



Insider Witnessing as a Two-Way Account of Therapy: A Gift Exchange

Loree Stout

Parts of this paper were delivered at the Spirit of Adventure Conference held in March 2018 in Calgary.

In this paper I will describe some of the ethical and personal responsibilities I feel for engaging in acts of meaning making that contribute to rich identity conclusions in my work and my life. I will describe these responsibilities and give examples of how my participations in Insider Witnessing Practices (IWPs) have been significant personal and professional life-shaping encounters. I will also include a description of a process and practices that we engaged in with the purpose of acknowledging and honoring the contribution of our clients to our work and life.

I first learned about Insider Witnessing Practices at a 2-day workshop in Calgary with Tom Carlson in January 2017. I was captivated by what he was saying and showing - the ideas, the practices, the videotapes of the work, the transcripts, and the live interview. In addition to being captured by his presentation of the practices of IWPs and the effects (outcomes) on the women who had been at the center of this practice, I was intrigued by his description of the effects on the therapists involved and the quotes he shared from other therapists and students who had been participating in IWPs. (Carlson & Epston, 2017).

Some weeks later I had an opportunity to participate in IWP with a woman (Sue) who had been consulting me for some months about concerns and problems, struggles that had threatened to take her life. Later that day I was sitting quietly rather overcome by my own sense of myself and by my experience of Sue. I was aware of feelings of tenderness, preciousness, loving - both in my connection with Sue and with myself. In my attempt to pay attention to my own experience and to try to capture this in words I



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wrote this email to Tom Carlson and my team (Sanni Paljakka and Tiffany Saxton) who I work with at the Calgary Narrative Collective. The CNC is a community based, not-for-profit agency that welcomes clients from diverse backgrounds with a wide range of concerns at a sliding fee scale.

Dear Tom, I am alone in my home and the evening is one of the most glorious we have had this spring. I was intrigued by how moved I felt portraying Sue in a way even I had not imagined before the interview. The twists and turns of the interview helped me connect and express through answering your questions my experience of her enduring moral character. I am thinking of a word that describes my feeling watching this hope biased performance.....it honestly feels more akin to love biased. It feels both like holding this warm soft baby who was dropped from the foster care in a home with little warmth or emotion in my arms and loving her preciousness AND looking at a woman with grit, an activist spirit with a strong longing (and determination) for more...a quest for the precious treasures to be returned to people and the rescuing of their souls. I would describe the feeling as one of love and a feeling of being part of something quite spiritual.

It is not that I have not had feelings of being inspired by women's commitments, beliefs, ways of living, or moments of tenderness in my work with people who consult me, experiences of being moved, but this was an amplified experience, a more powerful experience of what was not unfamiliar to me.

What does love have to do with it?

As I wrote the above email to my team, I was reminded of the first time I heard the word 'love' in the context of therapy. I was at a conference in Vancouver in 1998.

I was attending a presentation that Sally Ann Roth was giving. I can still hear



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her boldly stating, “I cannot help people that I do not love. In order to help people, I have to find a way to love them.” This was an astounding statement to me. I will not forget sitting there reflecting on the people who were consulting me at the time as a therapist in an outpatient mental health program. I remember silently reviewing the list of people who were consulting me at the time and asking do I love that person, or that person or that person.? I could not honestly answer yes to all of them. I could have brushed it off with some version of she does not really mean that. She can’t really be saying what I think she is saying, but I did not. Something about that statement spoke a truth to me....not one I had known before I heard it spoken, but one I could not let go of. How does she do that? What kind of therapist must she be? Should I really be doing this work?

Not long after that experience I was asking a person who was consulting with me how the conversation was going for her. She said ‘good’ and Michael White’s voice entered my head “there is good and there is good, what kind of good is it?” She answered with, “you believe me.” I did not have the wits about me at that point to ask what she was discerning, what she was noticing that allowed her to conclude that I believed her. I think I was consumed by thoughts of “this seems like a pretty low bar, a therapist who believes her!” “and there must have been other people, professionals (who’s intention was to be helpful) who believed her.” I had no illusion that was about me the person. What was I *doing* that translated into her saying, “you believe me,” I began to wonder was it my curiosity about what meaning she was making of the events and conundrums she was sharing with me. Was it the practice of not seeing her as the problem, was it the questions I was asking about the influence the problem was having on her, her life and her relationships and how it might have her thinking about herself or was it something else?

I do not know how she would have answered that question had I asked it, but what I do know for sure, or believe more strongly now, is that it was the practices that believed. It is the practices that acknowledge. It is the



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practices that love.

It has been over 2 years since I wrote the above email to the team in which included “it honestly feels more akin to love biased” and I think I now have a clearer understanding of my experience.

Imagine being interviewed about your knowing of someone that you have gotten to know over several hours of conversation about their life. Imagine that you have spent time pouring over your notes, studying their expressions, their very words, remembering the stories they have told you, being reminded of expressions and ways of living that inspired you. This is the gathering of the material in preparation for the IWP interview. Imagine being asked questions that bring forth what the person has been up against, the person’s honor in the struggle, their enduring liveliness through the suffering, an interview that is revealing of those moments of being touched. If I think of IWP interview I as painting a portrait (Carlson, 2017), I think of the reviewing of person’s words (notes) and the preparations as the gathering of the material...the paints, the brushes, the canvas. Imagine where your heart might be as you prepare to portray the person. I am beginning my portrayal of her with an already moved heart (Carlson and Swart, 2017).

I now believe that constructing a story out of the moments, seeing a whole life has a profound and powerful effect on the therapist. It becomes life worth loving. Some people talk about IWPs as an act of love (I don’t disagree), but I am wanting to express my experience of them as a practice that loves, the effects on the therapist of amplifying the experience of love for the person. I have now come to understand that constructing a story about someone’s moral character, a story that is created from a knowing of a person, a story that has the person’s own words, their own actions, their own narratives of events and responses at the center is an act of love for the person, but an act of loving for the therapist as well. You *do* love.



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Significant personal and professional life-shaping encounters

What is it about the therapeutic endeavor that is *potentially* changing of our lives as therapists, that *potentially* can contribute to our own stories of our identity being more fully described? What would be a relationship that could contribute to a therapist's identity being moved? I have found the answers to these questions for myself in Michael White's ethics about the therapeutic relationship and his commitments to what he describes as a two-way account of therapy.

White (1997) contends that a two-way account of therapy is "one that emphasizes the life-shaping nature of this work in respect to the therapist's life. In constructing a two-way account of therapy, the therapist takes the responsibility to identify, to acknowledge, and to articulate, within the therapeutic context, the real and the potential contribution that this work makes to his/her life." (p. 130). White believes that not to make it our business to acknowledge and articulate the ways in which our conversations with the people who consult us changes our own life is an 'Act of marginalization, an act that denotes those people who seek our help as other....'(p .55-56).

Being interviewed about transport

In addition to the practice of IWPs I feel very privileged to work with a team of colleagues who are, not only committed to putting our experiences into some graspable form but are also committed to taking-it back concepts and practices, a two-way account of therapy.

After some initial experiences with Insider Witnessing interviews, we invited our clients for a group follow up conversation about their experiences. We opened this group conversation with a reflection from each of the therapists involved about how this experience had moved and transformed our lives. The purpose of these opening reflections by the therapists, was for our



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clients to be witnesses to our own transport and to invoke reciprocity rather than constructing them as recipients of our knowledge. Our clients welcomed this idea of a group conversation with enthusiasm and curiosity.

I will not take the space here to outline the care and consideration we paid to safety for our clients, to ensuring an informed consent. Below, in the spirit of taking it back practices, I am including a short segment of the transcript of my part of the interview.

Loree: In my provocativeness in my career, so I haven't always spoken, but I have sometimes spoken and rattled the cages, and thought I could have done that better. The story I always have had about myself is, "Why do I rant on with that?" Some people appreciate my ranting. Some do not. [laughter] I appreciate it. But there was always this, other people seem to have *gracefulness* about saying things when they feel outraged, and I can't. I remember the moment, well it was probably when I decided to leave my job at the hospital, I was sitting in my office after listening to a woman tell me that she went to the Emergency Room in such pain that she didn't think she could move. She went with her husband and then she was put in this cell on the right. There was a guard outside and she sang to herself "*where am I? and what did I do wrong? and what is the crime I committed? and where is my husband?*" And then she heard a nurse talking about how she might be suicidal. And she wondered, "are they describing me?" So after she left, I was sitting in my office with the door open and my boss came by and she said "you look a bit tired, remember [?]" there was an invitation I might not have taken now. So I shared that with her about the horror I felt, and the *despair*. And her



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response was "Oh they didn't explain it that well enough to her. And I remember thinking "There is no explaining that."

Tom: Right, there is no explaining...

Loree: There is no explaining that. Sometimes I doubt myself, you know in a staff meeting. "Why did I go on and on about that? It didn't seem to change anything. I could have been more eloquent." But listening to Sue and Lin describe their experiences, it was so like--yeah. I needed to go on and on about that, and it didn't matter how I went on and on about that. The fact that I did go on and on about that, I could have gone on and on about a whole lot of other things. But--sorry, the feeling joined in--

Tom: Was there something about not just hearing Lin and Sue, but also you know taking them on that restored the honor of your ranting?

Loree: I'm thinking about that.

Tom: Are the things you go on and on about deserving of ranting?

Loree: It is deserving of ranting.

Tom: Is that what was restored to you? The honor of your ranting?

Loree: Yeah



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- Tom: Do you think that Lin and Sue would ever want you to stop ranting about the injustice of being put in a cell?
- Loree: No.
- Sanni: Nor would we! [laughter]
- Tom: What do you think it might be like Loree if more of us ranted in the way that you have ranted?
- Loree: We might have a different system.
- Tom: Lin and Sue restored some of that to you?
- Loree: Yes, yes. I enjoy it.
- Tom: You feel joy in doing that with them?
- Loree: By them.
- Tom: By them. Would they be cheering you on in your ranting? [laughter]
- Loree: They'd be doing a much better job. Cheering me on.
- Tom: "Way to go Loree!" [laughs]
- Tom: Yeah
- Sue: One conversation at a time.
- Tom: Is this changing the system too?





- Loree: Yes.
- Loree: But I'm thinking of another way, I don't know--can I go on?
- Tom: Please. Only if you are going to rant? [Laughter]
- Loree: I'm not going to rant [laughter]

Acknowledging and honoring of the contribution of persons to the life of the therapist

After our group interview, I met with Sue to talk about what the process was like for her and what she had noticed. Following is a segment of this conversation (which I recorded).

- Sue: It was ...I think the word I used was profound. After hearing you, Sanni and Tiffany ...I was just in complete awe. I thought it was absolutely amazing the effect that we so called 'patients' or 'clients'... the effect we had on you portraying us. Just how that interview process effected the three of you was quite powerful for me. And, I was amazed as I had no idea the kind of impact I could have on somebody else.
- Loree: Did you have any idea the degree to which Sanni and I had taken you on?
- Sue: No
- Loree: What was it like to sit there and listen, and maybe even feel, see the tears----just the influence you have had on our lives- the gifts you have given us?



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- Sue: I am humbled. I am extremely humbled. Having this opportunity, (*spoken shakily with emotion*) to partake in this opportunity has literally restored my self worth...that I AM deserving.
- Loree: And what difference has that made experiencing the significant impact you could on your therapist?
- Sue: It has made me even more proud of who I am. It's made me understand that I as a person impact others and that kindness needs to be shared.
- Loree: Can I go back? "I as a person...simply the person I am has an impact on others? What did you see?"
- Sue: Me, me! I never saw it before coming here and talking to you here, to other professionals. You are here to help but, who would have thought that in the sharing of what we share there can be something that inspires you or gives you hope.
- Loree: It changes me
- Sue: Changes you and allows you to take something from it and add it to who you are and what you do. Wow! You can be broken and still impact somebody and I would like to say, be a teacher.
- Loree: Is it that you can feel broken and the unbroken comes through?
- Sue: The essence of who we are is still there.



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- Loree: Even with the suffering...
- Sue: Yeah! The part we are not seeing. You just feel broken and crumbled, depressed and destroyed and lost, but there is still something in you that is pushing you through, that is getting you searching. And we are teaching and sharing and impacting other people's lives. Who would have thought!!
- Loree: Can I ask about something you said during the interview with Tom? Your experience of listening to Loree's Sue...You said it was like watching a play and you can't walk out because you can't wait to you need to see how it finishes. And by seeing the finish you have no choice but to see yourself. Do I remember that right?
- Sue: Yeah! You are sitting there watching yourself.
- Loree: Something about that is more powerful?
- Sue: Yeah! While I was watching the video, I kept asking, "How am I going to answer this question?" and then you get to listen to how it is answered and you go. And you will be thinking about it and you are hearing it and you are like, "My God, that is what I would say!" And then How Does This Person Know This? And that is when you sort of realize you are sharing stuff and your therapist was really hearing what's important to you. They are hearing that essence of you that you don't know is there...that the brokenness is trying to hide from you.





- Loree: So there is this wondering of “how does this person know this” and somewhere along...
- Sue: You connect the dots.
- Loree: Because this person knows you?
- Sue: That they really HEARD me! And knows ME! And then I realized while I was watching the video that I have felt that Me. Hey, that’s Me (tearful). I know that Me. I have met that Me. Where were you for so long?
- Loree: And “this has been Me” all along
- Sue: Yup, where did you go?
- Loree: “I’ve met you”
- Sue: Yup
- Loree: “I know you!”
- Sue: Yup
- Loree: “You’ve been there all along”
- Sue: Yeah
- Loree: That’s a profound experience...hey I have found me
- Sue: And I’ve found Me.





Loree: Is it significant having that experience of “I know you, you are familiar”is it profoundly different from someone like me simply telling you how I see you?

Sue: Coming from someone telling you...you shut down. I don't believe you. I am broken, I am lost, they don't get it. You don't hear it. They are just being nice. They are being fluffy. Even worse...they don't get it. Hugely different than meeting somebody you know. Or meeting the me that you know. And you can say “I know you.” It was like I was seeing me talking to me. The me I can see that's hiding. It is like these two me's are coming out and reintroducing themselves.

Loree: Like ...Remember me?

Sue: Why did you let go of me? Why did you wander away? I am back!! And you are not pushing me out again!! Period!!

Loree: You have described it so clearly. Through this process, you can actually meet yourself. Meet yourself in a way that feels familiar.

Sue And who would have known. You can make your therapist cry who is not even a crier. Absolutely amazing to see how touched you were by my life.

Sue's words are an amazing account of the powerful impact of being witness to the ways we (therapists) were changed by her and of the effects on her of being portrayed by me. Rather than confirming the thin conclusions of life and herself that brought Sue to therapy, she experienced an acknowledgment and honouring of the contributions of her ways of living to



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our work and our lives. She articulately expresses how these taking-it-back practices “contributes to the generation of thick descriptions of a persons’ lives and assists them to break free from thin and deficit-centered descriptions of their qualities and purposes’ (White, 1997, p. 131). She says this in a variety of ways in the above transcript, but perhaps most powerfully to me in “You just feel broken and crumbled, depressed and destroyed and lost., but there is still something in you that is pushing you through, that is getting you searching. And we are teaching and sharing and impacting others. Who would have thought!!”

Sue’s, also gives an account of the effect of how seeing my portrayal of her in an IWP has had on her in contrast to being told how she touched my life. From above conversation “and that is when you sort of realize you are sharing stuff and they are hearing what’s important to you. They are hearing that essence of you that you don’t know is there...that the brokenness is trying to hide from you” “and then you realize you have felt that Me...that’s Me. (tearful) I know that Me. I have met that Me.” She describes an experience of having herself restored to her.

That is quite remarkable and not something that could have happened by me trying to express what I see in her or how she has touched my life. She talks about her experience of therapists (And others) attempting tell her these things. “Coming from someone telling you...You shut down. I don’t believe you. I am broken, I am lost, they don’t get it. You don’t hear it. They are just being nice, they are being fluffy.”

In my experience, it is one thing for us to tell our clients how they have touched your life, it is quite another thing altogether for me as her therapist to show it through a portrayal of her life, using her words, and telling stories about her life that she, herself, has relayed to me and for me to be moved to tears in the telling of it. My own experience supports Epston’s belief that IWPs substantiate the therapists love and regard for them. We have come to believe that IWP turn our regard for the person into a substance, a graspable



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form.

I would like to end this paper with another quote from Michael White, one that has held precious resonance for me over many years.

“...my meetings with people who consult me over a wide range of predicaments, concerns and problems have always been significant personal and professional life-shaping encounters. And more than this, the people who have consulted me over the years have not only opened their lives to me in ways that, in the usual course of their lives, they do not to others, but they have significantly included me in their lives. This inclusion is such that these people populate many of the territories of my identity – I regard them to be fellow travellers, and they have made a significant contribution to the cast of the characters of my life, provided me with the opportunity to become other than who I was at the outset of these events” (White, 2002,p. 13).

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