



This Girl Is on Fire: A Feminist Narrative Supervision Story

Sanni Paljakka, M.Sc., Director Calgary Narrative Collective

Note: This paper represents a real-time account of feminist Narrative supervision practice in the form of an email between therapists at the Calgary Narrative Collective. This email conversation took place after the regular supervision meeting over zoom earlier that day. This expansion of the spoken supervision meeting into written emails over the following days is a common practice at the CNC.

On Tue 2020-09-08 2:23PM, Sanni-Ilona Paljakka wrote:

Dear everyone, near and far!

I think I'll die happy now, thank you very much. We had a bloody marvelous intelligent conversation today! This is a recap for everyone, but especially keeping 2 of you in mind who missed out. Crys said at the outset that our "love wasn't wasted on her." Was it ever not wasted, y'all - see below: Crys came fucking prepared, having read and studied Sarah's first-session-transcript as well as the written Crash Course. Based on these readings, her dramatic question, which, Crys said had arisen "in her body," was this:

"How do I find the story to get lost in?"

This was a bigger question set against the backdrop of the idea of being "decentered but influential." Crys had wonderfully surmised that "finding (or discerning) the story to get lost in" is apparently part the "influential-ness" that is the particular challenge set in front of a Narrative therapist. - Other therapists might puzzle over other influential-nesses, for example how to navigate "medical histories" and "depression inventories" (which Crys had some experience with in her psychology training) at the outset of conversations, but since we have done away with those puzzles of influential-nesses by purposefully dismissing these tools as guiding our influential-ness and attention in unwanted, distracting, and even - as Crys suggested- "violation-of-privacy" ways, we don't have to start our challenge there. But neither can we, as Narrative therapists, run away from taking responsibility for our particular influential-ness either. So Crys had brightly puzzled it out: "uh-huh, I see what's going on here. You are apparently putting your power, attention, and influence behind stories." She went one giant leap further to describe it poetically: "uh-huh, I see. It's stories to get lost in that y'all are looking for, hey." And so it is. And of course, Crys wasn't to be appeased easily, so hence her question was: How do I find the story to get lost in then?

At this, there was general talk of influence and power, and how we all have a lot of those two things, and have to decide how to strike our irons then, with all that influence and power in relation to our clients that our profession has murkily bestowed us. But there wasn't an answer to Crys' question. So she quietly wrote some notes, but then came back with the next question:

"-So this is my great task then: How do I ask questions that pull out stories to get lost in?"





At this, there was laughter, - because "great task" indeed! Tom amended the question to say "How do I think in ways that can help me ask questions that pull out stories to get lost in and resist unstories?" We spoke in general again about investing in thinking (rather than perfect questions), in thinking-out-loud-in-front-of-our-clients-practices (for example: "because you said this, I am now wondering how to ask a question about this, I am thinking I could ask you this way, or this other way, and – which of these is better, you think?"). Perhaps these are more correctly wonder-out-loud-practices, or thinking-together-with-our-clients-practices but what they have in common is the practice of learning to respond to the query of "the reason I am asking you this is because..."

These are coincidentally also practices to cede more power to our clients rather than hogging it all to ourselves (by being willing to "embody" our questions, meaning to explain the hope of the question, the why of the question, the context of how the question arose and thereby inviting a client's response, not just to a question, but to the thinking of the question...).

Crys again listened thoughtfully at everyone talking and laughing. But she was undeterred. She tried a third time:

"-Okay fine. Then tell me this, all you talking heads (I am paraphrasing, she said no such thing about "talking heads," but the rest of it is all true and reveals the relentless bright curiosity here, which perhaps is our first indication of one of Crys' wonderfulnesses, but that remains to be determined -by her, not me):

"-How do I begin to think in ways that helps me ask the questions that pull out the stories to get lost in?"

See? How joyful is all that? But it gets better, just you wait.

We basically told Crys that she is asking us to "tell her all the thinking in the world" - which is exactly the kind of impossibly curiosity that is rare but wonderful.

In fact, it reminds me very much of our former student when she first started her practicum with us and asked, "where is the book in which all Master Narratives are written out? Where is it, because I would like to read it now, please" (I paraphrase liberally again, for effect purposes). I am still thinking about that question, about the book of Master Narratives, a flippant answer would be "the Bible." Or "all of Shakespeare." Or "the DSM." Or the entire "self-help section of the local bookstore." That's where these things conglomerate and have tea parties and decide to hook up with each other and have questionable pregnancies. But I'm only partly serious. The question was good, because the work of seeing the master's narratives in any given moment is to see the wind, or to see that thing called "power." The less-well understood point is that every idea, I repeat, every idea, however radical it was meant to be at its inception, can be used for the oppressive restriction of the movement of a person. So it is with Narrative therapy, for example. Narrative therapy was conceived as a liberatory idea, an anti-therapy, a strong response to the usurping of control of people's lives by medical ideologies. But Narrative therapy turns into an oppressive idea if handled in a dogmatic sanctimonious manner as a machine of truth that dictates what can be said and what cannot. You see this when students self-consciously focus their attention on the vague but totalizing question "is it Narrative?" than about the ways justice can be sought inside a story, with a particular person. Another idea that was liberatory in its inception is the





concept of trauma that was meant to give another shape to the language of suffering and the contexts of its creation. But the concept of trauma can also be used to steal other vocabularies, to usurp understandings of what happens to people's bodies in particular moments, and to hold imaginations of the present and future still and captive. We shall undoubtedly return to the ways in which even our most favourite and precious ideas can be used for the congealment of the leaps of human imagination and their original proposals.

But to return to Crys's curiosity about "tell me all the thinking in the world..." – I read a fascinating essay this morning about wisdom and embitterment. In this essay, "wisdom," or the "capacity for wisdom" or even the "achievement of wisdom" were partially defined as the "curiosity to think things I have never thought before" – this could happen because life serves me up an unforeseen complication or in our case, our client speaks to us of things we don't know anything about, – like their lives! This is part of the reason I think that being a therapist is the richest goddamn job in the universe because we get to hear stories of experiences that can smash all the conventions of thinking we have held up until this point! But only if we invest in thinking "when it gets complicated." Which is precisely the moment when many therapists sadly but very understandably want to invest in advice or something "easy to follow" – the moment when it gets complicated.

So needless to say, the response to Crys to "tell her all the thinking" had a lot to do with "we need a particular client story to start thinking about thinking" instead of trying to do thinking outside of client stories in generalities (just like we need particular client story to think of Master Narratives involved instead of thinking of all Master Narratives to be pulled out of Bible in one standing, although there are 5 or 25 that immediately come to mind there :)).

Wonderfully, Crys put this, the "thinking inside a story," to the test and returned to Sarah's transcript and the question Sarah had asked of her client in their first session as almost the first question out (after hearing that this young man had been in a controlling relationship, so controlling in fact, that he was at times required to be naked until his partner gave permission for him to get dressed and had a hunch that he might suffer from trauma and "co-dependence" now years later. This was Sarah's question after hearing the above details:

Sarah: "How did it go down when you left him? Can you tell me the story? Was it sunny? Or was there a big storm happening? Did you have, like, a big dramatic yelling match and then leave, slamming the door? Did you kind of quietly leave without fanfare and never talk again, or did you have texting conversations for years afterwards or did you just somehow sneak away?"

Crys highlighted this question because it had moved her to think that Sarah wished to convey her "real interest" and "care" in the story of the "day of leaving" to client and had done so convincingly. Crys said, if someone asked her that, she would somehow immediately know that the person really wanted to know and hear and care about this.

We talked about Sarah's question for the remaining conversation as a formidable example of a question to "find the story to get lost in." First of all, can you all easily defend Sarah's decision to let this be one the questions to invest in? Why is it important to ask this young man about the "day of leaving" and invest in this story first above other possible stories to tell in a first session? Remember the young man's





un-story proposal: that this relationship had left him with a serious case of “co-dependence.” Can you see why Sarah might want to invest in the story of the “day of leaving” as a possibility for counter-story work to begin?

Y'all will of course think your own thoughts, but 2 things beyond the above un-story-counterstory work that Sarah embarked on struck me as wonderful about Sarah's possible thinking behind the question were these things:

1. How do we convincingly let a client know that we are looking for a story (instead of an unstory, a label, a one-sentence response, a descriptor, a conclusion)? Well, this is how Sarah did it in the first part of her question: *“How did it go down when you left? Can you tell me the story? Was it sunny? Or was there a big storm happening?”*

See how well that works? Sarah asked specifically for a story, but as if to further clarify to the client that she really was looking for a story about the “day of leaving” rather than a thin conclusion or a one-sentence answer, she asked about the weather on that day. She proved her interest in an actual story, did she not?

2. And how do we convincingly let a client know that we are looking for a story and are not too delicate to handle the damn story whatever it's going to be? Sarah had a hunch from the earlier conversation that the colonizing of this client by pathologizing un-stories had had lasting effects on his words and ideas, and therefore set out to help in the following manner: *“Did you have, like, a big dramatic yelling match and then leave, slamming the door? Did you kind of quietly leave without fanfare and never talk again, or did you have texting conversations for years afterwards or did you just somehow sneak away?”*

Put another way: sometimes, when our clients struggle to tell their own stories, we cannot just torment them with quizzical series of “what happened?” and “why?”-questions. Sometimes, the best way to help in finding stories is to create options as lively “reflecting surfaces” for the client. These options are not meant to be true or colonizing of the client as clients rarely pick any of these options, and neither did Sarah’s client. These options are meant to show the client something else: *“look I'm not going to hang you, whatever you say, I'm not too delicate, I've done some living of my own, and I'm a little tough too, so be at ease, if you want, and feel free to actually tell me your story because I'm not a fucking princess who was raised in a glass castle with golden plates and bows in my hair, I'm an actual human who knows that life is wonderfully complicated and sweaty and messy.”*

Vikki Reynolds once wrote or said something about “clients constantly assessing in their own way, whether they can trust us.” I imagine that clients sometimes sit there and cock their heads a little and wonder to themselves: *“man, can I tell this person that I just had sex this morning, or haven't had sex ever, or that I was stoned or furious, or struggling to put pants on this morning, or can I tell her that my partner and I licked chocolate off each other's bellies and then got into a fight about feeling fat? Can I tell her any of this?”*





If you want your client's answer to be YES, about telling you their stories in ways that were actually messy the way life was, then show them so! Prove to them your trustworthiness and that you're not going to turn into Prissy Mc-proper by making your proposals of options of what someone might have felt or how a break-up might have gone lively and human. Show your allegiance and admiration for ways of human living and your condescension for the conventions of Master Narratives by the ways in which you speak. This is a way of resisting Master Narratives on the slant: make sure none of your examples of options are quite proper, ever. (For example, consider the effect of the particulars of my "options" when a client of mine struggled to say "what happened next" after their partner stormed out of the house after a 3-hour yelling match: "What did you do? Did you stare at the wall, all vacant, or did you mindlessly turn on the TV to drown out the shit in your ears that just happened, or did you want to smash things or cry until the world ends, - or what did you do?" Consider this in relation to the proper-ness of asking "What did you do? How did you care for yourself when he left?" Remember here that our questions can open portals to worlds untold, and if our imaginations are limited to imaginations of "self-care," or other proper-life-options, we can lose our clients' trust in the process!)

Here's how Sarah proved herself trustworthy y'all: "*did you have like a big dramatic yelling match and then leave, slamming the door? Did you kind of quietly leave without fanfare and never talk again, or did you have texting conversations for years afterwards or did you just somehow sneak away?*" I'd tell this therapist what really happened. I wouldn't tell the therapist who asked me, all proper, in a yoga voice, "and how did it feel to say goodbye?" or whatever.

By the way, Sarah just laughed about all this wondering about her thinking, and said, laughing, "look, I just thought: *give me the good stuff, because I have to write a poem about this to you.*" So there we go, "thinking like a writer" is helpful!

So then, based on above conversation about Sarah's question, and the consideration of why it was important to raise the story of the "day of leaving" as opposed to other stories for now, Crys went all the way back and answered her own question:

Crys: "So basically, it's: ask about the revolution?"

I rest my case. So it is. You're on fire, Crys.

(Only teeny-weeny caution: there are about 2 thousand ways of revolution, so get ready to hear about the ways of revolution that you've never ever even imagined. But other than that. Yes. This is perfect. Be beset with revolutions and ask about all the days of the revolution and tell those stories. YES!)

Lovely revolutionary Tuesday y'all,

Sanni





let me bitchsplain this to you

*here, let me bitch-splain it for you:
i mean, i am asking for the real story.
tell me the story as if we were two, full blooded humans
because i am sure as hell full-blooded
tell me the story, i can take it, i want it.
give me the tele novella of it all
-well, how do i do that?
i'll let you in on a secret:
look for the revolution.
shhhhhh....
it's not always loud
sometimes, it's a velvet revolution
an act of defiance
an exasperated "fuck you!"
silent tears
or finally looking back at him, straight into his eyes
don't fool yourself into thinking you know what revolution looks like for her or him or they
or me
but, if you are curiouser and curiouser
think the thoughts that lead to questions that lead to stories
and look for the revolution
put that on your fucking form!*

class dismissed.

By Crys Vincent,
after day 1 of Narrative therapy practicum training

