



## Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

Editors: Tom Stone Carlson, Sanni Paljakka, marcela polanco, and David Epston

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### Editor's Note

By

David Epston

We are excited to announce the latest release of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy focused entirely on couples therapy. What is unique about this release is that it provides something of a historical account of what I consider to be promising new developments in contemporary narrative therapy practice with couples. But before I go there, let me first introduce our Spoken Word Publication for this release.

We are honored to include an interview with Sacha Médinè, a counselor from Vancouver, BC, Canada. In this interview, entitled “A Hope for Intimate Liberation: Activism in the therapy room,” he talks about his attempts to answer the question, “What do I need to do to justify therapy as my form of activism?” While there has been much debate about going beyond our offices in order to do justice work, Sacha highlights the powerful ways that racism/white supremacy, sexism/male supremacy (and all of the other isms) have real and embodied effects on both marginalized and privileged persons and a hope and a demand for therapy to provide a healing space for intimate liberation.

The first written paper in this release is a chapter that I (David Epston) wrote in 1993 entitled “Internalized Interviewing with Couples: The New Zealand Version” that was published in “Therapeutic Conversations” and is reprinted here with permission. This paper highlights the history of internalized other questioning, which I first developed in 1985 under the name “cross-referential questioning” and later shared with Karl Tomm who renamed it as such, and includes a commentary from Michael White. We are republishing this chapter here as it provides an important historical look forward (a history for the future as I like to say) that will set the stage for the ideas and practices that are to follow.

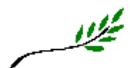
The next paper in this release is a reprint of an article by Tom Stone Carlson and Amanda Haire, entitled “Towards a Theory of Relational Accountability: An Invitational Approach to Living Narrative Ethics in Couple Relationships.” This article was first published in the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work in 2014. It is being reprinted here (with permission) as it offers a reimagined look at the possibilities that narrative therapy ethics can play in helping partners enter into more accountable relationships with one another.

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Editor's Note



*Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 1-2.*





Both of these historical papers are included here as they provide an important foundation for the final paper of this release by Sanni Paljakka and Tom Stone Carlson, entitled “Narrative Therapy in Times of Unlove: Intimate Witnessing in Narrative Couple’s Therapy.” In my opinion, the ideas and practices in this paper, represent some new avenues of contemporary narrative therapy with couples, which many of us have been awaiting. This paper dares us to enter into the often uncharted territories of love and 'unlove' and seeks for the means for partners to tell stories that love one another, especially in the times of their most significant acts of 'unlove.'





## A hope for intimate liberation: Activism in the therapy room

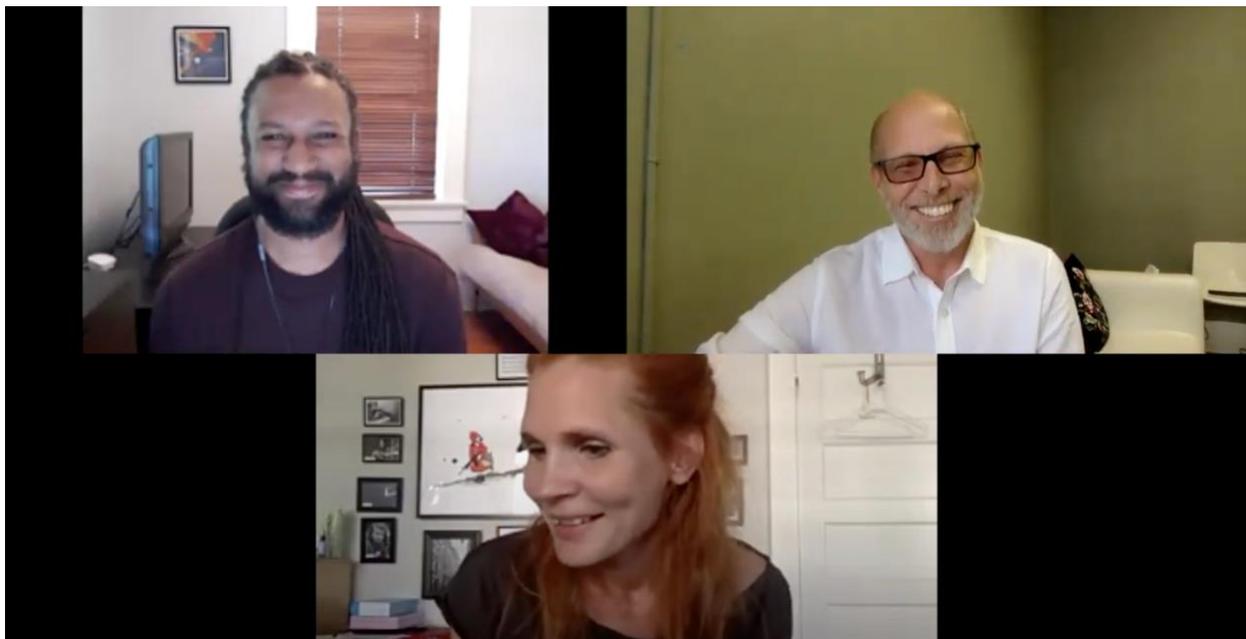
Sacha Mèdinè- Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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In this interview, Sacha Mèdinè, talks about the ways in which he has attempted to answer the question, “What do I need to do to justify therapy as my form of activism?” While there has been much debate about the need to get outside of our offices in order to do justice work, Sacha, highlights the powerful ways that racism/white supremacy, sexism/male supremacy (and all of the other isms) have real and embodied effects on both marginalized and privileged persons and a hope and a demand for therapy to provide a healing space for intimate liberation.

This publication is available in both video and audio format:

For video file click here:



For audio file click here:





## Internalized Other Questioning with Couples: The New Zealand Version

By David Epston

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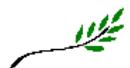
Excerpted from *Therapeutic Conversations*. Copyright (c) 1993 by Stephen Gilligan and Reese E. Price. Used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

This paper owes a great deal to the editing of Carole Samworth.

I devised a practice around 1985 which I then referred to as a cross-referential questioning. This practice of questioning owes a great deal to Michael White's (1989) innovations relating to both the purposes and methods of questioning in therapy. In particular, I am indebted to his "hypotheses regarding the couple's prescription for the therapist and the outcome if the therapist inadvertently conforms to the couple's prescription" (White, 1984). From discussions with Karl Tomm from between 1981-91, I have taken his designation of "internalized other questioning" to describe this practice, although he has certainly elaborated what I refer to as cross-referential questioning to many other therapeutic contexts.

This format of questioning was invented to disrupt those warring couples who construed couple counseling as a venue to contest their differences. These couples seemed to lack any conception of themselves as bound together, for better or for worse, in a relationship. It seems that without a "relationship," they can only act out of individual interest and contest their differences within one or more domains, each of which allocates certain practices and specified roles for the participants. In addition, each domain assigns the therapist/counselor both a role and specified functions. These domains of practice are (1) the juridical, (2) the ecclesiastical/moral, and (3) the politics of reality. These prototypes are derived from cultural institutions and have rather obvious analogues in the courtroom, ecclesiastical courts of the Inquisition, and the psychiatric/neurological interview.

Those practices and stances modeled on the courtroom are usually pale reflections of tactics of attack/defend, counter-attack/counter-defense, and credit/discredit. In this domain, the therapist is required to adjudicate the competing claims submitted to him or her and find parties innocent or guilty or to establish that neither has a case to hear or establish that no ruling can be made. Should either party to a relationship have recourse to this model, he or she will work hard preparing a "case" and gathering supporting evidence to undermine the anticipated counterclaims. A partnership soon dissolves into prosecuting and defense attorneys.





Those practices modeled on the ecclesiastical court or inquisition also position the partners in opposition to each other. The only difference between the court of law and the ecclesiastical court is that the “case” is argued not on the issue of lawfulness, but rather on the morality of innocence versus sinfulness. Here the therapist is positioned to adjudicate the competing claims in order to find between innocence and sinfulness. The sinful party in the dispute is assigned penance and the innocent party is morally elevated.

Those couples who have been organizing their differences according to the psychiatric/neurological interview assume not only a “world” that is objectively present but also one to which one can have direct and persistent access. Furthermore, it is taken for granted that others experience the “world” in an identical fashion. So what happens when persons responding to the same “world” experience and/or describe it in disparate or contradictory ways? The solution is to question the adequacy of the methods through which the “world” is being experienced and/or reported on by the other. One then calls into question the mental capabilities of the other by either critiquing his or her method of observation or by attributing pathology. The partner in the couple who assumes the role of the psychiatrist/neurologist claims a privileged and uncontested view of the world. Accordingly, any counterclaims or counterexperiences must be due to specious or inadequate perception or an underlying pathology. In such a situation, you have either a reluctant or recalcitrant opinions at odds with each other. Here the therapist is positioned as the consulting expert in the field in order to add greater weight to their junior colleague’s prescriptions for his/her “patient” partner.

I have found that if I don’t do something to the contrary very quickly, many of my meetings with couples rapidly assume the shape of the courtroom, ecclesiastical court, or psychiatric/neurological interview, with me being recruited very unwillingly into one of the above-mentioned roles. Such couples often become both perplexed and vexed if I decline to participate accordingly. With an interest both in avoiding these recruitments and in disrupting the couple’s familiar relationship tactics, I have devised a format of questioning that allows me to decline these roles and permits each partner to experience something of the other’s experience.

I have found it necessary to add both a prologue and apology prior to embarking on what was then referred to as “cross-referential” questioning. The prologue goes something like this:

If you aren’t a “one in a million” couple with a problem, I believe I can safely predict that you both have been asking each other a lot of questions and that those questions have not relieved the situation in any appreciable way or brought you closer to a mutually satisfying solution. My guess is that, if anything, you have found the situation deteriorating right before your eyes. I can safely predict, too, that you have been asking yourselves a lot of questions and those questions have not brought relief or a mutually





satisfactory answer. I base these conclusions on the fact that you are here. Am I right in thinking that all your questions have not so far provided an agreeable answer?

In that case, this leads me to a conviction that it would be folly for me to ask you the questions that you have asked either of the other or of yourselves. So I propose that I ask you questions that it is very unlikely you have asked each other or yourself. If you had, I would guess that you wouldn't be here today. And if by any chance I slip up and ask you a question already asked, please draw my attention to this so I won't waste your time by asking a question that has already been tried and found fruitless. I give you full credit for having tried your questions and, given the state your relationship is in, it would be unwise for us to employ the selfsame questions that have not stopped your relationship from being brought to its knees. Do I have your agreement to depart from the divorcing direction these questions are leading you to and to experiment with some questions that conceivably could lead to a reunion in your relationship?

The apology is very necessary to prepare the respondents for the difficulty in first construing the questions and then answering them. For that reason, they are forewarned as to how they might experience these questions.

As these questions are very likely questions that you have never thought of before or never asked yourselves before, I need to warn you of their difficulties and to seek your permission to pursue a course that may cause you discomfort. You might not have quick or ready answers. If you had either a quick or ready answer, I would distrust your seriousness, as these questions will require you to think what you never or rarely thought before. You can expect to take a while to get the gist of these questions, but you will if you persist. And I think I can guarantee you that it will take a minute or two or even more to think up the answers. In fact, the longer the better. So I apologize to you now for their difficulty. You may be stretched in ways you have never been stretched before. Do I have your permission to go ahead with this questioning process?

After having received the couple's permission to proceed, I ask: "Who would like to go first?" I request that the person who goes second listen to his or her partner's answers. I make it clear that they both will be subjected to the same line of questioning, after which both will be provided with equal opportunity to inform the other to what degree (or how close) their partner came to understanding their experience.

Assume that I am interviewing a hypothetical couple, Jack and Jill, whose relationship has been deteriorating over the last 10 years. Jill has offered to go first, so I direct my questions to Jill:

Jill, what do you think Jack would say if I asked him the following question: "Jack, how do you account for the deterioration in your relationship over the past 10 years?"





In very adversarial and other-blaming couples, the form of this question seems to have the effect of taking the vindictiveness out of the answer. Essentially, Jill is invited by the question to render Jack's complaints about her, even though the question is directed at their "relationship." In this instance, it is very likely that Jack will be restrained from reacting by jumping to his defense. Instead he may seem spellbound and curious as to how Jill will represent his complaints (or, in fact, blame herself). Even if Jill's answer is self-condemning (e.g., "Jill isn't giving me enough love."), I then ask a further question of ill: "Jack, what effect has this 'lovelessness' had on your relationship?" If Jill should find this question hard to answer, I would assist her with some questions to introduce some ways of assessing the impact on their relationship of this externalized version of the complaint, condemnation, or accusation: "Do you think a loveless direction is good or bad (healthy or unhealthy, adds to or takes away from, increases or decreases) the shared value of your relationship?"

With some practice (and it is surprising how rapidly people can respond to these questions if the interviewer is comfortable with them), the interviewer can delete the preamble and merely direct his or her gaze at Jill and inquire: "Jack, you have come up with three theories for the shape your relationship is in. There must be more than that! Are there any little reasons you think are too small to mention out of embarrassment or any big reasons you think are so big you are reluctant to mention them out of fear?"

As the nature of the questions leads respondents (especially men) to reflect in unusual ways, the answers come slowly, cautiously, and are carefully couched. The listener is extremely attentive. Since their complaints are being heard, the partners seem willing and curious to hear each other out without interruption. There is little need to defend against one's own allegations. Even if the mood at the beginning of the session is extremely combative, this is soon replaced by a contemplative ambience, with each person digging deep into his or her experience of the other.

On the single occasion that one party couldn't answer the questions (a couple who had been married 27 years), the interview was called to a halt and questions were asked of the unknown wife. "Judy, were you aware that, even though you have been married for 27 years, Dick doesn't know anything about you? Is this a surprise to you?" She replied that it wasn't at all. "Judy, what effect does this knowledge that Dick doesn't know anything about you have on your relationship to your 'relationship'?" Judy then went on to say that she had known this all along but she needed to hear it and that she was ending the relationship right there and then. I then asked Dick: "If it is now Judy's intention to end this relationship, when did you think it would end?" Dick thought it would have lasted for another 20 years. The answers are then cross-referenced. "Jack, Jill thought that you would explain the downfall of your relationship by way of an 'I'm all right and you're all wrong' patterning. How close is her representation of your experience to your actual experience of how your relationship is





declining?” An ambience of thoughtfulness, curiosity, and a degree of generosity is usually sustained throughout the interview.

I respond by “marrying up” the different versions of the story of their relationship at the end of our first meeting. This brings the story of their relationship up-to-date, customarily concluding in some sort of dilemma for the future of their relationship.

An example of a letter to a middle-aged couple summarizing the information derived from this format of questioning follows:

Dear Terry and Gloria

From what you told me yesterday, your relationship has come to something of a cross-roads. Gloria, from your point of view, you were “black-mailed” into the marriage in the first place; Terry, you must have wondered what hit you when Gloria, soon after you married, became dismayed and was called “depressed.” My guess is that at that time you both would have found it very difficult to understand what was happening to you, especially as it was quite contrary to the images you had of what your married lives would be like. Gloria, without wishing to discount your suffering, those events in your life could now be considered teachings. Your tuition was a long and grueling ordeal but look what you have made of yourself. When I asked you to tell me about yesterday’s person, you described that person as lacking in assertion, “not knowing what I wanted and how to get it,” “totally revolving around the needs of others,” so much so that you became an other-sensitive person at the same time as being insensitive to yourself. This led you into what they called “depression” and you thought the way out was a chemical life-style. So weaning yourself off that was just one more struggle that had to be overcome. One of your most important learnings was that you had “grit” and that was there for me to see.

At the same time, Terry, you became Gloria’s nurse and looked after and cared for her the more she became dismayed. There was a price you paid for this and that is the neglect of your own pursuits. You cared for, supported, and promoted Gloria into self-discovery, so much so, in fact, that yesterday’s person has almost been eclipsed by today’s person. I wouldn’t be surprised, Terry, if you were wondering if you didn’t do too good a job. You have been so successful at promoting Gloria that you may have fallen behind her. As you put it, “She’s hard to keep up to... I’m being left behind... I’m still back doing the same old job... I feel stuck.”

Terry, I wonder if you aren’t feeling dismayed in the sense that things haven’t worked out at all in the way you might have thought they would. In addition to all this, it would have been inevitable that you both would have been required by the departure





of your children to turn and face each other again without them in the way. All couples need to, if they are going to last the distance, go through a period of review and reevaluation. I got the impression that that was exactly where your relationship is, with each of you wondering whether you want to do the next half of the marathon together or on your own or with someone else? I can see, too, that you Terry, have also started to feel the pinch and have started taking some initiatives on your own, firstly joining a men's group and coming here to couple counseling. Both of these ventures are quite new for you.

You tell me that your relationship is imperiled and that if left to its own devices, according to you, Gloria, will go on to the rocks in six months or so and, according to you, Terry, could survive for a few more years. You could let your relationship drift and find out whose estimate is closer to the mark. On the other hand, you could, if you desired it, take your relationship out of the water and survey it. It may require a refit if you wish to sail in deep waters. If you do so, will you restore it to the fashion of the '60s or bring it up-to-date by the appropriate modifications.

I await your decisions on behalf of your relationship and I cannot conceal my curiosity as to what you will make of it or by continuing of a divorcing course, break up on the rocks. However, despite my appreciation of the dangers to your relationship, I found it very easy to like and respect both of you as persons.

Yours sincerely,  
David

Such an account entails a "double externalization," as it externalizes both the problem(s) the partners are experiencing and the relationship itself. This paves the way for a triadogue between, say, Gloria, Terry, and their relationship, replacing Gloria versus Terry. The latter only allows for the establishment of guilt, sinfulness, or pathology. The process of therapy from here on can now become a meta-commentary on the direction of their relationship as it heads for the metaphorical rocks or, by their determining a new direction for it, gets out of danger or departs from the problem(s). This is achieved by the deployment of some newfound or recovered relationship tactics or the reorganization of their relationship according to some other "recipe," "design," or "plan."

Such paradigmatic questions can inquire about anything but always invite the respondent to answer from his or her experience of the other's experience. This has the effect of undermining those cultural practices that affirm an objective reality. It seems to me that when a problem is understood in terms of an objective reality, most couples immediately seek recourse in practices that are detrimental to their relationship. The problem-solving practices derived from the analogues of the courtroom, ecclesiastical court, and psychiatric/neurological examination





tend to divide partners rather than reunite them. It is hoped that the practices described in these pages can serve to offer a remedy to this less than useful way to conduct a relationship and the prescriptions for the therapist that follow from it.

### **Commentary: Systems of Understanding, Practices of Relationship, and Practices of Self from Michael White**

Have you met couples whose relationship seem dominated by interactions that are of an adversarial nature?\* Have some of these couples been so locked into these interactions that they couldn't extricate themselves long enough to allow space for you, the therapist, to comment on their situation? And, when meeting with these couples, have you ever experienced the very real risk that you might get caught up in these interactions, or overwhelmed by them in some way? If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, chances are that you have, from time to time in therapy sessions, experienced yourself:

- (a) entering into unwanted roles; for example, the "adjudicator" or the "magistrate,"
- (b) going comatose,
- (c) wondering whether you might be hypoglycemic,
- (d) starting to clock-watch
- (e) wishing that there was a real therapist in the room who might intervene and save the situation, or
- (f) trying to figure out how on earth you got into the therapy business in the first place.

Very few therapists would consider these sort of outcomes of their interaction with these couples to be desirable. And I doubt very much that such outcomes are ever considered desirable to the couples who feel so locked into adversarial interactions. If therapists are recruited into and contribute to the patterns of interaction that dominate the relationships of these couples, or if they find themselves overwhelmed, frustration and despair will be experienced by all parties.

What sort of analysis of such predicaments might save therapists and couples from this fate? How could such an analysis assist therapists to engage with couples in a manner that might bring about preferred real effects for all parties to the interaction?

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\*Although this essay primarily addresses work with couples whose relationships are dominated by adversarial interactions, and when there does not appear to be significant imbalance in these relationships with regard to power, the practices of David Epston's "internalized other questioning" do render power imbalances more explicit and provide one avenue for redressing such imbalances.





What sort of analysis of such predicaments might save therapists and couples from this fate? How could such an analysis assist therapists to engage with couples in a manner that might bring about preferred real effects for all parties to the interaction? How might this analysis contribute to the desire that these couples have to interact with each other around possibilities in their relationships, rather than around the “settled certainties” that have so paralyzed them?

Here, I will briefly review one approach to the analysis of these predicaments. This approach will focus attention on the extent to which the interactions that so dominate the relationships of these couples are constituted or shaped by particular systems of understanding, practices of relationship, and practices of self.

### **Systems of Understanding and Practices of Relationship**

Do you have a sense that there is something entirely predictable about how things go in these adversarial relationships, and about how these couples explain their predicament? Has it occurred to you that relationships that are characterized by these adversarial interactions are not uncommon in the world at large? Have you noticed strong parallels in the relationships of these couples, and in the relationships of persons whom you know outside of the therapeutic context – perhaps even in the relationships of some distant relatives? Have you ever had the suspicion that these adversarial interactions are common enough to be represented as institutional practices of relationship?

If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, might it be reasonable for you to assume that each couple who feels locked into these interactions did not totally dream up or invent these ways of being together? And would it also be reasonable for you to assume that there could be common systems of understanding and relationship practices that relate to these scenarios, and that these might be of a cultural nature? If so, would it really seem all that farfetched to assume that these systems of understanding and practices of relationship may actually be constitutive or shaping of these relationships?

Do these considerations have you searching for ways of describing and naming the systems of understanding in the relationship practices that constitute such adversarial interactions? Do these considerations have you thinking about ways of engaging these couples in other systems of understanding and relationship practices that do not constitute such adversarial interactions: Systems of understanding that initiate alternative explanation of events, and practices of relationship that are not so polarizing and paralyzing?





## Practices of Self

Have you found that partners whose relationship is dominated by adversarial interactions seem to find it almost impossible to step into each other's experience even for a second? Have you ever observed that partners who are locked into such interactions are in pursuit of individuality that denies relationship? Have you had the thought that these couples conflate differentiation and separation and juxtapose individuation and connection? Have you sensed that the version of individuality that is performed under the circumstances is one that distances and isolates partners from each other, and that this is a form of individuality that is somewhat familiar?

If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, might you consider it fair to assume that there are some cultural practices of the self at work here that reinforce a particular version of individuality and that discriminate against other versions of individuality? Might it be reasonable to assume that these practices of self mitigate against the possibility of partners' "stepping into" each others experience?

Certainly, approaches to the constitution of the self that conflate individuality and separation are pervasive in this culture. One example of this is the extent to which the isolated or detached individualities dominate accounts of developmental processes (consider, just for a moment, the part that the isolating individualities play in the structuring of adolescent stage of development). Indeed, so pervasive is this dominant approach to the self that it is constantly being reproduced into "new clothing." For example, consider the patriarchal reproduction of this practice that is performed by a dominant form of the men's movement in North America, which emphasizes differentiation through separation from women .

Are you stirred by such considerations to assist couples to challenge the practices of the isolated individualities and to explore, in the constitution of the self, alternative individualities-individualities that are not completed with separation, individualities that are not canceling of connection? The alternative individualities that I am referring to here are those that are in league with affiliation, individualities that are derived through a collaboration between persons in the identification, articulation, and acknowledgement of aspects of each other's preferred identity – including desires, preferences, qualities, purposes, values, goals, comitments, and so on.\* Relationship is not a contradiction to these alternative individualities; connection does not subtract from them but contribute to them.

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\*I have no doubt whatsoever that women have traditionally been better at performing the practices associated with the affiliative individualities, whereas men have traditionally been better at performing the practices associated with the isolated individualities





### Internalized other questioning

David provides an important contribution to the breaking of the impasse or the predicament referred to at the outset of this essay. He does this by first describing and naming the systems of understanding in the relationship practices that constitute adversarial interactions in couple relationships and that often recruit therapists into particular roles that contribute further to frustration and to despair.

He names the systems of understanding the “juridical,” the “ecclesiastical/moral,” and the “politics of reality,” and typifies their associated practices of relationship. Once these practices are named and described, the therapist will find it easier to know how to avoid participating in these highly institutionalized and culture-specific forms of interaction.

David then introduces a prologue that explicitly disrupts the systems of understanding in the performance of their associated relationship practices. This prologue makes it possible, often for the very first time, for couples to step back from their institutionalized ways of being with each other, and to experience a degree of alienation from these ways of being. This is an important first step in encouraging couples to draw a distinction between the relationship, on the one hand, and what they experience about their interaction that is so problematic to them, on the other.

The apology that follows the introduction open space for persons to experience alternative systems of understanding in relationship practices. The discomfort that couples might expect to experience as they depart from habitual interactions is acknowledged, and is associated with new possibilities.

Following this, David proceeds to introduce a system of questioning- “internalized other questioning” – which not only effectively disrupts the institutionalize systems of understanding and relationship practices as named and described by David, but also those practices of self that constitute the isolating individualities. These questions require that each partner enter into an experience of the other partners experience of him or her. In response to these questions, and atmosphere of thoughtfulness, generosity and curiosity is established.

I believe that the cross-referencing of the answers to these questions provides an important opportunity for the evolution of other individualities – those that are affiliative rather than isolating. This is a particularly the case if these questions and falls in the direction of reflecting on events in the relationship to determine what these might say about the preferences, desires, qualities, wants, goals, values, beliefs, and so on, of the internalized other. The discussion that is initiated by the cross-referencing of the answers to these questions makes it possible for partners to experience a mutual contribution to the identification, articulation and





acknowledgment of these aspects of the “self.” For these couples, individuation and connection are no longer juxtaposed, differentiation and separation are no longer conflated.

### Comment

When David first introduced me to the practices associated with his internalized other questioning, I did not find these at all difficult to enter into – they seemed almost familiar. For sometime I had been exploring what I have referred to as “experience-of-experience” questions, such as, “What do you think these difficulties have talked your partner into about you?” But David’s internalized other questions do more than strike a familiar chord – to interview each partners internalized other in this way is something else, a distinct development in this work.

Collaborating with some couples who have felt locked into the institutionalized interactions that David describes and names in his paper, I have been experimenting with prologues, apologies, and internalized other questions. In this process, I have been re-casting experience of experience questions and coming up with “internalized other” versions of these like:

*(addressing Jill)* “Jack, what has this conflict been talking you into about Jill, and about your relationship?”

We have all been enjoying the outcome of these questions. So why don’t you and the couples who meet with you, give them a try?

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## Toward a Theory of Relational Accountability in Intimate Relationships

By Tom Stone Carlson and Amanda Haire

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This paper was previously published in 2014 in *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, 3, 1-16. Used with permission of the publisher.

### Our Shared Experience of Living Narrative Ethics

The ideas presented in this paper represent an attempt, over the past many years, to intimately apply the values and ethics that are central to the practice of narrative therapy in the lives of couples in intimate relationships. While the practice of narrative therapy is most known for its focus on the externalisation of problems and the identification of alternative stories of persons' lives, the uniqueness of this approach is not found in its techniques, but rather in the types of relationships that these ideas invite therapists to enter into with the persons who consult them. Freedman and Combs (1996) describe their first experience of witnessing Michael White's work is this way, 'When we met him, we were immediately attracted to White's work, to the kind of relationships he forged with the people who came to see him, and to the way he lives out his values both inside and outside the therapy context' (p. 14). As we work with therapists who are learning narrative ideas as trainers and professors, we are always curious about how they came to be interested in and drawn to narrative ideas. When asked this question, like Freedman and Combs, they, too, often speak of being inspired not by the techniques of the work, but by the ways that narrative ideas have transformed their relationships with the people with whom they work.

Our own experience in witnessing the work of Michael White, David Epston and other narrative therapists, has been similar. We were inspired by the compassion and hopefulness that were present in the work of the narrative therapists that we had the opportunity to witness. We were also inspired by the ways in which White and Epston attended to the shaping effects that his interactions had on the lives and stories of self of the persons who consulted him, and his intense interest in consulting persons about the ongoing effects that these conversations were having on their lives. While these relational ethics certainly seemed to have a transformative effect on the people with whom they met, they also seemed to have a transformative effect on therapists' lives. As we became more and more immersed in narrative ideas, we quickly witnessed the shaping effects that these ideas had in our work as therapists as well. We found it easier to embrace a more hopeful and compassionate outlook in our work, and began to notice that the people who consulted us were experiencing a level of change and transformation that we had long hoped for when we first decided to become therapists.



While we were hopeful that narrative ideas would create the types of change and transformations that we were witnessing in the lives of the people who consulted us, we were not prepared for the ways in which narrative ideas would transform our own lives and relationships. As we became more and more aware of the ways that our conversations shaped the stories of self of the people with whom we worked, we were confronted with an intimate awareness of the very real effects that our daily interactions had on the lives of our own partners, children, families, and friends. We experienced first-hand Michael White's assertion that narrative therapy is more than just an approach to therapy, but rather, it represents more of 'an epistemology, a philosophy, a personal commitment, a politics, an ethics, a practice, a life . . .' (White, 1995, p. 37).

As we embraced the politics, ethics, and practice of narrative ideas in our own lives, we were startled by the ethical implications that this particular philosophy of life presented to our lives and daily interactions with others. If, as White believed, 'we live by the stories that we have about our lives, that these stories actually shape our lives, constitute our lives, and ...embrace our lives' (White, 1995, pp. 13-14), and if these stories of self are continually being constructed in and through our relationships with other persons (Weingarten, 1991), we then, as persons, are always participating in the shaping of the stories of the persons with whom we come into contact. As we considered the powerful effects that stories have in determining a person's experience of self and possibilities for action in this world, we were again confronted with the serious consideration that, in our everyday interactions with those we love, we are responsible for the ways our actions shape the stories of their lives, whether or not the effects of our interactions are intentional. This understanding was unsettling for us as we were suddenly faced with the knowledge that we are always and inescapably accountable for the ways in which we participate in shaping the stories of our own partners and children. In an effort to relate to our newfound sense of accountability, we immediately called upon the ethics and practices of narrative ideas to guide our interactions in our relationships. These ethics and practices have required us to rethink common notions of responsibility and accountability in relationships. Concepts like mutual responsibility and bank account metaphors were no longer viable to us. From this new perspective, we had to consider the reality that we were always more accountable than anyone else for the shaping effects of our actions. We considered ourselves more accountable, not because we were somehow better or superior, but precisely because it was the only tenable solution to maintaining a sense of intimate accountability for the shaping effects that our everyday interactions had on the stories of those with whom we came in contact. If we were always accountable for the shaping effects of our actions, then we had to be intentional about interacting with our partners and children in ways that made positive contributions to their stories of self, and to be ever-mindful of the times that our actions (intentional or not) encouraged them to enter into negative or impoverishing stories of self.



Since embracing the ethics of narrative ideas has been so inspiring in our own lives and relationships, it seemed to be a worthwhile endeavour to apply these ideas to our work with the couples who consulted us. It was our hope that by inviting couples to live and embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their lives, it would inspire them to enter into new ways of being in relationship with one another that would be situated in a new understanding of accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on one another's stories of self. It was also our hope that these ideas would help couples be more intentional about engaging in relationship practices that encourage their partners to enter into more preferred stories of self. As we have attempted to apply these ideas in our work, it became necessary to make some adaptations to the typical practices commonly associated with narrative ideas. Our work was no longer about helping persons to enter into their own preferred stories of self but, rather, to invite persons to experience an intimate sense of accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on their partner's story of self, and to enter into relationship practices that intentionally shape their partner's story of self in preferred ways. This shift has required us to re-imagine our work with couples and to explore ways in which we could invite them to embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their own lives and relationships. Collectively, we have spent the past 20 years developing and refining an approach to therapy that helps guide couples through such a process, and have been inspired by the ways that these ideas have transformed the lives and relationships of the couples with whom we have had the honour of working. In this paper, it is our hope to outline the beliefs and practices that inform this approach to therapy that we have come to call 'Relational Accountability'.

### **Guiding Principles of Relational Accountability**

There are three primary principles that inform the practices that are associated with relational accountability. The first principle is based on the social constructionist notion of the relational self. According to the social constructionist position, the self is a relational achievement and is continually being constructed and reconstructed in our relationships with other people. Weingarten (1991) states that, 'In the social constructionist view, the experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others . . . the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives' (p. 289). This relational understanding of self is central to the ethics that are associated with the practice of relational accountability as it implies that each of us actively participates in constructing the selves of others.

The second guiding principle of relational accountability is centered in the role that stories play in shaping the stories of self that people are recruited into about their lives. As was previously mentioned, these stories are constitutive of persons' lives in that they shape the very expressions that are possible for people's lives and the meanings that they ascribe to those expressions (White, 1995). As such, the stories that people enter into have serious consequences or real effects on their lives. According to the narrative metaphor, the stories of





people's lives are not self-made; rather, they are continually being constituted in and through our relationships with other people. The writings of Michael White frequently refer to the responsibility that therapists have for the real effects that our involvement in the lives of the people who consult us have on the stories that they enter into about their lives and identities. For example, White states:

If we acknowledge that it is the stories that have been negotiated about our lives that make up or shape or constitute our lives, and if in therapy we collaborate with persons in the further negotiation and renegotiation of the stories of persons' lives, then we really are in a position of having to face and to accept, more than ever, a responsibility for the real effects of our interactions on the lives of others (White, 1995, pp. 14-15).

While White is referring to the implications of these ideas on therapists' work with the people who consult them, relational accountability expands this important implication to include the responsibilities that partners have for the shaping effects of their interactions on their partners' lives and the types of stories that they encourage their partners to enter into. From this perspective, our interactions within intimate relationships are never neutral. Everything that we do or say - or think or feel, for that matter - literally participates in shaping the stories of our partners' lives. The implications of this idea are far reaching in that we become inescapably accountable for the effects of our daily interactions in the lives of our partners and the stories that these actions invite them to enter into. Since it is impossible for our actions to not shape a person's story of self, from this perspective, we become responsible not only for the ways that we intentionally shape our partner's story of self, but also for the times that we unintentionally act in ways that encourage our partners to enter into impoverishing stories of self. We refer to this notion as radical responsibility; radical because of the way in which this idea turns the notion of responsibility in couple relationships on its head by removing notions of responsibility from an individualist discourse that privileges the idea that we are only responsible for hurting another person if our actions were intentional.

The third principle of relational accountability acknowledges the role that cultural practices and power structures (i.e., power structures that create unequal relationships between persons based on gender, race, sexual orientation, gender play in shaping the stories of persons' lives (Morgan, 2001). Such a perspective is central to the philosophy of narrative therapy and is vital to our work when using the ideas associated with relational accountability. Since not all people have equal access to power in society and in their relationships, and since certain people experience a greater level of privilege in their relationships, it is important to acknowledge that both partners may not have equal power in shaping the stories of their partners' lives. Therefore, the power differences that exist in couple relationships need to be taken into consideration before beginning any conversation about accountability. For example, in our work with heterosexual couples, we would be mindful to attend to the ways in which patriarchy privileges the needs and experiences of men in relationships in ways that disadvantage or





marginalise the experiences of women. Additionally, when working with a lesbian or gay couple, it would be important for us to consider the ways in which living in a heterosexual society influence or shape the stories that they enter into about their lives and relationships, and attend to these issues throughout every step of our work together (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011).

Each of these three principles places ethics at the centre of relationships and our approach to therapy makes ethics the primary focus of our work with couples. The ethics to which we are referring is not an ethics based on notions of individual responsibility or universal principles of right or wrong; rather, an ethics that is situated in an appreciation of the very real effects that our actions have on others, and the stories of self that these actions invite them to enter into. It is an ethics that is centred in a relational accountability that embraces the dizzying belief that we are inescapably responsible for constituting the stories of others, whether we intend to or not.

### **An Ethics First/Other-Focused Philosophy of Being**

We have found the work of philosopher, Immanuel Levinas, particularly helpful in offering a framework for the type of ethics that we are referring to here. Much of the work of philosophy is centred on the notion of ontology as the first and most important philosophy. In philosophy, ontology refers to the concept of being or what it means to be a person. From the perspective of most prominent philosophers, like Heidegger, the consciousness of being is considered primary to any other form of knowing. From this perspective, it is the consciousness of self that comes before any knowledge or consciousness of the other. Levinas, however, was critical of this self-first focus on being, arguing that it failed to acknowledge or comprehend a relational understanding of the self (Bauman, 1993) and would ultimately lead to a fundamentally self-enclosed or separate self. This realisation led Levinas to make a radical proposal that placed ethics, not being, at the centre of philosophy. An ethics-first philosophy places relationship (not self) at the centre of all knowledge: a knowledge that invites us into an understanding that we are always responsible for the other. It is this sense of always being responsible for the other, or the ways that we are always constituting the self of an other, that is at the heart of relational accountability.

### **How Individualistic Notions of Communication Problematise Couple Relationships**

Ironically, most approaches to couples therapy rely on an individualistic understanding of the self and, as such, are focused on helping each completely separate individual in the relationship to better communicate her/his own wants and needs to another completely separate individual. In fact, problems of communication among couples are considered to be failed attempts by these separate individuals to express and verbalise their thoughts, feelings, and needs to the other. The solution, then, to these problems of communication is to help





couples learn the requisite set of skills associated with proper communication. However, these attempts to teach couples communication skills are doomed to fail when they are based on an individual notion of the self. From a relational accountability perspective, it is not a lack of communication skills by individual partners that is the problem; rather, it is the very notion of the individual self that is the problem. From this perspective, a relational understanding of self is essential for any approach to couples therapy and must be the central metaphor for notions of effective communication.

Feminist author, Laurel Richardson (1994), appropriately laments what she refers to as the professionalisation of communication, and calls for notions of communication to be reunited with their 'etymological siblings: community, communion, and commonality' (p. 79). She goes on to argue that problems of communication are not based in an inability to effectively use a certain set of professionalised skills; rather, problems of communication 'are most strongly linked to the kinds of communion we can create' (p. 79). This relational, and even communal, understanding of communication necessarily shifts the focus of couples therapy away from teaching couples to communicate according to a specific set of skills, toward an understanding of communication as something that happens when we are joined in a shared appreciation of another person. When communication is joined with a relational understanding of self, communication in couples therapy happens when partners begin to see themselves as intimately connected and accountable for the shaping effects of their actions on each other's story of self.

The need for such a shift in our understanding of communication as it relates to couples therapy, is highlighted by the work of Gottman, Coan, Carrere & Swanson (1998) who reported that teaching couples communication skills, such as active listening, is about as effective as simply telling couples to be nicer to each other. The reason for this failure, in our opinion, has to do with the individualistic metaphor from which models of communication are based. Again, theories of couples therapy need to be based in models and metaphors that are situated in an appreciation for the relational ways in which identities are shaped and constructed. Laurel Richardson's invitation to view communication as a form of communion seems particularly relevant to helping couples achieve a sense of commonality and shared understanding.

When I (TC) was first learning about narrative ideas, I had the privilege of attending a training by Michael White. During the training, an audience member asked him to share what he thought narrative therapy was all about. Given the complexity of narrative ideas, I anticipated a fairly lengthy response. However, Michael simply stated, 'My work is about connecting people with other people'. In a simply uncomplicated way, our approach to couples therapy is about helping couples enter into an experience of communion with one another. The paragraphs that follow represent an attempt at describing the process by which this happens in our work.



## Primary Practices of Relational Accountability

There are three primary practices that are associated with our approach to therapy. These practices are: (1) Relational Identity Conversation Practices, (2) Relational Preference Conversation Practices, and (3) Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices.

### Relational Identity Conversation Practices

Given that Western culture tends to embrace individualistic notions of self, most couples who enter therapy utilise an individual framework for understanding both the problems that they face and the solutions that could alleviate those problems. This individual framework invites couples into an adversarial relationship that often leads partners to enter into a position of blame toward each other. Individualising discourses of self and relationship also have the effect of robbing couples of the many shared experiences that belong to their relationship, in particular, the shared experiences of hurt and loss that are often present when couples are experiencing relationship struggles. The effect of this individualisation process contributes to what we refer to as the isolation of shared relational experience. As we have worked with couples to help them gain an appreciation of the effects that their struggles have had on their stories and experiences of self, we have found that couples are often surprised by the fact that the effects of their struggles and losses are shared effects. For example, couples often describe having shared experiences of sadness, loneliness, loss of dreams and hopes, etc. These potentially transformative shared relational experiences are rendered invisible by the effects of individualising discourses. Therefore, from the very beginning of therapy, we use language and questions that encourage couples to enter into a relational understanding of self and the struggles that they are experiencing. These relational conversation practices are intended to introduce relational meaning to individualising interpretations of behaviour and to help couples resituate these interpretations in a relational framework that encourages partners to begin to see and experience their own self as a 'self-in-relationship'. Relational conversation practices are similar to the purpose of externalising conversation practices in narrative therapy. White (2007) refers to the practice of externalisation as a counter-practice 'against cultural practices of objectification of people' (p. 9). In a similar way, relational conversation practices serve as a counter-practice against the cultural practice of the individualisation of people. Therefore, from the very beginning of therapy, we introduce relational conversation practices whenever couples enter into individualising discourses related to their understanding of their lives and relationships.

### Using Relational Conversation Practices in Therapy

We have found that it is common for couples to come into therapy feeling at odds with each other in terms of their experiences and struggles in the relationship. In fact, it is quite common for couples to share with us that they could not be further apart in regard to their experiences.





We would argue that individualistic interpretations of self and relationship make it difficult for couples to identify the ways in which their struggles are actually shared struggles. As was previously mentioned, these individualist interpretations encourage couples to enter into an adversarial relationship with one another and to see their own struggles as completely separate and even opposite from one another. To counter this particular effect of individualizing discourses, we have found that it is helpful to begin therapy by exploring the couple's shared relational experience of their struggles and hopes. Because we are interested in inviting conversations that bring forth shared relational experiences, we are careful to ask questions that move couples away from individualising explanations that are so prevalent in Western culture. We have learned to take great care in beginning our work with couples in a way that opens up space for these shared relational experiences of struggle and hope to emerge. We accomplish this by asking questions that encourage partners to talk about their personal experiences of struggle in the relationship as they relate to their own lost hopes and dreams for partnership from which their relationship likely began. For example, we might begin a session with a couple in the following manner:

I want you to know that I appreciate how hard it must be to come and talk to someone about your struggles together, and I appreciate your willingness to allow me to play a part in helping you come to a better place in your relationship. I imagine that you did not start out your relationship together thinking that you would be in the situation that you are today, and that you probably had some hopes and dreams for your relationship together and for what you could each bring to each other's lives. I am just guessing, but it has probably been difficult for each of you to have struggled to live up to these hopes and dreams that you had for each other and your relationship. I would like us to start today by talking about what it has been like for each of you to be going through these struggles in your relationship. I would also be curious to know what it has been like for each of you to have this experience of not being able to live up to your hopes and dreams for each other.

Notice that the focus here is not on getting an account of the details of what has gone wrong or encourage the gathering of evidence related to who has done or not done what in the relationship; but rather, the focus is on encouraging a sharing of each partners' intimate experience of their struggles and what it has been like for them to be in the place where they are today. To facilitate this process, we have found it helpful to invite one of the partners to take on a witnessing role while the other partner is asked to take on a sharing role. While the sharing partner is talking, the witnessing partner is invited to be intentional about listening for experiences and struggles that might be shared and to listen for experiences that represent new understandings or appreciations for the sharing partner.





After the sharing partner has finished talking about her/his experience of the struggles and experiences of lost partnership, we use relational conversation practices to invite the witnessing partner to begin to gain an appreciation for the ways in which these experiences have shaped the sharing partner's story of self. The questions below represent an example of some of the questions that we might ask to facilitate this process:

- [Referring to person by name] What do you think it has been like for your partner to experience the struggles that have occurred in your relationship over the years and to live with the loss that comes with realizing that her hopes and dreams for your relationship have not been met?
- What kind of toll do you think this has had on how she experiences herself as a person and as a partner?
- What is it like for you to know that she has struggled in this way and to know how these struggles have influenced how she feels about herself as a person and as a partner?

Therapists who are acquainted with narrative therapy should find these questions familiar. These are the types of questions that a narrative therapist might ask someone while exploring the first and second steps of the statement of position map to gain an appreciation of the story that a person's experiences related to a particular problem has recruited them into (White, 2007). Since our approach to therapy is focused on helping partners enter into a relational understanding of self and relationship, it is important that these 'story questions' be asked in such a way as to help the witnessing partner gain an appreciation for the ways in which their unique relationship struggles, and the lost hopes and dreams for partnership, have shaped her/his partner's story of self. In this way, these questions invite the witnessing partner into a shared relational experience by entering into the story of self of her/his partner. Relationally-focused story questions, like the ones presented above, are important because they help couples begin to understand how their shared relationship struggles have had very real and personal effects on the story of self of their partners and, therefore, have the effect of inviting couples into a more appreciative position in relation to one another.

Once we have a sense that the witnessing partner has articulated a beginning appreciation for the effects of the struggle on her/his partner's story of self, we have found it helpful to use the third step of the statement of position map, evaluation, to encourage the witnessing partner to take a personal position on the ways that their relationship struggles have impacted the story of self of the sharing partner. We then use the fourth step of the statement of position map, justification, to help the witnessing partner to begin to identify the values and beliefs that inform the position that she/he has taken. For example, we might ask the witnessing partner the following questions:





- If you were to take a position on the ways that these struggles have affected your partner and have invited her to experience herself as a person and as a partner, would you say that you would be for or against them?
- Can you help me understand why it is that you are not okay with the effects of these struggles on your partner's life?

As this process unfolds, several important things are taking place related to helping both partners enter into a shared relational experience of one another. First, the witnessing partner is invited to join with the sharing partner in a way that is centred in an appreciation of their common or shared struggles. Second, the witnessing partner is asked to enter into an ethical position regarding the real effects of their struggles on the sharing partner's story of self. The sharing partner is also given the opportunity to experience the appreciation that the witnessing partner has for her/his struggles, and to experience the positive effects of being joined in this way by her/his partner - an experience that has probably been missing due to the isolation of shared relational experience. Finally, by encouraging the witnessing partner to identify the real effects of these shared struggles on the story of self of the sharing partner, it begins to shift notions of accountability from an individualistic one, where partners rely solely on the other to explain or inform them about their experience, toward a relational sense of accountability, where each partner becomes responsible for considering the potential shaping effects that their combined struggles have on the story of self of the other. This shift toward relational accountability is especially important when working with men in couple relationships, since individualistic interpretations of responsibility play such a powerful role in male culture. These relational conversation practices, therefore, have the effect of challenging this particular aspect of men's culture by helping men develop an increased capacity for attunement in couple relationships. It is important for us to highlight that the practices outlined above would look considerably different when working with couples where inequities of power and/or abuse are present. In these situations, we almost always meet with the person who has been misusing power or acting in abusive ways and take considerable care in ensuring that this person has gained an appreciation for the real effects of their actions on his partner's story of self and has begun to enter into more preferred and accountable ways of being before doing couple work. We have found the work of Alan Jenkins to be quite helpful in informing our practices when violence or abuse are present.

### Relational Preference Conversation Practices

Relational preference conversation practices are focused on helping couples identify their own hopes for how their partners experience themselves both as persons and as partners in the relationship. The identification of these relational preferences flows directly from the justification questions that were listed above. These questions often result in the articulation of particular values, beliefs, ethics, and emotions that are based on notions of love, concern, and appreciation for the other. The identification and naming of relational preferences is a vital part





of this work and serves as the primary foundation for helping couples embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their personal lives and relationships. In narrative therapy terms, relational preferences represent the preferred story that partners would hope the other partner embrace or enter into. However, there is one important distinction that makes the identification of relational preferences different from simply identifying a preferred story for the other partner. Since our approach is based on a relational understanding of self and accountability, the types of relational preferences to which we are referring are based on an ethical position that acknowledges the intimate role that the witnessing partner plays in contributing to the preferred story of the other. Thus, it is important that these relational preferences be articulated as much more than a desire or hope for a partner to feel a particular way about her/himself (i.e., individual responsibility); rather, it must be situated in a preference that is centred in the type of story that the witnessing partner would hope to invite the other person to enter into through her/his actions, feelings, thoughts, presence, etc. (i.e., relational accountability).

### Using Relational Preference Conversation Practices in Therapy

Encouraging this type of consideration on the part of couples is often difficult due to the influence of individualising discourses and the way in which notions of responsibility are interpreted from within such discourses. Therefore, we have learned to be very careful about the way we ask partners to name their relational preferences. For example, when we initially began exploring these ideas in our work, we would ask couples the following question: 'What are your hopes for how your partner feels/experiences her/himself?' While this question could potentially lead to the naming of some positive hopes, we soon discovered that those hopes were often associated with individualised understandings of the self, and were presented in ways that had the potential to be blaming of partners for not achieving these hopes in their lives. For example, common responses to this question were, 'I just wish that my partner would be more confident in herself' or 'I wish she could just love herself more'. This version of the question fell short of encouraging couples to develop an appreciation for their own accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on their partners' stories of self, and for engaging in relationship practices that encouraged their partners to enter into more positive and nourishing stories of self. After wrestling with this process for several years, we developed a series of questions that helped couples move from naming an individual preference for their partners to a preference that was based in a relational understanding of the self. Thus, we now ask partners the following questions to begin the naming of their relational preference for one another:

- What are your hopes for how your partner thinks and feels about how you feel about her/himself as a person?
- What are your hopes for how your partner feels about her/himself when she/he is in your presence?





- What kinds of feelings would you hope that she/he could sense coming from you about how you feel about her/him as a person?

While we have noticed that these questions often bring a puzzled look to the couples who consult us, and that we often need to repeat the questions a second or third time, it is common for partners to use words like loved, safe, important, cared for, and precious to describe their relational preferences. As these relational preferences are named, we take great care in noting these hopes and desires and repeat them back to ensure that we have an appreciation for the significance of these words as they relate to their preferences for how their partners experience themselves in the relationship.

While words that are identified in the naming of these relational preferences will become a central focus of our work in later sessions, we have found it helpful at this point to shift the focus of our work toward conversations that encourage partners to begin to gain an appreciation for the ways in which their daily interactions in the relationship have shaped one another's stories in ways that may go against their hopes and desires for one another through intimate accountability conversation practices.

### **Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices**

As was mentioned earlier, the narrative metaphor invites us to consider the significance of how stories shape and influence the lives and relationships that are possible in persons' lives. Additionally, these stories are continually being negotiated in and through our daily interactions with one another. This understanding led White to caution therapists to be ever-mindful of the ways in which our interactions with the persons who consult us in therapy literally participate in shaping the stories of their lives. When we apply these ideas to couple relationships, the ethical implications become very clear as partners are inescapably accountable for the real effects that their daily interactions have in the lives of their partners and the stories that these actions invite them to enter into. From this perspective, it is important to acknowledge that we are never neutral in our interactions with one another, as each action/inaction has a constitutive effect on the story of self of the other.

### **Using Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices in Therapy**

Given that our work is about helping couples intimately apply narrative ethics in their relationships, the purpose of intimate accountability conversations is to encourage partners to begin to enter into a place of accountability for the ways they have literally shaped their partner's story of self through their daily interactions with one another. It has been our experience that helping each partner gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of their actions on the story of self of the other plays a central role in bringing about change and healing in couple relationships. Therefore, we take great care in guiding each partner





through a process that facilitates a meaningful exploration of the potential ways that their actions/inactions have played a role in contributing to their partner's story of self in negative or impoverishing ways. As part of this process, we have found that it is important to help each partner do the following: (1) identify the specific identity messages that they have been sending through their actions/inactions; (2) gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of these identity messages on the partner's story of self; and (3) accept responsibility and acknowledge the role that they have played in encouraging their partner to take on a negative or impoverishing story of self. It has been our experience that it is common for partners to experience a great deal of distress when going through this process, as they feel the weight or heaviness of the real effects of their actions on their partner's story of self.

After each partner has named a relational preference (i.e., a hope for their partner to feel cherished in their presence), we begin intimate accountability conversations in the following way,

You mentioned that what you hope most is for your partner to feel cherished in your presence and that she could sense this feeling coming from you whenever you are together; knowing that this is something very important to you, I imagine that there have been times in your relationship when you may have acted in ways that have gone against this desire and sent a different kind of message to your partner about how you feel about her. I am wondering if you can think of time in your relationship when you might have communicated to your partner something other than her being cherished by you.

We then use the following questions to help partners begin to enter into a position of accountability for the real effects of their actions/inactions on their partner's story of self:

- As you think about [the particular event/interaction], what do you think it might have been inadvertently saying to your partner about how you feel about her/him as a person?
- If you were to translate this into some kind of message that you were sending you in that moment, what would it be? What would you be saying to her about your feelings about her worth as a person/partner?
- How do you think that living with [the message] has influenced how your partner feels about her/himself as a person? As a partner? As a parent?
- Given that this is an interaction that is common in your relationship, what kind of toll do you think that sending this message has had on your partner's sense of worth as a person?

Again, we have found it helpful to use the third and fourth steps of the statement of position map to encourage partners to articulate their personal position on the ways that their





actions/inactions have literally shaped their partner's story of self, and to begin to identify the values and beliefs that inform that position. For example, we might ask the following questions:

- What is it like for you to hear yourself say those words, to know that you have been sending this message to your partner for so long?
- Is it okay with you to be sending this message to your partner?
- Can you help me understand why this is not okay with you?

These evaluation and justification questions are important because they help partners enter into an ethical position on the real effects of their actions on their partners' story of self, and encourages partners to begin to articulate how they want their own values and beliefs to more actively inform their relationship practices.

### Case Story Highlighting Intimate Accountability Conversations

The following case story represents an example of what intimate accountability conversations might look like in the context of therapy. I (AH) was working with a couple, Mike and Colette, who contacted me in hopes of decreasing the growing influence of fighting in their relationship. Mike and Colette had been to several therapists to help them 'learn how to communicate better' and shared that, while they had learned the skills quite well, they did not have the type of influence they had hoped for. While they very much wanted to 'save' their relationship, they shared that this was the last attempt at seeing if they could do so. During our first visit, both Collette and Mike lamented the loss of feeling connected with one another and how desperately they missed feeling loved; they were also able to identify a shared experience of isolation and loneliness that resulted from the recent increase in their arguments. This shared relational experience of isolation and loneliness and the connection that resulted from these conversations was encouraging to me, and was helpful as we engaged in intimate accountability conversations together. The transcript below provides an example of how intimate accountability conversation practices were used to help Mike begin to take accountability for the shaping effects of his actions on Colette's story of self.

- A: Mike, you mentioned that what you hope most for is for Colette to feel adored in your presence, that if she walked into the room she could feel this adoration coming from you. Knowing that having Colette feel adored is very important to you, I would imagine that there have been times when you may have acted in ways that have gone against this desire for Colette to feel adored and sent a different kind of message to her about how you feel about her. I was wondering if you could recall a time in your relationship when you might have communicated to Colette something other than feeling adored?





- M: Yes, I suppose there have been. She always wants me to kiss her goodbye - I know this because I hear about it later in the day. You know, when I check in and call later in the day. It's not that I mean to forget, not like I do it on purpose, you know? I love her. I say it every day. I'm a busy guy Amanda.
- A: So, you're saying that you are sending a message that is different than your desire for Colette to feel adored when you neglect to kiss her goodbye in the morning?
- M: Yes, when I don't kiss her goodbye. Also when I don't ask her how her day was. That would be another time that I've done something, or not done something that would make her feel adored. I get what you're saying, but I'm a busy person - when I do ask it's not like she believes me anyway.
- A: Mike, what do you think you could be saying to Colette, that for 23 years, day after day, you have not asked her how her day was, that you have not taken the time to wonder how she was doing or what she did in her day?
- M: I guess not adored. I guess she feels like I don't care or that I don't love her.
- A: Okay Mike, so you're saying that maybe she isn't feeling adored or that you don't care. Mike, if you could take a second to reflect, what would you say that this says to her about her worth as a person? And as a partner to you?

It took Mike several minutes to respond. I could tell that he was struggling emotionally with the question that I had just asked, as if he was feeling the weight of the influence of his actions on Collette's sense of self. While we sat there in silence, I looked over to Colette who was intently staring at her hands, tears welling up in her eyes. When Mike finally did respond it was with exasperation; his head was shaking.

- M: Have I been telling her that all these years? Is that what I have been saying? [Mike was visibly shaken. Looking toward Colette who was still staring at her hands, tears running down her cheeks].
- A: Mike, if you could put that message into some statement about how this has her thinking and feeling about herself as a person, what would it be?



- M: Worthless, worthless. I have been telling her that she is nothing to me. That she is nothing to me. [Colette's tears began to flow more freely and she was nodding her head in agreement. Mike continued to shake his head with tears in his eyes].
- A: Mike, what is this like for you to know that this is the message that you have been sending Colette, perhaps every day, for 23 years?

It was at this point in the session that Mike reached for Colette's hand and her eyes were now raised to meet his. They were seeing each other, possibly for the first time in years. Mike, without taking his eyes from Colette's responded to my question but spoke to Colette directly:

- M: I feel awful, sick even. I feel that I have betrayed you. I never want to make you feel that way. You mean everything to me.
- A: Mike, I hear that you never want to have Colette feel that way again and that you would prefer to have her feel adored. Mike, knowing that you have been sending Colette the message that she is worthless, what is it like to hear yourself say those words and to know that you have been sending this message of worthlessness to her for so long?
- M: Those are words that I would never in my life say to her, yet that's the message she gets from me, day after day. This is probably why she feels so alone, maybe even why I feel so alone. It's horrible - not something I would do or say to anyone, let alone Colette.
- A: Mike, you're saying that this isn't a way that you want Colette to feel. Can you help me understand why this is not okay with you? Why is it not okay with you that she feels worthless?
- M: It's just not okay. I thought that if we just told each other what we thought and how we felt that that was good enough. It's not, it's just not. I love her and I would never want her to feel that way. She's worth everything to me. I really do adore her.
- A: Colette, what is it like for you to hear Mike say these words? What was it like for you to hear him acknowledge the effect that his failure to respond to your needs has had on your life?
- C: Everything he said felt so true... [Tears rolling down her face] I have been waiting for him to acknowledge me in this way for so long.



There are a several points from the above conversation that are important to highlight. First, while it appeared that Mike was very aware that Colette wanted or even needed him to take the time to give a thoughtful good-bye each morning, he was quick to explain it away as a result of his busy schedule and not as an indication of his lack of love and concern for her. In fact, he thought that it should be enough for her to know that he just loved her and that she should trust in that love regardless of whether or not he chose to meet this need. As we further explored the potential shaping effects of his failure to respond to Colette's needs, Mike began to experience the gravity of his inability to attend to Colette's simple request and that he had been telling the person he loves that she was worthless to him almost every day of their lives together. Engaging in intimate accountability conversations in this way helped Mike and Colette enter into a more relational understanding of self which allowed Mike to experience a more intimate sense of accountability for the shaping effects of his actions on Colette's story of self.

### **Back and Forth Witnessing: Extending the Influence of Relational Preference Practices**

As mentioned previously, we use relational preference conversation practices to help couples identify their own hopes for how their partners experience themselves, both as persons and as partners in the relationship. This process involves inviting partners to name a word, quality, or ethic that they could invite into their lives that would help them to be more intentional about engaging in relationship practices that nurture more preferred stories of self in one another. To facilitate this process, we invite couples to enter into an alternative form of externalising conversations that we refer to as invitational externalising conversations. For example, we ask partners to reflect on the following questions:

- Is there a quality or feeling that you could invite into your life that would help you communicate your desire (through your actions, thoughts, and words) for your partner to feel [cherished] by you?
- If you had to come up with a name for a quality or feeling that you could invite into your life that would help you more fully live out this desire to send a message of [name the specific message], what would it be?

After each partner has come up with a name for the word, quality, or ethic that they would like to guide their daily relationship practices, we invite partners to engage in a reflection assignment to help them intentionally invite the presence of these ethics into their lives. For example, if one of the partners had chosen the word 'love' as her guiding ethic, we would specifically invite that partner to intentionally reflect on the following questions during the time before our next visit:

- What would Love have me do in this moment?
- What would Love have me feel toward my partner in this moment?





- What would Love have me say in this moment?
- What would Love have me see in my partner in this moment?

While externalising conversations in narrative therapy are typically used in relation to some type of problem that people want to change in their lives, we intentionally externalise a positive or preferred ethic to help partners gain a more experience-near and relationally-relevant understanding of how these words might inform their ways of being with one another in each particular moment.

The use of invitational externalising conversations is particularly important when it comes to words like love because it has been our experience that it is common for couples to use the word love in universal or global terms in such a way that it has become de-personalised or experience-distant. From this perspective, love has little ability to influence or inform their daily relationship practices in meaningful ways. For example, we frequently hear partners say things like, 'Of course, I love you' or 'Don't you know that I will always love you', as if love is something that is universally present and somehow disconnected from the partner's intimate experience of the moment. The effect of this interpretation of love is that it diminishes partners' responsibility to be loving toward the other in each particular moment. It is our belief that the experience of love is something that we purposefully create as we tend to the ethics of the moment in our intimate relationships with one another. We have found that the use of invitational externalising conversations helps couples to interrogate the de-personalising effects of universal notions of love and to be more attuned to living as the ethic of love would have them love in a particular moment.

The next time that we visit with couples in therapy, we review the reflection assignment that was suggested during our previous meeting and specifically invite each partner to identify moments when the other partner had potentially acted in ways that fit her/his relational preference. Because our concern is to help partners give relational meaning to their daily acts and expressions of love, compassion, and concern for one another, we begin this process by inviting partners into a reflective witnessing process where they become responsible for identifying the ways in which the other partner has acted upon her/his specific relational preference during the week. For example, after reviewing the assignment and reminding couples of the specific relational preferences that they identified during the previous session, we typically begin the next session by asking one of the partners the following question:

- As you look back on the past week, what are some of the things that you noticed your partner doing that represented her/his desire for you to feel loved?

Again, we have learned to take great care in writing down each of the acts or expressions of love that were identified by the witnessing partner, making sure that we pause after each identified action to help partners gain a more experience-near and relationally-relevant





understanding of how the specific act was situated in a desire on the part of the acting partner to be intentional about sending messages that are consistent with the acting partner's relational preference (e.g., love, compassion, concern, etc.). While it is common for the witnessing partner to initially identify actions that might seem small or insignificant (e.g., sending a text message to a partner while at work), by carefully extending the influence of these acts and situating them in an intentional relational context, it has been our experience that even the smallest acts can have a transformative effect on the witnessing partner's experience of her/himself and the relationship. We have found that the following questions have been especially helpful in extending the influence of partners' acts or expressions:

- If the act of picking up and washing your coffee cup were to represent an effort on the part of your partner to say something to you about how she/he feels about you as a person, what might that be?
- What did sending you a thoughtful text message say about how she/he was seeing you as a person in that particular moment?
- What does it mean for you to know that your partner was intentionally thinking about you in this way at that particular moment?
- How did it feel for you to be noticed in that way?
- How did that experience influence how you felt about yourself as a person in that moment?
- How did that experience influence you throughout the day? At home? At work?
- How did that experience influence your relationship with your children? Your friends?

The first two questions represent an intentional effort on our part to place each identified act in an intentionally ethical context to allow partners to give relational meaning to acts that may have previously gone unnoticed due to the effects of individualising discourses. The remaining questions are intended to help both the witnessing and acting partners gain an appreciation for the ways in which such ethically informed actions contribute to a more positive story of self and relationship with one another. In this way, the use of such questions literally participates in the co-construction of the felt experience of love in the moment.

Because our focus is always on developing a relational understanding of self, at this point we turn our attention to the listening/acting partner to explore what it was like for the acting partners to experience the ways in which their actions influenced their partner's story of self. We have found that this experience is often quite emotional for the acting/listening partners as they experience both the: (1) acknowledgement of these actions and (2) the meaningful, and often surprising, ways that these actions have positively shaped the story of self of their partners. We have found the following questions helpful as we guide acting/listening partners through this process:





- How does it feel to know that what you did for your partner, had such a meaningful influence in her/his day?
- As you were washing the coffee cup, how were you experiencing your partner in that moment? What kinds of feelings were you having toward her/him?
- What feelings were you experiencing toward your partner as your partner acknowledged the influence that your actions had on her/himself?

Finally, we use evaluation and justification questions to help the acting partners articulate their position on the shaping effects of their actions on the story of self of their partners. For example, after carefully reviewing the positive effects that each identified action had on the witnessing partner's story/ experience of self, we ask the following questions:

- Knowing that washing the coffee cup influenced your partner in these ways, would you say that you would be for or against having this type of influence on your partner?
- Can you help me understand why it is that you would be for influencing your partner in these ways?

After we go through this process with one of the partners, we use this same back and forth witnessing process with the other partner. This then becomes the focus of our work in each subsequent consultation until the couple's preferred relational story is more richly described.

### Case Story Highlighting the Back and Forth Witnessing Process

The following case story provides an example of what relational preference conversation practices might look like in the context of therapy. Peter and Kristen consulted me (TC) about their desire to seek couples therapy after 15 years of marriage. During our first visit, they shared with me that they had simply grown apart over the years and were at a place in their relationship where they were not sure if they loved each other anymore. While they were both unhappy in their relationship, they felt that it was important for me to know that they were not angry at one another. There was no fighting; they had just grown apart. I asked both Peter and Kristen whether or not they were okay with this arrangement of having grown apart and being unhappy in their relationship, and each of them quickly indicated that they were not. After hearing such a quick and clear response to this question, I invited them to consider whether or not they were open to the possibility that things could be better for each of them in the relationship. Again, they were quick to answer in the affirmative. After moving through the three practices of relational accountability with Peter and Kristen, we began the process of extending the influence of their preferred ethics in their relationship with one another. Peter and Kristen had both identified love as the preferred ethic that they wanted to guide their daily





relationship practices. The following is a transcript of the back-and-forth witnessing process that took place between Peter and Kristen:

- TC: During our last visit, each of you had settled on the word 'love' as the preferred ethic that you wanted to guide your daily actions with one another. If I remember correctly, we had also settled on the idea that each of you would work to be a bit more intentional about sending messages to each other through your words, thoughts, and actions that represented this hope for your relationship. Does that sound right to both of you?
- P/K: Yes.
- TC: I think I remember that we had also decided that it might be a good idea to talk about the ways that each of you had acted on your desire to send messages of love to one another.
- P/K: [Looking at one another] Yep, we sure did.
- TC: Rather than asking each of you to give me a report of your own actions during the week, I would be interested in hearing about times during the week when you noticed the other person acting on this desire to be more intentional about sending messages of love. Kristen, would it be okay if I started with you?
- K: Sure. That would be fine.
- TC: Kristen, as you look back on the week since our last meeting together, can you think of times that Peter acted on his desire for you to feel loved by him, times when he might have been sending you the message that he loves you?
- K: Let me think about that for a minute. I know that it was a better week, but let me think ... yes, yes. The other day, I think it was yesterday morning, I get coffee first thing in the morning and bring it upstairs while I am getting ready for the day. Anyway, when I was coming down the stairs, I noticed that my coffee cup wasn't on the steps like always. I thought that was strange but continued down the stairs to the kitchen and saw that my coffee cup was washed and was in the drying rack. Peter had washed it for me [Kristen was looking at Peter with a smile on her face].





At this point, before I could ask Kristen to share a bit more about what this action represented for her, Kristen went on to describe other things that Peter had done that she felt were an expression of his love for her. In an effort to ensure that Kristen could give relational meaning to each of these actions, I carefully wrote them down and read each one back to her. After reading each of the actions, I asked Kristen the following questions to extend the influence of what these actions might communicate to her about how Peter feels about her as a person.

- TC: Is it okay with you if we go back to your story about the coffee cup?
- K: Sure.
- TC: So you shared how you were coming down the stairs and noticed that your coffee cup was missing, and that you had discovered that Peter had decided to pick it up and wash it for you. If the act of noticing and washing the coffee cup were to represent some type of message that Peter was sending you about how he feels about you as a person, what do you think that might be? What do you think that Peter might have been telling you about how he feels about you in that moment?
- K: That... that... [unable to speak for a moment while tears are running down her face]... that he loves me! He was telling me that he loves me!
- TC: He was telling you that he loves you. Okay... As you look back on that moment, what was it like for you to know that Peter noticed you in that way? What kinds of feelings were you having about yourself in that moment?
- K: [Tears are flowing now] I felt valued...I felt noticed... and loved.
- TC: Okay, so in that moment you felt valued, noticed and loved by Peter. I am curious to know the influence that feeling this way had on you as you went about the rest of your day.
- K: Actually, I remember it being a really great day at work. I had to give a presentation to a group of co-workers, and I am usually pretty nervous with that type of thing. But I wasn't nervous at all that day... I wasn't nervous at all. I felt really confident during the presentation... And, the rest of the day at work was just really good. It is hard to describe... I just felt really comfortable with myself.



- TC: So, you remember feeling comfortable with yourself and more confident. Okay, thank you Kristen [tears are running down her face again]. Is it okay with you Kristen if I ask Peter a few questions about his experience as he listened to our conversation?
- K: Please... Please.
- TC: Peter, Kristen shared with us her experience of you picking up and washing her coffee cup and how she felt like you were telling her in that moment that you valued and loved her. She also shared how much of an influence that had on the rest of her day. What is it like for you to know your actions had such a powerful influence on Kristen and how she felt about herself as a person?
- P: It feels really good to... you know... to know that something I did made her feel so good about herself.
- TC: Is that something that is important to you? Is it important to you that she feel valued and noticed and loved? She also talked about feeling comfortable with herself and confident. Is it important to you that she feel these things?
- P: Yes... Yes. It is very important to me. There is nothing more important to me [Peter is looking at Kristen now. Both of them are crying].
- TC: Can you me help to understand why this is so important to you?
- P: Because I love her... more than anything in the world... She deserves to be noticed. She is an amazing person.
- TC: As you look back on the moment that you decided to pick up her coffee cup and carry it down the stairs to wash it, would you have predicted that doing such a simple act would have such a powerful influence on Kristen's day and her sense of worth as a person?
- P: No... No... Of course not! [Peter takes Kristen's hand]. I just wanted her to know that I was thinking about her.
- K: Thank you, Peter. Thank you!



There are several aspects of this conversation that seem important to highlight. While Kristen was able to come up with a list of several actions that Peter had engaged in to communicate his desire for her to feel loved, due to the simplicity of these acts they could have easily gone unnoticed (in fact, they already had). By engaging Kristen in this reflective witnessing process she was able to give relational meaning to Peter's act of washing her coffee cup. Through this process, this seemingly simple act had a transformative influence on Kristen's experience of herself and her relationship as it was representative of Peter's love and concern for her. Additionally, this reflective witnessing process allowed Peter to gain a better appreciation of the powerful shaping effects that even the smallest actions could have on Kristen's sense of self when he followed his preferred relational ethic for Kristen. The back-and-forth nature of these conversations allowed Peter to experience his intentional acts as being honoured by Kristen and was encouraging of his efforts to continue to engage in relationship practices informed by his desire for Kristen to feel loved by him.

### Transforming Problem Moments through Invitational Externalising Conversations

While we have found that couples are frequently able to identify these positive actions or expressions of love by their partners, it is not uncommon for couples to have an experience of struggle during the time between meetings. In these moments, we use invitational externalising conversations to invite couples to explore what their relational preferences would have had them do in these moments of struggle. For example, I (TC) was meeting with a couple named Barb and Dave. Early on in our work together they both had identified 'love' as the preferred ethic they wanted to guide their ways of being with one another, and they were quite successful during our initial meetings at acting out these preferences in their relationship. We were at the point in our work together where we started each meeting using the back- and-forth witnessing process identified above. I had come accustomed to our meetings starting off in a very positive and hopeful direction. However, when Barb and Dave came to one particular meeting I could immediately tell that something was not quite right between them. As it is my preference to begin meetings by highlighting the times when they acted on their preferred ethics, I started the session by asking Dave to think back to times during the week when Barb had acted on her desire for him to feel loved. Dave immediately shared that this would be hard for him to answer because they had a terrible argument during the week. He proceeded to tell me that he had planned a special date night for them during the week and that he had made all of the arrangements (which is something that Barb had hoped to see Dave do more of). He shared how he was anxiously waiting by the door for her to come home from work with flowers in hand. But the time for their date came and went. Dave shared that she was more than 45 minutes late and that she didn't even call. When Barb finally came through the door, she walked right past Dave and into their bedroom. Dave was so upset that he threw the flowers down and followed Barb into the room. They got into a terrible fight. While I could tell that this experience was hurtful and difficult for both of them, I also knew that it presented an opportunity to use invitational externalising conversations to help Dave, in particular, to gain a





better appreciation for how his preferred ethic of love would have had him thinking, feeling, and responding to Barb in that moment. The following represents a brief excerpt of how this conversation went.

- T: Dave, I can tell that this experience was upsetting to you and that you had put a lot of time into planning this evening for Barb. I was wondering if you could reflect back on the moment right before you expected Barb to arrive and you were standing there holding the flowers in your hand. What kinds of feelings were you having for Barb at that time?
- D: I remember feeling excited and full of love for her.
- T: Okay, you felt excited and full of love for Barb. So, as you were standing there with the flowers in your hand feeling excited and full of love for Barb, what kinds of feelings were you hoping that she would sense coming from you when she walked through that door?
- D: What kinds of feelings did I want her to sense coming from me? I wanted her to know that I loved her; that she was the most important person in my life.
- T: So, would you say that you were connected to your preferred ethic of love, your desire for Barb to know that she is loved by you, in the moments leading up to the time that she had planned to be home?
- D: Yes. Yes! I really wanted it to be a special night for her.
- T: So, if you would have been able to stay connected with your preferred ethic of love as time went by and you were waiting for Barb to come home, even though she was late, how might love have had you think about or make sense of why Barb might be late?
- D: I guess that it would have had me wondering if she was okay. Maybe it would have had me feeling worried about her; hoping that she was okay.
- T: Okay, so love might have had you feeling a bit worried for her and hoping that she was alright ... So, if you would have been connected to those feelings of love and worry for her, how might love have had you respond to her when she finally walked through the door? What kinds of feelings do you think you might have had in that moment when you saw her face?



- D: Relief. I would have been feeling grateful that she was home safe.
- T: So, if love were having you feel relieved and grateful in that moment, what might love have had you notice about Barb when she came through the door, that you were unable to see before?

In response to this question, Dave shared that he would have noticed that Barb was upset about something and that he would have noticed that their daughter also came in, shortly after Barb, looking upset as well. As it turns out, Barb was late because their daughter had lied about having to be at an after school activity and Barb felt like she needed to talk to her about this and they had a long talk in the car before her daughter got really upset and yelled at Barb for being mean to her.

- T: So, as you think back to the moment when Barb walked past you and you saw your daughter walking through the door looking upset, what do you think love would have had you do in that moment?
- D: I would have followed her in the room like before, but with a very different feeling. I would have been less concerned with the fact that she ruined my plans and probably would have asked her if everything was okay. And maybe I would have held on to the flowers instead of throwing them down and given them to her anyway. Maybe she really needed the flowers after what she went through with our daughter. [Turning to Barb] I am so sorry for not seeing you in that moment; for not seeing that you were hurting. [Both Dave and Barb are tearful now].

As a result of revisiting this difficult situation through use of invitational externalizing conversations, Dave was able to become better acquainted with how love, as an ethic, had the potential to inform and guide his thoughts, feelings and actions in his relationship with Barb. These invitational externalising conversations also provided Dave and Barb with the opportunity to transform a difficult and hurtful experience into one that brought forth feelings of love, understanding and tenderness between them.

### Continuing Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices

While we use this back-and-forth witnessing process as the focus of the remainder of our consultations with couples, we have found that it is vital to continually engage in intimate accountability conversation practices throughout the process of therapy so that partners remain attentive to the ways that all of their actions send shaping messages to one another in ways that they may not have intended and that go against their identified relational preferences for one another. This practice represents an ethical commitment,





as therapists, to ensure that partners continue to engage in relationship practices that are centred in an awareness of and accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on the lives of their partners. As with any approach to therapy, our work is rarely linear. While we move back and forth between each of these practices, we are always mindful to attend to intimate accountability conversations throughout all aspects of our work with the couples who consult us. While the focus of the paper has been on working with couples who share in the hope of staying in a relationship together, it is important for us to acknowledge that successful couples therapy does not always involve reconciliation. It has been our experience that relational accountability practices can be quite helpful in encouraging couples to end their relationship in more preferred ways that are accountable to themselves and one another.

### Conclusion

It is our hope that the ideas expressed in this paper will encourage therapists to find new ways of helping couples enter into more preferred ways of being with one another, based on accountability, respect, and intimate belonging. We also hope that these ideas will allow therapists whose lives have been inspired by the ethics of narrative ideas, to similarly inspire the couples with whom they work to live out narrative ethics in their own lives and relationships. Finally, it is our hope that these ideas will invite therapists to become better acquainted with their own hopes and dreams for their work and allow those hopes and dreams to positively influence the persons with whom they work.





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## **“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove- Intimate Witnessing in Narrative Couple’s Therapy**

**By Sanni Paljakka <sup>1</sup>and Tom Stone Carlson<sup>2</sup>**

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*I dare you  
to decide this will not break me  
I dare you  
to decide to go where your dad couldn't go  
I dare you  
to want a life  
out from under the rug  
I dare you  
for aliveness  
so which will it be?  
and will we be together  
or apart in this dare?  
tell me now,  
the makings of your courage  
to dare for a life of aliveness  
with me  
my love.*

This paper is about ideas. More specifically, this paper is an account of ideas-in-motion. These ideas were charged onto our minds and our expressions throughout our work by a back-and-forth grappling with an ethics-first position, and by our clients’ feedback about the effects of our positionings. The thrust of this paper is to show, in detail, the “go-betweening” of ethical stances and of our clients’ embodied feedback into explicit ideas and practices, much as it actually happened to us.

We will forego the temptation to tell suspiciously complete or conclusive “case-stories” of particular couples (“and then they lived happily ever after”) and instead describe, cite, and amplify particular “reaches” we undertook together with these couples in as rich and clear a

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manner as possible and document the messy embodied manner of said reaches by showing transcript excerpts from our actual sessions.

We will follow up each reach by highlighting the stated and visible effects on our clients. Thus, we hope to invite readers to be able to fully deliberate alongside us about the ethics, the usefulness, and the real effects of our work.

The couples whose words and excerpts appear in this paper are all living in significant intimate relationships. These relationships may be called “couple’s relationships.” Some of these “couples” are heterosexual, some married, some currently divorcing, some gay, some currently exploring open or polyamorous relationships, and some inter-racial. The urgent reasons for seeking counselling were varied and included: arguing, disconnectedness, misery, inequality related to household chores or parenting responsibilities, betrayals such as lies or secret relationships, scare tactics, threats of violence, disregard, and loneliness.

This paper lives in an ideological home of concepts of transformative justice and healing: we hope to propose possibilities for responding to violence and isolation in our every-day intimate relationships in ways that not only address the specific incidents between particular couples but refuse and transform the conditions that gave permission for such miseries to unfold. It is our impassioned commitment to promote thoughtfulness of the ways in which we as therapists can actively practice in realms of healing storytelling.

As part of our work with couples, we refuse the ideas and practices of making persons disposable by well-worn tactics of shame, blame, denial, dismissal, withdrawal, revenge, isolation etc. The time has come: we as therapists can no longer ethically shy away from accountability conversations regarding relational tragedies, but neither can we coerce such a spirit of accountability, as this remains a gift that can only be freely given. This paper represents our reach into conversations in which the presence of accountability for the purposes of relational healing was actively sought in sturdier conversations.

We believe that relationships can hold, but do not have to hold. We invest less in couples “staying together” at all costs and care a great deal more about the possibility of inviting conversations that may be characterized as “events of love” whether we happened to share a momentary space with a couple in the midst of a break-up or in the midst of a 20-year marriage.



## Brief Story by Sanni

### *Fire and Ice*

*Some say the world will end in fire,  
some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To know that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.*

(Robert Frost)

I would like to situate my steps into an exploration of couple's work by highlighting the ideas that made my entrance possible.

Let me start out by saying that I was among the least likely candidates to entertain much hope for a possibility of enlivening couple's work at all. I work at a feminist and Narrative Therapy agency serving mostly women and queer folk. Prior to entertaining any couple's work, I was accustomed to issuing invitations to my clients' partners, lovers, and members of their chosen or other family to our sessions from time to time when my clients and I were in need of a witness to their significant developments in their lives<sup>1</sup>. In such cases, these beloved others in my clients' lives were asked to listen in and contribute to a conversation from an outsider witness position, complete with requests for them to take notes regarding the moving and surprising expressions of my clients in response to life events. I enjoyed such encounters, watched the note-taking with appreciation, and often felt inspired to hear the uniqueness and intimacy of the expressions by which these outsider witnesses backed up and willed on my clients in their discoveries. However, if the conversation was to center conflicts, frustrations or impasses in a particular relationship, I referred the clients to family or couple's therapists I trusted.

Over the course of my work, I could not avoid agreeing to sit in on or do co-therapy from time to time with some of the couple's therapists I kept referring my clients to. These were all memorable conversations, but not ones that I wished to keep pursuing in my own work. For example, once I was invited to join a colleague of mine with the express purpose to keep the yelling of expletives to a more tolerable volume, as my colleague's office neighbors had already launched noise complaints against her whenever she met with this particular couple. Another



"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove



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time, I was asked to step in and help phrase questions to a couple who sat on opposite edges of the couch and seemed to have nothing to say to each other but for stifled and polite expressions that were devoid of any life at all. I slipped and slid through both sets of conversations by the seat of my pants, mostly by practicing the art of interrupting-hand-gestures with the first couple and practicing the art of coming-up-with-lyrical-questions with the second, unfortunately, more for my own entertainment and to only questionable usefulness to anyone else in the room. Even though the couples were appreciative of my “help” and my person, I could not ignore the visceral after-effects of observing the distress they lived through right in front of me as their intimate partners spoke them into being in ways that twisted, dismissed and “missed” what was important to them entirely.<sup>2</sup> As I contemplated these experiences of conversing with these two couples, it was clear to me that they represented the two (seemingly) opposite ends of the spectrum of relationship distress that my women clients had often characterized to me in their individual sessions:

- “un-love”<sup>3</sup> by means of abuse (most often in the form of coercive or humiliating speech, threats and other scare tactics), and
- “un-love” by means of a quiet neglect (most often in the form of refusal to speak, to engage, to answer, to initiate, and other detachment tactics).

What I knew most clearly after these first steps is that I needed to wait for a better and more strident idea to come along to wade into such realms of un-love. Such an idea would have to strike at the heart of the formidable invitations for each partner to take up therapy as an arena for the contestation of differences in their visions for living and continue to miss and dismiss the (often tearful and despairing) partner that was sitting right next to them. Such an idea would also have to impress me with the capacity to not just reproduce the stale power-relations which dictate that some partners (in the case of heterosexual couples, women) be more responsible for the experiences of “un-love” and which leaves these partners undertaking the full labor of seeking connection and re-connection while more privileged and powerful partners could feel permission to not join in such efforts equally. I longed for ways of speaking that would address the lopsided and hurtful ways that we treat each that would in favour of something more honest, honourable, and “at eye-level.” And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I longed for an ethic to couple’s work that would dare to speak of love. I appreciated the concepts of “relational abc’s”, like relational accountability, relational being, or relational commitments, but I wondered where in the world all mention of “love stories” had disappeared to. I wished to know how it came to be that great love stories would end up on opposite ends of the couch, caught in deadly disregard or vindictiveness. And I wished to know that, not by way of therapeutic theory, linguistic finery or poststructural philosophy, but from





inside the landscape of these love stories themselves. For these important hesitations, I resolved to try to keep ducking out seeing couples in my own work for the time being.

I have to thank David Epston's practice of "cross-referential questioning"<sup>4</sup> that would later be re-named by Karl Tomm to "internalized-other questioning" as one of the major stepping stones to my participation in couple's work. I saw David Epston practice this way of interviewing a person "from the perspective" of another person a number of times and marveled at the ways in which this made epiphanies, claims and "reaches" into otherwise remote, unexpected and tender realms of experience possible. I began to wonder what manner of conversational turning points could become possible by way of a practice of focusing one's attention "into the experience of another." Could one address, or more appropriately, oppose even the experiences of "un-love" that women and queer folk had been crying about regarding their relationships in my office ever since I started working? Could the quality of tenderness I had witnessed when people were lingering over the experience of another be a way of love? Could one propose the means to "reach for" one's partner, the one sitting on the other end of the couch, in all that this particular person's anger, desperation, tears were saying? Could people tell accounts of lives and deeds done, *to* each other, *with* each other, and *on* each other's behalf?

This vision of a such a prospect was expanded to me by Tom Carlson<sup>5</sup> in a presentation about couple's work in Calgary in 2017. In this presentation, Tom took Michael White's ideas of our responsibility as therapists to ponder and take responsibility for the "shaping effects" of our actions on our clients and extended it to intimate relationships. Tom spoke of finding the means to help "couples gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of their actions on the partner's stories of self in either impoverishing or enriching ways." He further spoke of a step into an "always accountable" position, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin: "we have no alibi."<sup>6</sup> I sat back, and thought, what if it were true that my being, the words out of my mouth and my silences, my actions, and my inactions, the ways I look at people or avoid them, my gestures, my shows of affection, my writing, all of it – what if it were true that all of that can shape the story another person tells about not me, but themselves? Imagine if it were true that I can shape the way a person thinks and feels and experiences themselves, in short, about the story of their life?

I watched Tom phrase questions about these shaping effects to couples in transcripts and on the videos, for example, this: *"I might be asking some questions that are a bit unusual. For example, Dan, rather than asking you what living with these struggles has been like for you personally, I'm going to ask you to be a witness to what you think it has been like for Megan. To live with the feelings of resentment, the distance, and the coldness that you have been having towards her. Do you have any guesses as to what it's been like for Megan, as a person, to be living with this resentment and coldness over the past several months?"* Or: *"if you had to guess,*





*knowing Megan as you do, what kind of effect or impact do you think it's had on Megan's sense of herself as a person, to not have you there as you've always been?"*

I observed the partners in these exchanges grow thoughtful and tender, ironically even as they were asked to give meaning to their partner's experiences of events of un-love (which they themselves had helped to shape!). As they were asked about the kind of story that they had hoped to invite their intimate partner to enter into and to ponder their own shaping effects on the other's life in moments of unlove, I noticed again the familiar sense of appreciation that they could, in fact, do so, as observed in the witnessed partner's reaction. Perhaps the march of the neoliberal and individualist invitations to separation and disregard of the other had not been as successful as one would think? Tom further quoted Bakhtin: "Love is the focused concentration of attention that enriches the beloved over time." I sat with this quote for a long time. Here it was, a notion of love that I couldn't immediately argue with. Furthermore, could such an attention indeed be invited into couple's conversation? Would this be experienced as an "event of love?" Could experiences, or events of un-love, then, conversely, be considered the concentration of inattention that impoverish a person over time? This certainly spoke to the pain I had witnessed with the couples described above, who were visibly flinching, wincing, or stoically steeling themselves in response to the unrecognizable and twisted accounts of themselves in their partner's stories.

With these ideas, I was shored up to think that there was a way not only to step into adversarial interactions, but to do so while contesting the rampant un-loving practices of detachment, denial and domination of the other while keeping a fingerhold on some shy hermeneutics of the thing called love.

My cautious considerations were put to the test rather immediately after Tom's presentation:

I received an urgent message from a client of mine, requesting my help with a break-up that had not been accepted by her partner of 2 years. In her message, she related to me the many letters, conversations, and phone calls she had already engaged in to explain to him that she wished to separate from him, which had been entirely dismissed by him as "just a phase" or by explaining back to her that she was "too depressed at the moment to really know what she wanted." He therefore gave himself permission to continue insisting on her presence in his life by showing up at her house, calling her at all hours, and if she did not pick up the phone, texting her through the night. My client was exhausted by the attempts to explain "the inexplicable" to him, that she had lost the vision of a future they once had and felt torn between the demands to care for his hurt, console him, and continue to go on dates with him and her anger about his ever more paternalistic dismissals of her wishes. I agreed to see both of them and promised my client that I would do "my best" to help her in this effort to make him understand. Even though this couple's conversation was to take place in the realm of a separation, the usual practices of





downgrading of (or deafness to) a woman-partner's experience and forcefully requiring her continued presence and care for his needs were familiar to me. I resolved to really do "my best."

We began with some introductions, and I relayed my understanding of the struggle each of them found themselves in, and the heart-wrenching hurt of the moment when love ends. My client filled in the story, and was clear yet again, that she hoped for the possibility friendship down the road, but for the surprise dates and lengthy painful conversations to pause for the time being. She turned to him and said tearfully, "I know this is so hard, I'm so sorry, I know this hurts you, but please, please accept my wish to be free for now and focus on something else in my life." He returned, "you've found someone else, haven't you, that's it, isn't it." Despairingly, she exclaimed, "no!" and then looked at me in tears, as if to say "see? It's no use."

Ever so slightly fortified by my recent explorations, I turned to him and said, "may I ask you something really difficult? It may be too difficult to even consider..." He encouraged me to continue, and I did: "could you tell me, from her perspective, from the perspective of this woman, whom you love and struggle so hard to even entertain the possibility of letting go of, what is it like for her when you insist, despite her requests, on staying in her life?" He shrugged and said, "I guess it's hard. It's hard for both of us though! I just don't believe that she is being rational about this, I think she's too depressed to be making any decisions right now, I mean wouldn't you agree with me, as a professional..." I interrupted this attempt at conspiring with my supposed professional expertise against her voice with a well-practiced hand gesture. "May I interrupt? She was just telling both of us that she longs to be free in her life right now, did you hear that too? Now I know this is so very difficult, but can you tell me, why she knows this to be right for her at this point in her life? Why is she asking for freedom right now? Can you tell me, from your best knowing of her?"

"I don't know, I know she says that, but I just don't think it's the right thing for her, I mean if she does this, she'll end up just isolating and that's not healthy at all..."

I interrupted again as I saw my client silently crying in frustration. "When have you ever observed her, this woman right here, to be making thoughtless and stupid decisions for her life? Now I know, because she's told me, that you have been witness to some of the most thoughtful and principled revolutions she has caused in her life as of late. Do you agree with me?" He nodded. "And am I right in thinking that her thoughtfulness and principled-ness is in part, why you admire and love her?" He nodded again and grew tearful. "So then, can you do something to honor her thoughtfulness? Can you tell me, in the most thoughtful version you can muster, even if it means speaking AGAINST what your heart most desires, and please know, I know, *I know* what I am asking of you, and still I am asking: can you love her even in this moment, and tell me why she has made a thoughtful and principled decision to leave this





relationship? Please make her case, why this would be the best thing for her right now, from all that you know she has told you in the past week, why is this the best thing for her? Please convince me.”

At this, he delivered a most honorable defense of her decision to leave him, leaving both my client and me in tears as he explained and described and veritably dreamed her future into being, the future that she was reaching for and had been trying to tell him about. I received the following email from my client the next day:

*Good morning Sanni*

*Thank you so incredibly much for our appointment last night. It was perfect. Everything you said and asked was extremely helpful. I can't believe he finally understood me! Once we got back to his place, he agreed to let me be alone. We might hang out once in a while and are going to try our best to be normal at work. What means so much to me is that he told me again that he agreed that I know what's best for myself and that he trusts my judgement. Thank you so much. I really didn't think this was possible. What you asked him was everything that he needed to hear.”*

I, for my part, was now encouraged to take another step into conversations that would oppose “un-love” at every turn and reach for the means for partners to focus their concentration of attention to the experience of the other, in a way that would also oppose the binding of lovers in a stale reproduction of traditional power relations: I had found myself “convinced.”

### **Brief Story by Tom**

*“Her hair  
Her feet  
Dangling from the oak branch  
As she talked to me.  
I didn't say much  
I rested my 7-year old chin in my hand.  
15 feet high, suspended over  
Hell  
-And all I saw was her.”*

As Sanni mentioned, what had become important to me in my work with couples is inviting them to enter into an always accountable position for the shaping effects of their actions on their partners’ stories of self. Early on in my work with couples when I was trying out these ideas, I realized that it was important to not side step conversations that centered on couples shared experience of their struggles and the more painful and weighty conversations about the





ways that partners had shaped each other's stories in impoverishing ways. If, for example, I moved too quickly into exploring couples' hopes and preferences for their relationship, I realized that I would be siding with the well-worn patriarchal wisdom that advises couples to "just move on" and "not dwell on the past." Of course, the burden of following this wisdom almost always falls squarely on women (in heterosexual relationships) who are required to "forgive and forget" and to move past whatever "trust issues" they might have. And so, in an effort to not side with the patriarchal wisdom of the day, I decided to dwell instead on the intimate details of their struggles and the actions that led their partners to feel unloved and helping partners experience the weight of intimate accountability.

When I first started presenting on these ideas to narrative therapists, this extended focus on the struggles and unloving actions in relationships was met with some concern. Here is a selection of some of these questions posed to me: "But isn't this too focused on the problem story?" "I am not sure if this fits with what I know about narrative therapy. Aren't we supposed to help ease people's suffering by offering a more hopeful or positive story of the relationship?" "It all feels too heavy for me. Don't these conversations just invite people to experience shame?" Nevertheless, in spite of these repeated concerns, I pressed on because of the surprising effects that such conversations were having in the lives and relationships of the couples that I worked with. Somehow by going directly into these more weighty and painful matters something quite other than shame emerged, something more akin to solidarity and perhaps a "softness" that can come with a sense of finally being witnessed and known.

Years later, when I came to Calgary to present on these ideas, I had come to fancy myself as someone who was skilled at delving into conversations about struggles and suffering in relationships. However, after just a few enthusiastic conversations with Sanni, it was immediately apparent that I had a long way to go in my venture into the realms of struggle and suffering in relationships. What intrigued me immediately about Sanni's work was the unabashed and bold manner in which she invited her clients to speak of their struggles and suffering and the richness of her language in doing so. For example, as a comparison to my limited vocabulary in the question of mine that was included above (What has it been like to be living with these struggles in their relationship?), here is Sanni's alternative: "Over the course of relationship, what has been the worst catastrophe (disaster, abyss, desertion, betrayal, heartbreak, ache/knife-in-the-back, swampy misery, despair, concrete, failure etc.) of love? What was the worst of it?"

In wondering about Sanni's languaging, I came to find out that her words were not just due to her interest in poetics but that she had been supervised by her clients into a feminist ethic that would not let her cede to glib dismissals and patriarchal denials of her (often marginalized) clients' experiences. She would not be tempted to minimize the ache and peril of her clients'





relational experiences that had been related to her over the years. Interestingly, I have come to understand this insistence as a promising and necessary lead into veritable “moral tragedies” that couples face in their everyday lives. Nussbaum writes”

“Moral tragedies show good people acting in ways that they consciously knew were bad because they were caught in a tragic conflict between two incommensurable ethical claims. Tragedy tends, on the whole, to take such situations very seriously. It treats them as real cases of wrongdoing that are of relevance for an assessment for the agent’s ethical life. Tragedy also seems to think it valuable to dwell upon these situations, exploring them in many ways, asking repeatedly, what personal goodness, in such alarming complications, is.”<sup>7</sup>

I knew right then and there that I had found not only a co-conspirator but a mentor in the promising territories of struggle, misery, suffering, and unlove in couple relationships. Together, Sanni and I have been further intrigued by the idea of “co-creating languages of un-suffering”<sup>8</sup> in our therapeutic conversations with couples that would stand against the medicalizing of their distress and the expert technologizing of the remedies to distress (in the form of steps toward “communication skills”<sup>9</sup>). It has been of utmost importance for both of us to consider the language that is offered, proposed, and used in our couple’s conversations for its capacity to story love and un-love in a substantiated manner that does justice to, and takes seriously the “alarming complications” that brought our couples to the opposite ends of the therapeutic couch, often in tears. For example, consider the implications of one of Sanni’s first questions posed to the husband of one of her client’s in our first couple’s session with them. The language was borrowed from a heartfelt letter that this client had written to her husband and shared with Sanni prior to the session, and that the husband had proceeded to respond to with more silence. Sanni asked, “Your wife said that ‘every night she roams the rooms in the house all by herself,’ she said that you two ‘own a beautiful house together but are more alone than ever in it.’ Speaking as your wife, can you tell me what it is like for you to roam those rooms at night? What ideas, thoughts come to you then, what does it sound like inside your mind or your body, what are your worst terrors of the night?” Consider this example as a preview to the responsibility in languaging our questions to couples and to the worlds we wish to invite them to step into, - depending on the language we choose. In contrast, in this case, the language that was also available to us (because it had been proposed by the husband) was that his wife struggled with issues of “co-dependence.” Resisting this psychologizing dismissal of her and centering her dictionary of suffering and her experiences was particularly important in light of this particular couple’s power dynamics of a white man living together with a woman of colour. Questions posed utilizing poetic languaging of moral dilemmas, quandaries, wrongdoings is one such proposal that Sanni and I have experimented with in our work and that you will find





exemplified in this paper. We have encountered some questions regarding the term “morality” and would like to preface our thinking with this quote: “Taking morality seriously does not presume that people are good, but rather that they are evaluative in moral terms about their own actions and those of others.”<sup>10</sup> Sanni and I were ready to take our couples seriously, both as moral agents as well as authors of love stories.

### A Shared First Story

*the slow rot  
of our steady roles can't survive this  
weather.  
if we are to marry again  
come spring  
what are the colours of the seed packages  
we will buy  
for the hopes in our palms  
to match our new selves*

Our first opportunity came by way of Paul who left a voicemail message inquiring about the possibility of couple’s therapy for him and his wife. I, (Tom), returned Paul’s call to make arrangements for our first meeting. During the call, Paul said that their relationship was “solid,” but that there were some “issues from the past” that they needed to “resolve.” In response to my questions, Paul haltingly told me about a “breach of trust” that had occurred two years previously. Paul stated that he didn’t want to call it an “affair” but that it had been a relationship that developed over email and text with a former partner. Paul said that he had apologized profusely to his wife, Lisa, and has told her over and over again that it “didn’t mean anything” but to no avail. Paul went on to say that he has concluded that Lisa is struggling with “trust issues stemming from her past” and expressed his hope that coming to couple’s therapy might help her finally “let it go.”

Sanni and I met together before our first meeting with Lisa and Paul to talk through ideas and possibilities for the session. After I recounted my phone conversation with Paul and his hopes for us to help Lisa with “trust and letting it go” issues, Sanni sighed heavily.

Sanni: Oh great. Here we go. So according to this idea, we are to therapize her out of her trust issues, is that it? I very much wonder what Lisa would make of this mission for their therapy...





- Tom: Yeah, it's a pretty worn-out story that doesn't do justice to either Paul or Lisa and who they are as people...
- Sanni: (interrupting) Worn-out? I have heard it a hundred times over. "He does something or other but can she just please go to therapy to let it go." I don't want to participate in telling that story.
- Tom: Me either. We need some questions to invite Paul to reach for her and to tell this story in a way that seeks her... that seeks whatever she's been thinking and feeling over the past 2 years. On the phone, I tried to ask him, but he was pretty firm that the relationship is strong and that she needs help with these issues because they stem from her past.
- Sanni: Great. You see how the story of her problem comes complete with a past, a history now? I don't know how to ask the question to subvert this whole story line and step into another entirely. And, if we ask her, like "what has it been like for you these past two years" then we put the burden on her to defend her lack of trust - what comes out as the sum total is the idea that she ought to defend herself. That she owes a defense of her experience and maybe even owes him a letting it go. And it will all be set in the arena of those expectations of her. I don't like that at all. I want to subvert this whole trap.
- Tom: Yeah, it's like a she might feel pressed to defend her experience and justify her lack of trust. This is a story that can't afford to be repeated for either of their sakes. We need to find another way.
- Sanni: So what's the first question out, Tom?
- Tom: Well, we've talked about the witnessing...
- Sanni: (interrupting) What if we don't ask for his "explanation" of her experience? Tom, could we ask him as her? Rather inviting him to "mansplain" her problem, what if we asked him to put his weight behind her position, to ask him to tell this story anew in a way that makes her an interesting character in it? What would it do if we asked him as her? Could he do it? Would that change it?
- Tom: You mean set him up as intimate witness to her experience and speaking as her?





- Sanni: Yeah. What if for once it wasn't she who had to do the emotional labor upfront and describe the situation, but it was, in fact, he who was asked to defend... you know, her experience, to amplify it, to feel his way into it?<sup>11</sup> What would that do to the story? Would he know more and say more then? If he was asked to speak as her would he come to tell a different story?
- Tom: I like the idea of asking him to defend her... That's a different take on defensiveness. Maybe getting around defensiveness? A defensiveness FOR something rather than against something.
- Sanni: Yeah! And imagine what it would be like for Lisa to see him try?

In this conversation we resolved to give intimate witnessing a try. We were holding our breaths to find out whether any couple, and in this case, a couple at a two-year stalemate, could be invited to both: 1) tell a story that would amplify, favour, and love its protagonist, one's partner and 2) convincingly and substantially account for one's partner's experience of trespass and hurt. The intimate witnessing was proposed as the means to an ability to account (i.e. tell a particular kind of story, in this case, a love story).<sup>12</sup> We were prepared for our invitations to be met by considerable struggle, confusion, and defensiveness, as well as the need for us to be creative and gentle in redirection. As it turns out, nothing could have prepared us for the ease and the enjoyment of the conversation we were about to have. As a preview, Paul and Lisa sent us an email the day after this meeting that read: *"Dear Sanni, dear Tom! We wanted to send you a note to say just how much we enjoyed our meeting last night. It's a little hard to believe that it was SO MUCH FUN to talk about such serious issues. We didn't expect to be laughing quite so much! So thank you, both of you. We also forgot to book our next meeting, so when can we meet again?"*

Well, neither did we. Below is a brief transcript excerpt of the beginning of this conversation that captures the negotiation of the invitation to this witnessing conversation as well as the immediate surprising change on Paul's telling.

### **Paul and Lisa: An Invitation**

When Paul and Lisa sat down with us after some introductions, I asked Tom to reflect on the phone call, and catch us all up on what he had understood from his conversation with Paul.

*[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? Who is assigning speaking rights here? What might be some of our intentions in having Sanni open meetings, make introductions, and set the conversation in motion?]*





As Tom summarized the phone conversation with Paul, Lisa grew very tearful and sat with us covering her eyes and wiping tears. Upon seeing Lisa's tears:

Sanni (to Paul): "I would really like to know, if it was possible, about Lisa's tears and what they might be saying..."

But before I do, I have another question for both of you. I wonder if you two are the take-it-slow kind of people who want to speak about this in a roundabout, inching-our-way there kind of way. Because the other option is to do this ON SPEED, Paul." (Laughter)

"What I mean by speed is not to linger in the round-about but get to the heart of things rather immediately." (Nodding in interest)

"I think I can safely promise, if we do it this way, you'll get rid of us in about half the time, and can get back to spending your evenings with tea or wine or however you two like spending your evenings, rather than coming to this office to see us strange folks." (Laughter)

"You know the roundabout way is the USUAL boring way, where I ask Lisa about her tears and then she works very hard at explaining her position to us, which in turn will inspire you Paul to work equally hard to explain your position to us, and then the two of you at some point will turn to me and Tom all expectantly, and as if to say: which position is the legitimate one? Which one of us is right? Which one of us is crazy?"

Paul: "Oh, I get it. You'll kind of be the judges..."

Sanni: "Exactly. In this boring option, you two are defendants, each defending your position, and Tom and I are the judges. Now that's how it is usually done, and after some time, we might get somewhere interesting that way too. But not very fast. So there is another option that is much less boring and faster, but it will require a lot of you two."

Paul: "I choose the speed option." (Lisa nods.)

Sanni: "okay. But this is going to be hard, Paul. I am going to ask you the strangest questions. Now if it's too hard, we can take a break and reflect on the strangeness, but how about I just ask you the first question and you can see how you do."

Paul (smiling): "you're ON."





- Sanni: "Paul I am going to do something strange here, and call you Lisa, and ask you some questions AS LISA. Can you try to answer from her perspective?"
- Paul: "I'm Lisa, got it."
- Sanni (to Paul): "Okay so Lisa, why are you crying? You grew tearful during the re-telling of Paul's phone conversation with Tom. Did something move you in that? What are your tears saying?"
- Paul: "okay, Lisa's tears probably ..."
- Tom: (interrupting) "Paul, can you speak AS Lisa. Can you say "my tears are probably saying..."
- Paul: (smiling) "Okay, I'm her. I get it."
- Sanni: Yeah, no worries, I know this is strange. But Lisa, what are your tears saying?"
- Paul: "that he broke my trust. I always have put up some walls, but my walls are up to the moon now. I am so hurt."
- Tom: "And what was it that hurt the most, Lisa?"
- Paul: "Well, I've always had some doubt when it comes to relationships. I've been hurt before, by guys cheating, and my dad wasn't the greatest example of a gentleman either. So for Paul to do this to me of all things..."
- Sanni: "In this line-up of you meeting questionable men, was Paul different?"
- Paul: "Yeah. You know, when we first met, there were some red flags, with him being so outgoing..."
- Sanni: "Charming?"
- Paul: (laughs) "Yeah."
- Sanni: "So then in light of the red flags, how come you took your heart and your red flags in your hands and said yes to him anyway?"
- Paul: "Because he promised. He promised me that he would not hurt me..."
- Tom: "In the face of deep-down doubt, you listened to his promise, and then you decided to risk?"



- Paul: (tearful) “Yeah. I took a risk, I took the dive. And now my heart is broken.”
- Tom: “What was it that broke your heart the most?”
- Paul: (after a pause) “Well, I was pregnant at the time this happened, when he was chatting with that woman. We had just gotten married! I can’t even believe looking back that that’s what he was doing!”
- Sanni: “You had just gotten married, and you were pregnant at the time. Do you remember your wedding vows?”
- Paul: “Till death do us part. It was the whole thing.”
- Sanni: “A promise?”
- Paul: (tearful) “Yeah. He promised me...”

*[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? Who is speaking, to whom? Why is Paul asked to speak first? How does this help to undermine the gendered set-up in which women are expected to do the bulk of emotional labour? Why do we ask Paul to speak as Lisa? And why this question, in particular: “what are your tears saying, Lisa?” How might inviting Paul to consider his wife’s tears, from inside her experience, help to undermine the story that she needs to “just let it go” in favor of considering her distress very seriously? What does this set-up do to the common patriarchal practice entitled ‘the thousand ways of denial?’ What happened to Paul, as he was considering her tears? What was he able to say, to think, to feel in that moment? And what do you think it does to Lisa to have her tears elevated to a focus of discussion, not dispossessed as ‘women’s dismissible emotion?’ What might be the effect on her, as she is surprisingly relieved of the expectation to justify her distress?]*

During the above conversation with Paul, Lisa listened and watched with nothing short of rapt attention. She appeared keenly interested in the questions posed to Paul, and often turned to watch Paul answer with an expression of grave curiosity. She also nodded with approval or enthusiasm in response to particular questions, as if to say “yes! Ask him that!” After about 40 minutes, we turned to Lisa, to ask her about her experience of listening to this conversation. In Lisa’s own words:

- Lisa: It was weird at first, because I felt like I should be answering the questions! But then hearing him tell it, it was so different, I just couldn’t get over how much he had understood! I just couldn’t believe it. He’s always been so defensive, for 2 years all he has done is defend himself,





and just made it my problem. Like I need to let it go. That has made me so angry, that's almost worse than what he did. Because I did let go. 100% let go. Fuck you Elsa. (Laughter)

Tom: Is it fair to say that you have trust issues, or have you been the recipient of untrustworthy actions by men in your life?

Sanni: Like dick moves? Trust issues or dick moves? (Laughter)

[NOTE TO THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN POWER RELATIONS: What do you notice? How important was this story change for Lisa? Did you expect her to say "I just couldn't get over how much he had understood!?" What gave Paul the means to account for "how much he had understood?" Why was it possible for him to sidestep "defending himself?" Why does Lisa say that "defending himself" for 2 years was "almost worse than what he did?" And why did Paul not struggle more to account for her experience, even as he had to speak against his own actions, why did it happen so easily in the above transcript?]

### Poem for Paul and Lisa

As part of our interest in inviting and witnessing remarkable "love stories," we have decided to document our conversations with couples by way of therapeutic poems<sup>13</sup>. Below is the poem that was written in response to this first conversation with Paul and Lisa and captures Paul's reachings for Lisa's despair of the past 2 years. The poem was read to Paul and Lisa at the outset of our second meeting, to a surprised tearfulness on both their parts as well as Paul's exclamation that it's "dead on." Lisa smiled and commented thoughtfully that what moved her most was the effort to play with Paul's description that "she has built walls up to the moon."

POEM FOR PAUL AND LISA AFTER ABOVE INTERVIEW:

*We are here  
Amazingly still here  
After a breach of trust.  
And two and a half years of questions that followed.  
We are each battling with unseen forces in lonely corners  
She in her fortress, deep in conversation with the woman who didn't matter  
And I am everywhere  
Back and forth  
For each other  
And for our daughter.*

*"Going through the motions"*





*“Constructing civility”  
“Being a family”  
They all are pale metaphors  
For the laughter and the easy tenderness and the abounds of love  
That used to be ours.*

*We have grieved and hurt and fought ourselves just about too much  
And so we are here  
We want to be here  
To see if another way of living is available to us  
Still.*

*What if I didn't give you the rights to my phone  
But gave you the rights to my heart instead?  
What if we didn't talk about trust issues  
But what happens to my heart when people make dick moves?  
And how much effort has gone into understanding that which happened  
And the hurt?*

*I have been here before  
In deep down doubt about the red flags and the history of dick moves  
But I took my heart and lifted it above  
The doubts of devastation  
Because he said “I promise”  
I let it all go for his sweetness  
I let him all in  
And my hands were full of tenderness for him  
Pregnant and in the midst of our wedding vows:  
“I promise to hold your heart  
I promise to lift my heart to yours  
So fuck you Elsa, I did let it go.”*

*What are her tears saying?  
And how beautiful is the fortress she has built  
With its walls up to the moon?  
I see it at night  
And I wonder.  
I am the sea*



*Washing up to the walls of the fortress  
Does she hear my waves crashing?  
Each one says  
I fight for you  
I fight for the ring of your laughter  
I fight for the vows you made  
I fight for the tenderness of your hands  
I fight for the baby you carried.*

*Each night I am here  
Crashing against these walls  
Wondering.*

### **Intimate Witnessing: Frequently Asked Questions**

#### *Viewers May Think That This Should Be So Simple*

*If I didn't feel her heart sinking  
If her heart didn't have a hold on me  
If his words didn't matter to me  
If I hadn't been up all night  
If I had been able to work the next day  
If I could have just laid down and given up  
If hope didn't hold me  
If I hadn't promised to never be afraid again  
If I didn't know that he can't promise that  
If I didn't love being around him  
If he didn't feel me now  
If I didn't feel his heart in my heart  
If he didn't run with a pink shoe  
If I didn't want him to keep his own shiny shoe  
If his text didn't sweep me off my feet  
If it wasn't a dream that came true then  
If he weren't a broken master of empathy  
If she weren't a hurt queen of resolve  
If mine weren't a love of a life time  
If he weren't a love of a life time*

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*"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove*

*Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, [www.journalcnt.com](http://www.journalcnt.com), p. 43-93.*

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### *Then This Would Be So Simple*

In an effort to illuminate particular discoveries and epiphanies we stumbled upon in our conversations with couples, we would like to highlight some more transcript excerpts. We will situate these excerpts into responses to some interesting questions we have been posed by some of our couples, as well as by colleagues and students.

We hope that by centering such frequently asked questions and embedding transcript excerpts in our responses, we may be able satisfy the need for ideological discernments as well as the wish to see the actual words of the sessions. We are immensely grateful to each of the questioners for raising the means for our ability to account for our work.

*1. "But aren't you asking one person, in this case, a man, to speak about the experiences of another, in this case, a woman? Isn't this problematic? Don't men speak for women enough?" Or: "I tried to do this with my couple, but he protested and said, "I shouldn't speak for her!"*

Yes! This is at first glance really problematic! But the effort and achievement of a witnessing interview that is well-done is that it precisely aims to counter patriarchal, gendered, and hierarchical story lines and habits of speaking. We are purposefully trying to transform the conditions such as gender oppression, violence etc. by transforming the power dynamics that made them possible. Said another way, we are firmly resisting all manner of "man-splaining" in these conversations. For example, by asking Paul to put aside his theorizing about Lisa's problem (the initial explanation of the problem as "Lisa's problem of trust"), and instead, to imagine and tell the story of what happened from her position, it becomes possible to invite him to enter into the adventure of considering her experience substantial, attention-worthy, and interesting in its own right.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that one of the grave conditions which help to give permission for acts of dismissal, betrayal, and hurt is the sense that our partners, those intimate people who live with us, are but side-characters in our own stories. Due to the dearth of invitations to attend to the living stories of the "radical others," even those whom we profess to love, we "remember to forget" to consider their stories as substantial and full of lively context as our own.

It has been profoundly moving to us to witness women in heterosexual couples in particular, attend to the stories their partners tell about their experiences while listening with rapt attention. The most common responses of these women partners that have floored us have been surprised expressions like "I had no idea he knew all this," or: "I just couldn't get over how much he had understood," "I feel like he really feels me now" etc. Below is one such transcript

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"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove

*Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2020, Release 3, www.journalcnt.com, p. 43-93.*

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excerpt that makes these distinctions particularly visible. It is an example of a conversation in which a client protested the request to speak “for her,” and the effects of what happened next.

In this particular excerpt, Rob is trying to account for the effects on Michelle in the aftermath of his betrayal of her. Rob struggles to reach for the details of the story and tries to abandon his story-telling efforts by evoking Michelle’s story-telling rights (“you would have to ask the real Michelle”). Michelle, however, endorses his attempt to reach even further into an embodied understanding of her experience, even as it requires him to take guesses at some details. It is important to note that Rob and Michelle arrived at this session in a spirit of despair, having found themselves, in their words, back “at square 1” and Michelle expressing her frustration about Rob “not getting it, and not getting me.” After Rob’s telling, Michelle is invited to reflect on the effects of the below conversation and listening to Rob’s account, and she says, at the end, “I feel like he really *feels* me now.” Have a look at what may have contributed to this dramatic change:

- Sanni: After you discovered this lie, Michelle, how did you live on from that moment? What happened to you, Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): I was just very upset and mad and disappointed. We didn't really speak to each other for quite a while.
- Sanni: Was it night-time or day-time when you discovered the lie?
- Rob (as Michelle): It was right before bed. I think it was on a weekend and we didn't speak all week.
- Sanni: Right before bed... okay, Michelle, I know from speaking to many women how women sometimes... sometimes the worst of it is crying yourself to sleep at night by yourself. Is that what happened or did you roam around or fall asleep in exhaustion, or anger?
- Rob (as Michelle): I don't know. [soft chuckle] You would have to ask the real Michelle.
- Michelle: No, YOU went right to sleep. I was up all night.
- Sanni: Okay, I know this is tremendously hard to do, Rob. Please know that we will check in with Michelle and ask her. She'll get a say about how it really was. Is it okay Michelle, if I ask him some more questions to reach for how it was for you... even if he's guessing and even if he doesn't know exactly what you did, because he



- wasn't there that night with you? -That's why he's also protesting the questions because he wasn't there.
- Michelle: Yup. Please ask him!
- Tom: That was an enthusiastic yes! See, even if you don't know the details Rob, your guesses can come from your years of knowing and loving Michelle, and what matters to her...
- Sanni: Okay. Michelle says she was up all night, or you say, Michelle that you were up all night. How -
- Rob (as Michelle): (interrupting) I was just in disbelief.
- Tom: What were you up all night with, Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): Just everything was flooding back to me: "Why am I doing this? What's the point? What's the sense of it all?" If he's just going to do what he wants to do anyway.
- Tom: A flood of questions came to you?
- Rob (as Michelle): Oh, for sure. I can see that he's making progress, but it just doesn't matter. He misses the main point.
- Tom: Right, of all the things...
- Rob (as Michelle): (interrupting, finishing Tom's sentence) He HAS to be transparent. He has to like...
- Tom: Of all the things, is THIS not negotiable?
- Rob (as Michelle): Yes! Instead of being secretive, I just wish for him to have that conversation. That's the whole point of all this is so we can have these difficult conversations.
- Sanni: Were you tempted to kick him out of the house Michelle?
- Rob (as Michelle): No!
- Sanni: Were you tempted to do something else? What was the worst of it? What did you all... what... what ran through your mind? What were you going to do?
- Rob (as Michelle): No, I was just hurting and just needed for him to give me an honest reply.



- Sanni: And then you got up the next morning after not having slept very much being just flooded with questions and disbelief. What was your next day like? Did you have to go to work the next day?
- Rob (as Michelle): I did, but I couldn't concentrate and couldn't work. I work from home.
- Sanni: So it affected your work as well?
- Rob (as Michelle): Yeah it affected everything.
- Tom: Did you consider giving up?
- Rob (as Michelle): I don't know if the word would be giving up, but I definitely question what is it that were doing. Why are we... why are we putting all this time and energy into this if this is just what it's going to result in?
- Sanni: Did anything come to you Michelle? With you asking into the night and into the next day: "What's it all for? Why am I doing it?" Did the universe answer?
- Rob (as Michelle): Not that night but four days into it.
- Sanni: What did the universe say four days into it?
- Rob (as Michelle): He needs to go to Camp [laughter all around.] I need a break from him.
- Michelle: (laughing) Yep! Yes. And for the record, I WAS tempted to kick him out.

2. *"But can you ask couples to do this if they are really fighting and fiercely blaming each other? Don't you have to create some safe ground first?"*

Yes, we thought that too about "creating some safe ground!" But honestly, what we have discovered is that when couples come in fiercely fighting is the best time to invite a witnessing conversation. We have come to think that our couples, just like all of us, have to some extent internalized the "state" and its tactics of shame, blame, revenge, retribution, denial, trivializing, belittling, and all manner of accusatory and inflammatory remarks in times of grave stress. In speaking from the position of our beloved, what we have found to our great surprise is that these tactics become very difficult to sustain<sup>15</sup>. Instead, what we have witnessed in these tellings is that partners often readily and voluntarily indict their own actions in regard to their





impoverishing shaping effects on their intimate partner's life. Take a look at how this happened here in the following transcript excerpt:

On this day, Adrian and Nadia arrived visibly frustrated. Nadia spoke about the need to get a "bit of a divorce" from their phones, pointedly speaking to Adrian about the time he spends on his phone in the evenings, letting her take care of the rest. Adrian was angry in response. The session from the get-go appeared to be a lost session, full of anger and resentment, and the two of them turning to each other and yelling. Tom and I looked at each other, and then

- Tom: Okay. We have an idea that we wanted to run by you. The idea is that we might be able to find a different way of speaking about all this...
- Adrian: (angrily interrupting) You are on your phone too, you know!"(addressed at Nadia)
- Sanni: The idea is that we might be able to actually speak of this in a fruitful way, and in a way that doesn't take as long as if we try to go about this this way, with both of you angrily defending your position. Would you be interested in trying? (They both look at me now).
- Adrian: (angrily) Sure
- Sanni: Adrian, this might be too difficult to do, I am not sure if it is even fair to ask of you. I wonder, Adrian, if you could reflect on the past month from Nadia's perspective, and help me understand what her month has been like for her, what her frustrations and joys might have been...
- Adrian: (interrupting) She is frustrated about EVERYTHING!
- Tom: Okay, could I ask this of you Adrian, can you try to answer AS Nadia, speaking from her position, literally saying "I" - Nadia, what has been your greatest moment of despairing frustration in the past month?
- Adrian as Nadia: (crossing his arms) I am frustrated about everything. Adrian does nothing, he hasn't done a single thing...
- Tom: (interrupting) Adrian, if you can, can you speak from her position in a way that honours her perspective. This idea that Adrian does



- nothing is probably not what she would say, in fact, she already said something quite different when we started...
- Adrian: No I can't. I can't! I don't know what she thinks or wants! Whatever I do, nothing is good enough for her, she still says I do nothing....
- Sanni: (interrupting, to Tom) Hey Tom, is the question too hard? Maybe it's too shitty to ask about the frustration. I don't know. Maybe if we asked him about the moment of her greatest joy in this past month. Would this make a difference?
- Tom: Yeah, maybe. Okay Adrian, could we try this. Speaking AS Nadia, Adrian, Nadia, is there a time in this past month that comes to mind when you felt unexpectedly joyful...
- Adrian as Nadia: Yeah, playing with Cara (their daughter).
- Sanni: (with relief!) Playing with Cara, okay. What did you all play?
- Adrian as Nadia: Well, I was chasing her around in the back yard, it was just after the snowfall on the weekend. I had gotten her from day care, and it was a good break for both of us to be outside for a while....
- Sanni: And this was a particularly joyful moment? Did you two laugh together, or what was it like?
- Adrian as Nadia: Yeah, Cara was kind of shrieking with laughter. She was yelling, come mommy come! She loves being chased around. And then she invented this game of catching the melting snow in a bucket. It was just a sweet moment. It felt so good to let loose, and just to play.
- Sanni: And it was evening time, like after day care, you said, right. So then what happened?
- Adrian as Nadia: Well yes. We were in the midst of the play, but then it got dark outside, and all of a sudden I remembered all the chores that are waiting for me inside. So I had had a moment of fun, but now it was done, and it felt wrong, and I needed to go inside to start dinner and clean up...





- Tom: Given your history, might there good reason why it might be sweet and at the same time really hard to just play and be free like that Nadia?
- Adrian as Nadia: Well yeah, in my family growing up play wasn't encouraged. I always carried a great bunch of responsibility. The responsibility for all the tasks has been ingrained in me, there wasn't a lot of freedom to just play.
- Tom: In light of this great bunch of responsibility that was always put on you Nadia, was this moment of freedom and joy with Cara an achievement, Nadia?
- Sanni: Yeah, I'm thinking about that too! After day care, in the darkening afternoon, on a bloody November day, you and Cara were out there shrieking and laughing in the snow melt, probably getting hysterically wet and dirty. Man, against all that they taught you Nadia, about what it means to be a proper woman, a proper little girl, and what you ought to be doing with your time, was this a great protest by you, a protest of your own training, and then a counter-idea of what a grown woman and her baby daughter REALLY ought to be doing on such a day?
- Adrian as Nadia: (tearful) Yeah. It really was. I want to play, I want to play and fool around. And I want Cara to see this. I don't want to pass on a life of all the expectations and responsibilities on to Cara. I think Cara deserves to play. A life of balance anyway, between responsibility and play.
- Tom: Is it quite a risk you are taking, is your achievement here quite daring, then Nadia, in light of all your proper woman training?
- Adrian as Nadia: Yes.
- Tom: And is it a risk worth taking, for both Cara's life and your life, Nadia?
- Adrian. Yes. But it is so hard to do. I feel my own stress levels, and I am struggling with this frustration. You know, Cara and I came in from outside that night and Adrian's just sitting there, on his phone again. What an asshole! (Laughter all around, Nadia reaching for Adrian's hand at this point)



3. Why are you showing so many transcript excerpts of interviews with men speaking from the position of their partners? Do you also ask women partners to speak for men partners (if it is a heterosexual couple)?

Yes, thank you for noticing, our choice of transcript excerpts to show Adrian, Rob, and Paul speaking so far is entirely purposeful. It is often the case that we start with interviews with men partners in heterosexual relationships and ask them to consider their women partner's experiences from their position. This is especially true when couples have come to therapy because of a trespass on the part of the man partner in heterosexual relationships, as it is important for men partners in those situations in particular to be able to account for what happened from their partner's position. However, not all our couples are heterosexual and not all our couples are in therapy because of a trespass of some sort, and power relations do not always follow neatly along the lines of identity categories in any relationships. In the absence of such clear "mandates" for assigning turns to speaking rights, we tend to ask whichever partner appears to "hold more power" in the current moment in the relationship to speak on behalf of their beloved first.

Take a look at how and why this decision was made with Sofia and Josh, a biracial couple, struggling with varying visions of love and relationships due to their different racial and cultural backgrounds:

Sanni: ...so what I'd like to do is tell you everything I know from Tom, about his phone call with you Josh, - just so we're all on the same page. Would that be okay? (people nodding)... okay the sum total I know is that you two have been married for 5 years and that you have a little girl who's 4. I know that your family Sofia is in Chile and that you miss them terribly, is that right. (Sofia smiles and nods). Josh also said that you two have recently been talking about an affair you had Sofia, - and Josh said that you two had "worked that out" - is that right, am I saying that right? ("yeah" from both). Is that an okay word, "affair" - or is there a better word?

Sofia: No that's what it was. It was a one-time thing...

Sanni: Alright, - Sofia, Josh said that it isn't really the affair that you two want to talk about with us, but more, how did he put it, "where to go from here" and "the problems" you two had before the affair and still now as we speak. Do you agree with that Sofia? Is that still the right idea, Josh?





- Josh: Yeah. We talked all about the affair, and I don't really want to talk about it anymore. What I want is to talk about us.
- Sanni: And you Sofia? How does this plan sound, "to talk about you two" – or would we be forgetting something important?
- Sofia: No, I'm good with that! That's what we decided.
- Sanni: Okay... just as an aside...I'm kind of strangely fortified that you two "worked it out" and made decisions together prior to talking to us... it makes me intrigued about what powers you two have to "work stuff out," stuff that would stump other couples... Can I keep this in the back of my mind, that you two have some "unidentified superpower to work shit out," in case we need to rely on it in this conversation? (Sofia and Josh nodding, smiling...)
- Sanni: Alright, but that's only sort of secretly up our sleeves now. I, am I right in thinking that we should get to the current shit in need of working out, and that you two are up for that challenge? ("yeah"). So Tom, what's our first dramatic question out?
- Tom: Okay, here goes, are you ready (said jokingly)? So what is the current shit that is in need of working out that has brought you here? (Josh and Sofia laugh)
- Sofia: Well the issue is this. And it was like this before the affair and it's gone right back to this. I feel all alone in this marriage, I mean I left my family to come here and be with him, and now he just ignores me. He comes home from work and goes straight to the basement to play videogames. He never takes me out anywhere, doesn't talk to me except about routines and the baby and that stuff. But this isn't what I imagined what a marriage is...
- Tom: What was it that you both imagined when Sofia you decided to leave your family and be with Josh. What did you imagine or hope your relationship to be like?
- Sanni: Yeah, what was the dream you had about your togetherness?
- Josh: Well, honestly, until the affair, we were living my dream.
- Tom: Tell me about that, what was the dream you were living?



- Josh: I always just wanted to have a relationship like my parents...
- Sofia: (rolling her eyes, scoffing) That is the LAST thing I want. Those two live completely separate lives, - I've talked to your mom, you know, and she's miserable.
- Josh: I didn't know that.

*Exploration about the legacies of the visions of relationships and love of the 2 families... Josh talked about a traditional relationship in which his mom was serving his father and waiting for him in the evenings with dinner on hand, and no arguments were seen or heard and that his parents "kinda did their own thing." He expressed surprise that his mother had spoken of "misery" to Sofia. Sofia spoke of a similar traditional set-up for her parent's relationship, but also spoke of remembering how her father "adored" her mother, in words and gestures and attentiveness and interest in her. Here's where we get back to Sofia and Josh:*

- Sofia: And our sex life is a whole other thing. I am not attracted to Josh, I don't like the way he touches me, and also, he's gained so much weight in the last couple of years, because he never does anything, except sitting on the couch and playing videogames. He's lazy and unmotivated, and it drives me crazy. I don't know that I can be attracted to him anymore, he's heavy, I don't like to look at him in bed. If he loved me he'd be motivated to exercise and lose the weight... like, I'm an active person and I had imagined that I'd have a partner who'd do things with me. And the way he dresses, like a teenage boy, I mean look at him –
- Sanni: (interrupting) okay. (to Josh) Hey how are you doing with this part of it, - can you bear it?
- Josh: (low) Yeah. I've heard it all before, it's nothing new.
- Sanni: Okay, could I... I wonder, Tom, can we... Josh would it be okay if I asked Sofia some weird questions about this. I am trying to tread lightly here. Could you bear it if I tried to ask some questions about this, and ... if I am not doing well, like not asking in a way that is interesting to you, or that you can't take anymore, would you let me know in some way, like "timeout" or "I've had enough of this!" or whatever you can say?
- Josh: Go for it.



- Sanni: Now I have to ask you Sofia, would it be alright if I asked you to do something very strange, and it might be way too difficult a task, and unfair to ask of you. I know Sofia, I did hear about the misery you've been going through. Would it be okay if I asked about the misery, but in a strange way. And don't worry I'm going to ask Josh to do the same thing in a little bit. But are you up for starting? I'd like to ask you to imagine and speak about Josh's misery here – and my hope in asking you to speak on behalf of Josh's misery is that we might figure out something completely new, something that we didn't know before. But it's hard to do, to leave our own experience behind and speak of someone else's experience. What do you say, do you think you would give it a try? We'll both help you – and like I said, afterwards, we're going to turn to Josh and ask him for an account of what all this has felt like for you! –
- Sofia: I'm up for that! Okay.
- Sanni: And then, at the end, we're going to assign grades about which one of you did better at this strange exercise, it's like a contest... (said humorously, everyone laughs)
- Tom: Yeah, she brings prizes to this, just so you know... (laughter)... just kidding.
- Sanni: Tom, your question.
- Tom: I love how she does that. Sets it all up and then turns it over to me. No pressure. Okay, Sofia, since you are up for it I am going to ask you some questions not as you but as Josh. When you answer can you try your best to speak from your best knowing of him? So Sofia, asking you as Josh, Josh, of all of the shit that you are currently in, what is the worst of it for you?
- Sofia: The worst of it for him?...
- Tom: Yeah, speaking as Josh, what is the worst of it for you Josh in this, in where you find yourself in this relationship?
- Sofia: Okay, he says that he feels like a failure as a man...
- Tom: I know this is so weird, but can I ask you can you speak as Josh, can you say "I feel..."
- Sofia as Josh: Right, sorry, I feel like a failure as a man.



- Sanni: Josh, what makes you feel like a damn failure? Is there a time you remember you felt like this, like a particular moment, a particular evening maybe when you cried or otherwise when you were just all low to the ground, like I suck in life, I just fucking suck?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, the whole week after she told me about sleeping with my best friend. You know she told me right away after, and I... wasn't mad, I just...got quiet...I did cry a little.
- Sanni: Cried on your own, like in bed, or in the car, or cried with Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: I cried when she kept talking about it. This guy, you know, he's everything I'm not –
- Sanni: (interrupting) If the tears weren't about this guy, but about Sofia in some way, or about your relationship, - nah... Tom I don't want to ask this. Tom maybe, something about – it wasn't always this way...
- Tom: Yeah right. Maybe: Josh, what do you most miss about how you used to feel around Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: I used to feel...(choking up) funny. I was confident... energetic.
- Sanni: Was there something Sofia did that brought out all the humour and energy in the world? Or was it separate from Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: No, I always said how full of life she was, she was warm, she looked at me like I was really someone...
- Tom: So what is it like for you Josh, to go from “really being someone” in Sophia's eyes to moments when she looks at you and judges you as unattractive, to now be called “fat and lazy?”
- Sofia as Josh: Well, it's true. I have gotten fat.
- Sanni: (quietly) And so what if you have. Is that it? Is there something, Josh,... your life force surely can't be contained and summarized in descriptors like fucking “fat” or bloody “lazy,” like where did your life force go, and who sees it still, what on earth are we all forgetting about you, about who you are in this world, and what you want to do in your time here on earth? Where is your life force quietly beating like a heart and taking you in life Josh?
- Sofia as Josh: Well I am a really good dad. I love our daughter, I'd do anything for her.



- Tom: Like what are you thinking of Josh, right now, did a moment with your daughter just come to you?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, I make her laugh like no one else. You know Sofia has to come in sometimes in the evening and put an end to it because it's sleep time, but the two of us are just giggling away. And then there was this one time... (looking smiling at Josh)
- Tom: This one time...?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah, this one time when Sofia was out with her girlfriends all Saturday, and when she came back we had a little performance prepared for her... (smiling at Josh)
- Josh: Yeah (smiling)
- Sanni: Oh my god, Tom, do you see these two? Are you going to tell us or what? (said humorously)
- Sofia as Josh: It was, I don't even know how to describe this, it was this heavy metal version of Frozen, do you know that movie, like Elsa, ...
- Sanni: Yeah the "let it go" thing?
- Sofia as Josh: Yeah that! Elsa is kind of Zoey's hero, and we must have watched that movie like a million times with her, so we're kind of over the song. But then this was the heavy metal version, - I don't even know how you FOUND that thing, and they were all dressed up, like in wigs, and she sang her little heart out, like she was screaming on the top of her lungs, she didn't even wait for her turn, and he was mostly laughing, but helping her, it was absolutely ridiculous, and I remember, I didn't even get through the door, I sat on the floor in the entrance in my coat, and couldn't even get any further, just laughing and then they came to me and hugged me, we were all there on the floor, and then Zoey took apart the shopping bags, because I had bought them these cakes. It was the best moment (choking up).
- Sanni: I see you all there, in the entry way, laughing and hugging and cake!...(softly) Was this what it was *for*, Sofia?
- Sofia as Josh: What?





- Tom: Yeah, do you think that Josh had in mind for you to drop to the floor with laughter...?
- Sanni: With laughter and love...? Was this, in his best dream of dreaming this up on Saturday morning after you left the house, and then getting Zoey to conspire with him, was this what he was aiming for then?
- Josh: I kinda knew it would work, that she'd love it. But I didn't know it would work so well!
- Tom: Okay, - Sofia who were you to Josh on that day?
- Sofia: I was ...everything. (looking at Josh)
- Sanni: Everything. Man. And who was Josh to you that day, Sofia?
- Sofia: He was... well, we had sex that night is all I'm going to say. Like the good kind. (laughter all around)

*4. How do you make decisions about when to ask partners to speak from the position of the other? Are there times when you ask people to speak as themselves?*

Great question! It is important to note that even though we rely on witnessing a great deal to reach for the means for storytelling, we don't always do so. In fact, in some conversations, it is entirely vital that partners speak as themselves: for example, when partners are asked to reflect on the effects of these interviews, when they catch us up on important happenings that we might later turn into a witnessing interview, or when we ask partners to tell particular love stories. In fact, we have been playing with a set of questions that can only be asked of partners speaking as themselves that have had really enlivening effects on our conversations. We are excited to elaborate on this point at another time, but as a preview, here are some of our initial expressions of questions that have had spellbinding effects on both our couples and us:

- Can you tell me of times in your ordinary life together when you look at your partner, and perhaps your partner isn't even aware that you are attending to them in that moment, and you are inexplicably and powerfully drawn to him/her/them? A time when you think, "god, she's amazing" or "damn he's cool" or "I just really, really LIKE this person" or "I am so lucky to be here with this person right now..."
- It is important to distinguish these moments from times when your partner is doing something *for you*, engaging in an act of service of some kind, like making you a sandwich, or cutting your hair or organizing a party or the taxes for you. It's





wonderful to appreciate those acts of service. But for this story, we are interested in times when your partner isn't doing anything for you at all, no serving or caring or tending to you for your benefit. Can you think of a time when your partner is engaged in life itself *apart from you* and you noticed them and all of a sudden a rush of warmth or love or wonder in your partner's amazingness swept you up?"

Some of the most moving love stories we have ever heard have been told in response to such questions and such stories can only be told from one's own perspective. It has been wondrous to observe the partner thus spoken about find out, sometimes for the first time in a long time, of how their ways of living have made such life-giving contributions to their intimate other. These questions propose another avenue of reaching for a "radical other," a person beloved but beyond the partner's reach, unfinalized,<sup>16</sup> on the move, and with many ambitions, aims, arts, and pains that cannot be subsumed into anyone's telling or ownership.<sup>17</sup> What we are asking a person to do is to tell a story that strongly proposes a main character who, above all else, is spellbindingly interesting, and endowed with moral agency (or the capacity to act in trustworthy and moving ways). This story matters only insofar as how well it shows off, favors, adores, and loves its protagonist, one's partner.

But, as we mentioned, this and the vital reasons for distinguishing such moments from acts of service are a paper for the future.

To return to the question at hand with some manner of clarity, the times when we ask partners to forego speaking as themselves and reach for speaking from the position of their beloved are very specific:

- a. For matters of moral accountability
- b. For matters of moral agency
- c. For matters of moral zeal

We will discuss each of these ideas further in the following sections:

A. *A matter of moral accountability as an antidote to denial*

*my dear under-responder  
my dear running-man,*

*the water is dripping  
and the ground is softening  
do you hear it too?  
and instead of running now*





*say, will you stop and plant me a garden?  
will you put your back in to break up the concrete of happiness  
poured over our ground  
and will you dare to let our garden  
be blue, and red, and pink,  
in honour of our sorrow, our anger, and our friendship?  
and what colour is passion?  
will you discover the life of these plants  
and let me muck in the dirt with you  
will you give me the rough and smooth textures  
of your leaves  
and the conflict of all the bees and ants  
and tears  
and warmth  
as we dig together on our knees.*

*I promise, I will tend to the fireweed of worry!  
and will there be a holy-Jesus-plant  
that says "how are you, I noticed you, I saw you?"  
will you plant me a garden  
in this we-are-here-land  
rather than disappearing into who-knows-where-land?  
and if you have to pay a visit  
will you build me a bridge  
or a trail of breadcrumbs to follow?  
  
and what do you think-  
the wild roses we will just let run wild  
is that right my love?*

When couples find their way to therapy because of a trespass, a wrongdoing, or a tragedy of some kind, it is of utmost importance to find the means to invite partners to engage in a storied account of events of un-love. These accounts, if they are to be fair, need to be represented with significant details, a unique context, and both in-the-moment effects as well as far-reaching effects of the particular actions of un-love on one's partner. In the above transcript excerpts, several questions posed to Paul, Rob and Adrian were seeking of such an account:

- What are your tears saying, Lisa?





- And what was it that hurt the most, Lisa?
- What was it that broke your heart the most?
- After you discovered this lie, Michelle, how did you live on from that moment? What happened to you, Michelle?
- Michelle, I know from speaking to many women how women sometimes... sometimes the worst of it is crying yourself to sleep at night by yourself. Is that what happened, or did you roam around or fall asleep in exhaustion, or anger? etc.

The questions of “the worst of it” and its details are exceedingly important to reach for the heart of what has mattered most to their partners in the experience of hurt. It has been moving to us to witness how convincingly those partners who initiated wrong-doing have been able to reach for their wronged partners’ experiences, once given an invitation to do so. It has been equally moving to witness the wronged partner’s rapt and tender attention to the unfolding of these stories.

We do not fancy ourselves to be in the business of “teaching” accountability or “holding” people accountable, but to simply facilitate the means for their ability to account – because if our couples have taught us anything, it is this: their ability to account clearly pre-existed our invitation, as evidenced by the great ease and speed with which couples stepped into such accounts. The great secret, that is hiding in plain sight, appears to be thus: the current cultural codes for relationship repair consist of reiterations of apologies or explanations (defenses) or denials of one’s actions but what the many expressions of “I’m sorry’s” and “it didn’t mean anything’s” or “I did it because’s” fail to provide partners with is a satisfying ground for trusting and intimate futures. The ability to deliver apologies seems to pale in comparison to the ability to deliver a storied account of the events of un-love and their intimate effects on one’s partner. When such an account is freely and voluntarily given, it has an inexplicable moving effect, on both partners.

Listen to the effects of the following interview on Matt:

Matt (as Kara): ...Matt and I were having an argument and it got pretty heated. There was some yelling, I guess.

Tom: Kara, would you say it’s fair to call it an argument? Was this more of a two-sided or a one-sided argument?

Matt (as Kara): It was more of a one-sided argument, I guess.

Tom: If it was more of a one-sided argument, who was it that was doing the arguing?





Matt (as Kara): It was Matt. He got so angry about the restaurant change. He was really blowing off steam.

Tom: Kara, what happened next?

Matt (as Kara): He was yelling. He was standing in the middle of the living room and just yelling. He said some ugly things... (trailing off)

Tom: Can you tell me some of the ugly things Matt was telling you when he was standing in the middle of the living room yelling at you?

Matt: (crying)

Tom: I know this might be hard to say but it's really important. Do you remember when we agreed that we wouldn't shy away from speaking the worst of it and that we would do so for Kara? Do you mind if I press a little further?

Matt: I know. It's important to me. Okay. What was the question?

Tom: Kara, of all the ugly things that Matt yelled at you that night, what was the worst of it?

Matt (as Kara): (quietly) At one point he looked at me, he was so angry, and he said if I don't help him he'll tip over the book shelf.

Tom: Kara, what was that like for you when Matt threatened to push the book shelf over?

Matt (as Kara): It was scary, I guess.

Tom: Just how scary was it, Kara, to be threatened like that?

Matt (as Kara): I don't know...

Tom: Were you scanning the exits then, were you thinking you need to get away, or were you maybe mad, or frozen, or what happened to you?

Matt (as Kara): I...was quiet. I.. I did back away.

Tom: Kara, were you afraid he would push the bookshelf over on you? Is that why you backed away?

Matt (as Kara): (crying) yeah. We were standing right in front of it. And he was so mad. I didn't know what he was going to do... (after a pause) Tom, can I talk to





you as me? I just, this is just really sinking in. I just, I can't believe I did that.

Tom: okay Matt. Thank you for asking! I know this is really hard, and you might be right in that we can talk about this from your heart as well. Shall we do that? (Matt nods) Can I ask you one more really hard question, but I'll ask it of you this time?

Matt (as Kara): yes please go ahead.

Tom: Matt, if you were to return to that moment when you were standing in the living room, yelling at Kara, and you threatened to push the bookshelf over on her, - if your threatening to push the bookshelf over on her had other words or warnings for Kara, what might those words be?

Matt: (quietly) that if she doesn't do what I want, I can hurt her. She better watch out or I might really do it next time... (crying) Tom, it's so horrible. I can't believe I would do this anyone, let alone to Kara.

*Poem Read to Matt from Words Spoken by Kara in a Previous Meeting*

*If he pretends that it didn't happen  
If he doesn't admit to it  
If he avoids apologies  
If he gets mad enough to shut me up  
If he blames me for bringing it up  
If he says that I imagined it  
If he pretends he is the victim of this stress  
If he switches from shouting to "what-are-we-making-for-supper" even faster  
If he bullies me into silence*

*What happens then  
To that thing that happened?  
Who remembers it?  
Who learns from it?  
Where is the memory stored?  
And who can ever speak to it?*

*Do the things that happened  
Find a way to live some place?*





*My body  
My mind  
My imagination  
My idea of love?*

*I live between safety and threat  
Between out-of-control screaming  
And what's-for-dinner-honey?*

*These words are my only witness*

*B. A matter of moral agency as an antidote to dismissal*

*And Adrian knew Nadia his wife  
I was born grew up I observed  
I struggled grew bewildered I tried  
I took a stand was exiled I moved  
I fell into a bad dream lost my mind I suffered  
I held on knew better I got clear  
I wished wanted I dreamt  
I saw my future took my life in my hands I rose  
I made a home made a budget I worked  
I loved was comforted I was loved  
I fell pregnant gave birth I breastfed  
I taught my daughter to speak studied her I nurtured  
I heard advice grew silent I weighed it all  
I dreamt on her behalf listened I made a heart  
I made meals asked for help I asked to talk  
I searched learnt I wrote  
I spoke I cried I understood I knew  
I claimed  
My voice my life my courage my love.  
And Adrian smiled at me and knew me.*

When couples find their way to therapy their imagination of their partner as a moral agent has often been significantly flattened or forgotten. The term moral agency denotes the capacity to





dream, to imagine, to originate, to initiate, and to otherwise be in the very midst of lively living, and each of these verbs signifies many moments of freedom of mind from repetitive and ongoing oppression to the defeat of one's dreams and original proposals for living. Couples are faced with many invitations to flatten their beloved into stock characters in uninteresting stories. Side-characters like the maid, the girl with the pearl earring, or Hamlet's Ophelia who aren't asked to speak their minds or change the unfolding in a substantial fashion.

It is our hope that the invitation to tell stories from the position of one's beloved resists the such flattenings and instead, reveals fully human protagonists with options, say, and agency in the matters that matter to all involved.

In the above transcript excerpts, a partner's moral agency was sought and amplified with questions such as these:

- So then in light of the red flags, how come you took your heart and your red flags in your hands and said yes to him anyway? In the face of deep-down doubt, you listened to his promise, and then you decided to risk?
- Did anything come to you Michelle? With you asking into the night and into the next day: What's it all for? Why am I doing it? Did the universe answer?
- Were you tempted to kick him out of the house Michelle?
- Were you scanning the exits then, were you thinking you need to get away, or were you maybe mad, or frozen, or what happened to you?

By asking questions that assume formidable moral agency, traditional gender and power relations can be resisted within the story, and not outside of it, in order to unshackle original action that resists one's dismissal at every turn.

Listen to this exchange of seeking and discovering a partner's moral agency from within the metaphor chosen by the clients:

Sanni: But there was something.. (to Tom) Why were you scribbling notes just now?

Tom: Well.. I had a thought, an idea, but I'm just not sure if we have time for the idea.

Sanni: No, say it!

Tom: I'm thinking about what they said about understanding their unique and particular swords and armor and I'm wondering if we could ask them about that as each of them as the other..





- Sanni: Do you have time? Cause I have time for this.
- Jen & Felicity: Yeah, we have time. Okay.
- Tom: So Felicity, can you be Jen?
- Felicity: Sure.
- Tom: Yeah? I'm really interested in this idea of you two maybe being drawn to each other's armor and swords, particularly, even though it's maybe infuriating sometimes. (all laugh) and I'm wondering Jen, why is it that you have come to have this particular sword and armor in your possession?
- Jen: You're sure taken 'er not easy today, eh?
- Tom: I'm going to ask you the same question.
- Jen: I know you are. (Tom laughs).
- Sanni: No, I'll take on Jen. (all laugh).
- Tom: So, Jen, for what you know about, I mean about your history, about your life, about how you've been treated and mistreated in life, Jen, how is it that this particular sword and armor have come to your possession?
- Felicity as Jen: It's almost like a sword of truth.
- Tom: Sword of truth?
- Felicity as Jen: And it cuts through bullshit.
- Sanni: Has there been a bunch of bullshit in your life, Jen, to cut through? Is that an absolute necessity?
- Felicity as Jen: I think it's or maybe it's something... cause I have, I have this desire to communicate and to express how I feel and I seem to be in a world of people that don't have ears or don't have voices.
- Jen: Wow. Hey, Sanni can I take you up on a pen and paper now? I know you offered before.
- Sanni: Sure! (getting notepad and pen for both Jen and Felicity). -It's going to get interesting here, hey. (laughter)





- Jen: Yeah. I need to write this down. I want to hear what she says. I need to hear what she says and my memory is shit.
- Tom: Okay. Jen, you were saying you have found yourself in a world of people who don't hear and don't speak... the truth?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah! So I need a sword. So my truth is needing to be said and I am bringing it always to the table and demanding it from other people.
- Sanni: Have you had the sword from the time you, you were born, Jen, or was it, was it gifted to you at a particular time in your life? Was it forged at a particular forge or was it always there? Like was it laid in your crib as one of the gifts of your ancestors or was it forged somewhere in life after a particular experience?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah, I think it was always there. I think it just became stronger.. A stronger material – it was built with stronger material maybe.
- Tom: Was the sword always there? And then did it turn into a sword of truth that can cut through bullshit?
- Felicity as Jen: Yes!
- Tom: Was that the forging?
- Felicity as Jen: I think maybe I was born with a sword, but then trained in how to use it.
- Tom: And did the sword develop particular edges so that it could cut particular things?
- Felicity as Jen: I think at first, like any person who's training, you're not skilled, so you learn, maybe make some mistakes, you cut yourself and then over time, you learn how to wield your weapon so it doesn't injure.
- Tom: More precise.
- Felicity as Jen: More precise.. More clean.
- Tom: Why, why was it so important for you, given what you've been through in life to develop mastery with a sword that can cut through bullshit?
- Felicity as Jen: Because I,... There was a moment in my life.. There was a very pivotal moment in my life when I realized there was a limit to the time I had to work on my craft.



Tom: Yeah. Was there a lot of bullshit thrown at you in life?

Felicity as Jen: I think so. I think so. Or at least a lot of people were dishonest without realizing that they were dishonest.

Tom: Is that the bullshit?

Felicity as Jen: Yeah.

Tom: Is that your particular bullshit?

Felicity as Jen: I think so. Honesty is important.

Sanni: So you were born with a sword, a gift, maybe that was laid there by, I don't know whom, who trusted you to maybe become that? But you could have still chosen in your life, Jen, to not do any training like the sword could have just stayed at home in some glass cabinet thing and be admired, but never used. But you chose this training. I wonder where would bullshit take your life if you didn't, if you hadn't made this commitment, this decision to cut through it. Like why do you cut through it? Why do you zero in on bullshit? What do you know? Like if you go with the bullshit and disavow any sword skills, where is bullshit gonna take your life? What will bullshit do to you if you stop fighting it? If you lay down arms, if you, if you didn't practice your art anymore, well where bullshit take you? What would it do to you? Why is bullshit particularly dangerous for you, Jen?

Felicity as Jen: (tearfully) It would kill me. It would kill me.

Jen: Say that one thing again, I should've heard the whole thing, but I'll listen to it later. Why would, what...?

Felicity: Bullshit. What would bullshit do if you don't..Like if you, if you were forced to lay down arms, like to never fight again, to never train. If you are to never develop the talent?

Felicity as Jen: Yeah. It would kill my spirit.

Jen: Quiet. I would go through life quiet.

Felicity as Jen: It would kill my uniqueness, my personality, my individuality, my soul, my being.





- Sanni: Did anyone ever try to tell you, Jen, powerfully, even, even though you'd already undertaken the training and you knew about the power of the sword and were quietly, humbly proud of it. Did anyone ever try and tell you give it here and be finished with that? Did anyone in your life ever try?
- Tom: Tried to take your sword away?
- Felicity as Jen: I think everyone has at some point or people that are important to me have.
- Sanni: Have demanded it?
- Felicity as Jen: Partners because they don't like the reality of what it can do.
- Tom: So then what is this sword of truth that can cut through bullshit, right. What is it on behalf of if it's not to cut people down, what is it? What is it on behalf of?
- Sanni: She said it's precise and clean and it doesn't cut Jen anymore. It doesn't injure. It's precise and clean.
- Tom: So what is it on behalf of?
- Felicity as Jen: It's to help. It's to show others..
- Jen: (Softly) A different way?
- Felicity as Jen: Yeah, a different way. It's to heal.
- Tom: It's to heal?
- Felicity as Jen: It's to heal.
- Tom: It has like a surgical sharpness to it?
- Jen: Interesting...! A scalpel!
- Tom: Like a scalpel. Cutting to heal. Jen, if you had to say your greatest hope for using this sword of truth in your relationship with Felicity, what would it be? What would it be for?
- Felicity as Jen: It would be... To help Felicity see she can be free. And if she were to let go, what we could be together. Most of all, I want Felicity to be free of the bullshit about her that they fed her all her life. All the insults and the control and then the gaslighting, like "I don't remember saying that." I





want Felicity to be free, to listen and to argue with me. We don't need any bullshit.

Tom: Is it always first and foremost for the other person to be free, Jen? And then..

Felicity as Jen: Yeah.

Sanni: (In humor) You're on, boss.

Tom: Now, Jen.

Jen: Okay. But can I tell you one thing that I wrote down really quick?

Tom: Of course.

Jen: What I wrote down is that I don't want a sword that is flailing or cutting at shards. I want a sword that helps her but doesn't hurt me either. What I am realizing, is that ...I need to be sharp for us.

Tom: In all those ways, are you always sharpening your sword, for love, for the both of you?

Jen: Hmm (tearful)... fuck you. You made me cry now. (all Laugh)

C. *A matter of moral zeal as an antidote to shame*

*he is passing all points of connection with me  
with flying colours  
but he is cowering under some tree  
when the monster roars  
am I your number one?  
do you remember Paris?  
will you forsake all others?  
where are you when my eardrums are shattering?*

*come to me  
and put this monster  
in its place  
by telling me a story of love*





*that will last me the next 18 years*

Our main question throughout these conversations with couples has been: what does it do to both partners to be invited to tell a living story of their beloved as a protagonist in it?

Perhaps most surprisingly, these stories that are told have a subversive and beseeching effect all their own: they seem to incite moral zeal. Instead of flat repetitions of “I’m sorry,” we have been more likely to discover impassioned expressions of “I don’t want to be that guy/person.” Instead of stuckness in shame, we have been more likely to witness folks suddenly “knowing what to do.”

The stories that our couples have been invited to tell, both stories of unlove and stories of love, exist outside of the vague and totalizing explanations of cultural un-stories. The stories we have been looking for have detail and richness to them that such un-stories cannot argue with. It is a formidable task to counter all of “misogyny” or “patriarchy” or “toxic masculinity” or “DSM speak” in a story, but asked to find the words and the embodied effects of “tipping over a bookshelf” or “placing my partner into a two year defeating conversation with an invisible woman” or “leaving my partner to roam the rooms of our house by herself” or “stabbing my partner in the back by making rude jokes about their lack of manliness” etc. – it becomes possible to both take a strongly felt position and find oneself convinced of the merits of inventing a counter-act to such tragedies.

Once couples are invited beyond the idea that “it just happened” and beyond ideas of dissecting faults and curtailing all freedom, the stories they tell seem to remove all alibis to unlove. Couples become answerable to love. Outside of the unsatisfying mercies of normativity, stock plots, dominant but impoverished ideologies, neoliberal incitements to selfishness and the permissions all the -isms give to consider our partner’s life and love experiences less significant than our own, their own living stories seem to supply lovers with explanations of what is happening between them as well as calls of how to respond to it. Love stories that are original and endowed with moral accountability and moral agency are compelling in both their particularity and their capacity to move.

Tom: Matt, I was just thinking back to our first conversations together and the commitment that we made to ‘get right to work’ and not shy away from having difficult conversations together and speak openly about the worst of your actions and their effects on Kara...

Matt: Yeah, I remember how awful and ashamed I felt for having treated Kara so horribly. At first it was really despairing. But one thing that I will always remember is how we talked about men’s culture and how we are





taught to over-focus on our own feelings of shame for having done wrong and how unfair that is because it shifted the focus back to me once again and made Kara take care of me when I was the one who hurt her. How terrible is that?

Tom: What was it that changed for you then Matt? Did it have something to do with being asked to story your actions while standing in Kara's shoes rather than your own?

Matt: Not, not as much putting myself in her shoes, but the accountability of saying it in her words to somebody else, to you. To actually speak of my darkest most of embarrassing moments that I'm most ashamed of to someone else.

Tom: To speak them into being?

Matt: To speak them into being to another witness.

Tom: And when you had to speak them into being to me, not as yourself, but as Kara, what happened to the shame?

Matt: All of the sudden it helped me realize that I am not the victim here...that this needs to be about Kara and her experience. Did speaking the very worst of my actions into being cause me pain? Yes! But it isn't shame that I feel anymore. It is more like motivation or conviction.

*POEM FOR MATT AND KARA AFTER ABOVE INTERVIEW:*

*this is the summer of  
gripping angst on a wheel  
a summer of endless packing and preparations  
a summer of panic and attacks on Kara  
a summer of bellowed rule  
by the Lord Commander of us all  
the almighty taskmaster  
in front of whom we are but mice  
on a wheel.*

*Or*

*this is the summer of travel  
the summer when the world opens  
to our dominion:*



"Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:" Couple's Therapy For Times of Unlove





*the tacos in Tijuana  
the pool in San Diego  
the theatre in Montreal  
and the little restaurant in New York.  
this is the summer of my remembrance of my*

*hopes for Kara  
when we first met up:  
her crossleggedness on the beach  
the contentedness of her soul  
the curiosity of her eyes in a good story.*

*Kara my love  
this is the summer of my sacred step back:  
I shall build you a shelter  
May it span both our bodies  
May it keep us  
from the disaster of the taco truck that moved before our dinner  
Or from the rain in New York  
That wrecks all well-made plans.  
Under this shelter  
and in the New York rain  
I would whisper a toast to you Kara  
it's okay my love we'll go with the rain if it pleases you  
because this shelter by my hands  
will not just stop the wheel  
but break it  
all for the light in your eyes shimmering in the New York rain.*

## Epilogue

Last summer, I (Sanni) was in a car with my mom and sister driving on windy backroads of rural Finland. We had a ways to travel, and so my mom and my sister – fresh after running out of all other chit-chat, sought more substantial entertainment for their curious minds and asked me, “so what’s new in your work, Sanni?” To avoid having to undertake lengthy explanations, I said evasively, “well, I’m doing some couple’s work now...”, hoping that this would end the conversation. It did not. My mom’s and sister’s eyes lit up with intrigue and they said, “with couples who are fighting? How do you do that?”

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“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove

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The images of Finnish countryside with its red wooden houses, fields, and gloomy pine forests running past my eyes, I searched for a way to explain without references to therapy vernacular or post-structural theory of power relations. Then I told them: “well, let’s all imagine that either of you is locked in a fight-to-divorce with your husband. Like something you have been arguing about for a long time, for years, with maybe some brief reprieves, but whenever that topic comes up, it flares up and takes over your life and your husband’s life like a bomb. You don’t see eye to eye on this topic, not ever. Every time it comes up, you fight and argue until exhaustion and afterwards, you feel more lost and lonely than before and are contemplating moving to your own apartment from underneath this fresh new hell. Imagine that at one of these times, you’ve had it, and decide to go to some therapist’s office to talk about it (both my mom and sister groan at this point). Right, there isn’t much hope that THAT’S going to make this any better either, if all your talking and fighting all this time hasn’t made a dent. But you decide to go anyway, because can it get any worse, and then the whole way there of course you prepare the story you are going to tell this therapist about all these years of being misunderstood and mistreated by your husband, especially around this subject. You rehearse the sentences that you’re going to say so that at least you’ll be clear this time, and lack of clarity on your part will not be why this therapy enterprise fails too. As you are noticing your husband out of the corners of your eyes, you have this uneasy feeling that he is also preparing his version of this story. You sigh in exhaustion before the conversation even begins, and prepare for another complicated battle. You both sit down at the therapist’s office and are all ready to begin. But before you can tell the whole thorny story, the therapist turns to your husband and asks: “before we do anything else, could I ask you to speak from your wife’s perspective? Could you tell me, as convincingly and honourably as possible, from her point of view, what has been the worst of this argument for your wife for the past few years? What does your wife cry about, what makes her furious about this, what’s the thing you just haven’t been willing to understand about this? What makes her want to pack her bags and move to her own apartment? What is really hellish for her about this?” And then the therapist proceeds to interview your husband for next 30 or 40 minutes on this subject, and amazingly, right in front of you, he starts talking ...” at this point I trailed off and there was silence in the car. “What do you think of that?” I ventured after a few beats.

“Sign me up RIGHT NOW!” both my mom and sister shouted immediately. Case made.

Imagine the dare of looking for stories that each person listening would whole-heartedly sign their name under. Imagine if your partner voluntarily offered such a story, of unlove and love in your own life. Imagine what that would feel like. This is why we are thinking of these conversations as “events of love.” The effect, at the end of the day, regardless of where we started together, is something ineffable like a sweetness or a softening, for both partners. We remain, to this day, at a loss to describe it, and therefore cede the space to the poets:



“Love is Not Dead, Not Yet:” Couple’s Therapy For Times of Unlove





### Love Song (Rilke, 1907)

How can I keep my soul in me, so that  
it doesn't touch your soul? How can I raise  
it high enough, past you, to other things?  
I would like to shelter it, among remote  
lost objects, in some dark and silent place  
that doesn't resonate when your depths resound.  
Yet everything that touches us, me and you,  
takes us together like a violin's bow,  
which draws one voice out of two separate strings.  
Upon what instrument are we two spanned?  
And what musician holds us in his hand?  
Oh sweetest song.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See White, M. (2007). Maps of Narrative Practice. Chapter 4 for more information about definitional ceremonies

<sup>2</sup> See Belinda Emmerson-Whyte (2010) in "Learning the Craft: An internalized other interview with a couple" states "Therapists and clients describe the 'stress' and 'uncomfortable disjunctions' that can be experienced when a person is made up or spoken into existence by others in ways in which that person does not recognize themselves."

<sup>3</sup> See Illouz, E. (2019). *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Epston, D. (1993). Internalized Other Interviewing with Couples: The New Zealand Version. Republished in this issue

<sup>5</sup> For a review of some of these ideas, please see Carlson and Haire (2014). Toward a theory of relational accountability: An invitational approach to living narrative ethics in couple relationships. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. Reprinted in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Holquist, M (2002). Dialogism. Holquist referring to Bakhtin's idea that we have-"No Alibi"- "To be responsible for the site we occupy in the space of nature and the time of history is a mandate we cannot avoid- in the ongoing and open event of existence we have no alibi" (p. 161). "Life will not let me be inactive, no matter how dormant I may appear (relatively) to be in the eyes of others. I cannot be passive, even if I choose to be, for passivity will then be the activity of choosing to be passive. My relation to life in all its aspects is one of intense participation, of interested activity; having "no alibi" means I have a stake in everything that comes my way" (p. 154).

<sup>7</sup> Martha Nussbaum as quoted by Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: CA: University of California Press. Quoted from page 108.

<sup>8</sup> Epston, D. (2020). Personal Communication. Cocreating language of unsuffering- "I am interested in the notion of Danish philosopher Svend Brinkman and how he talks about languages of suffering. think it is incumbent upon us all to find languages of unsuffering." "What words are capturing of experience and, in particular, that experience that has not had words before. Shouldn't we take an interest in words that are



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alive with association? Shouldn't we think about the poetics of language and concern ourselves with how words feel to people?"

<sup>9</sup> White, M. *Exotic Lives*- Chapter - Narrative Practice, Couples Therapy and Conflict Resolution.

"Information technology by the human sciences, communication was afforded a high status. The development of specific communication skills was no considered a panacea for many of the difficulties of human life. This idea was nowhere more vigorously applied than to the area of difficulties in couples relationships. The relationship problems of couples were newly understood to be the outcome of absent or insufficient communication or of poor in inadequate communication. The resolution of relationship difficulties was to be found in the development of more functional communication styles, and relationship counselors were to become 'technicians' in the development, repair, and restoration of communication" (p. 7)

<sup>10</sup> Mattingly, C. (2014). *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: CA: University of California Press. Quote from page 204.

<sup>11</sup> Illouz, E. (2012). *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Maiden, MA: Polity Press. "Modern masculinity is more often expressed by withholding (not demonstrating of sentiment)." "Autonomy is established by a very careful monitoring and withholding of recognition."

<sup>12</sup> Ability to account- Account-ability is the ability to account for a shared experience Larry Zucker-Escaping Blame

<sup>13</sup> For more information about the practice of writing therapeutic poems see Paljakka, S. (2018) A house of good words. *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*.

<sup>14</sup> From Nussbaum, M. (1995). *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. "In a novel, we enter, I claim, that full world of human effort, that 'real substance' of life within which, alone, politics can speak with a full and fully human voice" (p. 72).

<sup>15</sup> Levinas (as quote in Lerner, G. (2008). *Exploring Levinas: The Ethical Self in Family Therapy*. - "To be face to face with another person overwhelms all our concepts and theorizing, and evokes an infinite experience of responsibility: to be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill, which applies as much to thoughts and language that override the other as to murder" (p. 353).

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. "The surplus or excess of seeing should be used with love in a way that equates to a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that confirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the other" (p. 63).

<sup>17</sup> For more on Levinas' idea of the radical other: Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern Ethics*. NY: Blackwell.

"Indeed, Levinas suggests that we are invited to see the other as completely other, as radically other than 'I'. Levinas proposes an other that is infinitely other, that resists all my attempts to define her in terms of myself and to grasp her totality, a resistance that thwarts without force all my projects to place her in a box of rationally comprehensible circumscriptions."

Binderman, S. (2013). Lévinas and the Disruptive Face of the Other. *Hakomi Forum*, 26. "We need to learn how to see otherwise, in order to respect, morally speaking, the singularity and the otherness of the other. We need to let the absolute foreign nature of the other astonish us. For Levinas, justice is not an abstract notion but is found in the expression of duty and obligation discovered in the face of the other. When ethical discourse is grounded in the face-to-face relation so that the freedom of the other is respected and preserved, absolutist systems are thereby renounced" (p. 7).

