: “well, let’s all imagine that either of you is locked in a fight-to-divorce with your husband. Like something you have been arguing about for a long time, for years, with maybe some brief reprieves, but whenever that topic comes up, it flares up and takes over your life and your husband’s life like a bomb. You don’t see eye to eye on this topic, not ever. Every time it comes up, you fight and argue until exhaustion and afterwards, you feel more lost and lonely than before and are contemplating moving to your own apartment from underneath this fresh new hell. Imagine that at one of these times, you’ve had it, and decide to go to some therapist’s office to talk about it (both my mom and sister groan at this point). Right, there isn’t much hope that THAT’S going to make this any better either, if all your talking and fighting all this time hasn’t made a dent. But you decide to go anyway, because can it get any worse, and then the whole way there of course you prepare the story you are going to tell this therapist about all these years of being misunderstood and mistreated by your husband, especially around this subject. You rehearse the sentences that you’re going to say so that at least you’ll be clear this time, and lack of clarity on your part will not be why this therapy enterprise fails too. As you are noticing your husband out of the corners of your eyes, you have this uneasy feeling that he is also preparing his version of this story. You sigh in exhaustion before the conversation even begins, and prepare for another complicated battle. You both sit down at the therapist’s office and are all ready to begin. But before you can tell the whole thorny story, the therapist turns to your husband and asks: “before we do anything else, could I ask you to speak from your wife’s perspective? Could you tell me, as convincingly and honourably as possible, from her point of view, what has been the worst of this argument for your wife for the past few years? What does your wife cry about, what makes her furious about this, what’s the thing you just haven’t been willing to understand about this? What makes her want to pack her bags and move to her own apartment? What is really hellish for her about this?” And then the therapist proceeds to interview your husband for next 30 or 40 minutes on this subject, and amazingly, right in front of you, he starts talking ...” at this point I trailed off and there was silence in the car. “What do you think of that?” I ventured after a few beats.

“Sign me up RIGHT NOW!” both my mom and sister shouted immediately. Case made.

Imagine the dare of looking for stories that each person listening would whole-heartedly sign their name under. Imagine if your partner voluntarily offered such a story, of unlove and love in your own life. Imagine what that would feel like. This is why we are thinking of these conversations as “events of love.” The effect, at the end of the day, regardless of where we started together, is something ineffable like a sweetness or a softening, for both partners. We remain, to this day, at a loss to describe it, and therefore cede the space to the poets:



“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove





Love Song (Rilke, 1907)

How can I keep my soul in me, so that
it doesn't touch your soul? How can I raise
it high enough, past you, to other things?
I would like to shelter it, among remote
lost objects, in some dark and silent place
that doesn't resonate when your depths resound.
Yet everything that touches us, me and you,
takes us together like a violin's bow,
which draws one voice out of two separate strings.
Upon what instrument are we two spanned?
And what musician holds us in his hand?
Oh sweetest song.

Endnotes

¹ See White, M. (2007). Maps of Narrative Practice. Chapter 4 for more information about definitional ceremonies

² See Belinda Emmerson-Whyte (2010) in "Learning the Craft: An internalized other interview with a couple" states "Therapists and clients describe the 'stress' and 'uncomfortable disjunctions' that can be experienced when a person is made up or spoken into existence by others in ways in which that person does not recognize themselves."

³ See Illouz, E. (2019). *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. NY: Oxford University Press.

⁴ See Epston, D. (1993). Internalized Other Interviewing with Couples: The New Zealand Version. Republished in this issue

⁵ For a review of some of these ideas, please see Carlson and Haire (2014). Toward a theory of relational accountability: An invitational approach to living narrative ethics in couple relationships. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. Reprinted in this issue.

⁶ Holquist, M (2002). Dialogism. Holquist referring to Bakhtin's idea that we have-"No Alibi"- "To be responsible for the site we occupy in the space of nature and the time of history is a mandate we cannot avoid- in the ongoing and open event of existence we have no alibi" (p. 161). "Life will not let me be inactive, no matter how dormant I may appear (relatively) to be in the eyes of others. I cannot be passive, even if I choose to be, for passivity will then be the activity of choosing to be passive. My relation to life in all its aspects is one of intense participation, of interested activity; having "no alibi" means I have a stake in everything that comes my way" (p. 154).

⁷ Martha Nussbaum as quoted by Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: CA: University of California Press. Quoted from page 108.

⁸ Epston, D. (2020). Personal Communication. Cocreating language of unsuffering- "I am interested in the notion of Danish philosopher Svend Brinkman and how he talks about languages of suffering. think it is incumbent upon us all to find languages of unsuffering." "What words are capturing of experience and, in particular, that experience that has not had words before. Shouldn't we take an interest in words that are





alive with association? Shouldn't we think about the poetics of language and concern ourselves with how words feel to people?"

⁹ White, M. *Exotic Lives*- Chapter - Narrative Practice, Couples Therapy and Conflict Resolution.

"Information technology by the human sciences, communication was afforded a high status. The development of specific communication skills was no considered a panacea for many of the difficulties of human life. This idea was nowhere more vigorously applied than to the area of difficulties in couples relationships. The relationship problems of couples were newly understood to be the outcome of absent or insufficient communication or of poor in inadequate communication. The resolution of relationship difficulties was to be found in the development of more functional communication styles, and relationship counselors were to become 'technicians' in the development, repair, and restoration of communication" (p. 7)

¹⁰ Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: CA: University of California Press. Quote from page 204.

¹¹ Illouz, E. (2012). *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Maiden, MA: Polity Press. "Modern masculinity is more often expressed by withholding (not demonstrating of sentiment)." "Autonomy is established by a very careful monitoring and withholding of recognition."

¹² Ability to account- Account-ability is the ability to account for a shared experience Larry Zucker-Escaping Blame

¹³ For more information about the practice of writing therapeutic poems see Paljakka, S. (2018) A house of good words. *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*.

¹⁴ From Nussbaum, M. (1995). *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. "In a novel, we enter, I claim, that full world of human effort, that 'real substance' of life within which, alone, politics can speak with a full and fully human voice" (p. 72).

¹⁵ Levinas (as quote in Lerner, G. (2008). *Exploring Levinas: The Ethical Self in Family Therapy*.- "To be face to face with another person overwhelms all our concepts and theorizing, and evokes an infinite experience of responsibility: to be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill, which applies as much to thoughts and language that override the other as to murder" (p. 353).

¹⁶ Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. "The surplus or excess of seeing should be used with love in a way that equates to a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that confirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the other" (p. 63).

¹⁷ For more on Levinas' idea of the radical other: Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern Ethics*. NY: Blackwell. "Indeed, Levinas suggests that we are invited to see the other as completely other, as radically other than 'I'. Levinas proposes an other that is infinitely other, that resists all my attempts to define her in terms of myself and to grasp her totality, a resistance that thwarts without force all my projects to place her in a box of rationally comprehensible circumscriptions."

Binderman, S. (2013). Lévinas and the Disruptive Face of the Other. *Hakomi Forum*, 26. "We need to learn how to see otherwise, in order to respect, morally speaking, the singularity and the otherness of the other. We need to let the absolute foreign nature of the other astonish us. For Levinas, justice is not an abstract notion but is found in the expression of duty and obligation discovered in the face of the other. When ethical discourse is grounded in the face-to-face relation so that the freedom of the other is respected and preserved, absolutist systems are thereby renounced" (p. 7).