

A Narrative Origin and Conversion Experience: A Story of Connections

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The Beginning

It's October 1988 in northern California. The LA Dodgers and Oakland A's are in the World Series, and Michael White is the presenter for the annual AFTNA workshop (Association of Family Therapists of Northern California). The memory is crystal clear as it is the context for both a conversion and an origin story.

Three years earlier (1985): I was all but finishing the Results and Discussion section of my doctoral dissertation when I decided to take some time off. There was a three-week family therapy externship advertised at the Family Therapy Program at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, a program headed up by Karl Tomm. I didn't know Karl personally, but as a student and teacher of family therapy I knew well that he had brokered family therapy theories in North America. When I showed up for the externship, with my one-year-old golden retriever Tyson, Karl was off for a sabbatical—unbeknownst to me (or to many) he was visiting Michael White in Adelaide, South Australia. Evan Imber-Black and Gary Saunders were teaching the externship, mostly Milan oriented. There were only ten of us, and I connected with Jeff Zimmerman, who was coming from Oklahoma at the time. It became clear that we saw things similarly.

Two years later (1987), now with a doctoral degree, I was teaching and practicing family therapy (mostly the Milan version), when I received a phone call. The caller was Jeff Zimmerman, my previous acquaintance in Calgary. Jeff and his family were moving to the San Francisco area, and he was looking for some teaching gigs. In the meantime, he had returned to Calgary to hear Karl extol the merits of Michael White; Jeff was now smitten. I asked Jeff to share with me everything he had learned and everything he was reading (that Michael had been reading, as well as anything Michael had written). This began a long relationship with readings from Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Edward Bruner, Jerome Bruner, and others, including some of Michael's early work on "sneaky poo" as well as with anorexia nervosa (a paper published in the journal *Family Process*).



I tried to catch up. As mentioned above, my first meeting with Michael (and Cheryl) was in October 1988 in Sonoma, California, where Michael was doing a two-day workshop for the AFTNC. (In between workshop hours, I was watching the World Series, where the Dodgers came from behind to beat the Oakland A's!). But baseball was not the story. The real story is a conversion story.

On my drive south to Los Gatos, where I was living at the time, I pondered Michael's teaching of the problem story and an alternate (preferred) story. (He was using a Batesonian model as a template in his earlier conceptualizations). I remember saying aloud to myself: "Does this mean I don't need to think of myself as a depressed person?"

Background

Much of my life up until then seemed to be one of darkness and melancholy. It wasn't devastating; I had been moving right along. My father died in a car accident when I was 15; although my mother was quite capable, she had to step up to an unimaginable task of raising three girls on her own. As the oldest, I also stepped up to more responsibility than I likely needed to. I had a close connection with my father, so losing him felt disastrous.

When I was a child, I was encouraged to be curious, to be a learner; whenever I asked "why?" my father would say "Let's look it up." Google didn't exist then, nor the internet. We had a bookcase full of Encyclopedia Britannica's, where we would find the word (or phrase) and read about the origin and meaning.

My parents came from early America Midwesterners, on my mother's side a small farm in the middle of Nebraska, on my father's railroad men. My mother, as the 2nd of eight children, went to a one-year teacher education post high school, and then taught first through eighth graders in a one-room schoolhouse. You could say that my father saved her from that fate by marrying her. He had finished his third year of engineering in college but left to go to work to help his parents. (This was post-depression time.) After a series of small jobs, he became a manager in a Safeway store, moving for one year to Kansas, and surviving the draft of World War II. Both parents realized they wanted more for their then two children, and off they went, headed for California in 1946, but deciding instead to land in Boise, Idaho where my mother had a younger sister and her family. After a series of living in rentals and the birth of my youngest sister, we bought a house next to my



mother's sister and settled in. Ours was not an atypical family in the middle of the 20th century, searching for a better life, for opportunity, but we may have been atypical in other ways.

I felt blessed; my parents wanted me to have a good education, and being brought up Catholic, I ended up in Catholic schools—where, indeed, I got a good education, learning discipline and hard work as well as the course content. Even after my father died, I worked to get a scholarship to a Catholic college, double majoring in chemistry and an integrated history/philosophy/literature course, finally going on for a master's degree in chemistry at the University of Notre Dame.

What's important about this background? Perhaps that it set the stage for what I'm calling a conversion experience. It was like "Paul falling off his horse." It was life changing. Through Michael's presentation those days in Sonoma, California, I experienced first-hand an understanding of multiple identities. I knew then that something had happened to me that would be with me the rest of my life, and I committed myself to a learning, a new way of thinking, one that suited me.

Why did it appeal to me? My growing up life somehow focused on the importance of community, relationships, the interconnectedness of all beings, and eventually an aversion to pathologizing. Growing up Catholic introduced me to the notion of the "Mystical Body," which, when separated from the religious aspect, helped me understand the wholeness of the universe and of all beings as somehow connected. My time in a religious community was likely an attempt to live a life of interrelatedness. Leaving it meant a search for belonging, for what could be possible.

Likely a decision to move from a science background (albeit with plenty of liberal arts to go along with it) to an education in counseling, then followed by a doctoral degree in clinical psychology was the direction the search took me. When teaching became my professional life, it was also an extension of continued learning.

The Clinical Psychology Background

I've made a distinction in most of my writing between a structural therapy approach and a post-structural one, seeing a systems approach as a sort of bridge

between the two. (See Dickerson, 2010). When I first started teaching, it was five classes of chemistry in high school. I did my best to help students pass the class because there were many who were not that interested. What I found is that my attempt to have meaningful, helpful relationships with my students had the effect of their seeking me out, outside of class, to talk about their lives. Before long, I realized that an education in counseling psychology might be helpful to me, and thus helpful to them. So, while continuing to teach, I also pursued a master's degree in counseling psychology at Santa Clara University. Because I was fortunate enough to live in California and pursue an education in the late 1970s, I could go to MRI (the Mental Research Institute) in Palo Alto and avail myself of classes with the West Coast family therapy tradition. I learned from Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, Richard Fisch, Art Bodin, and other notables; And I was introduced to their theory of change (See Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, & Bodin, 1974). For a time, I worked closely with Jules Riskin, and eventually ended up asking Jim Coyne, a one-time Director of the Institute, to be my dissertation chair (See Dickerson & Coyne, 1987).

Once graduated from Santa Clara University, I began teaching in their counseling department, classes in counseling the adolescent, family therapy, and couple's therapy. And I learned from another notable, Lynn Hoffman (1981), using her comprehensive book on Foundations of Family Therapy.

This background led me to postmodernism, as the 1980s saw a shift in the thinking of many family therapists and theorists, including Hoffman (1985, 1992), Dell (1982), and others. It eventually morphed into post-structural thinking. It led me to Michael White. In October 1989, San Francisco and the Bay Area were hit with an earthquake. When the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) decided to go ahead with their conference in San Francisco that November, I met David Epston (who I think suggested that when an earthquake is happening, we should yell at it—I found that extremely helpful!).¹

¹ David tells me: “The day of the earthquake, by a remarkable fate, I listened to an interview with the chief of police of LA, advising listeners what to do if there was an earthquake . . . only several hours later there was an earthquake, and Ann and I ‘shouted’ at it . . . and it stopped just as he suggested it would.”

Teaching and Learning

During that same year (1989), Jeff and I signed a contract on a space for therapy and training, which we named the Bay Area Family Therapy Training Associates (BAFTTA). We decided to teach solely the theory (approach) that Michael White was developing. This approach was only named “narrative” in 1990 after we had already named our center. In 1992, Jeff and I published the first article that appeared in the journal *Family Process* on narrative therapy entitled: “Families with adolescents: Escaping problem lifestyles” (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1992). Michael had published many articles previously, one for *Family Process* on anorexia; Jeff’s and mine was the first on narrative. That began a long process of a collaboration between Jeff and me that included multiple workshops, and many articles and book chapters, culminating in our 1996 book *If Problems Talked: Narrative Therapy in Action*.

In 1990 at an AAMFT meeting in Dallas, Texas, Jeff put together a meeting with Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, Melissa (now Elliott) and James “Griff” Griffith, and Janet Adams-Westcott; it may have been at the same meeting that I met Stephen Madigan. Our community was expanding. We considered ourselves the first narrative therapy pioneers in North America, teaching together, meeting together, sharing our writings, and extending conversations—a true development of the theory in our shared work. In 1991 Jeff and I presented our thinking about work with adolescents at an AAMFT conference in Washington, D.C. Michael White and David Epston were both in the audience—which of course made us extremely nervous and likely interfered with the quality of our presentation. In 1992 Jeff and I were invited among the first group of “narrative” therapists to Vancouver, B.C. for the 1st Narrative Therapy Conference, hosted by Stephen Madigan. Annual conferences followed, which after a decade morphed into what became called Therapeutic Conversations.

The decade of the 1990s was rich with teaching and learning, supervising interns, developing contacts and contracts with school districts, traveling and teaching, and finally writing. Jeff and I invited many persons connected with the narrative approach to Cupertino where we were located. Jeff and Michael White developed a rich connection as Michael stayed with Jeff’s family when he was in town. My relationship with Michael flourished but it took longer. David Epston also came often and was the person who most encouraged us to write.

Around the same time (1995) I moved further away from where our center was located and purchased a home in a town along California's Monterey Bay. This required a longer commute, but my passion was still located with BAFTTA and the work we were doing. The upside of my move is that my goddaughter lived with me for a couple of years as she was finishing her education in anthropology at the University of California Santa Cruz. She was reading all that I had been reading: Geertz, Turner, both Bruners, as well as Foucault and Derrida. We were able to have rich and expansive conversations.

All the while, Jeff and I were continually creating new ideas for workshops, presenting at AAMFT (American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy), APA (American Psychological Association), AFTA (American Family Therapy Academy), and the Vancouver Narrative conferences. We entertained narrative colleagues from New Zealand and Australia as guests.

Narrative on Tour and planet-therapy.com

As we closed in on the end of the millennium, we continued to create new possibilities. Our relationship with Stephen Madigan and his unrelenting entrepreneurial disposition inspired us, so that we crafted, along with our colleague Bill Lax, a project we called Narrative on Tour. The intention was to bring narrative ideas to an audience that might not otherwise be attending the Narrative Conferences in Vancouver. We would go to them instead of them coming to us. The idea was a good one, and we were invited to two venues: one in southern California sponsored by Duncan Wigg and Bob Mendlesohn; the other in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. We were a good mixture of experience and understanding of narrative work; we were entertaining; and we had fun, learning as we were teaching. The enterprise, however, turned out to be too costly for most groups, so unfortunately, we disbanded as a group but continued to teach separately.

Undeterred in our entrepreneurial approach, we designed a different means of reaching out as we finished our last day in Winnipeg. Because the end of the 1990s saw the explosion of the internet as a means of both education (content) and free enterprise, we saw our ideas as a perfect match for a content-centered website. (Twenty-plus years later, we know that enterprise won out over content). Jeff opted out of this project, but Stephen, Bill, and I jumped in



wholeheartedly—to the extent that I, for one, saw this as my future enduring endeavor. There followed a series of meetings to establish the content we wanted, the design group to create a website, and a means for raising money to create it. Stephen named it: planet-therapy.com. (The website is no longer active). He found a design group in Toronto. Bill and I went after the money. It was a whirlwind time, and we likely were out of our element. However, we started with an avantgarde design group, and pivoted to another less costly one, although not as flashy. Bill raised some money through a friend, and I found a likely benefactor in Silicon Valley. We made a presentation, got a promise of money, and then, as what happened to many dot coms in 1999, the money fell through. (Later we learned that our supposed benefactor had entered into many suspect money schemes—better that we never became involved). We didn't give up, but the ending was slow and disappointing.

However, other events were happening in the late 1990s. In 1999, we went to the 1st International Narrative Conference in Adelaide, Australia. We were also invited, later that year, to present at the New Zealand Association of Counselors (NZAC) conference in Hamilton, home of the University of Waikato. We knew David, of course, and had met John Winslade, Gerald Monk, and Wally McKenzie. And we were introduced to Kathie Crocket and Wendy Drewery. To my benefit, Kathie and I remained connected and have visited each other over the years. (For a while she was inviting me to do presentations in NZ, and she stayed with me in Aptos during a sabbatical). We have written together one of my favorite papers “El Tigre, El Tigre: A Story of Narrative Practice” in Al Gurman's (Ed., 2010) *Clinical Casebook of Couple Therapy*.

I stayed with David and Ann Epston for most of the June 1999 visit and was treated to Ann's amazing hospitality, including a massage from her masseuse, and my favorite Bluff oysters. David had arranged for Jeff and me to do a two-day workshop in Auckland prior to the NZAC meeting. It was there that I reconnected with two women, Dorothea Lewis and Aileen Cheshire, whom I had met at the narrative conference in Adelaide. That connection began a long and lasting friendship that is continuing to this day.

My 60th birthday happened during that visit, and David and Ann arranged for a birthday dinner. (My goddaughter also ordered flowers to be delivered to me!)

A Different Voice

Those last years before the turn of the century were also a turning point for me—the adventure and then failure of both Narrative on Tour and planet-therapy.com. But also, the 1st International Narrative Conference in Adelaide, the workshop in Auckland, the NZAC presentation; meeting and getting together with people with whom I would have a lifelong connection: Michael, David, Ann, Kathie, Dorothea, Aileen. However, that year also brought the end of a partnership and a friendship with Jeff. It was (and remains) a complicated ending, given all that we did creatively together. On the other hand, that separation brought me a sense of independence and a connection with my own knowledge, my own competence. It allowed me to push the boundaries and realize that I could write on my own, create relationships based on who I was (am), and extend and expand what I knew.

In 1992, I became a member of the American Family Therapy Academy (AFTA); this opened the door for Jeff and me to get known in a small, “elite” community of family therapy “experts,” not necessarily narrative in their approach, but some were “postmodern” in their thinking. When Jeff and I severed our relationship, I found myself gravitating toward the AFTA community. Many of our narrative friends were members but there were also others I had met over the years. A close friendship emerged with Rachel Hare-Mustin², a postmodern feminist thinker, whose writings had a major impact on the field of family therapy (See Hare-Mustin, 1987, 1994). Another connection was with Evan Imber-Black, who I had met in Calgary and was AFTA’s President from 1995-1997. She invited me to be the program chair for AFTA’s 1996 Annual Meeting in San Francisco where I brought together narrative and postmodern notables, including Stephen Madigan, Jill Freedman, Ken Hardy, Melissa Griffith, and Kaethe Weingarten. Their presentation became one of the more controversial in the years of AFTA’s program experiences. As such, it seemed like a sign of success. Taking on the role of program chair led to more connections, which were invaluable and led to some close friendships, travel opportunities, and certainly helped to expand my thinking. Also, Evan became the editor of the major journal *Family Process* in 2004 serving through 2012. She is a prolific writer, her editorials were always “spot-

² Rachel and I became close friends from the time I met her, likely around 2000, until her death in May 2020.



on,” and she is a presenter par excellence. (See Imber-Black, 2014, as one example). As the *Family Process* editor, Evan frequently encouraged me to write for the journal. (See Dickerson, 2004a, 2009, 2010, 2011).

Writing

Given Evan’s encouragement to write on my own, and at Evan’s invitation, I published my first paper as sole author in *Family Process* in 2004. Eventually, I was writing in my own voice and able to clearly articulate my thinking, thus gaining confidence in knowing what I knew. And even though Jeff and I had collaborated on a professional book, published in 1996, *If Problems Talked: Adventures in Narrative Therapy*, it wasn’t until I wrote and published my own “popular” book (2004), *Who Cares What You’re Supposed to Do: Breaking the Rules to Get What You Want in Love, Life, and Work*, that I felt like I had come into my own. This book, addressed to young women in their 20’s and early 30’s, utilized narrative thinking and a narrative approach. I remember working with Helen Gremillion³ in Bloomington, Indiana, where she taught at Indiana University. Helen invited Michael in 2007 to do a workshop, including a half day with her, Nigel Pizzini⁴, and myself. Michael seemed quite keen on reading my book and made sure he took it with him. It was probably the first time that we really connected personally.

Mentoring

I continued to be a part of the narrative community, presenting at every Therapeutic Conversations conference that Stephen Madigan hosted, also introducing new people into the narrative group. One year, I co-presented with David Marsten⁵, who then became a regular at the conferences. David had invited me to teach a workshop on couples in Southern California in the early 2000s. As a result, David and I collaborated on a couple of teaching gigs, both at AFTA and

³ I met Helen thanks to David Epston. She was a graduate student in anthropology at Stanford University, and David had read something she wrote about eating problems. Helen and I became fast friends.

⁴ Helen met Nigel when she took an intensive from Michael in Adelaide; thus began a relationship that became a marriage; and now Helen and Nigel live in Auckland.

⁵ David runs a non-profit in Los Angeles called Miracle Mile Community Center. The Center accepts clients who otherwise could not afford therapy; he supervises and mentors interns; and over time began to write about his work (e.g., *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland*).



including the one at TC. We tried to collaborate on a writing project, which didn't work as well, but David was able to complete other writing collaborations, including with David Epston and his then-partner, Laurie Markham. (See Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016). I had mentored Laurie and Jane Chiu, for a writing project that ended up in a "new voices" section of *Family Process* (2011).

After my book was completed in 2004, I took some time off and went on a hiking trip in Italy with my New Zealand friends, Dorothea Lewis and Aileen Cheshire. Subsequently, there were several years when I was invited to NZ by Dorothea and Aileen, and also Robin McGill and Kathie Crocket to do workshops. This allowed me to visit frequently and do what I loved: teaching and visiting my friends, such as David and Ann, and making new friends, including Johnella Bird⁶ (2000, 2008).

Teaching—Take Two

However, by the mid-aughts, with my book completed and a series of workshops booked, it was fortuitous that something came along just as I was looking for what's next. An adjunct professor position opened at San Jose State University in 2005, and because the contact person was someone with whom I had developed a relationship when we were training interns at BAFTTA, I wasn't shy in calling her. She wanted to know when I could start! With too many traveling commitments, I needed to wait until the following semester, which turned out to lead to another lucky turn of events. I was asked to teach an undergraduate class in Theories and Methods. In contemplating how best to organize it, the overall development of the course led to the template for the article (2010) "Positioning Oneself in an Epistemology: Refining Our Thinking About Integrative Approaches." As mentioned previously, I identified structural, systemic, and post-structural epistemologies. The idea itself wasn't new to me: a large nod goes to John Winslade who, in a NZAC presentation in Hamilton in the June 1999 conference, initially made similar distinctions. Here is a quotation from my article:

Winslade et al. (1999) discuss the importance of creating a template for understanding for students, rather than simply "teaching counseling theory (in a way) that resemble(s) a bus tour through a dozen different theoretical territories." They go on to say, "The challenge then is to teach counseling

⁶ Johnella and David were partners in a counseling center in Auckland for many years. Johnella has authored at least two books that describe her approach.



theory in relation to the underlying paradigmatic assumptions.” Although their paradigm distinctions are different from the ones mentioned here (they use Gergen’s (1991) listing from Saturated Self of Modernism, Romanticism, and Postmodernism) the point they make is similar, which is that integration cannot take place across paradigm differences, citing Kuhn (1962) to defend this position (Dickerson, 2010, pp. 363-364).

After one year of teaching the undergraduate class, there followed six years of teaching in the graduate clinical psychology program at San Jose State University. I taught everything from family and couple therapy to being the fieldwork supervisor for the graduate students. It was in that position that I opened a new way of working with the students—visiting them and their supervisors at the various practicum sites. By meeting the on-site supervisors and experiencing the context in which the students were working, we connected the university with the community. This had not been done before and required a bit of planning and driving, but the supervisors seemed very pleased, and it did set a tone for a good working arrangement. Although the department head was very pleased, subsequent professors found the activity too time-consuming, so it was unfortunately discontinued.

I saw my time at SJSU as one of a subversive influencer: the only person whose epistemology was from a post-structural position. There was another professor who practiced and thought similarly, although because she was on a tenure track, she tended to follow the more mainstream department rules: evidence-based. It always throws people a bit when I’m asked if narrative therapy is an “evidence-based” practice, and I respond with “it’s practice-based evidence.” I had many students who were able to appreciate how they were positioning themselves, realizing that there are many ways one can conceptualize one’s theory and practice, even when contemplating the same client. An unexpected gift was the development of a friendship with another professor who was (and is) a dyed-in-the-wool CBT theorist/therapist. After I left the program, and they re-tooled it to meet California’s new Licensed Therapist requirement, my friend Annabel Prins was asked to teach the Family Seminar. During the semesters she taught, she invited me to do one or two guest lectures from my post-structural/narrative perspective. Likely the highest compliment was when she told her class one day that she might prefer her way of thinking/approach, but if she went to therapy, she’d want to go to someone who thought and worked like me!



The American Family Therapy Academy

During these years, I was also very active in AFTA, chairing various committees. Serving as Vice-President 2007-2009, Bylaws Chair 2009-2013, and receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012. I presented at all the conferences and mentored others for presentations in that venue. In many ways, I considered myself an “ambassador” of narrative ideas, and I certainly became identified with that way of thinking. I continued to be connected to my narrative therapy friends, so whenever there was an opportunity, and usually this was at the annual AFTA conference, I created a dinner with our narrative group one of the evenings. Sometimes the group was small and intimate: Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, Bill Madsen, Melissa Elliot, Jeff Zimmerman, and me. Other times we included others of a postmodern/post-structural “persuasion”: Kaethe Weingarten, Rachel Hare-Mustin, and John Lawless. Often the AFTA conference occurred around my birthday, so sometimes these dinners were birthday celebrations, expanding outward and more inclusive. Those dinners over time serve as a memory of closeness, creativity, and learning. I have always appreciated knowing that I had a way of thinking that guided how I thought about people and how I worked; it has allowed me to remain inclusive and hopefully non-judgmental. Besides celebrating my 70th birthday in New Orleans in 2009, I also took a course in Transcendental Meditation that same autumn⁷. The practice of TM coincides with my way of thinking and continues to contribute to what I experience as an openness to ideas, persons, and events.

When Michael died in 2008, I was taken aback by a statement one of my AFTA colleagues made in a listserv where he mused that Michael’s death marked the end of narrative therapy. I had enough influence, given my connection with the editor of *Family Process*, that I was able to create a special section in the 2009 48th *Family Process* edition honoring Michael and his legacy—countering the negative musing. All the articles were momentous contributions, although the one by Winslade on Tracing Lines of Flight is a stand-out and most cited.

⁷ I had arrived home from the conference to find that my golden retriever was very ill, and he had to be put down shortly thereafter. Whether or not there was a connection between that event and the TM course is not relevant. But I have found that one way I can categorize events in my life is about the loss of a dog and the arrival of a new dog.



The End of an Era / The Covid Interruption

The two decades between 2000 and 2020 were filled with multiple and diverse opportunities. Never satisfied with being a “one trick pony,” I took full advantage of what came along, and it is no surprise that they were mostly in the writing/teaching/mentoring categories. Along with the San Jose State teaching gig, I was also invited to teach a summer intensive in the Counselor Education program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. This came along due to my connection through AFTA with Pilar Hernandez-Wolfe, who was an instructor in that program at the time. Even after Pilar moved on, I continued every summer to teach a one-week course in narrative therapy from 2010 through 2016. It was a rich experience with well-educated students who reflected their geographical context in a way that broadened my own understanding. I remember well showing a video⁸ of Stephen Madigan working with an African American mother and son, where in the therapy process Stephen was able to bring to light the inherent racism that was at the core of the difficulty the student was experiencing. The class could not wrap their heads around this understanding—an event that baffled me, to the extent that I could not enter into their interpretation, thus missing a key learning possibility. How much this incident reflected this particular group’s contextual experience is difficult to know, but it certainly played a part. When I was invited back to teach a class in 2016 to find that only two students signed up for it, I realized how the therapy world was changing and was affecting the educational system, moving away from an openness to poststructuralism to a strict evidence-based curriculum. This was also true in the SJSU system.

The Family Process Institute / Social Media Opportunities

An unlikely venue for my varied experiences opened up as I became slightly less involved with AFTA in 2009, after my vice presidency. The Family Process Institute, the board that oversees the publication of *Family Process*, now one of many journals under the umbrella of Wiley Publications, had a board opening. Again, because of the connection I had with Evan Imber-Black, the editor of FP at the time, I was offered a place on the Board, which I joined in late 2009 through 2012. It felt like a move that would broaden my own world of family therapy

⁸ This video is now available through Psychotherapy.net, and the clinical process is discussed by Stephen in his 2nd edition of *Narrative Therapy*, published by APA.

(approaches, various understandings, and a different group of scholars). I applied for the position of editor as Evan was finishing her tenure, although it went to Jay Lebow⁹ instead. Jay approached me and asked if I would be his Associate Editor for New Media; this was in 2012, when Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were becoming the media giants they are now. I jumped in, created accounts in all three sites, and began the process of making the journal known through social media. After I held that position for two years, and the Board began to rethink their Associate Editor roles, I advocated for a new position as Social Media / Communications Strategist. I acted in that position for FPI from 2014-2018, during which time I also created a series of webinars, first as a free service (they are still available on the Family Process YouTube channel), and then in partnership with the Ackerman Institute to provide CEUs. The FPI Board eventually decided that they didn't need someone fulfilling that role, likely due to the difficulty in actually showing how such publicity increased readership. Although I loved the creativity the position offered me, by then I had been elected the President of AFTA and had other ways to practice creative endeavors.

Serving as AFTA's President from 2017-2019 came after a couple of starts and stops. I ran for President in 2010, only to lose by two votes¹⁰. I was again asked to run for the position of President in 2014, agreed at first, and then backed off¹¹. It likely came as a bit of a surprise (even to me) that I agreed to run in 2016.

I had devoted a chunk of time to create two separate publications devoted to narrative ideas. Stephen Madigan's 2014 Narrative Conference was full of new energy and creativity, and I thought the ideas should find a larger audience, through the written word. I reached out to the presenters and offered to help them write about their work to be published either in *Family Process* or as a SpringerBrief. The latter was an AFTA publication, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin, in collaboration with Springer Publications. It was entitled *Poststructural and Narrative Thinking in Family Therapy*. Both issues arrived almost

⁹ Jay is another connection I am grateful to have made through AFTA; we continue to have a mutual understanding, and he has always been open to my ideas and writing.

¹⁰ This undoubtedly influenced me to spend my energy with the FPI Board rather than with AFTA. Although I was highly involved with the AFTA president, as we found a way to relieve the person from our newly created Director position and also change our financial structure.

¹¹ I was greatly disturbed by some of the processes the previous two presidents had put in place.

simultaneously in the summer of 2016 as I was at the AFTA conference in Denver. It was there that I was approached to run for President.

That same summer (2016) Stephen Madigan created a smaller version of his Narrative Conference, this time at Granville Island. I was pleased to be able to present with both Stephen and Jill Freedman and also to participate in David Marsten's presentation. It was there that I renewed my acquaintance with Gerald Monk, and through him met Navid Zamani. I subsequently asked Navid to work with me on putting the 2019 AFTA conference details on an app, and also invited him to be a facilitator on one of the presentations.

The AFTA Presidency

Even though I was in my late 70's, the idea of leading AFTA, which was dear to me as having offered the opportunity for multiple connections with leading theorists and practitioners in the field of family therapy, was too intriguing to pass up. And I relished the months leading up to the task and the two years of overseeing the organization. It is not a job for the weak of heart or for those who have no time; it is all-consuming.

Of course, I wanted to use my influence to create the best possible conferences and the best possible projects and programs, utilizing the excellent talent existing in the organization. Looking back, I am pleased/proud of the 2018 conference in Austin, TX entitled Relational Activism: Supporting Just Relationships in Family Therapy ably organized by Justine D'Arrigo-Patrick. And calling on the very capable Pilar Hernandez-Wolfe to put together the 2019 conference in Oakland, CA entitled Rupture and Repair: Remaking Relationships in Families and Communities¹². My experience with the Family Process Institute created new relationships with people, who I called upon to assist with both conferences. Ruben Parra-Cardona¹³, then situated as a professor at the University of Texas, created a post-conference workshop in Austin, which mobilized many in the AFTA community to draw on their expertise to counter the policies that were then

¹² See the AFTA Website for details of both conferences—
<https://www.afta.org/conferences/conference-history/>.

¹³ Melanie Domenech Rodriguez assisted in the planning of that workshop and then acted as a facilitator of one of the keynotes, along with Navid Zamani, at the 2019 conference. Melanie is the new editor for *Family Process* and Navid is active as a Board member and also the initiator of podcasts for AFTA.



being set in place at our southern border. The Witness to Witness program, initiated by Kaethe Weingarten, came out of this 2018 post-conference workshop, and took on a post-AFTA life, finding a home under the umbrella of the Migrant Clinicians Network¹⁴.

However, times do change, and the political underpinnings of AFTA had been troublesome for a while. The influence of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) upended many an organization and certainly affected AFTA. The notable changes occurred in the upper echelons, and I was hurt by accusations sent in my direction. It took me a while to recover as I experienced my time in office as a good one. I was supported by others I had met over time in AFTA, notably Lois Braverman, the previous CEO of the Ackerman Institute, with whom I collaborated for the FPI webinar series, Jay Lappin, who carries on the work of Sal Minuchin in Philadelphia, Jane Ariel in Oakland, CA, who has been with me through the years of ups and downs of AFTA politics, and Kaethe Weingarten, whose heroic managing of the Witness to Witness program began to be questioned. Realizing the tumultuousness of the times, and perhaps the lack of AFTA's political configuration to incorporate the change, allowed me to step back and be grateful for the AFTA community and how it had afforded me multiple opportunities.

Looking back on the decade of the 2010s has helped me realize that I actually performed (not in a performative way) my value of relationships and connection. I both mentored and learned, invited others to write, edited, and wrote original papers. Many of those I met have initiated projects and taken important positions in the field of post-structural family therapy.

A pre-COVID, post-AFTA interim venture started with a brief visit to my goddaughter and her partner, then living in Fairfield, Iowa. I had told Brandy (my goddaughter) that if she gave me a week (five days), I would help her finish her dissertation. It had become a mammoth project, with many interruptions, but she had all the data and had begun to gather the results through a quite good qualitative method called "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis" (IPA). The rest of her committee were enthusiastic about my offer, so over five days I thought through with her as she wrote her Methods, Results, and Discussion

¹⁴ See <https://www.migrantclinician.org/resource/witness-witness-resources.html>.



sections. I was delighted to learn about IPA, and it continues to be a useful addition to my knowledge base, as it continually comes up in papers I am reviewing for *Family Process*. Brandy's dissertation was completed in the summer of 2020 (in spite of COVID), and she was awarded the distinction of the best dissertation of that year. My work with her over those months (spreading over a year's time) were an extremely helpful segue from my intense work in AFTA to a strange COVID existence.

The Pandemic Quarantine

When COVID hit it upended ways of doing things that had facilitated my many professional (and personal) connections. We stopped meeting in person, and Zoom became the status quo, digitized faces and voices, a ghostly presence. In the very beginning of the pandemic, an inventive and ingenuous narrative therapist, Stephen Gaddis¹⁵, located in Salem, Massachusetts, created a 24-hour Storython, during which narrative colleagues from around the world entered on a video call an hour at a time, sharing stories of resilience and resourcefulness. I wrote about this project in a paper entitled "The 'Flip'—Sustaining Complexity and Multiplicity Post-Quarantine" (Dickerson, 2020). This paper also highlighted the work that Peggy Sax and her colleagues were doing in the "Collab"—an internet site (<https://reauthoringteaching.com>) that connects narrative therapists from around the world. As well, I described Weingarten's W2W (Witness to Witness) program.¹⁶

Since then, there have been losses to our community. Early on in COVID, May 2020, Rachel Hare-Mustin passed away after a fall—a huge loss to the family therapy community, although her writings will be with us forever (See especially Hare-Mustin, 1994). Stephen Gaddis died of lung cancer (an unlikely diagnosis) in January 2022, not long after his brilliant Storython creation. And Bill Madsen, whose term "disciplined improvisation" (Madsen, 2011) highlights his way of thinking, passed in February 2023. There have been other losses; I mention these only because they are core to this story.

¹⁵ I first met Steve at an early Narrative Conference in Vancouver; he was a graduate student, and I offered to look over his dissertation. We reconnected in Hamilton, New Zealand when he was a visiting professor at the University of Waikato—we played a round of golf.

¹⁶ A paper written by Weingarten et al. appeared in the same issue of *Family Process*, which detailed the program more completely than my brief description.

COVID put a pause on my trajectory: the traveling stopped, the presentations dwindled, and the writing interrupted. I stayed active intermittently, preparing to go to the June 2022 AFTA conference in Baltimore, which was canceled and made into a virtual event. However, I then attended the FPI Anniversary meeting in Washington, D.C. in the Fall of that year, also offering to work with others on various projects. Other opportunities in my life also slowed down—seeming somewhat appropriate. I’m less involved with AFTA; I’m mentoring a couple of students from Mercy College¹⁷ in New York; my writing commitment is to conclude this paper and perhaps work to see if Bill Madsen’s last writing piece on “appreciation” can get published. I also recently was invited to write an “Introduction” to a republished paper by Evan Imber-Black (Coopersmith, 1981) for a “classics edition” in the *Journal of Systemic Therapy*.

One unexpected effect of the “quarantine” experience is that I have found a friendship community in my local neighborhood and surroundings, which has shown up in different ways over multiple experiences.

An Ending

The world has changed considerably since the year I was born (1939) with shifts I would not even have imagined as a teenager or young adult. Cataloging these changes is not the purpose of this ethnography, but certainly I have been both subject and object of those changes. I have loved feeling like I can ride the edge of the front wave, often predicting what is coming next so that I can hop onto it before it breaks. I am delighted that I was privileged to know Michael White at the beginning of the narrative wave (before it was named narrative) and that I had the opportunity to form relationships with others who were also carried along by that (third) wave. I am grateful for my ongoing friendship with David Epston and Ann Epston and their continuing encouragement of me both personally and professionally.

I met Michael in 1988; he died in 2008, 20 years later; it is now 2023, 15 years after his death. What Michael accomplished in the 20 years that I knew him is unimaginable (and not to be cataloged here). I wonder what he would have

¹⁷ This activity is at the invitation and encouragement from Evan Imber-Black, who continues to direct the Family Therapy Program there. It keeps me actively thinking and helping others to think from a narrative perspective.

thought about the advances (and iterations) during the 15 years going forward. When Stephen Madigan (2019) published his 2nd edition of *Narrative Therapy*, I wrote a brief blurb saying, “He catches Michael White’s voracious appetite for learning new ideas and sweeps us up into a whirlwind of iterations of narrative—true to the original innovative thinking.” I do wonder if Michael would have agreed. Regardless, the way of thinking that Michael introduced me to has stayed with me, is integral to my identity, and imbues all that I say and do.

I am also pleased that I could expand and extend my relationships beyond the narrative community to the larger family therapy community, both AFTA and FPI, and all the collegial contributions they have made to my life. These relationships undoubtedly have been influenced by my thinking—how could they not be?

I find myself interested in why some of my older clients (over 60) are looking back at their lives with regret. This experience provides me with “information of a difference,” as I look back on my life with joy and happiness. I feel blessed to have met the people who have wandered into my life, many with whom I am delighted to have been able to stay connected.

Narrative thinking changed my life. The encouragement I received from Michael and David and the many others in my narrative community, along with the multiple relationships that blossomed because of my agreement to accept such encouragement, have so enriched my life that I can say nothing other than it has been full, fuller than I would ever have imagined. In many ways I wish my parents were alive to see how things have gone—they would be more than pleased, actually ecstatic, to see how rich my life has been.

Acknowledgement

A special note of gratitude to David and Ann Epston (thanks to David for inviting me to write this narrative). And to all my narrative therapy friends, in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the U.S.—too many to mention by name, but they know who they are! And thanks to my AFTA colleagues, from whom I’ve learned and who have given me support and encouragement.

