



The View from the Top of the World

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Donna and I have known each other for three years. She is a woman in her late 60's, who came to see me because of the terrible effects of all manner of abuse, suffered for twenty-five years at the hands of her father, and later for 30 years at the hands of her now-ex-husband. She has been in many kinds of therapy for 20 years and gained an encyclopedic wealth of knowledge along her journey. When we first met, Donna had been seeing the same psychiatrist and a succession of therapists for about 16 or 17 years and described herself as having done relatively well with this; she hadn't been admitted to hospital at all during this time. Then her psychiatrist retired. She was notified by a form letter. After 17 years! Understandably, she had no idea how to go on and consequently was admitted on this occasion for several weeks.

When Donna and I first met, her identity was pretty saturated by psychiatric discourse – ideas (like borderline and maybe hints of dependency, or something like complex PTSD) were offered to her. Over the years she sought out Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and attended a DBT skills group, something she was advised would be helpful to her. She completed the group, which she had previously done fifteen years before. Donna also returned to a mindfulness practice and remembered all of the things that she has figured out over the years that helped her get through hard times, brought on by the effects of the terrible abuse she so unfairly had suffered.

While Donna and I made some important strides in our work together, the effects of the abuse kept boomeranging back on Donna and catching her off guard and knocking her down, particularly during times of high contact with her ex-husband, over the holidays or other times when her children and grandchildren were in town. Despite our best efforts, I feared that sometimes just getting by might be as good as it could get for Donna.

I was at a loss as to offer her anything more than such a fate.





Tom Carlson came to town in early 2017, with his and David Epston's Insider Witnessing Practices (IWP) ideas. Tom spoke of how Insider Witnessing Practices might be particularly suited for working with people who have suffered trauma. He talked about how not all stories are created equal; some stories are real assholes – stories like “I'm not safe” or “I'm going to be killed” or “I deserved all the bad”. These kinds of stories can be set in stone by trauma. Tom also shared how sometimes, it is not enough to tell our stories on our own, that some problem stories are so gripping that we need others to tell a compelling counterstory on our behalf and that this is what Insider Witnessing Practices are designed to do. My notes from Tom's workshop had Donna's name scribbled all over them.

Given that the majority of our work at the Calgary Women's Health Collective is with women like Donna, who have suffered terrible effects of abuse in their lives, we were immediately excited about the possibility and promise of Insider Witnessing Practices for the women with whom we work. We eagerly studied transcripts of Tom's work to see how we might take up this work up in our own practice. A few months later in March, Tom returned to Calgary to help us prepare for our first Insider Witnessing interview. And as my notes with Donna's name scribbled all over them might have indicated, Donna was the person who was nominated for our first IWP interview. At the time, she was the first person in Canada to experience this practice.

Our team met on March 21st, to prepare for a counterstory interview, where I, as Donna's therapist, would portray Donna in a dramatic telling of the counterstory of her life. Prior to our planning meeting, I had gathered together the significant notes and therapeutic poetic documents from my previous conversations with Donna. We used these documents to plan a counterstory that would be as faithful as possible to Donna's words and the events and details of stories that she had shared with me. I presented these notes to the team and together, in a two hour meeting, we lovingly considered her words in an effort to tell a story that would do justice to all that Donna had endured and survived in light of what she had been formidably up against in her life. After a short break to gather our thoughts





and hearts, we recorded an interview of my portrayal of Donna's life, with Tom asking me questions that I would answer as 'Tiffany's Donna' according to my best knowing and hopes for Donna's life. I still vividly remember the moment right before the interview was about to start. I took a deep breath and let out a sigh as Tom and I made eye contact. Tom must have grasped the weight of responsibility I was feeling, as he asked, "Tiffany, I couldn't help but notice your sigh. Can you tell me what the sigh was saying? What is it on behalf of?" I responded, "I feel quite anxious. Not a bad kind of anxious but one that tells me how much I want to do right by Donna and the life that she has lived. No one deserves this more than she does."

During the interview, I was surprised by how natural it felt to answer as 'Tiffany's Donna' and how readily the answers to Tom's questions came to my mind, as though I was somehow infused by Donna herself. I was moved by Donna's life in a way that I hadn't been previously, from a perspective that I hadn't had before: from *inside* of her life. I was transformed by this interview as 'Tiffany's Donna', as an understanding of the possibilities of witnessing expanded beyond what I'd ever imagined, and have continued breathing new life into my work ever since. I remember secretly hoping that Donna would also be transformed by Insider Witnessing, even in some small way, and that she would somehow come to see herself as a loved and valued human being, deserving of safety, respect, dignity and honour.

We met with Donna the next day for the Act two interview where she became a witness to our attempt at a dramatic and honourable retelling of her life. Donna was given full authorial and editing rights over the telling. With her finger on the pause button, we stopped and started the video many times for her to ask questions of me, to revise the events that were told, and to make meaning of the events as they were told. on most occasions, donna paused the video recording to catch her breath and wipe away the tears that welled up as she saw herself, perhaps for the very first time, as someone who was an active agent, shaping the very events of her life as they unfolded before her eyes and ears.





I met with Donna about three weeks later on April 19th to explore the effects that watching a portrayal of her life had had on her life, armed with some questions that Tom had for Donna. While it was clear to everyone involved that the experience had been incredibly moving and meaningful to Donna, nothing could have prepared us for what she was about to say.

Donna came to the follow-up session in crisis, a crisis of great magnitude, the kind of crisis that might have derailed her in the past. Her son, daughter in-law and five grandchildren had just informed her that they were moving to the east coast in June. I thought it prudent to set the questions Tom had proposed, with the prospect of abandoning them.

She processed this as much as she could (as much as anyone could, I believe, as the situation continues to unfold) in about 20 minutes. This was remarkable to witness. Neither she nor I could remember her having done anything this before. This struck me as a very real effect of the IWP, and is referenced later in our conversation. Then Donna, in full possession of herself, turned to me and authorized me to proceed. “Okay, Tiffany, let’s do this!” I read out Sanni’s poetic witnessing response to her Donna spontaneously began reflecting on the effects of all of the poems – the ones produced from our therapy sessions, and the one from Sanni. I belatedly realized that I should have begun recording before I read out the responses from the team. As a result, the recording begins near the end of the conversation, where Donna is telling me that all of the poems from the past 2 years somehow fit together with the IWP.

Rather than trying to summarize the interview, I will let her words stand for themselves in the transcript below.

Transcript of Follow-Up Interview

Donna: It deepened into a real solid foundation of hope. Yeah. Yeah. Somehow it’s deepened into a stronger foundation for hope. Wow!





- Tiffany: Did the poems somehow or other deepen the strong foundation of hope that we talked about during the Act 2 (two)?
- Donna: Especially when I was listening to Tom as a man because those words – I found it like ‘you’re just bullshitting’ you know? Because I don’t buy that from men. Because I’ve never been able to understand or process anything but negative from a male.
- Tiffany: What it was like to see your life portrayed before your eyes by your therapist Tiffany?
- Donna: It was actually life altering. It was mind changing!
- Tiffany: Mind changing...
- Donna: My mind sort of became a slow globe
- Tiffany: Really? What did that feel like?
- Donna: Oh, it’s scary; it’s very scary. It’s like being on a swinging bridge.
- Tiffany: A swinging bridge?
- Donna: You know those bridges you walk on crossing over a river in a canyon. My mind was sort of turning on a pedestal. I could actually feel it turning inside my head.
- Tiffany: And what does that turning indicate? Was your mind turning toward something or away from something?





- Donna: I think, you know, it's stabilizing the right and left hemispheres of my brain.
- Tiffany: Wow! Is it a processing thing that you are talking about?
- Donna: Yeah, it's almost as if it is realigning my brain. Before the Act 2, my brain couldn't comprehend anything like that because I used to respond negatively to any comment all of the time. But in the Act 2 to sit there actually see this man and you talking, I almost want to ask, 'Who the hell are you talking to?'
- Tiffany: So you're looking over your shoulder and asking yourself, "Who in the hell are you talking to?"
- Donna: I thought to myself, 'I must be in the wrong room. They can't be talking about me.' I always thought I belonged in the room for bad kids or bad people.
- Tiffany: Do you mean a 'trouble room'?
- Donna: Yeah, the room for the bad people. The real bad ones.
- Tiffany: Donna, are you saying that seeing your life portrayed by Tiffany's Donna somehow turned something right side up in your mind?
- Donna: Absolutely! My brain actually shifted in my head.
- Tiffany: Wow. Wow. [is almost in disbelief – spoken slowly and deliberately] As you were watching the video of me portraying you, was there anything in particular that Tiffany's Donna said that really surprised you?'





Donna: I would say what really surprised me most was the authenticity. Let me put it another way, the rightness of it and I could get it. When I was watching you as me, you even looked like me and how I look down. Oh my god, it was really weird to see myself in you. I didn't realize that I was so soft spoken until I heard Tiffany's Donna speak.

Tiffany: Were there any particular words that my Donna said that surprised you or that you would have never thought of putting it quite that way?

Donna: I think when you were talking about all of my traumas. When I heard that, I knew in that moment, for the very first time, that these things really did happen to me. It set it in stone. When I've talked to other professionals, I always told them, 'Oh I had a wonderful childhood,' whenever I was asked about it. Just putting the pieces together now, I thought holy shit, I was really trying to put something over on them, wasn't I? It was as if I was trying to convince them I know that I am a really bad person. I didn't believe I deserved anything. I didn't even deserve to be on this earth. I would blame myself for everything that went wrong in my life.

Tiffany: Since the Act 2, did thinking over how my Donna told what happened to her give you an opportunity to think differently about yourself?

Donna: Yeah! Within about a week, I could actually feel like my brain was starting to shift. It makes my stomach kind of flip a bit too.

Tiffany: Was there a sensation of movement, like losing your balance?

Donna: Yeah! It was like okay, here we go. It was like being on a big ferris wheel ride. Oh boy here comes this ride.





- Tiffany: Was there a different sensation when you were at the bottom of the ride to when you moved to the top? At the top of the ride, did you get a different perspective?
- Donna: Up until now, I have always felt my head is over here and my brain is somewhere else. But now, my head and my brain feel like they are coming together. And now I actually think that I'm not the terriblest person on this earth. The processing in my brain must have changed things.
- Tiffany: Wow! Thank you, Donna. As you were watching my Donna, was there anything in particular that you found yourself relating to or agreeing with that you had never considered before?'
- Donna: I think one of the most profound moments is when you were telling Tom about the things that had happened to me. And it really took me awhile to think about that because it was just really hard to hear... It was like I was almost like taking a spaceship to Mars.
- Tiffany: Is this what you were referring to earlier when you said that this provided a foundation of hope that was now set in stone?
- Donna: Yeah! You know what I went from a mind stance of 'I don't belong here,' 'I don't deserve...' To being like almost... here it goes again Tiffany. My mind is turning a bit now. But I am fully present. My brain is shifting a little bit. Whew!
- Tiffany: Is that okay with you? Is it mind is shifting in the right direction for you?





- Donna: Yeah! It's kind of like a pendulum. I actually feel my brain turning. It's like I assimilated myself to the earth rotating on its axis.
- Tiffany: Where were you before?
- Donna: I've had a couple of experiences like this before but all of this probably started after the Act 2.
- Tiffany: As a result of watching my portrayal of your life, did you come away with any new appreciations of yourself and how you have led your life?'
- Donna: Yeah, it felt it kind of awakened my heart. It was like watching a new born baby– a little baby there...
- Tiffany: Is this a rebirth that you are talking about that either comes from your heart or is centered around it?
- Donna: Yeah! It gets glowy. It's almost like...[runs out of words]
- Tiffany: Was that in regard to anything in particular, say in watching Tiffany's portrayal of you?
- Donna: Yeah! If we were just having an ordinary conversation and you just sat there and told me the very same things that Tiffany's Donna did, I would have said, 'No Tiffany. It's not that. It's this!' And you, staring at me, then would argue the opposite. And you would say, 'No it's not. It's definitely this.' But hearing and watching you as me, my mind actually shifted. Because I could somehow feel differently about myself when it was Tiffany's Donna.





- Tiffany: When you talked about your rebirth, is it possible that somehow a different Donna was born during the Act 2 (two)? Perhaps one who is now more aligned with the axis of the earth?
- Donna: Yeah! Yeah!
- Tiffany: Wow! Wow! [in amazement]
- Donna: It's really weird. [They both chuckle together]
- Tiffany: What kind of a weird do you mean?
- Donna: I suppose like people who have smoked a whole bunch of pot or something. But my weird isn't in a drugged state, I was actually in my own state. That's the weird bit. I wasn't on Mars.
- Tiffany: Donna, was it weird in that you welcomed yourself home?
- Donna: Yeah! I was thinking I was way out in left field when I talked to mental health professionals before. And now I think I've made a 180-degree turn.
- Tiffany: If you're not out in left field, where are you now?
- Donna: I felt my brain was way over there in left field. My brain just kind of rotated on its axis like the earth and [Donna takes her right hand at a remote angle to her body and brings it quickly towards her chest, making a swish sound and then states] it's here now.
- Tiffany: Where is 'here' now Donna?





- Donna: On the earth!
- Tiffany: Are you more firmly rooted now in your world than before the Act 2?
- Donna: Yeah! Absolutely! The more I talk about what's happened to me since the Act 2, it's like people might think, 'God what drug is she on?' And I've never touched the stuff and I would never want to.
- Tiffany: Are you were saying that the more you talk about it [the effects of the Act 2, the more people look at you like and think, 'Holy smokes?'
- Donna: Yeah! If I were to tell people about this [Act 2] outside of therapy, they wouldn't believe me. In fact, a lot of people in my family would still criticize me for still being in therapy. But my mind stance now is, 'I don't give a damn!' All I care about is that you know my journey and are willing to help me. I could care less what anyone else thinks. I wouldn't even be able to profess this [effects of Act 2] to anyone else.
- Tiffany: I've struggled to put words to my experiences of this as well and it takes time to process, doesn't it? This shifting on your axis business is no small thing, right?
- Donna: Yeah! Right! And actually my head feels bigger.
- Tiffany: Did you just say that your head feels bigger?
- Donna: Yeah, there's more brain matter.
- Tiffany: Did this [the Act 2] somehow grow your brain and warm your heart at the same time?





- Donna: Yeah! I can now sit and read a book and actually process what I've read. Before I had a real hard time reading something and remembering what I had just read.
- Tiffany: Donna, are you saying that this process has not only changed your brain and warmed your heart but it's opened UP a place that's holy enough for you to reside? That's a weird question, sorry!
- Donna: Yeah! It's like now I am able to stand up to the fear. I've actually had a few conversations with my dad [who died many years ago] and told him, 'You're not fricking messing with me anymore. I am done with you trying to screw my brain around!'
- Tiffany: That is amazing Donna and must have taken a great deal of your courage! When you're talking back to your dad, are you sitting in a room? Are you speaking out loud? Are you writing something? Or something else?
- Donna: Yeah! Yeah! I think I came to a time when these things just needed to be said.
- Tiffany: And is it possible that it's never too late to say these things that need to be said?
- Donna: Yeah! Wow!
- Tiffany: May I ask another one of Tom's questions and I'll be quick. "It's been common for the people who've participated in the Act 2 before to tell us that they felt like they had travelled a great distance during the interview..."
- Donna: Yeah, totally!





- Tiffany: "...in the weeks that followed. Would you say that your experience was similar? How far do you think that you have travelled in your life as a result of this experience? "
- Donna: Well like I said it's like being up on top of the earth.
- Tiffany: What kind of view do you have from being up on top of the earth?
- Donna: It's like I am standing up there on top of the earth and can just feel the earth rotating around. That's what's going on inside my mind. As a matter of fact, it was going around pretty fast there for a while that I had to like pull off on the side of the road. I had to concentrate really hard and then it slowed down. Before, the earth tilted to one side and now it has righted itself with me on top of it all.
- Tiffany: Donna, is the earth righting itself even a little bit more just through these questions?
- Donna: Yeah! Yeah!
- Tiffany: Were there any points of realization that seemed particularly important for you to pursue either on your own or in this therapy?
- Donna: Yeah, to find out who I really am.
- Tiffany: With your brain shifting and your heart opening, is there somehow more space for the real Donna?
- Donna: It's the words. His words are leaving and being replaced with different thoughts.





- Tiffany: If the old words are leaving and new ones are coming, what are the new words that are replacing the old?
- Donna: The new words are my different hopes, dreams and beliefs. Before it was almost as if there were two people fighting inside my head. Like people are in your head fighting.
- Tiffany: Who are the two people who were fighting in your head?
- Donna: I think it's the real you and the one that was driven out.
- Tiffany: Can I ask one more question from Tom? 'If you compared the Act 2 with previous sessions with me, how many therapy sessions would you estimate that this experience was worth to you?'
- Donna: Oh my gosh! Let me think about that for a while. I don't know. Years! Light years! For so long I had a real fight in my brain – my dad was the driving force and was driving my brain; now I'm driving my brain.

I was stunned. I sat at my desk for several minutes after Donna left, unable to process the story that Donna had just told me, so I went outside for a walk. It was a typical Calgary spring day, mild and a bit cloudy with a breeze. As I walked, I slowly realized that what Donna was telling us was that the Insider Witnessing Practices had transformative effects reminiscent of those reported by people who have accessed well-known manualized trauma therapies. It also sounded as though she had reclaimed agency over her whole brain – what she thought and how she responded – that something in this wild witnessing practice had allowed her heart to take back her mind from the voice of abuse. How could any of this be? What on earth had we stumbled upon here? I then had the sobering thought that I was probably getting ahead of things as I have a habit of doing, and began to doubt that anyone else would think that Donna's account of the effects of the IWP was a particularly big deal. Still, when I returned to my desk, my hands shook





as I sent the recording of the follow up session to Tom, David and my team at the Calgary Women's Health Collective.

As it turned out, the others did think that it was a big deal as well. The team composed and sent beautiful witnessing responses to Donna, to offer up retellings of their hearing of what she had experienced. Here is one by my colleague and friend, Sanni Paljakka:

I once knew a room on this earth
And inside
There were beatings
And men and their words
Like stupid
And all the bad, the bad, the bad

But then you people -And him-
You all started talking
And the mannerisms
Were soft-spoken
And I kept asking myself
Who are you talking to?

And then you said:
"This really did happen."
And I thought
Here we go.
Here comes the ride.

Over the swinging bridge
We travelled
And on to the ferris wheel
And I was lifted high over this room
And on to the very
Top of this earth.





And here
 The old words took their leave of me
 And my heart was reborn to a glow
 And my brain tilted and turned.

And I could feel the earth underneath me
 Tilting and turning and then
 Slowly righting itself
 In rhythm to me.

Don't you give a damn Donna
 The earth sings its song to me
 The lonely season has passed.
 You already belong
 In the family of the high souls
 On this earth.

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Donna and I met today. She and I finished working together nearly two years ago and she continues to thrive in her life. She has had no interaction with the Mental Health Services (system) during that time – no contact with therapy or psychiatry, and no hospital or urgent care contact. This is quite remarkable, considering the nearly twenty years of regular therapy and psychiatry contact she had prior to the IWPs. Donna told me that not only have the effects of the IWPs endured, they have expanded into all areas of her life. Donna shared that the IWPs experience has been “like a tree, with new shoots continuing to grow.” Her life is rich and full, and she is accompanied by a “bravery” that was unavailable to her before the Insider Witnessing Practices. I tentatively shared with Donna my secret hope from nearly three years ago, that the IWPs would somehow afford her a view of herself as a loved and valued human being, deserving of safety, respect, dignity and honour. Donna hugged me tightly and said, “I see most of this now and try to





make sure others do too. Thank you.” The earth has indeed righted itself, with Donna standing firmly atop of it.

