



## "A Tender Letter I Was Not Prepared For:" Therapeutic Documents During Client Transfers

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### Introduction

As the newest therapist at the Calgary Narrative Collective who just completed my practicum term with their agency, it is a particular honour for me to contribute a paper to this Special Issue. I hope that my thoughts will serve to assist both students of Narrative therapy as well as perhaps more seasoned practitioners in thinking about their own practice. In this paper, I aim to show my thinking and my practice in relation to a pressing question that arose for me at the end of my practicum term that is surely familiar to most therapists: what are the best practices for transferring clients to another therapist?

It was my hope to be able to finish my therapy work with all my clients by the end of my practicum. However, amidst the time constraints of the practicum and client schedules, a few clients and I could not reach this goal. Five clients of mine requested a transfer to finish the therapy work that we had begun with another therapist at our agency. I was lucky to easily find willing transfer therapists among my team, email introductions were made, and meeting times were set. However, I could still not quite rest among these arrangements.

Here are some of the questions that beset me:

- How could I ease the relational smoothness of this transfer for the clients whom I had come to care deeply about?
- What would it be like for the clients to undertake the labour to retell all that we had already discussed and discovered to their new therapist, including matters that were difficult for them to talk about the first time around?
- How could the counterstory threads that we had begun to trace together survive and have traction through this transfer?
- In more poetic terms, could I do something to help mark a goodbye and a new beginning in the spirit of Narrative therapy?

As a response to these questions, I sat down to do what I had been practicing to do all year: write! In a spirit of an outpouring of creativity, I wrote five letters and addressed them to the transfer therapists, detailing my work with these five clients, what had most moved me, why I cared so much about them, and stories and words that had been so important to them to entrust to me. When I sat down to write them, I was not alone. I had pages of attentive notes, verbatim quotes, lingering questions, original metaphors, and all the stories in front me, in my clients' own





words. The letters quickly took on a life of their own. They had a momentum of excitement fueled by the notes I had written during dramatic tellings in sessions. As I wrote, I decided to take up a position as a witness. I had Michael's list of questions to ask during an outsider witnessing ceremony to guide me. I had these questions in my heart, my notes in my hand, and the letters flowed from the pages of my notebook onto my screen with an energy of their own.

In this paper, I will 1) show 2 examples of these letters that I wrote, 2) trace some theoretical foundations that I had relied on in thinking about therapeutic documents, 3) submit quotes from the clients and the transfer therapists about the real effects of these letters, and 4) end with a reflection on the effects of this letter writing on me as a therapist and a person.

### Examples of Transfer Letters

Below are two examples of the five transfer letters I wrote, one for Roxanne and one for Celine. All identifying information has been removed and pseudonyms were used to protect the clients' confidentiality. As you will see, these letters are addressed to Tara who is my colleague and the transfer therapist. The proposal was that Tara would read these letters aloud to both Roxanne and Celine in her first meeting with them. I hoped that both Roxanne and Celine would feel themselves as witnesses to this exchange of information between therapists and that this position as a witness rather than the direct recipient of the letter would embolden them to discuss the content of the letters with Tara more freely, and to make objections, corrections, and endorsements to them in their first meeting. I did send these letters to Roxanne and Celine as well as the three other clients by email ahead of the time to ensure their comfort with the contents of the letter to be shared with their new therapist. Each of them replied to me with expressions of appreciation and their consent to be introduced to their new therapist by way of these letters.

#### Letter 1: For Roxanne

Dear Tara,

I am writing to you now to introduce you to someone very important to me, Roxanne. I liked Roxanne right away! Roxanne is a writer herself- SHE WROTE A BIOGRAPHY OF HER LIFE, Tara. She is a metaphor-loving writer. She is a play-dance-music-in-the-car-the-louder-the-better person. She is creative and counter-culture and rocks her eye liner. She is articulate and thoughtful. I came to know this through our conversations. I think you will too. She has also been hounded by a particularly persistent Anxiety and Depression for a really long time now. Roxanne told me that when she was 20 years old, she had just started her studies at University, when Anxiety showed up in FULL FORCE. She told me this story, tearfully, Tara, and my heart broke. Roxanne described what happened when Anxiety arrived as a "crash and burn." Crash and Burn looks like Anxiety wreaking havoc in Roxanne's life and making daily life, just regular things like dentist appointments and getting out of bed, really difficult. She said, "It is unbearable," and that Anxiety is SO demanding, it can physically hurt as it courses through Roxanne's body. Roxanne told me that Anxiety in particular, but also periodically Depression,





have been showing up regularly ever since. I am telling you this, Tara, to honour the ways Roxanne has been fighting Anxiety for the rights to her life for twenty years now. She is a fighter with a vicious opponent.

Roxanne married not too long after Anxiety arrived, when she was still in her twenties. She was married for 14 years. Roxanne told me, “those 14 years of marriage took a toll on me,” and I could see the pain reflected in her eyes as she spoke. I came to understand the weight of these words as we continued to meet. But there is something important to note here, Tara. Did you catch it? Roxanne is no longer in the marriage that took a toll on her. I don’t want to undermine how painful those years were, and how the echoes of this marriage still bounce off the walls of Roxanne’s heart, but Roxanne told me one hell of a story, the Story of How I Left My Marriage/11:11/The Great Escape. I want to share some of this story with you, so that you might come to know a bit about Roxanne, the Great Escape Artist. This version is taken from my notes from a few of my conversations with Roxanne. It’s not the whole story, and Roxanne might let you know of other important details that I might have missed, but here we go:

*For a while, I gave up my power and stayed for the good of the family. I allowed things that didn't feel right to me, being mistreated, disrespected. I stopped having a voice because having a voice led to conflict or gaslighting. It was easier to let things go. There was a lot of anger and verbal and emotional abuse. I'm sad when I think of the things my children had to see. Initially it was killing my soul, and then I just died. Sometimes I think I shouldn't have allowed that, that I should have been strong enough to leave sooner, but part of me thinks I left at the right time. At a certain point, I made a mental decision. Four years before I left him physically, I separated from him mentally and emotionally. I knew that I would leave. I said to myself, I need to get ready for when I am a single mom. I stopped investing in him. I worked behind the scenes and started building my life. I went to university and graduated. I got my job. It sounds crazy, but the universe started sending me signs and I started to notice. I started seeing 11:11 show up everywhere, and I looked it up. It means, You're on the right path. Change is coming. One day, one of my clients texted me, Roxanne, it's 11:1. I knew the time had come. I had clarity. I walked in and said, "I'm leaving." I gathered what I needed to get out of there. I left for the last time. I planned my escape for four years, until the stars aligned. It was thoughtful. I needed to do it on my terms, not him running us out of the house.*

Are you on the edge of your seat, Tara? Are you wondering what magnificent Escape Artist would create a plan that took 4 years, a university degree, and a WHOLE lot of brilliance to execute? Are you wondering about a woman who has her ear tuned to the universe and her eyes to the stars, watching and waiting for signs that carry the message “Now Roxanne! It’s time!” Are you wondering about the Escape Artist who waited, patiently, to reclaim her life, to RISE AGAIN and live after 14 years? This is Roxanne. Yeah, she’s pretty impressive. I wanted to share this story with you, this unique knowing Roxanne has, because the Artist is planning her next big Escape.

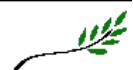




Roxanne's next Escape is even more daring, more risky, more complex than her first. Tara, Roxanne is going to Escape from the inside out!! I'm sure you're wondering what that means, Tara. Roxanne said, "I feel trapped in my own body." This is the Escape to end all Escapes. A challenge not for the apprentice Escape Artist, but for the Master. I'll tell you more about the trap Roxanne is planning her Escape out of: Roxanne's mind has been invaded by a Particularly Pervasive and Problematic line of thoughts that Punctuates Roxanne's daily life and DEMANDS her attention and compliance. Tara, that thinking is about Poop. Roxanne is being hounded and interrupted and intruded on by thoughts of having to process food and excrete it out. Tara, now, I have a feeling this idea, the idea of a woman's life being intruded on by thoughts of bowel movements might be as unsurprising to you as it was to me, when Roxanne shared this with me. See, it reminds me of all sorts of rules for being a woman that we are expected to live by. Like, "Do not cause anyone to be uncomfortable." And the subrules: "Always smell and sound pleasant as to not make anyone around you uncomfortable." "Do not ever appear to be uncomfortable yourself, as that might cause others discomfort." "Women's bodies make others uncomfortable thus you are not to speak of them or their functions, EVER." "Bodily functions are impolite and not proper conversation topics." "If you are uncomfortable and could possibly cause others to be uncomfortable you should isolate yourself away from everyone until you can appear pleasant and speak politely again." Have you ever come up against any of these rules, Tara? These are ones that come to my mind, I know there are many, many more. And I bet having to poop breaks a LOT of them. I like thinking about this: you know every time I go to the bathroom, I'm going to think about it as Breaking the Rules for Living if You are a Woman. That makes me giggle. Anyway, it makes a lot of sense to me, why women might spend a lot of time worrying about bowel movements. A and I know even in my life and the lives of women I am close to that Roxanne is not alone in her worry. I started a new job last week, you know, Tara, and let me tell you about the relief I experienced when I realized that this place of work had private stalled bathrooms. Yeah, I worry about poop, and pooping at work, and having to leave meetings to poop, and why my body can't just poop when I want it to. Yeah, poop is a big deal for women. Roxanne said to me once, and I couldn't help but agree, "I'd like to cancel poop." So, although Roxanne might be in very good company with her worries about poop, Roxanne's Poop Worry is really REALLY intrusive and she is not ok with this. I'll tell you about some of the ways this Worry interrupts her life, in Roxanne's words from our conversations.

*These intrusive thoughts overwhelm me, they are persistent, shameful, and embarrassing. I think it stems from a childhood memory with a babysitter, and now they crop up in times of stress. They demand for me to have complete control over my bowel movements; they consume everything. They cause my body to be tense and my stomach to be in knots. I'm required to think about it 24/7. I don't want to eat, and I love eating, but it steals the joy from food and controls my life. The minute I think I'm hungry and that I should eat, I get tense, my stomach will knot. I'll wait until I'm starving until I will eat. It makes me care about something that I don't care about. I don't want to care about it anymore.*

You can see, Tara, escaping this Worry is no small task. I hope you also can get an idea of how important this is for Roxanne. How urgent!





As Roxanne and I spoke, I started to get an idea of what Escape would look like for her. Here are some of the ways Roxanne is imagining what her Escape will feel like.

*I want to shift my perspective, let go of the shame, let it be a normal function. Not have to be jealous of other people who treat it so naturally. I would like a healthy relationship, that it would be natural, and not controlled.*

So, how does The Great Escape Artist plan for the Escape of the century, the escape of her life? What will be her greatest tool? Tara, lean in close, I am going to share the most wonderful secret with you. Roxanne's Escape will be pulled off by Gentleness. I know that's not what you were expecting! But there is something exceptional about Roxanne's Gentleness. Here's what she told me:

*I have a sense of pride in my gentleness. I have a gentle spirit, childlike. I value this part of me. Gentleness symbolizes freedom, a whole spectrum of colour in a world full of grey and things like "You're either healthy or messed up." The Gentleness tries to bring perspective to Anxiety that only lives in black and white. Deep down, I am not selfish, I have flaws, but I have a Pure Heart.*

Are you starting to see the plan take shape, Tara? Unsurprisingly, no Great Escape was ever accomplished without significant obstacles..... Here's one. Roxanne told me about a few rules for living that she was taught by her very stoic German family, like Keep it together. Do what you have to do. Only dogs get mad. Just plow through. Even when she left her marriage, she didn't take any time off work, she said, "I just plowed forward." So why change, why do it differently now? Tara, Roxanne said to me: "The cost of that has been too much."

What does post Escape life look like for Roxanne?

*Now, I want to create a life I don't want to escape from." "I want to do things because they are important to me. I want to do things out of joy and not well I got that over with. To do things with passion behind it, excitement about it!*

Roxanne calls this "Living in the flow."

What gets in the way of Living in the Flow? Bullshit Tara! Roxanne told me that she was considering making some adjustments to her Bullshit Tolerance.

Roxanne said,

*My tolerance for bullshit is so high. If I could stick to my commitments it would speak to my value. Every time I go back, I give up a piece of myself. I tell myself, this is what you deserve, not decent treatment." "I am fighting for my sense of self. This is what's on the line. I've known this for a long time. In order to connect with myself, there will be pain, there will be discomfort. Giving up that quick fix of attention from someone else. But*





*when you put up with stuff that isn't right, you send your body messages like, you don't matter.*

I have listened to Roxanne speak of her life, Tara, and I have been awed by her thirst for joy, for fun, for laughter! Her love for the Gentleness she invites into her life. Her vision, her staying the course, the careful, thoughtful steady planning of the Escape of a lifetime.

Roxanne is observing her life, she told me this:

*When this bout of depression first hit, I was fighting against being swallowed up by a big black hole. Sometimes I think this is how I will forever, but I am coming to terms with these phases, these seasons. I want to fight less and be more. Lean into it. It will pass. It's a process of trusting myself. I am NOT completely helpless and incapable. Even though it's not smooth, I am capable of navigating through this stuff. There is some fight to put in, but at the end of the day, it's about being gentle. Like yesterday, I was feeling out of sorts. It was like an experiment. I laid on the couch and watched Netflix. I don't remember ever doing that before. I actually loved it. It was gentle.*

There is a story that is yet to be told, but Roxanne has begun to write it in her heart. Tara, this story is a story of Roxanne's Redemption. It is a story of Rising Above, of A Second Chance from the Universe, a story of Gentleness and Compassion, Movement, and Freedom. Roxanne is writing this with her voice that "gets crowded out sometimes but is still there." I can't wait to read it.

To you Tara, as Roxanne's new companion, her co-conspirator, I send you both on this next leg of the journey with all the gentleness in my heart.

Love,  
Crys

## Letter 2: For Celine

Dear Tara,

I am writing to you now because you will soon meet someone very important to me. My hope is to introduce you to her, to acquaint you with some of the things we've discovered over the last few months together, some of the triumphs she has celebrated, and some of the tears she has cried. My best hope is that this letter would be more than an introduction, but a monument to the hard-won work Celine has taken on, and that I have borne witness to. I hope this letter serves to communicate the ways I want to honour Celine's work, her fight, her advocacy, her ways of calling things out as exactly as they are, without the usual candy-coated sprinkles of Canadian-lady-politeness. No, the conversations Celine and I had were much more than polite, they were often battlegrounds, bloody and sweaty. Maybe a better metaphor might be, they were like an





Ironman Race (or Ironwoman) (which is a triathlon Celine is training for right now!). Yes, our work was like an Ironwoman Race, an accomplishment that exceeds the ordinary and asks of us much more than might be reasonable, an exceptional experience. Here, let me invite you to stand by the race path, Celine is about to zoom by, and I'll tell you about the miles she has already covered.

The particular Ironwoman Race Celine has been running, Tara, might be called something like, "Work be Work." See, Celine has a master's degree IN the field of travel. Isn't that interesting?! She is really passionate about telling stories about places! So, Celine's work has always been important to her, but work has often meant more than just a pay cheque. Celine comes from a family of extremely high achievers – her brother, Paul, is a delightful exception, though, maybe she'll tell you about how he has carved out his own ways of living and being and his relationship to Work and Achievement. But, Celine's mother and father were both very accomplished in their respective fields, and Celine took on this family legacy very early. She said to me, "I tried my best to live a perfect life." She has told me about being 14 years old and expected to be very independent, like having to budget to buy her own bras (she even had to pack her own lunches at the age of 4!!). So, 14-year-old Celine was learning the saxophone, starting a school newspaper, playing a ton of sports, coaching a girls' sport team, and working a part-time job. Celine told me when she thinks about 14-year-old Celine, "I wish someone had told me to stop." "Why would YOU wish that?" I asked. I think Celine's answer alludes to some ways she thinks about a life worth living, some ways of living that she has started inviting into her life now. Tara, her answer was this, "Because, it's about finding balance."

Celine was adopted by her mother and father, and she's always known this. Celine's adoption was open, and she visits her birth family a few times a year. Celine told me that she was brought up to be "The Poster Child for Open Adoption," and this might have taught Celine to work very hard to please people, even when she was very young. She told me: "I feel like I need to grieve for the kid who tried her best." This desire to please people shows up in all sorts of ways in Celine's life now. It's rather a complicated thing. Here, I'll give you an example. Celine really likes for people to be comfortable and feel included when they're around her. It's one way she shows her love and care for her friends. But it also shows up in ways Celine is no longer ok with, such as feeling like, "my whole life has been about trying to please my parents."

Now, to Work. Work is a really complex thing in Celine's life, it's multifaceted, and Celine's figuring out exactly what she wants it to be able to say about her and her life. When I met Celine, she had taken some time off work to care for herself, and her goal was to think about what she wanted from Work right now. All this kind of came to a climax this past October. Celine realized things were especially, extra, not ok and she called her family to ask them permission to go to the hospital." I'm sorry to say, Tara, this phone call wasn't what Celine needed, her parents failed her, failed to provide Celine with the support and understanding her life depended on. This was devastating, it caused Celine a deep, deep hurt.

But Tara, do not under-estimate Celine and her unwavering commitment to herself. Do you know what she did after that? After that devastating rejection? She decided that it was not critical



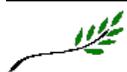


for her parents to be on board. She kicked them off her safety plan, and then, she picked up the phone again, and this time, she called Rodger. Now Rodger is an important person in Celine's life. Tara, they were actually married for a time, and although they decided a while ago that they did not want to be married to each other, they remain best friends. And when I say best friends, I mean like, show up when needed, always pick up the phone, act as your proxy person with work, REAL love best friends. I have come to know about this commitment between Celine and Rodger and it's really quite amazing. So, Celine reached out and did not give up on reaching out until she was met by what she needed. And what Celine needed back in October was a bit of a time out from the Race. She stayed at the hospital and rested-body, mind, and soul. And that's what she needed.

Celine decided that what she wanted to do was to go back to her job for a little while and make some money. She said that she has worked so hard because she was "determined to go back to work" and that's what we've focused on. She has some WILD EXCITING ideas that involve an RV and entrepreneurship, and Celine is dreaming about what kind of counter-cultural future she might build for herself. but right now, making her salary at her job is how Celine is caring for herself and the future she is dreaming about! She said to me, "I want to nail this, and I know I can." And I will tell you, Tara, CELINE WENT BACK TO WORK! The last time we had spoken, she was moving forward with her back to work plan and was working 4 days a week and she's DOING IT! But going back to work didn't mean that she was going to stop listening to her body. Celine told me that she had returned to work after taking some time off in past, "but this time," she said, "feels different." It's a good different, Tara, and Celine has told me that a huge part of the differentness can be found in the ways she has changed her relationship to alcohol. She said, "I realize now how much havoc alcohol had...how much it had wrecked my life. And how a lot of things get easier when I'm not drinking." She also told me, "Without alcohol, there is no buffer, you feel all the emotions. Now, I feel it all."

Some other things that are different, according to Celine, are: "I'm listening to my body and resting," and learning that maybe she is quite in tune with her own identity after all! Things like her Ironman training, and singing Karaoke, and making friends really easily. Celine described herself once to me as being made up of "Three piles." They are "the skills I got from my adoptive family; biological things, like a strong family resemblance, from my birth family; and then the other things that come from no one, like my love of music, tacos, playing the ukulele, and eating spicy food, these are my favourite things, the things I love about myself, this is my identity, the core of who I am. I am a musician. I am an athlete. I try things!" Celine describes herself as "a Renaissance Woman." Excited to meet her yet?!

Another thing that is different, Tara, is that Celine's priorities are different this time. She said to me: "Before, I would have tried to do all the things. Last time, I would have worked a day and then gone out for wings and drinking, but I'm not going to do that this time. I have a nice little plan and it's working. I have control over what I show up for with 100%." We talked about how much power work has had in Celine's life and how she is changing this. Celine told me this, "I'm a thousand times more happy now than when I was "productive." She has spoken about the presence of Shame in her life by saying, "I would like to not feel shame," but when something





happens, like her radiator breaking, or a toilet backing up, “it’s for an hour now versus weeks or days.” That’s quite incredible, isn’t it Tara? Celine said to me, “It’s better. And better is better.”

We get really excited every time Celine feels angry, because this is all new, Celine giving herself permission to be angry, to validate her own experiences by feeling angry. Celine said to me, “I’m so proud of myself for being angry.” Something what makes Celine angry is how the mental health system functions, how if we have a physical ailment, we’re taken care of, doctors come in and tell us how to get well, but when our hearts and minds are ill, we’re left to figure things out on our own, be our own experts and advocates. I stand with Celine on how despairing our mental health supports are, how we in Canada leave people alone in their suffering so often. Celine said, “I have a PhD in mental health!” and I agree with her. She’s been fighting for her life for five years now, coming up with her own “treatment plans” and she’s been “doing the work,” but she (and I!) are still angry. She said, “I’m well enough to do the work,” but we all know, not everyone is, and many people slip through the cracks of the system. She said, “I’m angry on behalf of others.” It makes me angry too.

She wants to continue narrative therapy (because “CBT is the McDonalds of therapy, it’s empty calories” LOL, that’s one of my favourite Celine quotes) and because “this is not the time to back down, I am safeguarding and protecting my wellness.” To this I say “Hear! Hear!” and I am so inspired by Celine’s commitment to her wellness, to her life, to the future she’s creating for herself. This future might even include Celine exploring what it might be like to think about a romantic relationship, and Tara, she might talk to you about this. She’s asked these tough questions like, “Do I deserve intimacy, love? Basic human contact?” and I get excited by these questions! She told me, “Me as a person, is someone who can be loved; this is where I am going,” I’m excited for Celine, I am truly SO FREAKING EXCITED because I know my life has been changed by knowing her. The leg of Celine’s Ironwoman Race that I could run alongside her has come to an end, but there’s still much of the route left to cover, and I’m still cheering her on. I know she’s going to nail it. Celine, the Ironwoman. Celine who “lives out loud,” who says “I refuse to be measured by accomplishments anymore. I am a human being who deserves to exist.” Who said,

The soul matters, Crys. You can’t explain it, the spark that makes me human, is worthy of protection. I’ve been so far away from myself, distanced from the spark. But I will cry because of the work I did, that is the testament and I am proud because I stuck with something that was just for me. It was Beautifully Selfish. The process is enough. My will through all of this has been stronger than I thought.

Celine who looks at her parents, her job, the health system and says, “It’s different this time,” but “nothing has changed, but me.”

I’m waving from the sidelines, Celine, go nail it!  
Love,  
Crys





## Theory

In this section, I want to highlight a few of the teachers in Narrative letter-writing practices whose ideas I am grateful to. Over the year of my practicum, a quote from David Epston has accompanied me in my discoveries: “What are these spirits (of Narrative therapy)? Here’s what immediately springs to mind: enthusiasm, irreverence, improvisation, imagination, righteous indignation at injustice, solidarity with those who suffer, collective creativity and a fascination with the mystery and magic at the heart of everyday life.” It is my hope that evidence of these spirits that touched me are visible in my letters.

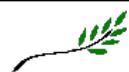
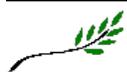
Beyond an immersion in the spirits of Narrative therapy, letter-writing is of course a practice that was first made well known by Narrative therapy co-founders Michael White and David Epston. It was very moving to me to discover dozens of examples of letters written to clients over many years, as well as to see how letter-writing practices have been taken up by other Narrative practitioners (Bjørøy et al., 2016; Ingamells, 2018; Morton, 2021; Paljakka, 2018; Pilkington, 2018; Pule, 2009).

The application of a therapeutic document, whether to provide “an account of the developments that are unfolding in the therapy,” (White, 1995, p. 36), to “add momentum to counter-storying” (Ingamells, 2018 p. 6), to “generate a storied representation of a person’s life” (Pilkington, 2018, p. 21), or “deliberate together with people on the living of their lives in some way that would honour their character and expand the horizons of possibility” (Paljakka, 2018, p. 52) or to “illuminate and address a deeply tricky problem” (Morton, 2021, p. 36) are broad and varied. “However, despite the form of the letter, their purpose is always to give traction to an emerging counter-story.” (Ingamells, 2018, p. 6).

In a study of the use of therapeutic letters in family nursing, Moules (2002) gathered qualitative notes on the effects of receiving a therapeutic document such as “having a record of the clinical work that endures through time; having an ongoing documentation of their strengths and successes; having the current effect of re-reading the questions into the present and in the kinds of different reflections generated as a result; having reminders or measures and markers of change as a testament to the personal work they have done; and having a visual affirmation of the reality of the suffering they have endured and the personal ways they have challenged the sources of suffering in their lives” (Moules, 2002, p. 111).

Moules further underscores the importance of reflections in therapeutic documents that ensures that the “cries of the wounded” be heard and that “suffering should not be buffered with platitudes, and accolades of success, perseverance or triumph” (Moules, 2002, p. 110).

Stepping into these authors’ and writers’ footsteps, the following ethics and considerations were central to my construction of these transfer letters:





- to create an opportunity for the client to witness their own lives.
- to not shy away from the representation of suffering in the clients' lives.
- to underscore the clients' agentive efforts up against the context of their suffering.
- to communicate the ethics and stances that had caused clients to undertake these efforts.
- to write into being the momentum that had been gathering in my work with this client.
- to keep close faith to and amplify the clients' words and metaphors and inner world in the descriptions.
- to write as myself and in my own voice and person as someone who had been moved and inspired by the clients' experiences and achievements.
- to help the transfer therapist "pick up where we left off" with minimal labor to the client.

In order for the letter to realize its potential for therapeutic value it must be written with care, consideration, intention, and love (Moules, 2009). "They [the letters] will be read by people with their spirits and their bodies. Words will slip off the pages and be breathed into the lives, relationships, hearts and cells of those who read them" (Moules, 2002, p. 112). It is in this carefully constructed rich description of the person's actions they have taken on their own behalf, their spontaneous declarations of ethics, the battles fought, lost and won, in front of the bathroom mirror – it is in the dramatic retelling of these ordinary sounding stories that they are elevated to monumental status. This is both a grave responsibility and a joyous possibility. In my practice at the CNC, and encouraged along by Sanni, I learned the art of writing to each client after each session. I came to conceptualize this as "monument building." I would take the words and the stories shared, the tears fallen, and the declarations made as if they were bricks and clay. I would then sit with these and craft something that would stand as a monument to the exchange that occurred in session. I believe it is the act of monumentalizing, to lift up, and take notice of that Michael White was speaking of when he said, "the therapeutic practices I am referring to here contribute to the rich description of these knowledges and skills that have been generated in the histories of people's lives, to elevating the significance of these, and to emphasizing the relevance of these to efforts to address the very problems and predicaments for which people are seeking help" (White, 2011, p. 3). Thus, I called my letters "monumenting letters" to honour both the significance of the achievements they denote as well as my role as a monument builder in service to my clients.

### Effects of the Letters

With the help of the transfer therapist, some of the letter-readings to clients were recorded in order to allow for a reflection of clients' responses to these letters. Clients responded in many ways; they spoke of being moved by the person in the letter, of being understood, of having a sense that I had paid great attention to what they had said, and that the actions described in the



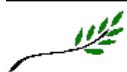


letter were the actions of an interesting, even impressive person. They also reflected on the practicality of the practice of writing such transfer letters: they reflected appreciation for not having to start all over and retell their stories to their new therapist, but rather that they could use the letter to continue the work in therapy.

Below is a selection of verbatim quotes from the 5 different clients:

- (Tearfully) “I feel like it’s a very tender letter, and I’m not always quite so prepared for tenderness.”
- “I feel that it paints a kinder character in me, it feels very...it feels very aspirational, and very much how the reader would perceive the main character as the protagonist.”
- “I think in a lot of ways, - it's because it's really distilling down what I would like to be, how I would like to be understood,”
- “It feels very much like a friend is talking back. Rather, I think it just feels like...the whole thing is a lot more. It doesn't feel like here's our notes from the session, you talked about these things. I think the letter writing structure feels more like a conversation than a summary. And more collaborative than prescriptive,”
- “These are some of these things where I'm like “I know that about myself, even if no one else knows that about me.” So it feels very...validating to have given voice to it and had it heard by someone. Even if maybe, you know, in a broader sense, it's hard to share those things. Just to have it voiced and then understood and reflected back I think is very meaningful,”
- “If this were someone else's story, it would be the word I'd use is I guess, impressive. If someone were to come and read this story to me about someone else, I think I would be a lot more respectful about it and a lot more and a lot more impressed by it,”
- “It saves time, for sure. And then now we can go and we can delve into the things that I think affected me the most, right, so you have a background with everything. And if there's holes, right, we can fill them in. Right? So it's definitely more helpful. You get an idea of who I am”
- “I'm actually a little surprised it hasn't been a practice to be honest. I mean it saves me going back, and I'm sure that most people would tell their story chronologically, and it would take a long time. And, they'd feel like they needed to fill in every detail because of this letter. I don't feel like I need to tell you blow by blow everything I've ever told Crys,”
- “But her transfer letter’s reflecting a moment in time...this is where Kimberly is now, not this is the basket case I started with. And Crys was reflecting where we've made it to,”

I also asked the two transfer therapists about their thoughts regarding the helpfulness or the experience of receiving and reading these letters at the outset of their work with the clients.





Both therapists spoke of the “worth” of the letter in a practical sense of removing the need to “redo” the previous work, or to bring them up to speed on both what the client had been up against and what they had done on their own behalf. Both therapists spoke about how the letter fast forwarded the development of the therapeutic relationship; the client felt like their new therapist had an understanding of them even before they had begun to work together. The therapists also commented that due to the letters, clients were surprised to find that they were closer to their goals after reading the letter than they had previously thought.

Below is a selection of quotes taken from that interview with the transfer therapists:

- “It short-cuts the work in a big way. It leaps over and it leaps ahead in the work.”
- “It puts me and the client somewhere in the middle of the work, not at the beginning, but maybe closer to the end than they had thought previously.”
- “Whatever grace they’ve afforded you, somehow transfers magically to me.”
- “It affords them the view from the outside.”
- “Maybe in the moment it works, but maybe it keeps working, through time. It’s got legs; they have a motion and a momentum of their own.”
- “It keeps the old therapist present. We can use your presence as a witness to us.”
- “It’s a short cut to relationship building. People feel heard and understood immediately, and knowing that I’ve read that, it’s like, oh you ready know. I didn’t tell you, Crys did.”
- “It creates a reflective surface immediately.”
- “The letters carry a presence of sacredness and reverence.”
- “It prevents backsliding, you can’t go further back in time. You can’t go back.”

These comments are consistent in therapist feedback in practicing narrative letter writing, specifically as noted by Moules (2002) the ability for the letters to increase the clients’ commitment to change and reduce the return to the problem. Pilkington (2018) and Pyle (2009) also noted the conjured presence of the therapist that is created by a letter that is consistent with my interviewees’ comments that the transfer letter kept the transferring therapist present in the work and the ability for letters to have continuing therapeutic benefit by allowing the client to return to them.

## Reflection

Despite these wonderful reflections on the effects and benefits of the transfer letters, the secret is that the person most changed by this effort was me. The transfer letters were an extension of my learning to write therapeutic poems during my practicum year: I had come to understand the





poems I laboured over after each session as documents to hold on to what had transpired in session and witnessing statements regarding the efforts of my clients to realize their intentions for their lives. Now, my work, my final act was to create perhaps a “poetic letter” that would speak to understandings and words that the client and I had fought for together, whence we had come and where we had journeyed to, and what hopes the client retained and wished to continue to pursue with the new therapist.

After writing all five letters in a spontaneous outpouring, I wondered to myself why it had been so “easy” for me to find my way into them and why it felt so “good” to write them. I suddenly remembered times in my personal history as a daughter, sister, mother, and partner when I had done something that felt akin to this moment of letter writing. In response to significant events in my family’s life such as goodbyes, deaths, births, and more hidden personal revolutions that I had been entrusted with, I had often spontaneously created tangible “monuments” for celebration- and memory-keeping purposes. I realized that the document writing practice was a way of “monumenting” important events that I had always practiced in my life.

These letters were loving monuments I had created to honour the lives of the clients I cared so deeply about. However, the “monument letters” also acted as monuments for me; they stood as tangible evidence of the work and the labours I had taken on behalf of my clients. No longer could I hide my head under the blanket of shame and of my own rather stubborn doubts of failure. The writing of these letters effectively reauthored my own narrative about who I had been as a student therapist. Even if my work as a therapist stood in question, the letters oddly and perplexingly, stood tall and told stories of how my work had been collaborative, attentive, purposeful, bold, and full of feeling besides. The writing of the letters proved, not just to my clients, but to me how I had attended to the softly whispered dreams they had dared to share with me. They spoke of my sincere love for them and my refusal to forget what they had spoken.

In closing, I will leave a short segment of a reflection written to me by Tara, in reflecting back to me how she experienced the letter:

What you did is not the mapped-out path, Crys  
The mapped-out path is to say:  
“okay, bye love, gotta go now  
-hope it helped!”

And then the clients are left to ask:  
What? Start over? Say it all again?  
Will I have to explain about THAT thing?  
And how I realized that I can do THIS after all?  
And how we laughed because THAT’s so funny  
And how I cried  
Because it had been so long  
That I wrestled with THIS.





Instead of a map  
What you did was to give us the walker's guide:  
Here we walked, Tara  
This is the hilltop we lingered on  
We took a look at the meadow but didn't visit  
Under this tree we cried  
And this is her very favourite spot by the river

Hill and river, tree and star  
All ours now.

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