



Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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Editor's Note

This release is novel in that for the first time it is a collection of papers from a specific agency—the Calgary Narrative Collective. The Calgary Narrative Collective is a proudly feminist and Narrative informed not-for-profit counselling agency with a flexible sliding scale to accommodate as many as possible. The team consists of several regular therapists as well as students and interns who are present throughout the year. The Collective is an active teaching and training agency. The entire team meets weekly for supervision that is based on the therapists' transcripts of their sessions with clients.

I first met the Collective when they sponsored the first annual Contemporary Narrative Therapy conference March of 2018 and subsequently returned to present 4-day long Intensives in collaboration with them in September 2019 and again in February 2020. While I was there, I had the opportunity to see work of the Collective firsthand and to participate in one of their one of a kind supervision meetings. I was enthralled! What caught my attention about the Collective was both their creativity and joy for embracing unorthodox thinking.

We decided to dedicate this entire specific special release to allow for as comprehensive a representation as possible of the activities of such an agency. And as well, we are including papers or contributions to papers from both therapists and students at the CNC.

Reading and reviewing these papers, I want to commend them to your interest for two reasons. Firstly, the agency has committed itself to what might be referred to as a 'poetics of practice,' unlike any other agency of which I am aware, requiring poetic responses to sessions. And secondly, to use the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt's, term they have "defrosted" some matters of orthodoxy regarding poetry in narrative therapy that have been 'frozen' for some time, what Arendt refers to as "unexamined prejudgments." 'Rescued speech' poetry has been commonplace in narrative therapy practice for almost 20 years now. But for some reason, the requirement that such documents must exclusively be the words of the client have seriously circumscribed its utilisation and the practice has understandably waned over the years. I can think of only a few published examples in the last 5 or so years. As well, such a restriction concealed the fact that many such rescued words were evoked in response to poetic questions and as such are not the sole property of the client but might be considered the sole property of the therapeutic conversation. I commend Sanni Paljakka for her innovative and important revitalisation of the poetic in narrative practice. For those interested please see her paper entitled, "A House of Good Words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents" in this journal.

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In my Introduction to White (2011), “Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations,” I mentioned ‘Poetics Alongside Politics’ (see p. xxv-xxvii):

“These papers direct our attention to the politics and ethics, but you (I am addressing Michael here) rarely commented on what I am calling the poetics of either your practice or your thinking in general. Perhaps for you, it was so taken for granted that it was just beside the point or tacit and beyond your own telling. Any who watched a videotape, read a text of yours, or heard you speak couldn’t help but marvel at the eloquence of your thought’it was here in the enchanting externalising conversations with young people that I first marvelled at your genius with your vocabularies. It was rare for you to say much that you hadn’t invented.....If we are to engage with the significance of poetics in narrative practice, I suspect we would have to trouble ourselves and read beyond our disciplines. Why do I believe this would be worth doing? Because, Michael, it is of concern to all of us- and one which will delight us as well- to consider the language by which you brought the world of your reimagined social imaginary in to view. This would cause us to reconsider externalizing conversations and perhaps make more of them than we have done so far.

In the *Language of Inquiry* (2000), Lynn Hejinian wrote: “It is at least in part for this reason that poetry has the capacity for poetics, for self-reflexivity, for speaking about itself; it is by virtue of this that poetry can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits. Poetics as well as narrative renders language a medium for experiencing experience. You and those who consulted you seemed provisioned to ‘think otherwise’- to go beyond the linguistic limits that had previously circumscribed them” (p. 1).

In my introduction, I quoted Marcela Polanco writing about her experience of translating Michael and myself in to her Colombian Spanish:

I found a poetic resonance. It is not a language that tells about a lived experience; rather it is a language that once again brings the lived experience to life. It is like a living vocabulary. Life is happening in the vocabularies, not besides them or prior to them. When I was translating a story, I was living it. The idea of time that says that this story happened before and is now being told was irrelevant (p. xxxii).

Reading some of the both enthralling and enchanting poems and therapeutic conversations and their consequences has made me rethink this matter given the Collective’s avowed intentions to poeticise their practice. And as a consequence, I started re-reading one of my favourite books- Holland et al, (1998), “Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds” (1998) and her appeal to the theorising of Mikhail Bakhtin regarding linguistic limits and her notion of the ‘space of authoring’ (compare Bakhtin’s ‘authorial stance’ or ‘authoring selves’).

I am going to quote at some length from Bakhtin regarding what he refers to as “one’s own word.”





“Internally persuasive discourse- as opposed to one that is externally authoritative-is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with “one’s own word”. In everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enter into inter animating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a ‘struggle’ with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogue it, this discourse is able to reveal even new ways to mean. (Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin Ed. M. E. Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, p. 345-346).

What does he mean by “this discourse is able to reveal new ways to mean”? Holland suggests he means “no longer giving over to a voice of authority but as a person who begins to rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices and by this process develops her now ‘authorial stance” (Holland, p. 183).

Again, in Bahktin’s words:

“The process-experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons-becomes especially important in those cases where a struggle against such images has already begun, where someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification, or is striving to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, alt ought born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (Bahktin, M., 1981, p. 381).

This has me re-thinking an ‘externalising conversation’ as an ‘anti-language and the contribution that makes to the problematisation of the ‘problem’...how it could be spoken about in novel terms or ‘in one’s own word’ although admittedly those ‘words’ emerged in and out of a therapeutic conversation. And as well has me propose why the Collective’s frank poeticisation of their practice might be so formidable and to quote from above “will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse”.

Reading these papers has had me consider some questions: 1) does a novel ‘reading’ of experience require novel forms of expression of them to do so? 2) “Poetry doesn’t mean florid,





extraneous or obscure. It gives people a sense of their separate existence...” (Lewis, R., Poetic Injustice, The Oldie, Oct. 2020, p. 31), and 3) are such vocabularies prerequisite for what Cheryl Mattingly has recently referred to as “the responsive and experimental narrative self”, “self-making as a kind of moral experiment in perceiving and attempt to realize any ‘best good’”(Mattingly, C. Ethics, Immanent Transcendence and the Experimental Narrative Self, in Moral Engines, Mattingly, C., Drying, R, Louw, M and Schwarz, T. (Eds) Exploring the Ethical Drives in Moral Life, 2017, Oxford, UK; Bergahn Books.)

It is my hope that others will follow the example of the Collective in an effort to poeticize their practice with the same spirit of joy and enthusiasm that I have been so fortunate to witness time and again when in their presence.





Christina and the Robin: A Decidedly Narrative Response to Rape

Sanni Paljakka, M.Sc.

The story I am about to tell had its beginning in my stunned astonishment following a conversation with a colleague of mine. One afternoon over coffee with our fellow therapists, my colleague chatted to us about her experience of going to a job interview at a well-established therapy agency. I am curious about human encounters in general, and particularly nosy about any and all conversations pertaining to the therapeutic enterprise. And this was a job interview, no less, imagine my intrigue to find out how other agencies go about interviewing prospective therapists. What could their fashioning of a job interview tell me of their vision of the venture of therapy? What could it tell me about what kind of person would make a good therapist? What could it tell me about the agency's imagination about the questions of what a good life is and who holds the keys to paradise in their minds? "WHAT DID THEY ASK YOU?" I asked my colleague, barely containing my suspense. "They asked me to take them through a 6-step intervention for panic," she shrugged. "What do you mean? Was that their first question out, and did they give you a mock client, or a description of a person of some kind?" I inquired, puzzled. "No, I asked them to give me a bit of context for the panic, but they said it wasn't necessary, 'just your 6-step intervention, please.' And once I was finished with that, they asked me for my 6-step intervention for depression. And so it went."

I had suddenly run out of questions. I was grateful for my colleagues for taking over the conversation, as I sat in silent disbelief. A little later, I drove home and tried to avoid thinking about what I had just heard. "Well, lucky it wasn't you in that interview, Sanni," I tried to console myself. "I wonder why it was exactly 6 steps and not 3 or 7 and three quarters?" But one question would not let me go: "What would you have said, Sanni?" The following story is my wordy response.

I cannot tell you my 6-step intervention to panic, even though for seven years now I have been in constant conversation with people experiencing all the different shades of panic. Precisely because of my many therapeutic conversations over the years with people with panic I can no longer consider it a faceless phenomenon, nor a simple medical disorder that exists outside of the context of its creation, and any attempts to formulate a rote treatment intervention on my part would therefore do nothing to enlighten you about my practice. Surely we may find more intelligent means to speak to my therapeutic practice that will sidestep a crude stereotyping of the venture of therapy with the clients to whom all of us undoubtedly are united in giving our highest care.

May I tell you about the last person that was referred to me because of panic instead? Her name is Christina, a woman in her mid-30s, has a degree in engineering, is quietly bright in her





demeanor and has a subversive sense of humour. Christina has been working at a large engineering firm as one of only 2 women company-wide for the past 4 years. The past years have been charming for Christina, because her superiors at the engineering company have tacitly decided that the #Me Too Movement applies to Hollywood starlets only, and so she has been relentlessly harassed, pursued, smirked at in her presentations, condescended to and dismissed in meetings, blackmailed by superiors into sexual favours, and lastly, sexually assaulted by one of her managers.

Below is an excerpt of one of the sample resignation letters Christina and I worked on as part of our therapy to provide Christina the means to deliberation and clarity about the context of her panic attacks:

...I started my position here 3 years ago full of dedication and interest in the actual work itself and have seen all my projects through in accordance to my own high standards as well as your exclusively positive performance reviews. I have, in fact, enjoyed the work on my projects. However, if another qualified, competent, and conscientious engineer approached me now asking for my advice in taking over my position, I could not ethically or morally recommend that they apply for or accept a position here. I do not say so lightly:

The company culture is so poisonous to professionals, and in particular, to women professionals as well as others who do not fit the “outgoing salesman” personality that any enjoyment of the work itself is not worth their time or effort.

Over the course of the past 3 years, I have been chronically mistreated: interrupted in meetings, mocked in presentations, undermined in my professional conclusions, degraded in front of my peers, made to triple check math in response to questions by peers who simply don't like or lack the qualifications to understand the black-and-white numbers, made to endure the daily mansplaining of my own work by those who don't know what they speak of, relentlessly harassed, blackmailed and sexually assaulted. As you might imagine, these daily experiences of degradation, sexism, and vile lack of professionalism have had very serious effects on my life and my person, including the diagnosis of PTSD in response to the sexual assault that occurred.

Even though some things have gotten better since the dismissal of the individual who assaulted me, the company has done nothing to better the overall culture that would stop any of this from happening again.

In contrast, practices of mockery, intrusive interruption, and personal humiliation that are so commonplace here are not only NOT addressed or disciplined but condoned and





rewarded by promotion. I and other professionals have been repeatedly told that we simply need to get better at selling our work. Unequivocally, I am a scientist, hired by you to do an exact calculation, and not a salesman. The shocking lack of consequences for public acts of disrespect as well as the ineffective and silent bystanding by those in positions of authority have gravely contributed to this culture of rampant male entitlement that has put me personally in harm's way. So make no mistake, this is not a letter about assault; this is a letter about the daily company practices that are still ongoing and that gave rise to the conditions that led to my mistreatment, both in and outside of meetings.

In summary, if I may, Christina indeed experienced panic attacks at work. Do you concur with me that perhaps the context of her panic attacks ought to be considered in the design of a “treatment plan?”

At the outset of my work with Christina, I received a letter from her well-intentioned doctor. She stated in it that Christina needed to be treated for her experience of panic attacks at work and inquired whether or not I am qualified to treat the panic attacks. As this was a well-intentioned letter and an example of a commonplace practice of collaboration among professionals to better serve our clients, it pressed me to think further about the hidden assumptions of the venture of therapy. I wondered to what extent the expectation was that I, as “an expert” was to “treat” Christina out of her experience of “panic attacks” so that she could resume her position as a productive, self-assured worker she once was. I wondered to what extent I was expected to play my part in helping Christina “adjust” better to rape culture. I wondered what would happen to her panic attacks if Christina were not referred to therapy, but the men at her company were asked to participate in mandatory and intelligent gender equality and accountability training? And what is my responsibility to Christina if it is not the promotion and perpetuation of smooth adjustment to contexts of oppression and injustice?

I might also ask: Since Christina is but one example of my many, many conversations about panic attacks and the context of their creation in my therapy practice, how could I answer your question about a 6-step model? I might ask this question differently:

How do we as therapists grow regard for another person? (White and Epston, circa 1985)

How do we grow outrage at the contexts of disregard of the humanity of another person?

Or:

How do you grow an arsonist heart?

“why yes, I am the girl with the arsonist heart

all your fathers warned you about.” (Amanda Lovelace)





If respect, or regard, for our clients are neither personality traits, nor natural phenomena, but practices, how might I work with Christina in a manner that substantiates my regard for her person and her experiences?

An important detail to consider in my formulation of a “treatment plan” with Christina in particular was that the usual means for treatment plans in my work were not immediately available to me. This was due to the fact that Christina actually spoke very little in our conversations. I would come to know later that Christina had, in fact, quietly resolved to take her life due to her sense of hopelessness about the experiences of her life, her blaming of herself for bringing them about, her shame for not being able to respond to these developments in a stronger manner, and the physical and emotional misery of the continued panic attacks. I did not know at the time of our first meetings that our work had some kind of ultimate deadline attached to it. All I knew when we first met was that she spoke very little and barely looked at me and answered questions in a low monotone fashion.

Usually, I construct therapeutic documents from my conversations with my clients that serve as reflecting surfaces, witnessing statements, veritable proofs of life and that which my clients are currently trying for, but with Christina, due to the ways her words had been stolen from her, it proved difficult to try to write a document back to her. I remember thinking after our first sessions, “Good gods, what have they done to her...” without knowing who the “they” were... I thought this because somehow, even in limited worded expressions, Christina had convincingly, without a shadow of a doubt, communicated to me that she was very bright and was following my questions with great intellectual curiosity and even suspense. I had concluded this because there were times when she straightened her back from slumping or broke her staring at the floor and looked up at me with a flash of intrigue in her eyes and, most beseechingly, there were times when she suddenly smiled, amused for but a moment. These times of breaks in her demeanor were all in response to words and questions and guesses and story snippets of mine in which I had attempted to be particularly smart or funny. I came to know in short order that my guesses had been on track and that Christina was indeed particularly curious and agile in her intelligence and that every smile was truly an insurrection! Christina told me, later, in one of those freer moments when her words were available to her, that “they” went about it all very “smartly,” that what she had suffered had been 4 years of undermining her every sense of worth and trust in herself up against the constant insinuation that there was something “wrong” with her, and that the liberties the “boys” took with her were of her making due to her “lack of confidence” to make them stop. Every smile of Christina’s in our beginning meetings was an insurrection against rape culture and violence and violations against her person, a mounting refusal to be silent, a question that was brewing in its subterfuge: who is culpable here?

In my thinking in these early meetings, I relied on some questions of David Epston’s to design my “treatment plan” with Christina:





- *How can we assist people to name their experience?*
- *How do we ask questions in such a way that words come alive for people?*
- *How can we ask questions in such a way that people make such vocabularies of experience their own? How do we allow people to decide what words resonate for them?*
- *What words are capturing of experience and, in particular, that experience that has not had words before? Experience that has not been rendered in to an event before?*
- *What do we do in therapy talk that generates the new rather than merely reiterating the old?*
- *Shouldn't we take an interest in words that are alive with association?*
- *Shouldn't we think about the poetics of language and concern ourselves how words feel to people?*

Consider the last question in this list: shouldn't we concern ourselves how words feel to people? It was clear in my conversations with Christina that some words raised her spirits and others did not: some words caused her to collapse and to slump over, and others clearly made her straighten her spine, raise her eyes to me, smile even, and respond. The transcript excerpt below tells the story of the visceral importance of the often-tacit practices of discerning the felt effects of stories and words in our conversations and looking together for ways to speak that do not replicate hurt nor insinuate fragility. This is a transcript from an early conversation with Christina in which I knew nothing about the context of her panic attacks yet that might illuminate our collaborative reach for Christina to name her experience in a way that would not leave her feeling slumped over. Please know that I do not side with the idea that people "have to talk about it" in order to have more say over their lives or to appease some collective culpability that requires people to "speak" in order to protect themselves or others. In fact, Christina and I never "spoke" about the details of her rape, although she later decided to write pieces of her experience to me that were holding her soul and her voice captive. That part of the therapy Christina and I undertook in writing only. But in the conversation below, I knew nothing of rape, or mistreatment and only had her silences, her words and the observable felt effects of my words on her to guide me.

C: (slumped over, low, not looking at me) I hate my work. (then: silence. Not elaborating)

S: You've said that a few times... I found it in my notes... You've said that almost every time we've met. You said last time that your sister said to you that "you don't have to put up with it." You know, I have been wondering what your sister meant by this.

C: (silence)

S: (after waiting a while): The first time we met you were telling me about the "long hours at work." Is this what you mean?





- C: (silence)
- S: I was wondering whether this company of yours subscribes to some sort of ethic that if you want to work here, we own all your time. I have heard this from other people sometimes, some lawyers, and some servers... That companies sometimes require people to be extensions of the business, and if people want to hold on to some time of their own, or some initiatives in life outside of work, they get fired in short order.... Is this what you mean by “long hours” – do they act like they own your time, hook line and sinker?
- C: (smiling at the expression) A little.
- S: Is this why you say you hate your work?
- C: (slumping; silence)
- S: Shall I think of other questions, and not bug you about work, because maybe work is just a cesspool in which all good ideas go to die, and you have had plenty of people like your sister giving you well-meaning and annoying advice about it?
- C: (smiling at “cesspool.” Not answering)
- S: Cesspool, huh? Shall I bug you about it?
- C: I don’t know. I guess I should talk about it.
- S: Should you? Who thinks that? You? Or your annoying sister?
- C: (smiling at “annoying”) I think that.
- S: So you have set yourself the task of “got to talk about work!” even though it inspires you like a dog inspires a rabbit?
- C: looking right at me) Yes.
- S: Shall I ask you a bunch of annoying questions about work then, until you are like, aaghh, can’t take this annoyance anymore?!
- C: (humouring me) Yes.
- S: Alright, tattadadaa: here’s the first one. This is super ingenious. Worked super hard on





this one: Why do you hate work?

C: (not answering, but amused at my phrasing, and not slumping, but thinking)

S: (wanting to help) Maybe it's easier than my dumbass question, to answer: why does your sister hate your work?

C: Well, she saw it.

S: Your sister saw you at work?

C: Kind of... she was here in the summer visiting my parents, and we were supposed to meet at this restaurant. I had a work meeting there and it was supposed to be over by then. She was going to just meet me there.

S: But when your sister arrived, the work meeting was still going?

C: Yeah.

S: So she hung out and waited for you and was watching a bit?

C: Yeah.

S: This is going to be your favourite question! Wait for this. I already know that your sister concluded that you shouldn't put up with shit that goes down at work. So I wonder, did your sister observe some of that shit at the restaurant that night?

C: Yeah (starting to slump).

S: (Hurrying) What the fuck did she see, Christina? Do you know, I have an older sister too, and she worked at a bar when we were both in University. I used to go and visit her at the bar after my late evening lectures. You know, I'd take out my books and notes and study at the bar, and she'd serve me lemon water, because I had no money. Anyway. My sister was super protective of me, and was watching my back really closely, and would shoo anyone away who approached me, especially the dudes. Well, not shoo, she would really tell them, "leave her alone" and my sister is pretty scary when she means it, you know. More like, "shut up, don't talk to her."

C: (smiling, looking at me attentively)





- S: Anyway. Do my sister and your sister have something in common in what they were observing in their little sisters' lives?
- C: Yeah.
- S: What I mean is – I know a little bit about restaurants, and I know a little bit about dudes in restaurants, - am I on the right track here?
- C: Yeah.
- S: And then your sister was observing your colleagues behaving like dudes in restaurants sometimes do with women?
- C: Yeah.
- S: My sister was watching them look at me and approach me. Sometimes I would have little chats with some of them, and she would glare at me and the dudes from behind the bar. Was your sister glaring too?
- C: I don't know. I'm not sure.
- S: That thing she told you...that you don't have to put up with it...did she tell you that that same night?
- C: Yeah.
- S: Don't worry, I am not going to embarrass you by having to find the words for the indignities of these dudes...by how exactly they made fools of themselves that night...
- C: (interrupting) It's not just my sister. Telling me that I don't have to put up with it.
- S: Oh good, others have had eyes to see! Who were they?
- C: Some of the bartenders.
- S: Fuck, Christina, are you telling me that the dudes at your work behave so atrociously to you at restaurants that even bartenders are noticing and taking you aside to say, "You don't have to put up with it."
- C: Yeah. One time, I was on my way to the bathroom, and I was cornered, and the bartender





came to me afterwards and said, “Aare you okay? Can I call you a cab?”

S: Fuck! And did he...call you a cab?

C: Yeah. He even sent someone to wait with me.

S: (Sarcastically) Nice. So it's so bad that you can't be left there to wait for a fucking cab by yourself? There's just open season on you, according to these dudes, who are your fucking colleagues?

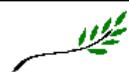
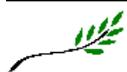
C: Yeah!

S: 'm sorry Christina. And I'm pissed off!!!

C: It's not always that bad. But yeah, the meetings at the restaurant are the worst. It's like a game. They are all hitting on me, and making stupid jokes, well, not all of them, but some of them, and staring and following me around, wanting to talk to me. And if I'm not friendly, then it's worse, that I can't take a joke or whatever. Sometimes it's been really hard to get out and get home...

In the above conversation, Christina did find her words, and proceeded to tell me about the mistreatment in restaurants as well as at the office. When she left, I sat in my office deep in thought and re-reading the scarcity of notes I had taken of Christina's own descriptions of what was happening to her, and I thought, well, here we are. I can't write a therapeutic poem from these expressions! These are expressions of something terribly wrong happening to someone, and she stands to conclude that somehow she is at fault. No, a poem will not do here. I need something else, something that illuminates the question: Is there something “wrong” with Christina, as “they” have said, or is there something “wrong” with something else? I need some means to take these happenings and re-politicize them, instead of medicalizing Christina's panic attacks. In opposition to Christina's doctor, I was clear that Christina's panic attacks at work are not a problem, but an effect of male entitlement and mistreatment and, as I was going to find out later, rape. Furthermore, Christina's panic attacks at work are not just not the problem, but in fact, a response to male aggression and rape culture. Her panic attacks signaled to me that Christina is entirely alive and shouting, “I cannot live like this.” Her panic attacks at work are not a problem, but only an encouraging sign of an alive moral character at work, and my job from here on out was to join her in these deliberations to find her other ways of insurrection that she has beyond a doubt, already been inventing and littering all over the place.

I found another quote by David Epston that reads: “The counter story selects out the words and meanings generated by its rival to sow suspicion or to frankly contest it. For example, you cannot





be abjectly wrong and terribly wronged at the same time. To some extent or other, to be wronged absolves you of being wrong. One set of meanings has to submit to the other. Counter stories come in to being by way of rivalry, vying for the person to contest their loyalty to a damning problem story.” Here was the beginning of my task: to sow suspicion with the idea that Christina was somehow wrong and instead, find a way to contest, in a political realm, that which had been happening to her. If I was to have any hope of considering a counterstory in Christina’s life in the near future, I needed a way to convincingly contest the patriarchal story of men’s permission to treat women however they please and that anything men give themselves permission to say and do is probably the fault of the woman in the first place. The many stories of rape that I have heard over the years have charged the importance of the clarity in my heart: there is nothing women can do to protect themselves. We cannot be nice enough, respectable enough, fierce enough, confident enough, smart enough, aware-of-our-surroundings enough, versed-in-martial-arts-enough, sober enough, dressed-appropriately enough to override the fact that some men choose to give themselves permission to assault and rape. The painful examinations of “but-what-were-you-doing?”, “why-were-you-there?”, “why-didn’t-you-just ...?” serve to promote victim-blaming and respectability politics in which some people can take part in pretending that well-intentioned “tips and tricks” for women are the way out of rape culture.

Without standing strongly in the way of such stories, I could scarcely begin to interview Christina about the effects of this mistreatment, her responses to it, and what her responses would tell both of us about her moral considerations or her moral character. Born out of these considerations, below is what I wrote for Christina ahead of our next meeting. The smile that broke onto her face after I placed 10 versions of these “flyers” into her lap and she considered each of them silently, only encouraged me along: I told her that I would be more than happy to go post a selection of flyers in the men’s bathrooms at her company – she didn’t wish me to do so, but these flyers signified a turning point in Christina’s and my work and the trust between us, as judged by her ability to speak to me in more words at each of the subsequent meetings. What I didn’t yet know is that the political reorientation would cause a moral reorientation that helped to usher in a halt in Christina’s plan to take her life.

Reminder

#MeToo – mandatory company-wide meeting taking place

Friday October 19 at noon

(Yes, over lunch-hour, asshole.

And yes, it will take as MANY HOURS as it will take for all of you to come clean.)

PS: Absence will be noted as aiding and abetting of the charming rape-culture at this fine company of yours

Calgary Narrative Collective Special Release



A Crash Course in Assault

- 1. Keep your hands to yourself, at all times. Unless she has given her unequivocal consent to being touched.**
- 2. Assume she DOES NOT WANT YOU, unless TOLD (in words!) otherwise (by her, not your buddies or your active imagination).**
- 3. Her appearance, clothes, body parts, or other references to sex (yes, jokes included) are off-limits in conversation. Don't tell me you have nothing else to contribute to conversation.**
- 4. If she is interested, she will express ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT. Up until that moment, you've got nothing. (Refer to the above.)**
- 5. If she expresses enthusiastic consent, and later changes her mind (by stopping to participate, freezing, saying "no" or another equivalent – eg. "I should go" or "can we just talk...") – you have ONE WORD available to you and it is "Okay." You may add: "Can I call you a cab?"**
- 6. Pursuing her, cornering her, monopolizing her time, following her around, watching her, making suggestive overtures to her WITHOUT HER VERBAL ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT amounts to STALKING!**
- 7. If you see a colleague, friend or stranger do any of the above, you have one option: INTERVENE.**
 - a. Say (to her, not to him) "Are you okay?" You may add: "Can I call you a cab?"**
 - b. Say (to him, not to her) "That's not cool." Watch that he stops.**
- 8. If you follow the above steps, don't expect a life-time achievement award. You're not a hero. Yet. The above steps only slightly elevate you from the tank of bottom feeder creeps to the possibility of being a decent guy.**

A short while after our conversation about the above flyers, Christina sent me an email requesting a meeting time. She also let me know that her doctor had written her a note for a 2-week leave from work due to concerns about her well-being and her experiences of the panic attacks. Christina let me know in the email that she had been working from home but had not





been doing particularly well during this time of absence from work. The following is an abbreviated, but otherwise verbatim transcript from the conversation that took place when we met.

...

C: In THE first week, there was panic.

S: In the first week? Do you mean to say it changed after the first week?

C: (Nods. Not looking at me)

S: (Waiting for her to elaborate. Then:) What happened to the panic after the first week?

C: (Silence. Not looking at me)

S: Did it maybe lift off of you somehow, or did you duck out from underneath it somehow, or maybe it went elsewhere...

C: (After a while. quietly) I just stopped caring.

S: (Waiting for her to elaborate. Observing: C is looking on the floor, being currently crushed by something, but what?)

S: You stopped caring, hey. Do you mean caring about work?

C: (Nods. sinks lower.)

S: Do you mean that you stopped caring about what panic was talking to you about, all the pressures at work, you stopped caring about that?

C: (Shifting—I can see my guess is going the wrong way. After a long silence:) I just stopped caring about a lot of things. (She starts to cry silently.)

S: (Hesitating a long while, fighting with myself about I think I know what she's saying) A lot of things. Maybe caring about you?

C: (Nods, barely audibly) Yes.

S: (Deciding to be sturdy about this) Maybe caring about your life?

C: Yes (barely audibly. Looking at the floor.)

S: (After a brief pause, quietly:) Oh well, here I was, all dumb and curious to know how panic changed after the first week, and you are telling me, listen, it changed, because what came after scared the shit out of even panic?





- C: (Looks up, smiles at my choice of words, the smile gets right to my heart.) Yes. Things went really dark.
- S: So a darkness that scares the shit out of panic and sends it for a run – that is some scary darkness hey.
- C: (Smiles again.) Yes.
- S: Tell me, if you want, I am imagining you looking out the window and seeing darkness. When did it start to gather, what kind of darkness was this, was it all the time?
- C: (After a long pause). It wasn't there during the day. Well I don't know, I didn't look outside. I kept my head down and focused on work. It was any time I wasn't focused on work.
- S: I am imagining you at work, all focused on your report, and studious and conscientious. And then when 5 o'clock came around, you'd look up, surprised, and it has gotten dark outside.
- C: I don't stop work at 5 o'clock.
- S: (smiling). Right, sorry. 6PM? 7PM? 8PM? 9PM? Some other ungodly hour?
- C: Between 8 and 9.
- S: Huh, I didn't know that. Is that... is that a choice of yours, to choose the focus of work for long hours rather than have the darkness scare the crap out of you?
- C: I don't know. No. I have to finish things.
- S: I wonder what the sky is like outside the window while you're working away? Is it possible there is rain, or sunshine, or snow, or fog?
- C: No. I don't know. No.
- S: After a long pause) What kind of weather do you like?
- C: (Looks up, surprised like WTF is wrong with you) What kind of weather do I like?
- S: Yeah, I'm trying to imagine, and I'm so slow, I don't even know, what kind of weather I might imagine. Like some people really like the light in the spring, or the moonlight, or when it rains you know, or sunshine.
- C: Sunshine.





- S: Sunshine? I wouldn't have predicted that! Like an all-out warm, sunny day, like a summer day?
- C: Yeah.
- S: This might be too hard to answer. I don't know. Can you tell me, when was the last time you spontaneously glanced out your window, at home or at work, and it was all-out sunny, like brilliantly sunny out there?
- C: In August.
- S: This past August?
- C: Yeah.
- S: And it was here in Calgary?
- C: Yeah.
- S: Did you get up at home and open the blinds, and here it was, all the sunshine flooding in?
- C: Yeah.
- S: What did that feel like?
- C: That things will get better.
- S: (Choking up) The sunshine said "things will get better, Christina?" What was your day like that day? What did you do? Did you work...or other things?
- C: Other things.
- S: (After a long silence) Christina was someone there with you that day?
- C: Yes. Andrew was with me... (tearful)
- S: Andrew. May I ask something about him?
- C: Yeah.
- S: Was Andrew in agreement with the sunshine that things will get better, Christina?
- C: Yeah. he told me I don't have to put up with this.





S: He knew maybe a bit about work and what you were up against there, or did he mean something else?

C: No he knew a little. Not all of it. He saw. He was there.

S: He saw a bit about how they treated you, and was all like “I don’t approve.” And kept telling you “you don’t have to put up with this either?” He cared about you?

C: Yeah.

(... chat about the story of Andrew. She was able to say more words during this story, and some life returned but she also cried, because at the end, Andrew left her. Then we were out of time for our session, but I was still a bit preoccupied exactly what I am sending her home to. For good reason, as I was to find out later. So I said to her:)

S: Christina, I want you to know that I promise. I'm here now. And I promise, I won't leave like Andrew, and just tell you you don't have to put up with this. I'm here now, and I swear, I'll do everything I can to figure this out with you. I won't leave you to it. We'll figure this out, we'll fucking make the sun shine! Will you let me try?

C: Yeah. (looking me straight in the eyes)

S: Alright, I'll take that. Man, what in the world am I going to write for next week? A story about the weather?

C: Laughing a little, but looking at me with interest

S: No, I'm kidding. But something about sunshine and promises, I bet. Is that okay? Is there anything you wouldn't want me to put in it, or do I have free reign((wrong reign....rein..eg. to give a horse free rein?

C: Free rein. You do what you want anyway (said graciously as a poke at me, with a little smile)

S: I do, I do! Shit, I do, you caught me. Okay, I'll do what I do, and when can I show it to you. I mean when are we meeting again.... (taking out calendars and hashing it out in good way.).

Months later, Christina told me what this conversation had meant to her. She told me that during those two weeks on leave, she had quite seriously considered taking her life, and had in fact, written a will to leave her belongings and savings to her beloved little brother. She told me that my words, the “promise” I had made to her had shaken her up, and that she had indeed resolved in that moment to give me a chance and to see whether another possibility might appear. She told





me humorously that I seemed so “weird” and “resolved” and “full of hope” that at first, she only decided to give me some time so as not to “disappoint me.”

However, the time and trust Christina gave herself and me that day would soon change into conversations and experiences that would surprise us both. After the “moral reorientation” of our beginning sessions as to what was happening to Christina and who was wrong in that which was happening, we started our work on counter-storying. This counter-storying work took place in a new realm now: we were not just trying to tell Christina’s stories in ways that made her stronger, but I was resolved to raise Christina above the fray of what she had been up against, and find ways of speaking from a “new plane” of being a moral agent and a judge I was determined to stand in the way of the years of patriarchal trespasses on her life and to find the means for her to cast a moral reading of the situations she had been in, and to see how she had responded and how she wished to respond now. It was my wish that all options remain open to Christina from her new vantage point of a judge of the actions, her own, as well as those of the “boys” at work (I continued to purposefully refer to them as “boys” which always made Christina smile.) I wished that this judge would remain unencumbered and unclouded by patriarchal fog stories about the trustworthiness of her judgments. In these beginning considerations, I asked one question over and over again, “Christina, what would do justice here?” We considered lawyers, resignation letters, notices of complaint. What was “justice-doing” here? What was the political action available to us? I didn’t know but most certainly I was not going to stand in line with all the people who had already told her what to do. In the chaos inflicted upon her, I believed that Christina knew more than she could say.

And indeed she did! Christina’s preferred political action in response to her mistreatment at her workplace was neither to resign as she had in fact earned her position and enjoyed her work, nor to put herself in the position of having to tell this story to her colleagues. Instead, Christina told me that she wished to find the means and words to speak, and speak back, in her ordinary everyday life, in meetings and in encounters with her colleagues. Christina’s chosen response was an alive, embodied insurrection against male violence, all cast in the arena of her work meetings. Christina told me that wanted to speak about the meetings at work in which she was dismissed, interrupted, harassed, or asked to convince the boys of her competence 10 times over for no other reason other than because she was a young woman. She devised a plan “to give 50% less fucks” about the game of misogynist dismissal, and, paradoxically, “care 100% more about my value and my competence.”

I will show these achievements in Christina’s life by way of the therapeutic poems I wrote for her shortly, but to highlight the change in Christina’s life, please read over the following brief transcript excerpt:





- C: Phew, I'm just glad today is over. We had a big meeting, the engineer from the head-office was there to for the final assessment of the project. I have been working late every night for the past week to prepare.
- S: Alright, from your demeanour, I'm guessing it went okay?
- C: Smiles) Actually it did! I didn't know what to expect from him, but... he wasn't stupid.
- S: Wow, a bright one among the lot!
- C: (Smiles) Yeah, he came to introduce himself to me and talk to me before the meeting and he was actually interested in the project. I even showed him some of the numbers ahead of the time. And at the meeting, it was so funny, the one braggy guy kept talking, and even when it was my turn to present, he kept interrupting. But he didn't even make any sense. He was just doing his salesman thing. I didn't even bother trying to shut it down, but I watched the other guy, the head office dude. He was kind of looking around, you know, all confused, about why is he talking? I think for the first time someone saw it, the wild lack of facts and people just talking out of their ass. Like this guy didn't even work on the project, so why was he talking? So the dude was super serious and didn't join in, he seemed confused... And at one point he kind of looked at me.
- S: What kind of look was this?
- C: I don't know, he looked at me... like he raised his eyebrows.
- S: Like in a conspiratorial manner, like "are you seeing this too?"
- C: (Laughing) Yeah, like "what the fuck is going on here?"
- S: (Laughing) Alright he raises his eyebrows, like "Christina, you with the brain, can you explain this to me, like what the fuck?"
- C: Yeah!
- S: What did you do in response?
- C: I didn't say anything.
- S: Did you look away, like "I can't explain THIS."





- C: No, I looked back at him. Maybe... maybe I kind of... was like, yeah, that's right. That's what it's like.
- S: (Laughing)S so the dude is like "what the fuck" and you, in response are like, "uh. Yeah. BEHOLD the fuck."
- C: (Laughing) Yes! That's exactly what it was like! And then sometime after he was like, uh, can we get back to the numbers please. And I kind of snorted.
- S: What??? Like snorting in derision, in laughter?
- C: Yeah, the sarcastic kind.
- S: Man alive, BEHOLD the sarcasm!!! (Raising arms in triumph, Christina laughing)
- C: Yeah! It felt so good, and I just delivered my presentation. I was all calm about it, and the dude from the head office and I had a good conversation about my presentation. And no one interrupted anymore.
- S: Well would you look at that now. Maybe it's the wrong question, but I am thinking about all the times you went back to your office and felt sick, and were panicking...what was it like to walk back to your office after THAT?
- C: I... I just felt good. For a minute I sat there and I replayed it all. But then I decided, I decided, that it was... that it was right.
- S: That it was right, like correct, like JUST...?
- C: Yeah!
- S: What is the feeling of justice being done, Christina? Consider your words because every woman I speak with here is going to want to know what you say!
- C: It's... I don't know. It's calm. And you know what, I decided, I'll give 50% less fucks about all of their stupidity from now on.
- S: (Laughing): So: what the fuck? And: behold the fuck. And then: And now, by the way, I give 50% less fucks about the stupidity of the boys.
- C: (Laughing) Exactly. Exactly.





Nussbaum (1997) writes, that in a counter story “we enter, I claim, the world of full human effort, that substance of life, within which alone, politics can speak with a full and fully human voice” (p. 72).

As Christina’s life changed right before my very own eyes, something curious happened: the panic attacks disappeared. As she came to view her own responses to her mistreatment as substantial, especially as we traced the long history of her moral clarity and unique agency in advocating for how people ought to be treated, the option of taking her life also did not reoccur to her. Integral to these conversations about a counter-history to her supposed “lack of confidence” that, according to the patriarchal logic, had placed her in harm’s way, were Christina’s remembrances of her ingenious protections of her younger brother, as well as her recollections of her trustworthy and outspoken friendships with fellow students, most of whom were men, in University. In fact, one of her fellow students from her University days reached out to her in the midst of these counterstory developments to ask her, “Christina, I need your advice. I need to talk to my boss about something difficult. I don’t know how to go about it. Would you talk to me and give me advice: I am asking you because you are the only person I know who knows how to do that.” I nearly fell off my chair with the sentence “you are the only person I know who knows how to do that.” As you might imagine, this sentence was repeated between Christina and me often as a spontaneous and remarkable counter-claim within the counterstory of Christina as a measured “strategist” with a proven talent for the “cool use of intellect when in great peril.”

I will reprint two of the many therapeutic poems I wrote to Christina after these conversations. They are the first 2 in a series, entitled, First and Second lesson in fire. The achievements that these poems depict in Christina’s life are what Christina called “justice” – the kind of justice that a moral agent brings about in her life on a seemingly ordinary Tuesday afternoon. Please do not read them lightly.

First lesson in fire

In the hallway
Before my presentation
He says
“I like those jeans on you”
I keep walking
And put a hand in my pocket.

In the conference room
Before my presentation
He says
“Just lighten up and smile”
I focus





And put a hand in my pocket.

In my presentation
5 sentences into
My analysis of the numbers
He says
“Oh let me read those numbers for you”
I decline
And put a hand in my pocket.

After it’s all over
And I’m taking a breather
He says
“good job you looked really cute today
Come out for a drink will’ya”
I smile
And put a hand in my pocket:

“My pockets are full of matches
You see
And I’m a little busy
Planning to set all of this on fire.”

Second Lesson In Fire (Or: How Do Revolutions Spark?)

How do revolutions spark?
They spark in a heart in the womens’ bathroom in front of a mirror
That is no longer a funhouse mirror
But shows me
Calm and clear

They spark
In the discovery of an unexpected ally
When he pokes his head in to say
“They are real cowboys here
-How do you stand it?”

They spark
In raised eyebrows





When I am interrupted again
By the biggest blowhard of them all
And the other engineer
Grows confused at the wild lack of facts
And makes eye contact with me across the table,
And raises his eyebrows
as if to say “WTF”
And when I hold his gaze
And shrug: “Yeah, behold the fuck.”

The sparks are not loud:
They might be
An askance look
A blunt word
An un-skirted walk
An unprompted thought
A snarky idea
When I decide
To give 50% less fucks
Because I never agreed to be a casualty
Of these manmade disasters.

And I realized they were noticed
When my manager
Asked: What happened to you?

Revolutions
Spark
Against a long history
Of being pressed
Out of
My mirror image
My allies
My looks
My words
My thoughts
Against the long history
Of being pressed
Into 10 museums of cowboy ideas
For my mind





I am re-minded:

Every fire
Worth its mention
Sparks with
A human
Who didn't just stand it
But lit a fire
Over History Repeating.

Christina's life was clearly on the move. I was left to celebrating more and more achievements and returns of her old strengths in her life and taking in these changes in a state of sheer joy. Panic, without a single "intervention" devised to ease panic!, had receded, and instead, Christina's words, laughter, sarcasm, and brightness filled our conversations. After a few meetings of conversing about visits with her family and her hopes for her two nieces, I started wondering whether it was time to space out the frequency of our meetings as Christina seemed to be thriving. I decided to check in with her about these considerations at our next meeting when I received an unexpected email from Christina herself the evening before our next appointment. She wrote:

"Sanni. There is something I need to talk to you about. I have wanted to bring it up the last two times, but I chickened out. Something is bothering me, something that happened, and I'm afraid that you'll judge me. This is the reason I haven't talked to you about it. It makes me think maybe everything we worked on is a lie. I'm so afraid of this. Please help me."

I responded with words of reassurance to Christina, and was intrigued, to say the least, about this request. In preparing my thoughts for our conversation, I was aware that something had happened that had caused Christina to question the "rightness" of the story that we had been telling together, and that it pained her to think that whatever happened would after all serve as evidence against her. I was not altogether surprised at Christina's email, as I have witnessed this before with many of my clients who tell a story of mistreatment or abuse or rape to me for the first time in their lives, experience some relief but then return to me urgently with spontaneous and insistent story snippets that have followed them ever since the telling. "But what about this part of the story? How does this fit?" they ask me, often in tears. Moral deliberations are no small achievement, and clients continue to test their judgments against memories of events, of who said what, and who did what, and in which sequence. These considerations and reconsiderations and unfolding reaches in light of their own knowledges, memories, and pronouncements of others, tell me about the significance and accomplishment of the venture of reaching for moral judgments, especially when such judgments are cast by women whose thoughts and experiences are still routinely called into question as to their trustworthiness.





Whatever had happened, I resolved, Christina and I would reach again for the means to tell the story and weigh it according to her own moral code. Hannah Arendt's words are often on my mind in times like these: "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge. It is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that this ability to think will prevent catastrophes and moral collapses in those rare moments when the chips are down" (Arendt, 1971, p. 446). I resolved to believe in Christina's ability to tell right from wrong, and beautiful from ugly, in response to something that had happened that was clearly significant to her story going forward.

Out of respect for the rare and intimate beauty of this story I would come to know in the meeting that followed, I will only trace it in its outline, and then provide the poem I wrote for Christina afterwards.

This was the story of an experience Christina shared with a colleague 3 months after she was raped. Her colleague, whom Christina was fond of, invited her to a good-bye party as he was leaving the company for a job overseas. Christina went to the party because of her fondness for this colleague. After the party, he walked Christina home through a quiet early spring evening and she enjoyed his company. At her garden gate, Christina freely made a decision to invite him in and spend the night.

Christina was afraid that the story of this night would somehow, in my mind, constitute her as "a slut" after all, and then everything the boys at work had been saying would be true after all, and we had had no right to condemn them for their actions and trespasses against her. Christina was afraid that this story would tell us both that she was guilty of her rape after all.

Of course, Christina did not come up with these fears on her own. I need only to point to the long history of rape trials in which women's consensual sexual experiences are admitted as part of the evidence of what happened on any given night. The patriarchal master narratives about women's sexual experiences, the when's, how's, and who's of them and in particular, whom we owe confessions of our sexual experiences to, and to what extent these experiences make us either credible or untrustworthy as people, point to the well-known history patriarchal hysteria about the control of women's lives.

As the story about that night poured out of Christina at our next meeting, with few prompts from me save for soft "what happened next?" questions, and after she had told me what she had found herself saying "yes" to and why she had said "yes," and what she had felt, I felt tearful at many turns. Here are some excerpts of the questions I found myself asking towards the end of the session.

- "Christina, is it possible that the trust you placed in him, the feeling you had for him that night was, in fact, a triumph of your spirit?"
- "What is the difference between this night and that other horrible night?"
- "Was this night, then, an affirmation of life and of feeling?"





- “Was this night also a living affirmation of the right, your right Christina, to say “yes” and “no” and the insistence that you know the difference?”
- “Was this night an insurrection too, Christina, but of the most surprising kind?”
- “Can it be an insurrection, or a magnificent reclamation, a kind of protest, if you will, when a woman decides freely to say yes to something?”
- “Does this mean that you had decided that both your no and your yes matter?”
- “Was it worth your while to say yes to this?”
- “Is this a night worth remembering?”
- “Why do you suppose that shame has been so hard at work trying to tell you something about that night?”
- “Where is shame now?”

These questions are born out of considerations about what exactly constitutes a “response to trauma.” For a long time now in narrative therapy all that we have had is the metaphor of protest to understand that which people do in response to trauma, but protest is but a small arena, a small imagination, of what can constitute a response. In my work, clients like Christina have taught me to go beyond the limitations of the metaphor of protest, which invokes a worded response or a confrontation of some kind that is always tied to that which happened and perhaps even the actors involved. Christina and I had also conversed in the arena of protest and considered her responses in the arena of her workplace (i.e., looking men in the eyes, speaking her mind, refusing to check her work when the results did not please the men, blunt comments etc.). These efforts of restoring her responses back to her were of utmost importance. However, the metaphor of protest can constrain our imaginations of the ways that people are responding to trauma by fashioning their lives according to their own will, their longings, and their moral codes. These “fashionings” or designs of lives might not look anything like “protest.” They might look like a walk on a spring evening with a companion of one’s choosing. If I fail to see how my clients have gone on to fashion a life against that which happened, in moral objection to that which happened, in quiet but joyful triumph over that which happened, then I have failed my responsibilities as a witness.

After Christina and I parted that night, here is what I wrote for her about this experience and our conversation. Please do not read it lightly.

Feelings I Don’t Know the Names Of Or: After Rape

When you walked into the garden
there was nobody left
the silver of the moonlight was long gone
not to speak of the gold of sun
no squirrel rustled in the bushes
no bird told another of its world





no magpies argued
no cat's lament
not even the rain would come

It was all a-hush
And still
In shades of black.

You stopped at the gate
And your brown eyes over the garden were
Warm.
And for your stopping
and the gold of your eyes
I whispered
“Do you want to come in?”
And that was my first real sentence in months
And my breath shook the earth.

I made you a separate bed
With white linens
And served you water
And you laid down and said “goodnight.”
And for your lack of demand
My breath shook the earth once more.

So I walked away and showered
And dressed myself for bed
And took my favourite book
To my own white linens with me.
And as I read
Comforted by the familiar lines I knew so well
I heard a sound.
A red robin in my black still garden
Perched and sang
A song of early spring.
I listened
And my heart shook in disbelief.

And then, was it moments
Or hours





Or days
After its song was finished
I got up out of bed
And my bare feet were warm on the wooden floor
And I tip-toed to your bed and whispered
“Will you hold me through this night?”

You held out your arms to me
And I laid myself down with a sigh
And just as I went to close my eyes
To the sleepy beat of your heart

I saw
That the moon had risen over my garden
And bathed us all
In gold and silver.

Epilogue

Shortly after this poem was written, Christina applied and was accepted for post-doctoral work at a prestigious University in another city. We negotiated and celebrated this development in her life over the course of a few sessions. But then came the day when she visited me at my office one last time before her move. After a conversation about her jitters, which she herself calmed with cool ease by advising me on what exactly to tell the next woman I was to meet who was being mistreated at work both of us grew suddenly silent and awkward. Christina sighed and packed her bags and then lingered uncharacteristically at the door. “I’ll miss you.” I said, choked up, a pathetic phrase in light of all that Christina and her life had come to mean to me. She didn’t answer and looked away somewhere into the hallway, somewhere she was about to go. But she didn’t take the step yet and lingered in the doorway still. I waited too. Then I said, with all the spirit I could muster through my choking back tears, “Alright. Get the fuck out of here and fly. I fucking hate goodbyes!” Christina looked back at me then, and smiled right at me as brilliantly as ever, and the smile went right to my heart. Before I had time to get choked up again, she was gone.

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On the Pedagogy of Poetics

Sarah Green, Tara Luhtanen, Chelsey Morton, Sanni Paljakka, Tiffany Saxton, Larissa Szlavik, and Crys Vincent

I (Sanni) wish to situate what you are about to read, dear reader. This paper represents a collection of creativity at the Calgary Narrative Collective in the form of examples of the therapeutic poems we write to our clients as part of our daily practice.

The representation of these poems is a reach to show you our collective work in Narrative therapy in a way that 20 pages of prose could only long to do. These poems will reveal much of the ambition and joy at the heart of our work.

When I first began writing poems for clients, I could not have imagined putting together this paper today: I find I am no longer alone. I never thought that either colleagues or students would join me in this venture of therapeutic poetry writing with such imagination, larceny, and passion. The writing of therapeutic documents is our only agency requirement for all new therapists who train with us, but even then, I have always been cautious to state: “this requirement of therapeutic documents can take the form of letters, poems, notes, songs, postcards, certificates, stories, etc.” as I can imagine no worse perversion than that of “mandated poems.” We indeed need therapists who, as Ursula LeGuin reminds us, “remember freedom.”

So imagine my surprise to find myself surrounded by all these therapists who are writing poems as matter-of-factly as to say, “um. How else would you start a session, or know your client, or structure your work, or create trust, or record their achievements if you didn’t write poems?” As a therapist and teacher, it is a great vexing question to me why people no longer hear stories of radical others. Over time, I have become convinced that this happens because people have been convincingly initiated in what to hear instead. If I had a life mission as a teacher, it would be to remove these instructions imprinted on otherwise entirely capable human ears so that they could hear a radical other speaking and respond as spirited and curious human beings all over again: such that they could linger over the imagination of others’ experiences with rich and specific language and an affectionate notice of their world.

The practice of writing poems has proven of great use in this regard. The craft and habit of surveying session notes and writing to every client, after every session, has pressed a reorientation from therapist’s anxieties and self-conscious questions in the aftermath of their





days to a repeated practice of a focused concentration of attention on clients' stories and contemplation of the idea proposals that spell possibility.

The incitement to write nothing short of poems in syntax and form also seduces therapists away from one of the great pitfalls and complacencies of our time: the reduction of the beauty and complexity of life to the lowest common denominator of something akin to SMART goals. When faced with the necessity of poetry instead of a therapeutic check-sheet, problems can suddenly appear interesting again. Problems can rise to be political and poetic dilemmas and spawn into tetrallemmas that any living person should rightfully lose much sleep over. The exorcising of problems into neatly boxed externalizations slightly loses its appeal next to clients' chaotic and living descriptions. No matter how much I wished to bestow all goodness to my clients and all badness into problems, the writing of poems has not born out this view to me: once one eschews the stretching of pithy metaphors over the richness of experience, it all becomes, well, interesting.

The writing of poems can cause the pause that spells fascination, not just in regard to problems but in regard to change. In restriction and revolution. In dragons and quests. But even writing these juxtapositions belies the true fascination: the interest in human beings. In the education of attention on both the moments of complicated problems and the moments of halting transcendence human beings reveal character, intent, and history to me as a witness. Poems are the counterpractice to the pain of experiencing the world in an anonymous, vague, illegitimized, and labelled manner. They work as a way of passing on knowledge, lived experience, solace and solidarity about our rarest human moments that, if it were said directly, wouldn't work. They allow descriptions of ideas and lives in one page rather than 15 pages. I am not a particularly concise speaker in my therapy sessions, and it gives me great grief at times to think about how to pose the heart of the matter. The whole idea of the poem is to cause a surprise change – otherwise the poem is useless to me. Poetry interests me because it is brief, it cannot say everything, but it puts an idea in motion, in the form of instant dialogue between my client and myself. I chase the moment when you can make a poem burst into a soul with good will and boldness. I think this happens when you catch what is at the heart of the matter for a living person, when you are able to speak of failure without hanging people, when you come close to inching to precipice that spells transformation, all set in the ordinary lives of persons, and in their own dialect. This surprise halts the slide back into our usual eyes in favor of the possibility of lingering: the ability to think while being swept up in the sensory emotional experience of the world. That's the kind of poem I want to write, the kind that stops being about word-play, and starts being about life.





And above all else, poems are an anti-dote to despair: ours and our clients. What has surprised me most is how the passion of writing poems restores itself, - I don't understand it. The poems can happen without trying so hard, they prove our work without proving our self-consciousness about our work. And dare I say it, there is a kind of happiness to them that is the true purpose of this paper.

In preparation for this collection of poems I asked the team of therapists at the CNC to tell me why they started doing it, and why they have persisted with it through the years. Each of them passed on their thoughts to me generously, and I cast about for a while with the question of how to represent their ideas. I had in fact, set up complicated bulleted lists of shared themes before it came to me: write a poem! So the following poem is constructed in its entirety from the words of the therapists who responded to my question:

***A Response to the First Time Sanni Assigned an Easy Task:
Why did you start writing poems for clients?***

*As I sat there, listening
I had been shriveling up like a rose bush in dry soil
In the barren landscape of counsellor training:
The parrots were squawking:
Microskills, lists of good questions, SMART goals
Was THIS what I had put my mind to doing?*

*The spirit of the poems grabbed me:
This was real talk defending clients' honor
And there were swear words, metaphors and rich details
The poems were alive
Subversive, moving, funny, and human
And I was enlivened:
Alert, vibrating, writing notes vigorously
It opened a door to another world.*

*It was the poems that set me ablaze
They were my way into Narrative therapy
And I don't understand how therapists who don't do poems do it
Because how do you do Narrative therapy
Without this: People's. Words. Matter.*





*You have to understand:
I too, have the whole: "I-Am-Not-a-Writer
And-I-Certainly-Have-Never-Tried-To-Write-Anything-Since-A-Grade-7-Haiku" -thing
Going on,
I still don't think of myself as a poet,
I would never win a poetry writing contest.
But I listen for the poetry in a person's story without trying
And how do you explain THAT?*

*I am not a preschooler,
And I believe that my mind has the ability to create
Something unique
I do not need a "fill in the blanks" form.*

*So I hit the ground running and never looked back.
And here's what I learned:*

*Lesson number 1:
Writing poems catches people by surprise!
I saw them weep, laugh, and beam with pride.
They print them, post them, share them, bind them, re-write them in calligraphy
They wait with baited breath for the next one
And I can't wait to read them to him or her or them
"Yes, read it now!" People say,
"Aahhh, I have a poem written just for me."
"You just broke through 364 days of loneliness."
And if I had a nickle for every time a person says
"I feel so heard"
I wouldn't have to work anymore
But I would choose to do THIS.
And that's not all.*

*Lesson Number 2:
It takes a lot of attention
To put together a piece of writing
In a way that has the potential to be healing.
If I don't pay attention*





*People can feel like shit.
People's responses to the poems
Are the ultimate supervisor of my work:
They require me to puzzle on clients' dilemmas
Sweat with power dynamics
Choose poignant moments*

*The poems are a gauge
And they keep me on my toes:
They show me
What I did in session,
And if struggle writing a poem,
It tells me it was a shit session:
Creativity arises most readily from creativity.*

*The form of the poem invites it to be dynamic
and changeable
unlike a letter that is so paragraphy:
Prose cannot capture a love that is at risk of a rebel coup,
or the discovery of childlike gentleness as an "anti-anxiety" strategy
Or what a pill bottle by the bed spells:
"and when I see it
by the bedside
it's a pill container full of trust"
Would we have the same thing to work with
If I had read a dreary letter saying
and then you did this, and then you did this...?
A poem does not bind you to the conventions of regular speak.
You can convey big ideas and big feelings in so few words.
You can be weird and interesting.
Perhaps the thing I love most about poetry is the tonality:
In a way, you have the ability to infect someone with a vibe,
like a give-no-shits vibe,
or a this shit is a s-trrrr-r-u-g-g-l-e vibe,
or an frantic vibe,
or a calm vibe,
or an 'I got this!' vibe,
or a deep with feeling vibe ...*





*And if people can be moved by their own stories
Laugh at their oppressors
Feel empowered
And catch a glimpse like this:
“if that person is the person I am in this world
then goddamn why do I hate myself so much sometimes?
I loved the person in the poem, she was jovial yet deep.
She is handling and coping with the situation beautifully with grace and dignity”*

*Then
I say,
Go ahead
Don't trust me
Write a poem instead,
Listen carefully to their response.
And
Then wait for what it is that will come next*

*Shh:
If it's neither
Unicorns
Nor
Vicarious Trauma
Would you be surprised?*

A Collection of Poems with Brief Introductions

Tara Luhtanen:

The following two poems are dedicated to one of my most favorite people whom I talk with. The brief background is that at a very young age she found herself in addiction and living with a much older drug dealer who was not going to let her leave him. After 3 days of 24/7 partying, she was dope sick and lying there on the bed and he had gone out - for cigarettes or drugs or some brief trip - and she had been given some drug that was laced with something and it woke her with a fit of adrenaline, and she knew instantly, if I don't do it now, I never will. She got up and ran out the door and she doesn't even recall putting shoes on, and she certainly did not pause to close the door behind her. She ran straight to the police station, and she said that moment was





"as if I was running through a field of daisies." In a session prior to me hearing about this story of running, she told me about her before-dawn drives to find spots by the river where she would sit - feeling safe - in quiet and darkness - knowing if he were around, she would hear him through the quiet. I so admire this woman who feels safe alone in the quiet darkness in the middle of nowhere. This one drive was to get a tattoo, and she stopped first to have coffee by the water and watch the sunrise, knowing that she is safe with the timing of nature and that it will take time for her to move past all that happened. She got a full back tattoo that day of a moth that is flying over a mountain – and she described this peace on the other side of the mountain. I share both poems with you here, the one before the other. Every time I read the “Running Poem,” I get shivers. When I read it aloud to her, I choked up with tears and had to stop reading a moment. When a poem that I wrote has this effect on me, I know it's because of what happened in the session, because of what she shared and how she shared it.

The rise and fall of the sun

*In the peace of the mountains
with no yelling, cars or noise
with my coffee
and the dogs swimming
I sit at the river's edge and wait
for the transformation
to rise
with the sun before me
in its own time,
the clock of nature
where everything comes and goes
and in this dark peace the world has its sounds
and its rhythm
and I **will** take part in it*

*This energy
of writing
while the fire crackles
and the water rushes
and the dogs lie lazily
and the blanket pulls snugly
lying in the back of the truck
this energy of writing
prompted by the sunset*





*is energy sent out into the quiet still moment
it is not energy for you
it is yelled into the woods
with my knees on the cold hard ground
and when I rise
my back turned on you
as if with a rebirthing
the moth flies over the mountain*

*A full back tattoo
paints over your knowing of me.
this back
that I turn on you
dude
all you know
is an unrecognizable
version of a me that
has flown over the mountain
in a last-minute decision
that is all the time you're worth*

A split second of insanity or, A split second of sanity
*Did you ever just know: this was your moment?
Did you ever run, feeling like nothing can stop you?
Did you ever run, as if through a field of daisies
Did you ever run, like you have the warm wind behind you
propelling you forward
pushing you but also just carrying you in its embrace
like a moth catches an air current over a mountain
and ahead the road is rising up to meet you
and there are no stop lights
and there are no street signs
because none are needed
there's only one path
so clearly laid out before you
Did you ever know something deep within you
so much that you didn't even have to think about it anymore
that your body could embrace the action*





*knowing that your mind and soul had already fully embraced it
Did you ever embrace a moment
Did you ever take one moment and put everything you have into it
in a now or never kind of way
Did you ever just get up and run
and not even close the door behind you
or take anything but yourself
Did you ever care for yourself that much?
Did you ever just take yourself somewhere, and nothing else?
Did you ever just run, knowing it was your moment to run across the daisy fields to freedom*

*And did you see those fields begin to open up
where you took yourself
and where you find yourself now
when you feel for once
you could just ride forever
with your dearest love
and not worry where you're going
with tall grasses and growing dusk as the sun sets
Did you ever know when you were running free
that you were running
to fields like this?*

Crys Vincent:

The following poem was written for a young Indigenous woman and mother, Jane. Jane chronicled for me the long history of her family, punctured by the childhood loss of her mother, the estrangement from her sister, and the loss of her daughter to Child and Family Services. But Jane's story was not overcome by Loss, no, her story was one of rich family ties spanning generations. There were ways her mother's wisdom continued to guide her even years later, even as Jane herself had become a mother at 12, to both her sister and herself. This wisdom, these knowings continued to inform her as we spoke and she fought to get her daughter back from foster care and curate the next evolution of her family, spirited by her mother's energy, but with people of her own choosing.

As we continued to meet, Jane told me about the visits she was allowed to have with her daughter. She told me about hunting the concrete city for pockets of nature so she could expose her daughter to the ways her culture connected with nature. Jane spoke of herself as a Mama





Bear, ready to fight as she prepared for another meeting with her social worker. I was struck by the fullness of Jane's identity that encompassed both the Hunter and the Bear along with the cultural significance these symbols held for her.

The Hunter and The Bear

*Sometimes I am the hunter
Smelling that smell
Of earth, dirt, and water, and air
Hunting the city limits
For pockets of nature,
Of beauty
Of leaves my daughter can crunch
Beneath her feet*

*Hunting for connection in dreams
And meaning in challenges
And truth in everything*

*Sometimes I am the Bear
The fierce Mama Bear
Who protects and fights and never loses sight of her young
Even the ones she only sees in her dreams*

*The Wise Bear with instincts that knew even as a child,
that a person is more important
Than a can of beer
The Brave Bear who risked it all
To protect the young
And still keeps watch in the "no go zone"*

*I am connected to my culture
My spirit
My family*

*Sometimes, I am the Hunter
Sometimes, I am the Bear*





The following poem was written after the first session with a young gay woman navigating the micro system of the gay community in a mid-sized western Canadian city. She spoke of this community as a circular cage, where she continued to run into the same people, the same ex-lovers, the same drama everywhere she turned. I love this poem because I can hear her voice so clearly. Lois had a distinct cadence and vocabulary that captivated me right away. She spoke of mistakes as "garbage" and the drama within the gay community as "fire," and her girlfriend as a "cool glass of lemonade" in the midst of the flames. Lois spoke of the desire to walk away from the fire that burned inside the cage. To watch the flames from a safe distance, but be able to have a calm mind.

Garbage on Fire

*Lately, I've been feeling like a broken record
Someone change the vinyl!
I'm sick of this song on repeat
The song of confusion
The song that keeps repeating every dick move I've ever made
And calls me garbage*

*How about some refreshments?
She was like a cool glass of lemonade
An ice cube, sounded by a ring of fire*

*But this town is small, man
And it feels more like a circular cage
So that no matter how fast I run
I keep running back into the same damn things
The dick moves
The betrayals
The secrets
The hopes that maybe this time
It might be different*

*Not all half-truths are lies
You know how hard it is to have any privacy in a circular cage?
Maybe I'd like to tell you who I am
Outside of the cage
And away from the fire*





*Turn off the soundtrack
And let me out!
I'd like to know who I am outside
Without the lyrics of loss
You insist on repeating
Echoing in my ear
It's enough to drive anyone crazy
So that must mean I'm perfectly normal
Yeah, I might be screaming
But this shit is on fire*

*I'm not even angry anymore
I don't have any anger left
I'm tired of watching people I love
Add gasoline to the fire
And then ask me why I'm so hot*

*I've been burned, that's why
And you've looked at my scarred skin and
Figure it's what I deserved
You know, cause of the garbage*

"I'm only here until I find someone I like more"

That's garbage on fire

*Maybe I am still angry after all
Looks like I still have some fight left
And maybe I'm only really sad
When I have to hear that song on repeat
The one you wrote
But have stuck my name to
I didn't write that crap
And I'm not reaching for the fire extinguisher
If you want to burn it down
Go ahead
Maybe I'll roast a marshmallow*





*Maybe I'll just walk away
Maybe I'll watch from a safe distance
And do my best to avoid the sparks*

Sarah Green:

This is a poem I wrote recently for a client who is a new mum. I've changed the names of people and places to protect their privacy. This new mum, we've chosen to call her Sally, first came to me to discuss anxiety, something with which she has had a long relationship, and has actually found to be quite helpful, especially in her job. But since her pregnancy and the birth of her child, she has found that there has been an increase in anxiety and the biggest impact being on the relationship between her and her husband, "Mike." She complained to me that she cannot let things go, or just do things and go places, and that this makes no sense to Mike. Sally and I have had 3 sessions now, all over zoom, and all of them with the baby, "Oden" present, being lovingly cared for by Sally. We've discussed the huge weight of responsibility that falls on mothers, the aloneness that Sally feels with these responsibilities, and the ways in which she's been determinedly practicing her ethics and values of care. She doesn't let them go. The poem is not particularly pretty, or linguistically musical. But Sally still shed tears, and thoughtfully responded to the poem, not only because it summarizes the story of our sessions, but because it offers a position which problematizes cultural assumptions about the distribution (or lack thereof) of responsibilities between women and men when it comes to child-rearing, household duties, and of keeping our concerns and anxieties to ourselves. In our most recent session, the one in which I read this poem to Sally, she thought aloud that perhaps she did not actually want to attempt to let things go because she does really care about those things, but rather find ways of sharing the burden of responsibility with others, and with Mike. I'm proud of this poem, not because of its prettiness, or its polish. It might seem at first as though it is simply a list of the things that Sally has told me about her problems, and then a happy triumph at the end. But it did a lot more for Sally than just remembering everything we talked about, or validating her feelings. Sally was really thoughtful about how the only other people she knew who shared similar experiences as her were other women that she knew, and how drastically their lives changed after having had babies, whereas their male partners and spouses had very little change in lifestyle. I'm proud of this poem because of how it offers a position on gender norms and societal pressures to "let it go." from inside of the story of her experience with anxiety, her marriage, and motherhood.





I Don't Let It Go

*His name is Oden, our first.
When I was pregnant anxiety was all about trying to protect the baby.
I thought once I saw him it would be ok.
That was wrong.
The biggest impact is probably on me with my husband.
I was really on one end of the spectrum of careful.
Mike was on the opposite end.
I asked him to wash his hands.
Is that reasonable? Or completely driven by anxiety and how ridiculous am I being?
It was just one of the ways that I could do everything to protect him.*

*Whatever it is I get stuck on, I don't let it go.
Mike literally can't grasp what anxious feelings could be like.
Don't tell me to let it go!
Don't tell me to calm down!
I've been trying to protect this little guy for almost a year.
Strict on the food I was eating and things.
Knowing with my job some of the bad things that can happen:
Those things are real. I see them.
And with my job, anxiety is actually helpful, productive, a key component for where I am today.*

*Before this recent third wave lock down, almost 6 weeks post c-section,
I was going to take Oden to my parent's house so that I would have someone to help more consistently.
I desperately wanted to go.
Anxiety reminded me that my sister has daycare aged kids,
that I should keep trying to check that his car seat was in right,
that packing is up to me,
that I could not talk about it all week because I would seem ridiculous.*

*I knew in my mind the night before that I would find a reason that sounded reasonable enough to not go.
"You haven't started packing yet?" said my husband,
because packing is assumed to be my job.
It would be nice to be out of these walls.
But what would I forget? What about a car accident, or a cold?*





*These considerations are also my responsibility alone.
Anxiety tries to help, but the aloneness and burden of responsibility become a monster.
When the time comes I'll be thinking carefully about everything.
I won't let it go, but we will go.
He's a bit older. He has his first set of vaccines, everyone in my family has been vaccinated.
I'm feeling excited.
There will be more hands.
The care load has been just on me.*

*Then comes a call from the university to say can you come for your second vax?
But I am alone because Mike is away playing golf and I am secretly upset but not upset.
I either have to find someone to take him or take him with me.
That set me into a tail spin, prior to him peeing on me and my lunch beeping at 3:00.
In his mind, booking his golf today and his motorcycle road test tomorrow morning is nothing,
because he is not responsible for worrying or thinking about "what-ifs?" or planning.
And he doesn't understand anxiety, it's mine alone.
I didn't know until last night that he wasn't going to be here for all of these hours.
Don't tell me to let it go.*

*The burden falls on mum.
Who's going to be up with him half the night after a 3.5 hour drive?
I'm still going to go, but now I'm like, shoot,
getting vaccinated next week is no longer fine, I messed up royally as a mum, it didn't even
dawn on me that I was putting my baby at any risk,
because this responsibility is mine alone.
Going to parents isn't even a risky situation. Plus I have the vaccine booked.
My anxiety doesn't like last minute changes in plan.
My husband would probably say, "Well why didn't you just go?"
I don't know if I'll even tell him; I don't want to explain it to him.
Its not just about anxiety, but the burden and the monster and aloneness.
Then of course I'll think about it all day, because it is my responsibility alone and I won't let it
go.*

*I didn't let that vaccine phone call go.
I hopped in the car with Oden and drove to the clinic.
I have been vaccinated with my second as of this morning!
Made for a busy exit out of town, and I have anxiety in tow.
But the monster isn't stopping me, and we are half way there, and I'm not looking back!*



**Chelsey Morton:**

The following poem is about a woman who has decided to get a divorce and leave a relationship that was fraught with control and dominance. She knows leaving this marriage will leave her in an economically precarious situation. She spoke of not wanting to be a doormat anymore.

You Think You Know Anything About Doormats?

*This doormat just got legs and its standing up
It took its time
Waited it out
Hoped for a peaceful transition
The in-and-out traffic of the door
Provided a soft place to wipe your feet
Or remove your shoes
It was welcoming – it was giving of itself
Over time with constant use
The doormat was drowning in melting snow
Eating shit
And playing dumb
It was drugged and drug
Just to show up
With its tidy fringe
A betrayal pierced a hole in the weave
And the mat felt under attack
Uncertain if it could continue playing the game
It had been witness to so many attempted escapes
But it kept getting the dust beaten out of it
Laid back on the floor
For fear of punishment
Until this doormat got legs and stood up
Pulled back it's truth
It cancelled the steam clean
Refused a particular pair of shoes for the first time
The doormat knows fear is a prison
Strategy is escape
Courageous and planful in its care
To rebuild a foundation*





*This doormat just got legs and it is standing up
On sturdy beautiful floors
That are grounded in intention
It is a home and a place of belonging
Just beyond fear
The doormat has been woven with golden threads of beauty
Fine chains of a compass lace the edges
Flower petals have dyed the fibres
And this doormat just got legs and it is standing up
For a life of freedom*

This second poem is dedicated to a young queer person who struggled with belonging and feeling like they are not 'normal' -they spoke about how weeds are misunderstood and maybe dandelions are beautiful.

Picking Through the Weeds Finding Dandelions

*Normal weeds parade as potential flowers
And go on to suck the nutrients from the soil
In noxious and diminishing ways
And the gardener is forced to
Spend all day on her hands and knees
Dissecting which sprout is worth keeping
Thorns of tough love can be pretty prickly
Leaving days to pull out each puncture
Caused by attempts at 'normal'*

*What might become a surreal blossom
Of weirdness
With aromas of tender care?
The dandelion of course!
Feeding the bees with early pollen
The bold yellow flower
Giving a place of belonging
In the contrast it provides
There is an ease in spotting the dandelion
But an effort, not so easily traced,
In appreciating it*



**Larissa Szlavik:**

I am all ears when my client (I will refer to her as 'Erin') tells me that for some weird reason, she thinks of her grandfather any time she sees a black bear – which is often! We are at the threshold of Summer, a time of year that brings the kind of sadness that speaks to an absence of family, and an absence of her “most special” person. It's been 2 years since her grandfather passed away, and the pain of being excluded from his funeral is especially present today. She grew up in a particular church that is imbued in homophobia and patriarchy. Erin did not feel she belonged there. Eventually, her family turned their backs on her when she announced to them her truth: she's queer. Her grandfather was the one family member she could count on to love her no matter what, just as she is. The following poem was written in response to the re-membering conversation that ensued – it is not only an attempt to bring Erin closer to her grandfather's spirit, but also to an identity that was stolen from her. See, Erin tells me that her grandfather was indigenous on his mom's side – Mi'kmaq, she suspects – a truth that was silenced by Shame, the Indian Act, and a church fire that devoured the birth records. Erin feels a sense of “loss” over this. I highlight the agency of her longing to know about her indigenous ancestry and culture as “clinging to memories that refuse to get lost” and a series of questions that Erin poses. These acts are not mundane, they are a counter to the forces that want to erase her indigenous heritage entirely. I did a little research and came across the Mi'kmaq legend of Muin, the bear who was called to bring medicines to the human people¹. It's a beautiful story about humans living in harmony with land, animals, and plants – which is very fitting as Erin has a strong connection to nature. I pitched the metaphor that her grandfather brought medicines to her heart, which she loved. The poem tells a story of a woman who is able to access her grandfather's medicines, even after death, by walking in his footpath.

Reference

1. Mi'kmaw Culture - Legends and Stories (muiniskw.org)

Bear Brings the Medicines

*I've wandered these woods
following the footpath Bear left behind –
It leads me to a strawberry patch
all plump with the end of summer.
Heart pangs like a lump you can't swallow
like a church fire that devoured part of my history*





*like a clenched fist clinging to memories
that refuse to get lost.*

*There is so much I would want to know.
Where did his mom come from?
Why did she leave the reservation?
What was she like?
What was the rest of my family like?
What did being indigenous mean to him?*

*I used to go to the old Bear's house
on Sundays
instead of playing with the church kids.
Play Scrabble,
read John Grisham,
adventure on the four-wheeler.*

*He sensed the loneliness
thawed it's cold right outta me with his warmth
He used to call me 'Moonbeams'
not because my white hair,
but because I was different.
He saw me shining—
“you're gonna do big things” he'd say.*

*Bear would always bring medicines
to my heart.
Didn't matter what was going on
or what I needed.
He saw how I refused to play certain roles
for certain people.
His love was unconditional,
always —
We were each other's most special person.*

*He used to love how much I loved to read,
and when I'd get up from the dinner table
to help myself to seconds or thirds,*





*he'd say, "Eat! Eat!"
We were the same in spirit,
the Bear and I,
voracious
for big words
insatiable curiosity
I remember his big bear laughter
strengthening my resolve
to live my truth.*

*He no longer roams this Earth,
but I still walk in his footpath,
with gentleness and
Stewardship to the land.
Closer and closer I come
to the medicines*

*and I find Freedom
in the quiet moments
between each step.*

Sanni Paljakka:

The following poem is written for Raine, a pseudonym chosen with pride by this client. Raine is a young queer woman who struggles with physical symptoms of anxiety as a result of a lifetime of disregard and abuse of her person and the queer-phobic questioning of her experiences and decisions by powerful others. She came to consult with me under duress as she had recently taken her courage in her shaking hands once more to explore the kind of intimacy, romance, desire and want that would befit her soul. Prior to this conversation, people had told her in no uncertain terms that these explorations of hers were “unhealthy” – this poem sought to capture her lived experiences and her decision making to claim her moral authority on her ways of loving. Raine commented that this poem honored her and made her proud.

Wonder

*How do you build a life
Within your own skin
In a world that is scary as hell?*





*I'll tell you:
If you decide to take a measured look at scary
And aim the steering wheel right into
It even if your hands shake
The comfort in your skin will grow
-It's a wonder.*

*And after you decide that foursomes aren't for you
And your ride picks you up
And you drive into the night as your hands shake
The knowing in your skin will grow
In the presence of a friend
-It's a wonder.*

*And after you risk
And lean over to kiss the man with the beard for the first time in your life
And he turns out too shy
Or after you risk and smile at the woman who has a belly just like you
And she turns out too straight
The hope in your skin will grow
-It's a wonder.*

*If you look at skin and blood and bones
And ask them what they long for
They might tell you:
I want to build a family
My chosen family
The one I painted when I was six
The one to jump into cold water with
The one to go to Christmas parties with
The one to care for a kitten with
The one to drive long into the night with
The one to trace our ways into our skins with
-Like wonder.*

*My hands tell me
My longing*





Is for family-esque

And so, with shaky tender hands, I brought home a kitten today:

We're ready.

Tiffany Saxton:

This poem is from a conversation with an older Indigenous man, the week after the presence of 215 unmarked graves was confirmed by members of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation, with the help of ground-penetrating radar, at the Kamloops Residential School. He had previously been under increasing pressure from suicidal thoughts and in this conversation, remembered what he knew about the life-saving power of being seen and believed. He came to our next session and responded to the reading of this poem with, "I'm good now. Listening to you telling the stories of my knowing did it. I guess you and me, we saved my life again. Yeah, my soul's good with living in these old bones."

Homecoming

Surely

With the 215

you cannot turn away from the Truth

We always told:

For five springs I went to him,

Begging for a job,

an escape,

From the beatings

From the loneliness

From the shame

From the train tracks.

There were 6 of us in my family;

I am the only one left

of our generation,

Stolen to unlearn the Truth

of who we were,

To have the Indian slaughtered

out of our bones and souls.

When I was 13,





*He said yes
and
saved
my
life.
I worked hard
for decades;
He is still my mentor
And I have become a knowledge keeper
of both his craft and my legacy.*

*Knowing that you will walk with us
Allows my journey home;
To stand tall once more,
To finally know
How to live again
In these bones,
With this soul.*





Narrative Therapy in the “Imaginative-Agentive Gap” Or: Imagined into Agency: Goth Lolita Comes to Life

Chelsey Morton

1. Summary

In this paper, I seek to illustrate ideas of working in the imagination by utilizing excerpts from a case story of my therapy conversations with “Misha,” a pseudonym chosen by this client. I highlight how our steps into an imaginative realm in our conversations led to surprising discoveries of Misha’s agency and joy in her living. With the help of some descriptive summaries as well as poem and transcript excerpts from my conversations with Misha, I hope to invite readers to consider the healing possibilities of the imagination.

2. The Beginning of My Story with Misha

Misha had experienced several “failures” at therapy by the time she made up her mind to give it one last try with me. She gently and quietly summarized her hope at our first: “I want to feel something other than depressed and anxious...” She had clearly decided to make this last effort at therapy count as she proceeded to offer a description of how she had felt compelled to “lie” to her previous therapists about the “usefulness of their suggestions” to her in living with the effects of what felt like an “all-encompassing depression” in her life. When I asked more about the purposes of such lying Misha told me how she was too ashamed to return week after week having attempted her breathing exercises and not feeling any differently. I invited Misha to spare me the lies and instead requested she fire me immediately and without warning if I ended up setting her up to fail at our conversations. We giggled together at this and from that point I vowed to forego any advice, suggestions, or tips for Misha’s life. Instead, I turned my efforts into learning more precisely how it was Misha had been hurt and also how she has held tightly to the idea that she is something far beyond depression: that she has a life worth living.

In our first conversation Misha invited me into the realm of her experience of “depression:” she spoke of the relentless “arguing” in her mind for her to finally learn to “suck it up,” “control herself,” “smile” or else “be invisible” and if she could not fulfill these demands, she ought to consider herself a “waste of space” and her life to have come to its end.

She spoke of the aching loneliness and strangeness she felt with the world and the people in it. She described the crushing pressures to “please others” and make “pretend appearances” in life as a “compliant and pretty girl.” Misha asked me to help her understand if she was “crazy;” how





else could she come to understand the effects of a life of being neglected and the little favor she had experienced, especially at the hands of her respected parents. She told me of her sense of being an “unwanted burden” to others as a small child and her longing to be attended to in a loving way. She described her days as a child spent alone in an apartment from sunup to sundown scrounging for food and watching television. She recalled the many times her requests for company or attention were rebuffed as “complaints of a spoiled brat.” Misha told me of the time the role she was to play in life was made abundantly clear to her by her caregivers: at age 6, when she cried, a mirror was shoved in her face and she was admonished: “look at yourself, you look ugly when you cry.” My heart broke for Misha upon hearing these stories of cruelty and haunting neglect.

*She was born a girl
Nourished on scavenged milk and bread
Fed lies of illegitimacy
And yet she grew up
In hell – a place that whispered endlessly to her:
You don't matter
Hell is scary and an all-alone place
It tears apart her insides
As she musters every ounce of faith
To beg – please, stop the punishment
Instead of a trip to Heaven,
She found the apartment cleared out
-The hell moved to its next phase...*

“So you see,” Misha concluded, “all my life I have lived in a box and it was opened only for me to perform a perfectly good and cute girl. If the box was opened, and I happened to not be smiling to the pleasure of others I was reprimanded to smile and not be so serious.” “I do see, Misha. I do,” I said, feeling the sorrow of a young child who was in a horrible bind to please the whims of these adults and struggle with the confusion of these demands that left her lonely and a bereft and at odds in her own skin. I was full of sadness for all that she had been deprived of when she was not treated as a precious child. But there was something intriguing about the fact that Misha did not flinch when she told the stories of her life. As a consequence, I felt my own hopefulness billowing within me as we set out to plot her escape from the box.

*...She tells the truth
And she forms her words late into the night
Because she has always knew how to hoard the most precious things
Like her very own life:*





*She knows how to lie to stay in school
She knows how to be enraged at comings and goings without explanation
She knows the pungent taste of hatred in her mouth
She knows how to rely on herself
She knows how to demand an explanation
She knows how to scream: HOW COULD YOU?
She knows she is not willing to live with disregard
She knows how it feels to be rejected by society
She knows how women are forced to make horrible choices
She knows how to shift her charms when need be
She knows how to hold onto tenderness and hints of love
She knows how to recognize soothing words
She knows how to silence taunting recollections of the past (Don't ever talk about that again)
She knows what it feels like to live alongside angst and sorrow
She knows how to pick up the phone in the midst of darkness*

In this first meeting, I came to imagine Misha's life of invisibility, of performance pressures, and abandonment. I came to imagine and understand something of what it was like for Misha to live "shoved into a box:"

*...It is tricky to spot me
Inside this box
Emerging with the masks
That will please you
And protect me
It's a neutral costume
That has been skillfully sewn together...*

I came to marvel how Misha had mustered up the energy and steadiness to walk herself up many flights of stairs to get to her university counselling center and to exclaim in her desperation: "I want to die." I came to understand depression as a strong, argumentative voice in Misha's life that functioned to keep her poor company inside the box. Depression's tiresome arguments left Misha's mind exhausted and had diverted her from questioning the reality of the painful experiences she had endured so she might consider any sense of her own agency navigating a lonely childhood and youth.

*...It was then that we thought
Maybe the depression
Was leading her astray
With the idea that feelings
Are failures,*





Tearful mirrors have been used against her after all.

*But all the other stuff, it has to count, doesn't it?
We wondered together...*

“What would you say, Misha,” I asked towards the end of our first meeting, “if you and I were to set out in our conversations together to understand the makings of this box...” Misha seemed intrigued. And so it was that we set out to understand the makings and effects of the worst of the good girl-cardboard, plastic, and paper boxes and to tell every story of the living girl and her efforts at liberation. “She does have a logical voice and a tiny light with her in the box,” Misha ventured shyly. I was moved by her proposal! But that is not all she had as we were soon to discover together. Not by a long shot.

3. Beginning Leads into Our Work in The Imagination

Our lead into the realm of the imagination happened by surprise and was entirely guided by a moment of rare joy and delight on Misha’s face. It was the first time I had seen Misha smile a real smile since our first meeting, and this smile with the accompanying sarcasm in her voice set us both off for travelling far beyond boxes to another way of appearing.

At the time of this significant smile, Misha was struggling with her upcoming birthday. She told me that every year, her forthcoming birthday was a time of particularly intense arguments and accusations by depression. Depression was exacting “happiness performances” of her as well as overwhelming her with memories of being scolded for acting like “she owned the day” and reprimanded for not being sufficiently cheerful. “The only time when I escaped this box...” she began shyly, but then stopped abruptly, as if embarrassed. “The only time...?” I said, hoping to encourage her to continue speaking, holding my breath. “Well, the only time was kind of using ... make-up...” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Well, I remember when I was 11, I used to bring make up to school and wear these really bright colors of eyeshadow and lipstick at school. I’d feel like such a rebel. I wiped it all off before I got home, of course... but”

“But?” I asked, on the edge of my seat. Misha smiled at me full of mischief: “On those days, it felt more like *me*...I wasn’t granted freedom to express myself at home at all, so it was these little wins that would keep me sane.”

*...There are precious and hidden compartments
In the box
That represent secret freedoms
In moments when I remember
About all the selves I do not show*





*I impulsively
Kick myself out of the box
Like only the most daring kind of rebel would:*

*Full of cool piercings
Colourful lip balm and the boldest eyeshadow
Picking up little wins along the way to keep myself sane
I want the punk, the goth, the feminine frilly girl
To be expressed*

*One day I might march the streets
Right out there as myself
Holding placards:
ANTI-CONFORMITY
PRO-JOY
My black nails and Lolita dress
Will grab your eye
And you might wonder
How I got out of that box
But I will know it was a lifetime
Of hidden rebellions
One tiny kick at a time...*

There was a growing excitement in this conversation that really captured my attention. Misha was laughing and being sarcastic; she was nearly “giddy” (Misha’s own word!) in recalling what she “got away with” with her joyous “make-up rebellion.” Here is the end of our conversation that day:

Chelsey: Given these little acts of breaking out of the box all along, how important is it for you to express yourself in these kinds of ways for your own freedom?

Misha: Umm, I mean they definitely do bring me joy. I can talk about my piercings. They are permanently there. When I see them I think they are so nice. I think I’ve learned that there is a “me” inside my head, the punk one, the frilly girly one, the one with tons of piercings, the one that likes things that aren’t the norm. I’m happy keeping her in my head. Yah, it brings me joy. I’ve sort of learned that I’m not going to get that because society expects me to look a certain way. I can conform to that while living a fantasy in my head.

I was so delighted to witness Misha’s excitement in sharing these details of make-up and piercings and “alternative me’s.” When I remembered her smile long after she had left my office,





I resolved to not let these details go, but instead to “delve” into them. I wondered where Misha’s imagination for bold expression might take us. I very much wanted to be front and center on the runway of Misha’s “expressive revolution” and couldn’t help but wonder if this might be the very key to unlocking the “counter agent” that Misha had been shaping even from inside that box, safe from her critics.

- What if her smile and the rebellion she had imagined into being at age 11 might have something to say about the pressures toward “good girl appearances?”
- If she could wear daring makeup as a means of expressing the artistry and freedom of her soul at age 11, in what ways might she imagine to respond to her neglect and the voice of depression now?
- If the clothing one wears has the power to change the way one walks, as Misha proposed, might it also have the capacity to embolden her thoughts beyond the reaches of the punishments she had received?
- If she could play with her senses in the world of color, texture, design and movement, maybe Misha could walk right on into a new kind of world?
- And what would be possible for Misha to utter in this new world without depression arguing every one of her thoughts right out from underneath her?

In any case, I couldn’t let up on this realm that Misha just invited me into; there was hope in this land. I could see it in a smile.

4. Enter “Goth Lolita”

While holding on to Misha’s spontaneous expressions of delight and taking them as substantial guides for a possible path to walk out of misery and suffering, I trained my ears to listen to her expressions for what she could enact in this imaginary world. I heard her say: “Expressing myself brings me joy,” and “the idea that if I like it, that’s what matters.” These were entirely new ideas and words unlike the ones that “depression” had long whispered to her. “Joy” and “liking” - Misha and I coined these terms as part of her “hidden rebellion.”

*...I thought of the unexpected giddiness, the unusual happiness.
An empowering action she did for the sake of possibility.
I thought of how she got away with it!
And there was this lightness that followed
It was a blue streak
Beaming with intention...*

Here is the ensuing conversation that introduced us both to an imaginary character that would become our treasured guide.





- Chelsey: Is it valuable to discern the parts of you that you've held onto and secretly imagine yourself in these different looks...or maybe dressed up in your room, but no one even saw you...have you tried that?
- Misha: (with delight) Oh yah! I know exactly what I'd wear. I'd wear black lipstick or crazy make-up...
- Chelsey: The way you speak of this is so remarkable to me Misha! You know, earlier you used the word rebellion...
- Misha: (strongly) Yah!
- Chelsey: Is there something of a rebellion going on inside you that people don't know about?
- Misha: (smiling) Yah!
- Chelsey: Would it be fair to say it's something of a protest against these restrictions that were set upon you?
- Misha: Yah
- Chelsey: Is this... the words "rebellion" or "protest"... is this a way you've known yourself before or is this new idea to you?
- Misha: No. I think it's always been there since I was a little kid. I think it's more internalized. I guess I knew I'd get in trouble or be reprimanded if I showed it. I don't want to do that...but I'd still like to do that. While I'd still like it I'm not going to show it, it will be MY thing that I'll keep to Myself. Even if my parents accepted or tolerated it, it's kind of like... hoarding things that are mine. When I was little, I was a tomboy, always in runners and tracksuits. They were telling me to be a pretty girl with white socks with a frill. Which is funny because now I do like those things. Not dressing how they wanted me to... that was my little win. I was doing all these other things to please their demands, but I was doing this one little thing that wouldn't get me into trouble, but it was my own.





- Chelsey: Have you told anyone about this little rebellion before? I shouldn't call it little...secret rebellion? Is that a good word? What do you want to call it What's a good name?
- Misha: Hidden? Haha
- Chelsey: The hidden rebellion you've described as being internalized... in sharing it with me, is it getting out a little bit?
- Misha: Yah, parts of me think, maybe I should just do it. Almost like I should freak out and just do it.
- Chelsey: You play with this in your mind?
- Misha: Like, who cares.
- Chelsey: Holy cow. And if you were, one morning...no, let's say Monday, cuz it's your birthday, you were to wake up and something magical was in the air, maybe it was, when you wake up on your 26th birthday and you have this giddy feeling in your body like you described and you get out of bed and you think, "you know what, who cares, it's my birthday, I'm just gonna do it." What would you put on?
- Misha: What would I put on?
- Chelsey: Yah
- Misha: Hmm... I would say... a Lolita dress.
- Chelsey: Do you have one? What would it look like? I don't really know what that is...If I did, I'd be way cooler. (laughter)
- Misha: It's a Japanese alternate fashion. They look kind of like dolls, like cupcakes.
- Chelsey: What color would yours be?
- Misha: I'd merge them, like a Goth Lolita. Black dresses...yah!





Chelsey: Okay, I gotta write all this down!!! I want to hear the rest of the outfit. We only have the dress down...

Misha: I'd wear a crazy color hair.

Chelsey: Like what? Pastel?

Misha: Yah, pastel would be good, I like alternate color hair. Something crazy...maybe pastel blue or something yah...

In the above transcript, I was introduced to someone whom Misha and I would from here on out refer to as "Goth Lolita." Goth Lolita, according to Misha, is a woman who has some very clear ideas about how she can take up some alternative ways of being in her world. Goth Lolita is an expert in doing what she wants which was exceedingly important to Misha. For example, Goth Lolita had ideas for Misha's birthday; she thought that Misha might go out in her dress and have a picnic in the park and that she might like to see others go by and marvel at her freedom of self-expression. I was floored to discover that Goth Lolita could so easily speak about her clear vision of a riotous birthday outing. Misha herself for the first time spoke of the word "bravery" relating to Goth Lolita's ideas for her life. Our conversation on that day ended like this:

Chelsey: You know what I'm noticing right now? You may not agree with this... but guess who didn't boss around our conversation? Like this was you and me really talking, like the you you. Is this right? Do you agree that depression was shutting up while we were talking today?

Misha: Yes

Chelsey: (smiling) Did you just rebel against depression in this conversation?

Misha: (smiling) It was freeing. Everything I've shared is a secret, but this is a secret that I'm not ashamed of. It doesn't bring pain to my life. It's something weird about me, but not messed up.

5. "Goth Lolita" Shows the Way

When Misha came into my office for our next meeting after her birthday, I was in for a surprise. Misha appeared with her hair dyed blue and her nails painted black. Misha laughed at my dumb-struckness and my attempts to ask about how Misha had gone and taken up Goth Lolita's ideas!





She was beaming as I asked questions about this “visible action” toward her invention for her much-dreaded birthday.

In addition to hair dye and nail polish Misha also took to the page and wrote me a letter that week that outlined the “worst of her stories” of her growing up experience. She told me she sent the letter to me with shaky hands and a beating heart and was up all night after hitting send. She had never before uttered these words to any living soul. She had dreaded feeling horrible regret and shame and perhaps even getting scolded by me or her family for her change in appearance and spirits.

However, in our conversation following these developments, Misha found herself questioning the voice of depression about its threats regarding her shaping rights of her own life because she did not suffer retaliation for her bold new actions. Misha wondered if this had to do with the spirit of “Goth Lolita” appearing by her side, the spirit of a young woman who can catch her eye in the mirror and be surprised by happiness and stand proud in her “breaking out of the box.”

*...It did not lead to spirals
But to a woman
Who caught a glance of herself in the mirror
Except this time
She knew something of happiness
The depression shrivelled so small in that moment
Like a wrinkled raisin
Its power was diminished....*

At this, I wondered if there was a way to speak to Goth Lolita herself. If Misha and I might travel together into the imaginary realm of Goth Lolita and her ideas, what possibilities alongside “snacks for a picnic” might we consider?

Misha and I decided to invite Goth Lolita to be interviewed during our conversation. I was attempting to learn Goth Lolita’s thoughts on Misha’s behalf, and to bolster Misha’s agency as she had already begun to bring this inner idea about an “alternate self” into the outer world through her hair, make up and writing down the “unspeakable.” I was wondering how Goth Lolita might lend her voice to Misha as she was stepping into these new questions, words, possibilities and experiences in her life. I puzzled over what would happen if Misha could be witness to Goth Lolita’s thoughts on her recent efforts in living. Could this imaginary realm expand Misha’s possibilities further?

(*Note: In my study of this transcript, and on behalf of any future ventures into such imaginary realms, I found myself wishing to refine the questions I asked of Goth Lolita that day. I have included my revised questions in the following excerpt for further considerations).

Chelsey: Goth Lolita, are there any particular words or saying or phrases that come to mind? You don’t have to censor them...they can be horrible swears, or not, In





Spanish or not...that you would say to this shame and blame. If Misha's voice was shaky and her mind was blanking and she needed you to speak up for her and push back, what would you actually say?

Misha: (as Goth Lolita) That there is nothing to be ashamed of who you are or what happened to you. That there was no...you didn't have a choice, it wasn't by your own doing. That in many ways surviving it shows some strength or some resilience and that even though it happened, and you may never want to talk about it or acknowledge it, maybe you can take it and sort of build yourself up knowing you can overcome things that you thought you couldn't. [PAUSE] But that girl grew up and is no longer in that situation. So, I guess she can jump out of the box and be Goth Lolita.

Chelsey: HOLD ON GOTH LOLITA! You're saying: "Hey Misha, join me!" Is that how you'd say it?

(Chelsey, revised: Hold on Goth Lolita! Are you suggesting that Misha has lived in such a way that you would be honored for her to escape from that box and join you? Why is it that Misha earned this spot as your companion in living – do you have some stories coming to mind about how she has befitted such an honoured position as a co-picnic enjoyer, style-star and freedom fighter? When did you first get the sense that Misha would one day join you and what you stand for in life?)

Misha: Sort of. Break all the barriers... whether it is you or other people have placed around you whether its break the box or jump out of the box, I guess it's don't let the errors of everybody in that story hold you captive in the box.

Chelsey: I'm having a clearer picture now, Goth Lolita, of you saying these things out loud with a conviction, almost like talking to the box. I see you in your dress, like this maybe talking to this box. Is there an action you'd take, Goth Lolita? Do you extend your hand? Do you help pry open the box? What do you do as you encourage Misha to break the barriers?

(Chelsey, revised: What have you witnessed Misha doing to escape the box that she was held captive in? What kind of unboxed life was Misha reaching for when she pried open the box enough to see you standing there with your hand extended?)

Misha: I guess it's sort of rebelling one step at a time. And maybe it is working on the things that made Misha more Goth Lolita. So, whether its Step 1: dye your hair blue or step 2: wear black nails...Finding what other steps or what other actions or what other feelings can be given to Misha so that she can break out of the box, or walk out more Goth Lolita and less childhood-stuck-in-her-past-Misha.





Chelsey: And Goth Lolita! You have this idea and you have even laid it out in step form! Does this get you thinking Goth Lolita about what might be next for Misha if she were to see these steps as things that she could do or take up in her life?

Misha: It's an overall arc of accepting her weirdness or her alternate tastes that might bring joy. It may make her more comfortable in her own skin. Maybe it's working through her self-worth because right now there isn't much of that.

(Chelsey revised: Are you suggesting somehow, Goth Lolita, that there might be some worth in accepting an overall arc of Misha's weirdness? Just how much worth do you think Misha has had to hold onto in order to keep her ideas and alternate tastes alive despite the boxed life that others had in mind for her? In this overall arc do you imagine Misha's dyed-blue hair might hold more worth than what the tab at the salon might have been?)

6. "Goth Lolita" Takes Back Stage While Misha Stands

This imaginary conversation with Goth Lolita as a witness to Misha's actions made it far more difficult for the arguments of depression to dismiss Misha's imaginative ways of responding to the narrow life proposed by the dull rules, the dress code, and the dismissal of her person. At the beginning of Goth Lolita's companionship, Misha would always anticipate what the voice of the depression would have her believe about the insignificance of her own actions in life, but Goth Lolita served as a lively counterargument with flesh and blood and bold ideas. Misha said to me at one point: "I started this. I voiced it. This gives it a shape and physicality. There is something worth trying for in this push against the voice of depression." Misha recalled how the arguments of depression were losing their influence in her life. She began to be curious about the criteria by which she could stand behind her actions rather than having the voice of depression and its counsel of regret and shame be the sole judge of her life. Misha started to move beyond being a model for the purposes of others to being a designer of her own future.

As an example of this reorientation, Misha shared a story of living in residence at university. She told me that historically she struggled to find meaningful connections with peers. However, when she was in university, she had developed some friendships. Misha was putting in all of her best efforts to achieve this aim. They had, to Misha's surprise, developed a supportive back and forth when it came to studying and leisure often going for ice cream together to unwind after exams. The voice of depression had overshadowed the friendship successes Misha had accomplished with one person's casual comment about Misha being "weird." Misha initially grew destitute as the depression told her she was a failure and would never have any real friends. Once we knew something about how Goth Lolita might have experienced these same events, Misha was able to evaluate her own efforts and actions as "wins" in the realm of developing connections and relating with others. Misha's imagination had allowed her to recalibrate her own barometer toward making meaningful actions against the depression.

Misha continued taking these agentive steps when she told me more stories of her life. Now they included tender memories of her and her family creating art together and caring for one another,





not just the harsh tales of mistreatment. Her eyes, even when focused on the past were able to see a fuller picture of how she was living. This made it possible for her to reinvigorate joyfulness and connection and hold it close to her heart for the future she was imagining.

These steps amounted to a grand leap in sharing the truth of her inner world after feeling very struck down by arguments with her mother who had trouble understanding exactly what Misha had been up against. In these arguments Misha had, for the first time, attempted to share her confusion about her mother's attempts at "tough love" throughout her life. This argument felt insurmountable to Misha, however, and she considered cutting her Mom out of her life as she had done many times before. But upon consideration of her new ways of expression, Misha wrote a letter to her mother outlining what it is like to live with the voice of depression in her mind and shared all of the ways she had tried to be a perfect daughter and how they were no longer appealing to her. She had spoken the "unspeakable" of her longing and the ways she was hurting, to her mother of all people. This was unimaginable before our forays into the imagination that all started with make-up and blue hair. At the end, blue hair was no longer necessary. Take a look:

Chelsey: I'm imagining a SNAP and a photo of you standing in front of your work...do you have the blue hair in the picture?

Misha: Yah, I think so.

Chelsey: And what else?

Misha: I don't know. I think at this point maybe it would be more important than dying my hair or the clothes I wear or how I physically look...its more how I feel. Its more that there is a certain strength or comfortable in my own skin and being okay or accepting who I am. Being at ease with my thoughts. The dark voice may still exist but it's in the back, it's not fully presence or consuming me. There is a certain lightness and carefree nature that I've fixed all the broken pieces and I'm stronger. I don't know, I'm just a better me....

*...The unspoken is spoken
A butterfly flaps its wings
A baby is born
And
Goth Lolita re-applies her lipstick.*

7. Conclusion

Misha taught me about the possibilities of the imagination through our active engagement with Goth Lolita.





It seems to me that it is oftentimes the “labelled problem” that insists on our attention as therapists: in Misha’s case this was the label of “depression.” When Misha and I moved into Goth Lolita’s world outside “the box,” something wonderful happened. It became possible to speak of Misha’s lived experiences, both the painful and the joyful. Misha, for the first time, smiled as she jumped right into the glorious minutiae of her imagined agency like the hue of her nail polish, and she shook and cried as she wrote me a letter of the “unspeakable.” Both these developments stand in stark contrast to Misha’s conclusion that she was simply “depressed” without the means of seeing this label in connection with her lived experiences of oppression and joy.

However, the imagined world of Goth Lolita did not stop there. Somehow, this imagination of Goth Lolita as a companion by Misha’s side transformed into the real life energy of agency that suddenly involved the sparks of dying her hair, celebrating her birthday for the first time, meeting friends at the University, writing a heartfelt letter to her mom, and perhaps, least visibly but most powerfully to me, speaking to herself differently. A world opened up, aided by imagination: Misha spontaneously remembered memories of some tender moments within her family and with other people that had been long lost to her.

As our conversations continued, the boxed-in-life continued to make threats, but Goth Lolita became a solid ally in our conversations who could be counted on to matter-of-factly counter arguments to hateful and diminishing voices in Misha’s life.

Misha’s reaches and epiphanies took me back to thinking about my own life and my felt understanding how problem stories are not welcome in the land of imagination, how they have no history of viciousness there and struggle to take root, because they were never present in magical places in the first place (Carlson, 2020, personal communication). In a similar way, the use of the imagination freed me up, as a therapist, to move about in a place of hopefulness; this lent itself to a playfulness in our conversation, something that was welcome against the backdrop of the intensity of the voice of depression.

The revised questions highlight the necessary ‘giving back’ of agency from Goth Lolita to Misha, rather than maintaining Goth Lolita as an ‘advice giver’ and position her as “the central character, the protagonist, the agent” in her own life (Paljakka, 2020, personal communication). This serves not only to shine a spotlight on Misha’s accomplishments in living, but also to allow Goth Lolita’s witness to become a powerful internal presence blurring the lines between imagination and reality, an internalized imaginary other that can pipe up when she is in the “depths of despair.”

Paradoxically, what I witnessed when our conversations were focused in the imagination with Goth Lolita was that Misha herself came more to life. She ventured beyond the darkness of the voice of depression with something of an ease. At the end of these conversations, Misha would often comment something to the effect of “this helped. I feel better now, like the pinprick of light is still there for me” or “I feel lighter having had this conversation, I liked it.” Enlivening the counter story through the imagination brightened possibilities for Misha’s life.





I vividly recall our first session and Misha's shy retelling of a moment of "temporary escape" from the "boxed-in-life" when she was growing up. On this day, she was visiting Disneyland, a land of characters and stories she had long secretly admired and delighted in. She spoke of the sign she saw when leaving the theme park that read: Have a Magical Day. She recalled, with some embarrassment, that this statement didn't annoy her, but how her heart skipped a beat in response to think that this may be possible in her life yet.

Misha, thank you for the magic you have brought into my life. I will never forget it. All the streaks of blue hair will remind me of you.

*...Goth Lolita is a superhero
She can bravely time travel back to the time
When barriers were built around her
And she can whisper softly:
"You are not to blame
This was never your choice
You have survived and overcome
And here we are taking the past back
Don't be scared, nothing can happen to you now"*

*Goth Lolita doesn't give a damn about what others say
She does not conform to superhero dress codes
And she certainly doesn't stick to nude shades for her lips or nails
Her superpowers are amplified –
She is strong when she opens up (crushing terror)
She is tough when she accepts her weirdness (it's a joyful arc)
She is kind when she shares her story (it won't hold her captive)
She is caring when she keeps pushing toward new directions (freedom awaits)*

*She voices the unspeakable giving it shape and physicality
Kick starting her way to a new life
Building up a catalogue of over comings
Breaking barriers
With her chunky platforms and lacy socks
The magic awaits...*





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

Crys Vincent

Introduction

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

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

Here are some of the questions that beset me:

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

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





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

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

Examples of Transfer Letters

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

Letter 1: For Roxanne

Dear Tara,

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





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

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

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

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





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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

What does post Escape life look like for Roxanne?

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

Roxanne calls this "Living in the flow."

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

Roxanne said,

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





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

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

Roxanne is observing her life, she told me this:

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

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

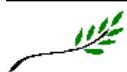
To you Tara, as Roxanne's new companion, her co-conspirator, I send you both on this next leg of the journey with all the gentleness in my heart.

Love,
Crys

Letter 2: For Celine

Dear Tara,

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





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

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

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

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

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



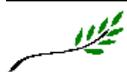


for her parents to be on board. She kicked them off her safety plan, and then, she picked up the phone again, and this time, she called Rodger. Now Rodger is an important person in Celine's life. Tara, they were actually married for a time, and although they decided a while ago that they did not want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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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





Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

Effects of the Letters

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





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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

Reflection

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





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

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

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

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

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

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



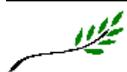


Instead of a map
What you did was to give us the walker's guide:
Here we walked, Tara
This is the hilltop we lingered on
We took a look at the meadow but didn't visit
Under this tree we cried
And this is her very favourite spot by the river

Hill and river, tree and star
All ours now.

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The Woman Who Made a Home for her Sister: A Re-membering Witnessing Transcript

Larissa Szlavik

This paper is an invitation to the reader to step into the midst of my practice and my own considerations regarding my practice. It represents a transcript of my conversation with Harpreet, a 19-year-old woman of Indian descent, living in a small rural community in Alberta. It is my hope that in contributing this study of my work, a reader might vicariously experience an expansion of possibilities, questions, and imagination that might benefit their own practice.

In this conversation excerpt, Harpreet and I are meeting for the first time. Prior to (the printed) THIS exchange, I was working towards a degree of understanding of what had been so important to her at this time in her life so as to take the time to come to speak to me. Harpreet struck me as a deeply loving person, “love is so healing,” she said, “it’s a powerful thing...I love loving people.” She spoke tenderly and full of feeling about her family, especially her mother, her brother, and her cousin Alia. She spoke softly about her hesitation to share parts of her experiences with her mother “who wouldn’t understand” or might feel disappointed in Harpreet’s experiments with weed and her intimate relationships. She was tearful in reflecting her struggles with what she called “moods”—experiences of anxiety, irritation, and a listlessness that took her to bed to sleep for 15 hour stretches at a time. Harpreet spoke quickly, as if she had waited a long time to reflect these confusing “happenings” to a listening ear. When I asked her about some of the hardest moments, she went on to tell me about a period of time for three months last year that she didn’t want to be alive. When I gently puzzled alongside her what had kept her going a year ago and what is currently keeping her here in this life, she readily knew the answer. Harpreet reflected the dramatic turning point to her struggles last fall when her 15-year-old cousin, Alia, died suddenly. Harpreet referred to her young cousin as more like a “sister” in their closeness. She described how she stopped wanting to die after her cousin’s passing saying, with emphasis, “I have to live for myself and for her” and “I can’t kill myself because I saw the effects of a young person’s death on other people.”

At this point in the conversation, I asked Harpreet whether it was more important to her to talk about the “mood problems” or “her cousin Alia.” Harpreet replied, “I would say like, Alia, because I haven’t gotten a big opportunity to talk about her much, since she passed away ...after she passed away my dad said there’s no reason... my dad’s my dad, I guess, but he doesn’t take emotions really well. So when I cry about Alia, he’d just be like, ‘there’s no point to crying’ and ‘you can’t do anything about it now.’ So, like I guess I’ve held a lot of my emotions in for a really long time, but...”

In this spontaneous, first-session remembering conversation about Harpreet’s cousin Alia, I decided to cast Alia as someone who had known Harpreet as a “loving sister” and be introduced to Harpreet through Alia’s eyes on her life. To do so, I invoked Alia as an insider witness to





Harpreet's ways of living and loving, which is a practice I have learned in my time here at the Calgary Narrative Collective. Besides my deliberations about this decision, and my observation of the effects of the decision on Alia, I am also working to imbue my questions with more imagination and dramatic edges. In parts of the transcript, I am inserting my thoughts or proposing better questions to myself from the safer distance of hindsight and time, which I hope will serve the reader in their thoughtfulness as much as it served me.

Larissa: This might sound like a bit of a strange idea, and you can refuse any of the questions I ask or proposals I make. But would it be alright with you if I were to ask you some questions as if you were Alia, and you just try your best to answer how you think she might in your best knowing of her what you think she might say. Would that be okay?

Harpreet: Ya.

Larissa: Okay, so I'm going to refer to you as Alia, and then you can speak from her perspective, like "I remember this..." or "I did that" you know (looking to her if she's following, she is nodding) ... So, welcome Alia, hello.

Note: So what is my intention here? I want to flesh out Harpreet's previously stated values for "family" and "loving people in a particular way." Harpreet told me she wants to "live up to Alia's way of loving", but I don't really know the stories of what she means by these words, so my hope is to elicit stories from her cousin's perspective so that I get a degree of understanding of what matters to Harpreet.

Harpreet: (Very quietly) Hi.

Larissa: Umm, I've been talking to your cousin, Harpreet, and would you know that Harpreet tells me that she really admires the way that you love people. Does that surprise you to hear?

Harpreet: Ya (nodding).

Larissa: Does it really (she's nodding)? Do you think, like, do you have any guesses about what Harpreet means by admiring the way that you love people, Alia?

Note: I'm starting by focusing on what Harpreet admires about her cousin because this might be easier for Harpreet to access and feel her way into. I'm hoping to start with a really easy questions so that we can both ease into the insider witnessing account, as it is a bit of a strange way of speaking. Wonderfully, Harpreet does not struggle at all to keep up – which is perhaps a clue about the depth of her relational orientation to life.





Harpreet: I'd just say (tearful), just always being there for her, and like (sniffs and wipes tear from her face), just accepting her for who she is ... and just being so free spirited, just happy, and like giggly (giggles), and just like, joking around.

Larissa: I know Alia that you're younger by a few years and I know, well not always, but often younger people look up to the older people in their lives, so I wonder were there things about Harpreet that you looked up to?

Note: Again, I'm trying to make the answer less of a reach for her. It seems reasonable to assume that Alia looked up to her in some ways because they were like sisters and Harpreet is older.

Harpreet: I would say how hard she works when it comes to school, and just, like I guess always being there for the people around her.

Larissa: Did you experience this Always Being Ther Spirit of Harpreet's for the people around her, Alia?

Harpreet: Yeah! I was there and saw many of her friendships and how she is with people around her.

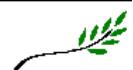
Larissa: You know, Alia, Harpreet said to me that "she loves loving people." She exclaimed this strongly and spontaneously and I've never heard anyone say that. What do you think she means by this? Is there a time that stands out in your memory that was most impactful to you that highlights Harpreet's ways of loving?

Harpreet: I'd just say the times I'd go sleep over at her house when things were rough at home (tearful), and we'd go get breakfast in the morning, and like go shopping and just have a good day.

Note: So here I am. I would like to understand more about this, but not just in little sentences. I would love to be able to see a "young woman's way of loving" or her "ethic of loving" or her decision "to love" in a story, such that Harpreet could see it more clearly as well. I want to let Harpreet know that a story of love is what I'm looking for. She mentioned a "sleepover" spontaneously, so that's my starting point for co-constructing a story together.

Larissa: Sleep overs when things were rough for you. Okay. Can you tell me a bit about, if you think about one time in particular when such a sleepover happened? Alia, did you call her, or did she call you? How would the sleepover get initiated?

Note: I am thinking about whether Harpreet knew to shelter Alia during rough times, and whether she did so intentionally.





Harpreet: My mom would call her mom and be like, “I’m dropping my daughter off” (laughs).

Larissa: Oh really, so you would arrive there, and Harpreet's there, and like, how would she greet you?

Note: I am of course noticing the mothers and Alia’s rough times at home – but I am deciding to go with the relationship of these two cousin-sisters and their ways of loving each other. I am purposefully asking about that in detail on the ground of the actual day of their sleepover, so that this ordinary sounding moment not be lost to Harpreet.

Harpreet: She'd come downstairs and be like, “let's go in my room” and then we would go up and just hang out in her room, maybe make dinner, and like, just listen to some music, clean her room maybe (laughs), just do random things until we'd go to sleep, talk about school... you know, things would be rough at home, but I'd always have her home to go to when I'd feel like a second home.

Larissa: Harpreet would make it feel like a second home? Like, how does somebody do that? Like how does somebody like Harpreet make her home feel like a second home to someone like you?

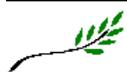
Harpreet: Just, everything that was hers was mine. If I wanted to borrow some clothes, she'd give me her clothes. We would sleep in the same bed. Just like, this space is also my space (tearful). Just her family was so welcoming as well, her mom, her dad. It always felt like, like I could, like this was also my home. It's not just the one place I live in. This family is my family; they joked about adopting me. Just bringing me into her home.

Larissa: And what do you think Alia, since Harpreet was older than you she could have easily been like, “Yeah! I have some grown up things to do” or whatever, but instead she came downstairs and was like, “my home is your home. My clothes are your clothes. My bed is your bed.” What do you think that says about what Harpreet values in life or thinks is important?

Harpreet: I know that she values her family a lot, her cousins especially ... and that I'm, I was always a priority in her life, over things that she didn't care much about. You know, if she'd go hang out with her friends, she'd bring me along. So I was a priority in her life.

Larissa: (softly) What difference did that make in your world, being a priority in someone's life like that?

Note: I wish I could convey the tenderness between Harpreet and me in this moment. My question belies the felt effect of what was transpiring. Harpreet was remembering the moments





between her sister- cousin and herself with the help of the undeniable details of the story of sleep overs. It is one thing to say, “my cousin Alia and I were close, like sisters” and another to say “everything that was hers was mine. If I wanted to borrow some clothes, she'd give me her clothes; if I needed a bed, we would share it. If I needed a second home away from roughness, I found it in her room.” I think my question lacks dramatic edge and I could have used the opportunity to witness this back to her...

Alternative QUESTION: *Okay, so let me see if I got this right: Things for you were pretty rough at home at times, and so your mom would drop you off at Harpreet's house, and instead of being like, “I've got some grow up things to do, or whatever, Harpreet says, “Hey come to my room” and everything that's hers is yours and she 'd invite you along into her world, her friends, her life. What did it mean for you Alia to meet someone like Harpreet who loved you like this?*

Harpreet: It meant a lot (tearful)...

Larissa: Isn't it strange Alia, that both you and Harpreet talk about your admiration for each others' ways of loving. Is this another way that you were sisters to each other, sisters in this ethic of love? (Harpreet nods, tearful) And when Harpreet talks about your way of loving, Alia does she by any chance have something to do with that? How you got to be that way?

Harpreet: (tearful) Yeah.

Larissa: I see the two of you were creating a home away from home for you Alia and being sisters in this ethic of love. What do you think, what kind of world does that create, if more people were this way?

Harpreet: I just feel like everyone would be so much more accepting, just loving, being able to see things from other people's perspectives. When I first met Harpreet I had a pretty small family, like Harpreet's parents were one of the few people my parents trusted so much as to leave me at their house, or call and be like, “I'm going to drop my daughter off.” So, it just made me realize the power of like, love and how positive of an impact it can have on people's lives to be accepting and loving. How it can better other people's lives while also bettering yours, like eventually getting closer to my other cousins that we were estranged with, just like how happy you can be and how loved you can feel, just the more people you have in your life. It helps you stay positive a little longer; it helps you love other people just as openly a little bit better than just being able to love just a few people. It just opens you up a bit and opens your world up a bit and gives you more understanding of people because you have so many different types of people in your life, like you have a cousin who's 5 years older than you telling you about his girl problems, right, or like, your other cousin, like you meet so many different types of people when you open yourself up to the world, so you just become more loving and caring and more compassionate rather than when you're closed off and





you don't get to meet this people you don't get to be as open and as loving when you have such a small circle.

Note: I was attending to Harpreet's shift in speaking. In hindsight it feels as though this young woman is feeling empowered to claim a philosophy of relating in this moment. I might have asked more about this, but in the moment of the conversation, I wished for Alia to lend her voice for a moment longer to speak to Harpreet's revolutionary turning point to put aside thinking of her OWN? death in favour of living or any other ways in wish cousin-sister relationship had changed Harpreet's life beyond Alia's death.

Larissa: Wow. It sounds like Harpreet has made quite an impact on your life. Do you think that, ya, that the way in which you and Harpreet touched each other, that it stayed with her even after you passed on?

Harpreet: Ya.

Larissa: In what ways do you think you're still connected today?

Note: At first I thought maybe this question is a little cliché, but it elicits a considerable emotional response from her.

Harpreet: (tearfully) The way that she's always gonna keep me in her heart and that she's going to try her best to live the life that we had planned to live together, even though I'm not there. She's gonna continue to do the things we were going to do together.

Larissa: Why is that important that she would go on to do the things you planned to do together?

Harpreet: Because I'd want her to be happy and like because I'm not there doesn't mean that she can't do the things that we were meant to do.

Larissa: What kind of things did you set out to do?

Harpreet: We were gonna go sky diving, backpacking in Spain, raise our kids together, just like basically grow up together and grow old together, and kind of live through our lives together. Just because I'm not there doesn't mean that she can't do what we planned to do.

Larissa: I'll ask you questions now as yourself, Harpreet. What was it like thinking from Alia's perspective and answering questions in that way?

Harpreet: It helped a lot.





Larissa: In what way was it helpful?

Harpreet: It helped me see, like how big of an impact I had on her life, and how much, how big of a part I was in her life. It helped me see how much she changed as well, from when we first started talking to when she passed away in September, like, like she grew up so much as a person, but we grew together a lot as well. And it just it helped me to see that I was a constant part of her life. I was always there for her just as much as she was there for me (wiping tears from her face).

Larissa: Does that do anything to the “Asshole Committee” we talked about before to see things from Alia's perspective and talk in this way?

Note: The Asshole Committee was a metaphor for the critical voices of doubt that Harpreet has been struggling with.

Harpreet: (Nodding)

Larissa: It does? What does it do?

Harpreet: It just makes me feel like Alia would be like, you just beat that Asshole Committee up. Stop listening to a bunch of assholes. You are my sister at the end of the day. You did love me. You gave me your best. She didn't pass away thinking that I didn't love her or I didn't do enough for her. That is not what she thought.

Poem for Harpreet

As is my custom, I wrote a poem for Harpreet from the above conversation. I named it Sistercousin in honour of Alia and Harpreet:

“Sistercousin”

*I still hear you giggling, even after death,
even now that I am free among the spirits.
I can hear you say, “let’s go to my room,”
the way you used to
when things got rough
at my house.
You, my Sistercousin,
my second home.*

*Space to cook dinner,
listen to music,
and talk*





*about crushes and the random things
my parents would never understand.*

*Remember how we would joke
about your family adopting me?
Your bed was my bed,
your clothes were my clothes,
you made everything that was yours, mine.
You did everything to help, I know
you would have helped if you could.*

*You were always offering guidance,
without expecting me to take it.
You treated me like I was my own person
Accepting me and loving me,
no matter what.*

*My back was had,
I knew you had time for me, always
you showed me your way
of making the people you love
a Priority.
You showed me the way
you love Love.*

*All this tells me
just how loved I was.*

*You chose me,
younger Sistercousin,
over nightclubs in Cuba.
You introduced me to your friends
You expanded my family
across borders –
bonds formed,
cousins I didn't even know about.*

*A world opened up
where I could be more willing
to Trust
I could realize how my parents
worked hard for me.
It gave me permission
to lean more*





on family.

*A window was opened
into other people's perspectives
and a world that is more accepting,
loving, and compassionate.*

*Don't close that window
Let it breathe Love
into there future memories
where I can live alongside you,
free-spirited, falling from the sky,
backpacking through Spain
raising kids,
living for yourself and a legacy
that belongs to us.*

