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Content

Editors' Note

p. 1 Introduction by David Epston

Insider Witnessing Practices

p. 5 Who is the Outsider in Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices? Tom Stone Carlson

p. 16 What is a Good Story and How do we Tell One? Tom Stone Carlson

p. 38 Questions for Preparing for an Insider Witnessing Interview- Sanni Paljakka & Tom Stone Carlson

p. 47 On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter? Sanni Paljakka & Zhen Zheng

p. 85 The View from the Top of the World- Tiffany Saxton

p. 102 "Render the Tacit Tangible" Or: How Insider Witnessing Practices Address Power by Raising the Means to Speak- Sanni Paljakka & Malidi Hanuse

p. 136 Insider Witnessing Practices as a Two-Way Account of Therapy: A Gift Exchange- Loree Stout

p. 152 Observations on the real effects of Insider Witnessing In our clients' words- Sanni Paljakka, Tiffany Saxton, Loree Stout, & Tom Stone Carlson

p. 166 Insider Witnessing Practices, Trauma, and Neuro-Affectional Reauthoring- Jeff Zimmerman & Tom Stone Carlson

p. 206 The coming together of the LA Insider Witnessing Team- Larry Zucker & Michelle Chong, LA IWP Team

p. 221 Norway IWP Team- Andreas Breden & Luna, Norway IWP Team



Editor's Introduction

David Epston

It has been three years since we published our first accounts of Insider Witnessing Practices in the inaugural release of the *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*. It gives me such joy to introduce this Special Release that features the work and contributions of therapists around the world who have extended our curiosity and excitement far beyond our initial imaginations. This special release features 11 (!) articles written in the unique voices of therapists and clients from distinct contexts. I could not have been more thrilled to sit back and contemplate these rare accounts of collaborations between therapists and co-research projects with clients and each of their practice- and experience-based discoveries of where the ideas of witnessing have taken them. I would like to thank each author who contributed their writing to this special release and all of the teams currently studying and working on Insider Witnessing Practices in Argentina, Canada, Norway, and the United States. I would especially like to thank Sanni Paljakka and Tom Carlson for all their efforts on behalf of Insider Witnessing Practices including their many travels, their training, and for bearing the critiques that surely come with the introduction of any new practice. I reserve my greatest thanks for our co-researchers who have willingly scrutinized Insider Witnessing Practices in and of themselves and who continue to regularly inform us of the short- and long-term effects on their lives.

I hope that you, dear reader, are up for an adventure of the mind as these contributions have the capacity to suggest new paths into what has yet to be rendered into our collective knowledges of narrative practice!

As I was reading the unique accounts featured in this special release, I thought again, as I have so many times in my life as a practitioner-theorist, about the power of stories. Holland, et al (1998) remind us that “identities- if they are alive, if they are being lived- are unfinished and in process” (p. vii). But my question remains, what if such identities have become fixed by stories, especially those told by histories of abuse? What if a great deal rests on the stories of culpability or innocence of those who have suffered?





Rebecca Solnit (2014) reminds us of the hazards of such binding stories and points to 'the task of learning to be free' of them:

“What's your story about? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice...We tell ourselves stories that save us and stories that are the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown...Not a few stories are sinking ships, and many of us go down with these ships even when the lifeboats are bobbing all around us...We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories straddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning, The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them and then to become the storyteller” (p. 3-4).

If we seek the possibility of freedom, how do we assist people to “hear,” “question,” “pause and hear silence,” “to name,” and finally, to use the terminology of Michael White, “re-author their lives and relationships?” In his paper, “The Process of Questioning: A Therapy of Literary Merit?,” Michael put it this way: “This ‘form’ of stories of literary merit corresponds with the ‘form’ of therapy that brings forth unique outcomes, redescriptions and possibilities. Thus, we could investigate the benefit of defining a therapy of literary ‘merit’ in which the therapist’s greatest gift to persons seeking therapy is to help them become their own writers” (p. 40).

Like Michael, I have been keenly interested in finding the means for people to become the authors of their own stories. In fact, I might say that this question informed both Michael and me at the outset of narrative therapy and such matters have been on my mind ever since. I believe the question of “re-authoring means” has been quintessential to much that distinguishes narrative therapy practice from other ‘therapies.’ Practices most stridently concern themselves with questions of freedom of authorship include Consulting your Consultants, Co-





Researching, Outsider Witnessing Practices and relevant to this release, Insider Witnessing Practices.

I am thinking back to Michael's enthusiasm in 2007 as he was deliberating on the practice of Outsider Witnessing. In fact, I never knew Michael to write with such conviction as he did in regard to Outsider Witnessing Practices:

“Of all the therapeutic practices that I have come across in the history of my career, those associated with the definitional ceremony have the potential to be most powerful. Time and time again I have observed outsider witnessing retellings achieve what is quite beyond my potential to achieve in my role as a therapist. I have also witnessed this on many occasions when observing other therapists' explorations of definitional ceremonies. However, this does not diminish the significance of the therapist's contribution. The retellings of definitional ceremonies achieve resonance for the people who consult therapists when they are shaped by the appropriate outsider witness inquiry and when vital considerations to the success of these practices are closely monitored.” (White, 2007, p. 218).

I hope I can be forgiven for a similar degree of enthusiasm regarding Insider Witnessing Practices and the accounts of the effects on both therapist teams and clients alike as well as the generative creativity in their joint wondering of how and why these effects may have come about.

I have a hope that reading this special release may entice you, dear reader, to join us in the exploration of the theoretical developments and practice applications that have come from our adventures in Insider Witnessing Practices including the craft of counterstorying, the repoliticizing of practice, the calling out of binding master narratives, the close attention to the poetics of stories, and the means to raise oversight. In contrast to the humanist incitement to insight, the means for oversight depend on our relationships with witnesses to our stories of captivity and our stories of freedom. Interestingly, “oversight” just might be ‘the space of authoring’ (Holland et al, 1998, p. 169).





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Who is the Outsider in Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices?

Toward a theory of oversight in narrative therapy

Tom Stone Carlson

Since we introduced Insider Witnessing Practices just over four years ago, one of the most common questions that we have received is “What is the difference between Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices?” When developing a new practice, it is easy to get sidetracked by the intricacies of the practice, the “how-to’s” so to speak, and consequently, our early answers to this common question focused more on the distinctions in practice between insider and outsider witnessing. We quickly became thoroughly dissatisfied with trafficking in the land of technical distinctions and decided to engage in a close study of Michael’s writings on outsider witnessing in an effort to discern the shared purposes and commitments of both insider and outsider witnessing. While we were not surprised to find more similarities than differences between the two practices that we will outline this paper, we stumbled upon, what we consider to be, a theoretical gold mine for narrative therapy; a theoretical framework that extends all the way back to the origins of narrative therapy perhaps waiting to be revealed. Not surprisingly, it can be found in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, who Michael and David had decided would be one of their lead sources for the reimagination of narrative therapy which they promised to take up before Michael’s untimely death. So, what is this undiscovered theoretical framework, you might ask?

Bakhtin and Outsideness

In our very papers on insider witnessing practices, we reported a rather surprising discovery that changed the way we think about narrative therapy. Gary Saul Morson, perhaps the most prominent translator of Bakhtin, introduced the term “authorial agency” referring to the freedom of the author to view the story from the outside. The notion of outsideness in order to come to know or see oneself is based on Bakhtin’s belief that since we can





only see our selves and our lives from the inside looking out, we need the “essential surplus of seeing” that other’s, especially loving or intimate others, can provide. “Only other people can see our body as a whole object in the world; we can never see ourselves surrounded by the space in which we are situated. Only others can hear our voice and see our facial expressions; we know ourselves from the inside but not in the way others know us from ‘outside’” (Pollard, 2011, p. 11). Holquist, another Bakhtin scholar put it this way, “In order to have her own vision, each must use the means by which the others see. In dialogism this sharedness is indeed the nature of fate for us all. For in order to see our selves, we must appropriate the vision of others” (Holquist, p. 28). Holquist continues, “it is only the other’s categories that will let me be an object for my own perception. I see my self as I conceive others might see it. In order to forge a self, I must do so from outside. In other words, I author myself” (Holquist, p. 28)

In fact, Morson (1994) , following Bakhtin, argued that for a person to become an author of their own story, outsideness is required. For Morson, outsideness, or the view of the author, is critical in order to allow a person to move beyond seeing themselves as mere characters in a story, “The author makes the world, a character dwells in it, the author is located outside the world...The author alone can *mean directly*” (p. 94; emphasis added). And from this authorial view of one’s life, “the author exists in a different kind of time, one that makes the whole of the character's life subject to contemplation as it could never be in the character's own time. Once there is such a whole, then each moment of my life figures in advance...” (p. 94). The distinction that Morson makes here between being an author of own’s story versus a character in one’s story is seems particularly important here. Without creating the means for oversight, when people are speaking about their own lives, from within their own stories, they are likely to experience themselves as characters and not authors of their life stories. The question is, how do we provide the means to lift a person outside of their stories, to see their stories from outside of their lives? Or as Emerson put it, “How do I get outside of my life – with its pain, indignity, missed opportunity, crimped perspective –so as to shape it into something I can live with, that is, shape it





as I might shape an artistic creation?" (Emerson, 1997, p. 217).

But First a Bit of History

In our first paper on Insider Witnessing, we mentioned that we decided to take the name Insider Witnessing Practices in honor of Michael's Outsider Witnessing Practices. Little did we know at the time that there would be a great irony in the naming of these two practices. But that is for later. The source for our study of the similarities between these two witnessing practices were Michael's writings on outsider witnessing, his summaries of client accounts of their experience of outsider witnessing, as well as a study of the comparable accounts of our client co-researchers who have been so instrumental in our efforts to theorize and extend insider witnessing.

Both Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices are part of a shared history and borrow heavily from Myherhoff's definitional ceremony. Given the centrality of Myerhoff's definitional ceremony in Michael's thinking about Outsider Witnessing Practices, and his great enthusiasm for its potential to transport practice, it is surprising that so very little has been written about it since its introduction to narrative therapy in the mid 1990's. Michael referred to a definitional ceremony as a ritual of acknowledgement and regrading of persons' lives. The term ritual is relevant here as it sets it apart from traditional practices of therapy by engaging person's in a witnessed retelling of their lives. In his writings over the years, Michael offered up several definitions and purposes of definitional ceremonies. We would like to share three of them with you below that are of a particular interest to us. We will offer a brief commentary after each quote to situate how we relate them to the shared interests and commitments of Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices.

Definitional ceremonies deal with problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality, and being (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 267).





It is important to point out here, that Michael seems to be arguing that some stories, due to the extent to which an identity has been rendered invisible and marginalized leaving little room for action in the world, require the use of definitional ceremonies. We take this to mean, that sometimes, and perhaps most times, when faced with gripping problem stories, we need to find ways to do more in our work that extend beyond our everyday therapy conversations; ways of working that garner ‘witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being.’ We believe, as did Michael, this is especially true when working with people who have been subject to abuse and the ways in which problem stories seem to grip their lives (White, 1995). Definitional ceremonies are especially suited for this purpose as they serve as ‘rituals of regradation’ (White, 1995); we especially refer to rituals that have the effect of regrading and re-politicizing a life from the effects of individualizing discourses that continually degrade identities of those who suffer from abuse and de-politicize their suffering by stripping it from the very contexts and conditions in which it was created in the first place; leaving people with a collection of symptoms that is devoid of any history or backdrop that tells the story of what people have been up against in life. It is in the face of such invisibilized and marginalized histories, when problem stories are particularly unrelenting of people’s lives, that we need witnesses to tell our stories on our own behalf. Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices call on ceremony and ritual that garner witnesses who engage in a retelling of the counterstories of people’s lives.

Definitional ceremonies... *“establish conditions that conspire to engage people as active participants in their own history and in making themselves up... These ceremonies provide people an ‘arena for appearing’ and for ‘opportunities for self-proclamation of being’ (White, 1995, pp. 177- 178).*

Michael was very enthusiastic about the possibilities of engaging persons in definitional ceremonies. Being a witness to one’s own life, Michael commented “provides for people something akin to a *quantum leap* in possibilities for re-authoring of their lives, and for action in the world.” He





goes on to say, “Of all the therapeutic practices that I have come across in the history of my career, those associated with the definitional ceremony have the potential to be the most powerful. Time and again I have observed witness retellings achieve what is quite beyond my potential to achieve in my role as a therapist.” Michael’s enthusiasm here seems worthy of our attention.

Due to his excitement and enthusiasm for the possibilities of definitional ceremonies Michael engaged in an initial evaluation of effects of Outsider Witnessing Practices on clients’ lives. Here again are Michael’s words, “This was undertaken on a basis similar to that of David Epston’s study of the value of therapeutic documents...How many sessions worth of good therapy is a good reflecting team discussion? The outcome of this evaluation was fascinating—at an average of 4.7 sessions!” (White, 1995, p. 195). In addition to these more formal evaluations of practice, Michael also engaged in informal interviews with people regarding their experience of participating in Outsider Witnessing Practices. As a result of these interviews, Michael was quite clear that the most beneficial part of Outsider Witnessing Practices was when they were in an audience position listening to a witnessed retelling of their lives by team members (step two of Outsider Witnessing Practices). In fact, people were far less enthusiastic about the usefulness of other aspects of Outsider Witnessing Practices, especially when they joined in the conversation with team members. Here are a few of the comments that Michael summarized based on his interviews with clients.

- “I found it more helpful to *sit back from my life*, and to be an audience to the team, rather than *sitting in my life* in direct discussion with the team” (White, 1995, p. 196).
- “If you get into a discussion with the team, this has the effect of depriving you of the option of standing outside your life and experiencing it from a different perspective (White, 1995, p. 196).
- “When it was my turn to listen to the team, it felt that I was somewhere else, not with the problem. I could see how I didn’t have to be with the problem. This didn’t happen the time I was talking with





the team. It is not that I didn't enjoy talking to the team, but it wasn't the same as listening to them" (White, 1995, p. 196).

- "There is something that is so much more powerful about listening to a conversation about your life that is acknowledging and respectful of who you are" (White, 1995, p. 196).

In each of these quotes, it is clear that there is something quite powerful for people when they are in an audience position, listening from outside rather than inside their stories. In Michael's study of Outsider Witnessing Practices, clients described this as "sitting back from my life," "standing outside your life" and "I was somewhere else, not with the problem." When people re-entered the conversation with the team, it had the effect of "sitting inside" their stories and they were "deprived" of the gift of oversight that was afforded them when they were in the audience position. Michael goes on to say:

- "The power of outsider witness responses is much greater when the person concerned is not in the conversation itself. In the position as an audience to the conversation between me and the refuge workers, Luna could hear what she would not have otherwise heard had she had been in dialogue w/ Sally and Deane" (White, 2004, p. 49).
- "The process of retelling in which Luna was strictly in the audience position was very powerfully authenticating of what Luna accorded value to. Had Sally and Dianne turned to Luna and said directly to her 'Look, it's really important that you treasure this value that you give to children's lives, and that you hold onto this,' this would have made very little if any, difference to Luna. This could too easily be discounted, and would not provide, for Luna, that experience of resonance with the outside world" (White, 2004, p. 50).

Obviously, something was happening here that caught Michael's attention and he had a "plan to a more formal re-evaluation of this work in the near future" (White, 1995, p. 195). Unfortunately, due to his many other projects and his untimely death, Michael was unable, as far as we are aware, to carry





his theorizing about this audience or outside perspective any further.

Outsight in Insider Witnessing Practices

As we mentioned previously, early on in our study of Insider Witnessing Practices, our co-researchers commented over and over again about how this practice had a distancing effect, allowing them to see their lives as if from outside their stories and that this contributed greatly to their ability to see and relate to themselves as if they were another person. Here is just a sample of quotes from the co-researchers that we have interviewed thus far:

- During the Act 2, I felt that a level of detachment occurred for me. I was looking at someone else's story. I felt differently about my own story because it didn't feel like it was me. Seeing myself this way allowed me to feel compassion for myself even though it wasn't me, it was my story. How can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me? (Miranda, 19)
- From this outside position, it put me in an unusual position as a judge rather than a critic of my life. It compelled me into a space that I had not thought of before, that stitched things together in a way that it could not easily be waved away. It had this quality to it that my internal critic can't just refute. (Lynn, 55)
- It's weird, to hear it as an outsider looking in. It is like reading a story. And you think about all the adventures that the person went through. And you're tying in the memories to all of that. It's kind of crazy to hear it in that form. People have told me that "you're one of the strongest people they know" and I don't get it. I've just survived. Gone through the motions. But then you hear it like that, like you are a hero in the story. Going through all these adventures. And it's just like, "wow." It's crazy to think about. Because it is actually me. (MC, 22)





Repositioning the Outsider in Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices

When it comes to the naming of both Outsider and Insider Witnessing Practices, ironically, both David and Michael named the practice after the role that the therapists are to take up. For example, in, Outsider Witnessing Practices, the therapists are named the “outsiders” due to their role as witnesses from outside the client’s life. In Insider Witnessing Practices, it is the therapist who is designated the “insider” since their role is to engage in a witnessed retelling that is in the form of a portrayal of the client. However, both insider and outsider witnessing practices are intentionally set up to allow for persons to step outside of their own stories and to listen and see their lives with what we might call oversight rather than insight. If this is the case, which I am convinced it is, then both practices, Insider Witnessing Practices and Outsider Witnessing Practices, are really, when focused on the client, Outsider Witnessing. I don’t mean to suggest that we call Insider Witnessing Practices, Outsider Witnessing Practices but rather that we write this paper about outsideness as a way to call attention to what is at the heart of the matter with regard to both practices, creating the conditions by which oversight is possible.

We have come to see both insider and outsider witnessing practices as rituals whose direct purpose is to create conditions for oversight. When people are transported into a position of an outsider to their own life stories, it makes it more possible for them to see how they have actively participated in the shaping of their own counter stories and counter histories of their lives. Listening to a witnessed retelling of their lives by trusted witnesses creates a powerful arena for people to appear unto themselves as active agents in the living and shaping of the events of their lives all along. And isn’t this the purpose of narrative therapy after all? While he didn’t have the language for the term outsideness or oversight at the time, Michael White, when asked about the purpose of narrative therapy in an interview stated, “This work is to encourages people to take up an observer... position in relation to their own lives...to become the narrators of the events” of their lives (White, 1995, p. 134).





If we look at the history of narrative therapy, especially its beginnings, externalizing conversations appear to be another means toward oversight. According to Michael, “externalizing conversations employ practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people” (White, 2007, p. 9). Through the objectification of a problem, the person is invited to take up an observer or outside position in relation to their lives. Elsewhere, Michael proposed that through externalizing conversations “persons experience a separation, and an alienation in relation to these [problem] stories. In the space established by this separation people are free to explore alternative or preferred knowledges...” (White, 1991). The separation and alienation and the space that such a separation offers people, sounds akin to Miranda’s detachment from the story and Bakhtin’s outsideness. However, up until now, outsideness, through externalizing conversations, has only been used in the territory of the problem story. As we have seen from the comments above from Michael in his study of Outsider Witnessing Practices and from our co-researchers and our study of Insider Witnessing Practices, is that there is a whole new territory, the alternative or counterstory of a person’s life, where the power of oversight can have, as Michael put it, “quantum leap” effects. Perhaps, oversight has been the overarching theory of narrative therapy all along.

Returning to the quote above, we believe that Michael’s use of the term narrator is quite interesting here. A narrator isn’t just someone who tells the story, a narrator is someone who is outside the story looking down at everything that is happening. What we have found so fascinating is that time and again that clients’, in their feedback of Insider Witnessing Practices have spontaneously continue to echo and expand on what Michael’s beginning research into oversight proposed. Donna, one of our co-researchers, in a more lyrical form put it this way, “It was like I am standing up there on top of the earth and can just feel the earth rotating around... Before, the earth tilted to one side and now it has righted itself with me on top of it all.”





Insider Witnessing Practices as an “Extended Performance”

In his book, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, Michael wrote about a “variation on the stages of definitional ceremonies” that involves “an extended performance” (White, 2007, p. 199) of the retelling or performance that extends the time that the client is in the audience position. Michael argued that this was particularly important “when the person seeking consultation has little sense of personal agency, as is common among people who have been through significant trauma” (p. 199). Michael continued, “When people who have little sense of personal agency, they often feel irrelevant, empty, desolate, and paralyzed—as if their life is frozen in time.” (p. 199).

In such circumstances, when there is little personal agency and person experiences their life as frozen in time, Michael proposed that it is important that we find a means for people to experience “katharsis” or the experience of being transported “in response to witnessing powerful expressions of life’s dramas” (White, 2007, p. 194).

We have developed Insider Witnessing Practices for this very purpose, to provide the means for people to become witnesses to their own powerful life’s drama through an extended performance of the definitional ceremony. White states that “these extended performances... can include letters, audiotapes or videotapes sent [or performed] to the person whose life as at the center of the definitional ceremony” (White, 2007, p. 199).

This is where the difference, but not intent of Insider Witnessing Practices and Outsider Witnessing Practices lies. In Outsider Witnessing Practices, during stage two of the process, the client is an audience member to abbreviated retellings by several different team members which lasts for about 10-15 minutes. During Insider Witnessing Practices, however, the client is an audience member to an extended retelling of their life’s drama (by way of a recorded performance of their life story as told by an intimate witness—their therapist), a story that portrays them as moral agents who are and have always been actively shaping and bending the events of their lives according to their own moral purposes. When people are witnesses to





such a retelling, when they see the counterstory of their lives performed before their eyes, an unmistakable throughline appears that holds the entire story together; the throughline of their own personal agency. Sam (age 45), one of our co-researchers put it this way, “There was an arc to the interview...a story that unfolded...a throughline...that went all the way back.”

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What is a good story and how do we tell one? Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling practice

Tom Stone Carlson, Ph.D.

When we set out to develop Insider Witnessing Practices, it was born of an urgency to do more in our work. An urgency to do more in our work with people whose lives were under the influence of particularly gripping problem stories. People who had suffered from the terrible effects of violence and abuse; whose lives were also filled with beauty and triumph and a fierceness that left us in awe but whose aweness somehow escaped their own view and our own abilities to offer much more than a life preserver when what they needed was the safety of a boat. I am sure that you are all familiar with the challenges of finding yourselves standing in presence of such gripping and unrelenting stories. At times, cracks in the problem story appear and the person finds some respite from its grip, but then the crack quickly slams closed and the person finds herself back in the clutches of the problem story. Perhaps this is particularly familiar to those of us who work primarily with people who have suffered from violence and abuse and find themselves experiencing a sort of ever-presentness of the trauma that came to them as a result. In our desire to find ways for this work to do more; ways of working that might do right by the people who consulted us; ways of working that just might answer the question “What is the sensation of justice being done?;” we realized, that in such circumstances it is not enough to let others tell their stories on their own behalf. Sometimes, as Michael White said in his writings about definitional ceremonies, we need others to tell our stories on our own behalf (White, Narrative ways of working with trauma) and do so in a way that positions the person concerned as a witness, an outsider listening in, an audience member, to the telling of a story of the events of their lives. If we were going to take up Michael’s invitation to tell stories on another’s behalf, we quickly realized that we needed to know a whole lot more about what it means to tell a good story.





And so, reader, I thought I would tell you a story about how we can appreciate the importance of telling a good story in narrative therapy.

I first attended a workshop by David in the spring of 2014. The workshop was entitled, “What is a good story?” and he began by asking a provocative question. “How is it that we call ourselves narrative therapists and, yet, we know so very little about what a good story is?” In fact, David has lamented at just how little has been written on the topic of stories in narrative therapy, given that stories are, after all, the crux of the matter when it comes to this work. His question seemed to stop me in my tracks. Here I was working with people to construct alternative stories without any idea about what a good story was; without any idea of what makes for a compelling story; a story that has the capacity to win the day; or in the words of Michael White, a story that has the capacity “to eradicate a problem story.” All I had ever learned about story in narrative therapy was that a story has a past, present, and a future and that development of an alternative story in therapy involved the linking of events across time; events that had gone unnoticed due to the influence of the problem story. But this is a rather thin description of what a story is. What David was trying to impress on us that spring day in 2014 and every day since then, to anyone who will hear, is that is essential for us, as narrative therapists, to understand the elements that make a story a good story. For we certainly shouldn’t be okay with telling just any story. When faced with gripping problem stories, stories that just won’t seem to relent, stories that mar and dirty and damage, not just any story will do. We need to learn to tell stories in our conversations with others that have the capacity to counter damaged and spoiled identities, stories that rise above stock plots, stories that have literary merit; stories that are filled with drama; stories that are filled with mystery and surprise; stories that are filled with suspense; stories that are filled with imagination and beauty.

David’s insistence of our learning the craft of this work to do more on behalf of the lives of the people who consult us. If narrative therapy is said to have a tradition, it is that the fostering of new ideas and practices comes through



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





searching untraditional writings outside of narrative therapy itself. And so, we have spent the past several years reading anything that we could get our hands on (or more accurately anything that David has happened to stumble upon in some random library) related to the characteristics and aesthetics of good stories. We have found the writings of Cheryl Mattingly particularly helpful.

What Makes a Story a Good Story?

While we are still, in many ways, novices in our study of literary theories related to good storytelling, our brief study of writers like Cheryl Mattingly, have pointed to three areas of good storytelling that seem to be most relevant to us in our work. Good stories, stories that have literary merit, are stories that are filled with drama; stories that are filled with mystery and surprise; stories that are filled with suspense; stories that are filled with imagination and beauty. Each of these elements work in concert with each other, allowing a particular narrative arc to appear that drives the story forward while at the same time revealing throughlines running backward and forward in ways that give the story, as Geertz (1986) might say, a “graspable form” (p. 373), give it a substance, or in the words of one our most recent IWP co-researchers, give the story “purchase.” Rather than getting into a detailed discussion of each of these four elements of a good story, we thought we would provide readers with some of the quotes from our studies that have been most meaningful to us in our effort to learn how to tell compelling stories in our work.

Stories Filled with Drama

Before sharing quotes about the need for drama in good storying telling, I feel compelled to tell a story that brought the point of drama home for me in ways that I will never forget.

I still remember the moment I sent my first transcript to David Epston to review as we prepared to do our first IWP interview. I had conducted what I thought was



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





a fairly good narrative interview and felt good enough sending it to him. At least so I thought until I was about to hit the send button. “Holy shit!” I thought. “You are about to send your work to David Epston. Are you sure you want to do this?” Against the onslaught of growing voices of doubt, I decided to hit the send button knowing that I couldn’t pass up an opportunity like this to be mentored by David Epston. I set my doubts and anxieties aside thinking that it would be a few days before David responded. “He is busy after all.” Just two hours later, to my great surprise, an email from David appeared on my computer screen.

I opened the email with an anxious excitement. “What would he think of my interview? Had I done enough to encourage him to want to continue our project together?” While David was kind enough to be complementary of some aspects of my interview, there was one resounding theme that ran through his comments like an unmistakable plot, “MORE DRAMA TOM!!!,” written in all caps (as anyone who has had the pleasure of communicating with David via email knows well). I don’t remember how many times his plea for more drama appeared but the message was clear.

My first response to David’s urging was “But I am not a dramatic person. I am quiet and speak in a soft and gentle tone.” I have to admit that I felt an initial sense of discouragement, wondering if I had what it takes to do this work in the way that David had hoped. And for a very brief moment I even thought about giving up. Fortunately, I quickly realized that David was not talking about drama in the personality sense of the word, but drama in the literary sense of the word; a drama that involved the painting of dramatic scenes and images that showed the person as a moral agent actively shaping the events of their life against the odds of what they have been up against in life. In that moment of realization, I decided right then and there that I would study David’s questions to see how he invoked drama in his work. I also asked him for any readings that he might recommend on the topic of narrative and drama and good storytelling and I will never forget his response. “Please read Cheryl Mattingly’s “Healing Dramas Clinical Plots. If I were stranded on a desert island and only had one book, it would be this one. I have





learned more about being a narrative therapist from her than from any other narrative therapist.” When David Epston, who has read countless books and who has visited more libraries around the world most anyone, says that if he only had one book, perhaps we should listen. The interesting thing about David’s recommendation is that Cheryl Mattingly is not a narrative therapist. She is a sociologist who uses narrative theory as a guiding metaphor in her studies of parents of children who have a terminal illness. However, after reading *Healing Dramas*, and Mattingly’s other two books “*The Paradox of Hope*” and “*Moral Laboratories*, I would have to agree with David, that I learned more about what it means to be a narrative therapist from Mattingly than from any other author.

So, what does Mattingly have to say about the relationship between narrative and drama that we have found so compelling?

For starters, Mattingly takes the rather curious position that narrative and drama are interlinked and interchangeable terms. According to Mattingly, a good narrative is a good drama and vice versa.

It should be very evident that within the dramatistic tradition and the narrative phenomenology I am proposing; the term narrative is not used in its ordinary sense...Storytelling and the reception of cultural texts represent one small part of how narrative infuses practical actions and lived experience. It is in part to underscore this expansion of “narrative” that I link it so closely to “drama.” In drawing from multiple disciplines, I use the closely interlinked terms drama and narrative almost interchangeably. (Mattingly, 2010, p.44)

Before I get too far ahead of myself, I guess we need to know what the word drama means. The origin of the word drama is literally “action” or “to act.” Typically, a drama in literature is referred to as “a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue and typically designed for theatrical performance” (Meriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2018). The word drama also refers





to “any situation or series of events having vivid, emotional, conflicting, or striking interest or results” (Meriam-Webster’s Dictionary, 2018). In this sense, drama is particularly well-suited for the task of narrative therapy as its express purpose is to portray the life of a character in ways that highlight the conflict or danger that actors face and the actions that they take up to resolve the danger in vivid detail and often with striking or surprising results.

Mattingly reminds us that a narrative as a drama is much more than a chronology; a mere linking of events across sequences of time. A chronology is “structured as a series. It recounts events in such a truncated way that it obscures rather than illuminates what is central to the way actions are linked to motives as well as to consequences” (Mattingly, 2010, p.104) For Mattingly, narratives represent a “dramatic transformation of lived experience” (Mattingly, 1998, p.34) and in their dramatic form “offer moral arguments” (Mattingly, 2010, p.104) about the ways in which people have gone about living their lives in the face of what they have been up against in life.

As a way of clarifying what she means by narrative as drama, Mattingly often uses the term “poetic narrative.” Here Mattingly is saying that she is not interested in just any kind of narrative but a narrative that dwells in the world of poetics and art. According to Mattingly,

a poetic narrative imitates action and experience through clarification and condensation, revealing causal connections between motive, deed, and consequence which also allows a moral reading of events. The purpose of a narrative is not simply to tell what happened but to provide a moral perspective on past events (Mattingly, 1998, p. 29).

By using the terms “moral reading” and “moral perspective” Mattingly is not calling for some top-down or normalizing judgement of morals from some outside authority, but rather that the re-presentation of a person’s life through a dramatic/poetic narrative allows persons to engage in their own moral and just reading of how their actions, throughout the course of their lives, and especially





in the face of their greatest dangers, were indeed guided by their own intentions, purposes, and desires for living.

Poetic narratives (good stories) have a way of identifying, locating, and highlighting moments that could be otherwise seen as routine or ordinary and imbuing them with dramatic quality. A moment becomes a dramatic moment through the use of vivid particularity, heightened emotional significance and attention to what it is that has been at stake in a life.

Events take their meaningful shape (are lived experiences) for actors depending upon what they bring to the encounter and what is at stake for them personally.” (Mattingly, 2010, p.48)

Drama in Practice

Earlier, I told the story of my first act one interview and David’s encouraging insistence that my questions needed MORE DRAMA! We thought it might be interesting to use my first attempt at an IWP interview and show you some of my actual “drama-light” questions and offer some alternative questions that attempt to present them in a more dramatic form.

Context

The questions that will be presented here are based on an act one interview where Megan portrayed her client Jennifer. Jennifer had suffered from the effects of terrible migraines and other physical pain since she was 6 years old. At the age of 6, due to the fact that no one believed her complaints about her physical health, she devised some rather unique strategies to deal with the pain. She created imaginary worlds to escape to; worlds where she was a doctor of sorts to animals and used imaginary spells and incantations to heal them of their pain. At home her physical pain was labeled as make believe and interpreted as attention seeking and trying to avoid going to school. At the age of 12, she decided that she was ‘tired of’ living with the effects of pain and took ‘drastic measures’ to find some relief from the pain. Those efforts involved being an advocate for her own



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





experience in relationship with her parents and doctors. As a result of her self-advocacy efforts, Jennifer was eventually able to get the medical and emotional support that she needed and was able to find significant relief from the effects of pain in her life. Unfortunately, anxiety entered her life shortly thereafter, as a result of being bullied at school and a return of surveillance practices by her parents. This cocktail of bullying and surveillance led Jennifer to withdraw from friends, engage in self-harming actions, and eventually to make threats against her life. Jennifer and Megan had been meeting for 6 months at the time of the act one interview and Jennifer had already made significant strides in taking her life back from anxiety.

Initial Question #1

The following question was in response by Megan's Jennifer that appeared to make some implicit connections between her triumphs against the effects of anxiety with the 'very mature and serious' way that she handled her physical health struggles when she was 12.

- Can you tell me a little bit about how the history of being tired of your physical health struggles may have been a help to you in changing your relationship with anxiety?

Revised Question #1

In looking at the transcript now, it is clear to me why this was a question that David had nominated as a candidate for MORE DRAMA. First of all, my question did very little to bring to light the rather remarkable context of a 12 year old young woman who was somehow able to become her own advocate in the face of repeated dismissals of the reality of her pain from her parents and school teachers. Let me offer a revised sequence of questions here that might add some needed drama to heighten the significance of Jennifer's current efforts and situate it in a long history of acting on her own behalf in quite remarkable ways.



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





- Jennifer, when I asked you the question, “How was it that you were able to take your life back from anxiety in a timeframe that you would consider “ahead of anything I expected,” you wondered whether it had something to do with learning to be an advocate for yourself when you were just 12 years old. If we were to take a moment to look back on the efforts of your 12 year-old-self at the time, what do you think it might take for a 12 year old young woman to hold on to her own experience and convictions, *even in the face of a 6 year denial* by the adults around you?
- Did this ‘moral strength’ of your own convictions just suddenly appear when you were 12 or might it have a much longer history?
- If I remember correctly Jennifer, your 6 year-old-self created imaginary worlds where you somehow managed to *escape the prison of your physical pain* and in those worlds you were a healer who used special spells and incantations to provide animals with relief from suffering. Do you think that it is possible that the imaginary worlds that your 6 year-old-self imagined into being somehow served as a training ground for your moral strength?
- And is it at all possible that the *spells and incantations* that you offered your animal friends, when you were the tender age of 6, somehow made their way forward to you when you needed them most so that you could be a *healer for yourself* like you were for your animal friends?

Okay, I am getting a bit carried away here. But, hopefully you can see how these questions build upon each other, using the rich imagery from her life history to heighten and dramatize the significance of the actions of her 12 year-old-self and extend the history of those actions far back into her past.

Stories Filled with Suspense and Surprise

Another important quality of a good story/poetic narrative is a sense of suspenseful suprisingness. Anyone who has read a good novel knows what it feels





like to be on the edge of their seats swept up in the suspense of what will happen next. At David's encouragement, I have tried to see my work as akin to reading/writing a good novel. Does the story portray a character who acts on the scene and is capable of surprise? I have found E.M. Forster's idea of round and flat characters helpful here.

The distinction in literary theory between "flat" characters and round ones is helpful here. E.M. Forster tells us that "Flat characters, in their purest form, are constructed round a single idea or quality. Once they are identified, flat characters never surprise us, never waiver. They do exactly what they are supposed to do, no more and no less. Round characters, by contrast, possess multiple qualities, shadowy ambiguities, and outright contradictions. Most important, they are capable of change" (As quoted in Mattingly, 2010, p. 108).

Forster's idea of a round character has been helpful to me as I think about how I go about telling a story of a character that is at the center of the unfolding drama. If my questions lack drama, suspense, and surprise, if they fall flat, the character in the story will very likely come off as a flat character that lacks the capacity to capture the imagination of the person in a way that, as Michael was fond of saying, might 'fascinate' them.

Another Detour on the Topic of Dictionaries. While we are on the topic of characters, I want to draw your attention to a term that David has been attempting to introduce into his new dictionary for narrative therapy. You might be asking yourselves, "There is a new dictionary for narrative therapy? Why? And how come I didn't know this?" For the past four or five years, David has been traveling the world introducing new words to complement and reimagine the narrative therapy terms that we have become accustomed to. Why, you might be asking, would David want to come up with new words for the very terms that he and Michael created to describe narrative therapy in the first place? As David tells the story, there is a shelf life to words and phrases just as there is for food (with





the exception of Twinkies it appears). According to lexicographer Kory Sampler (2018), the shelf life of most words is dated at 10-20 years. Once words have been sitting on the shelf for too long, they blend into the background; become part of the everyday scenery and lose their capacity to inspire. According to David, if the start date of narrative therapy was 1985, then the narrative therapy dictionary has exceeded its expiration date. David is not calling for a wholesale burning of the lexicon of narrative therapy, not by any means, but what he is advocating for is the introduction of new words, terms, and phrases that might have the capacity to re-inspire, re-enliven, and re-imagine the spirits of narrative practice (Epston, 2019).

Back to the topic of characters then... One of the terms that David has nominated for this new dictionary of narrative therapy is “Moral Character.” When thinking about good stories in literature, one of the most common questions that we are introduced to as readers is, “What is the moral of the story?” Each story has an intention to teach some kind of virtue or moral that comes with particular invitations that ask us to consider what it means to live a good life. As we borrow the notion of a good story for the purpose of therapy, the question becomes “What is the moral of the character that has been driving this story along?” You might think of the moral character of a person as an ‘against all odds’ longing, desire, spirit that has been the driving force behind all of their efforts and labors on behalf of their own living. This, then, begs us to ask other questions, such as:

- Given what we know about what this person has been up against in life, and all that they have been striving for against these odds, just who is this person standing before us?
- What is it about the substance of this person that has allowed them to stare down the particular dangers of their life and somehow, against all odds, live out a life for themselves?
- What word, image, or phrase might capture the moral or spirit of this character that has made all of this possible?





To complete this particular detour, it is critical that the stories that we tell in our work put the moral character of the person, in all of their roundness, on full display. And suspense and surprise matter when it comes to revealing a person as a round character in the stories of their lives. Mattingly argues that the stories we tell need to take place in what she refers to as “narrative time;” a time that is “marked by suspense and surprise” (Mattingly, 2010, 85).

After all, in dramatic time, some kind of transformation occurs or at least seems possible. This is what makes a drama suspenseful. When desires are strong and there is some chance that they could be realized, even if trouble looms large, participants are willing to take risks. Out of this risky action, transformation may occur and time becomes unpredictable. (Mattingly, 2010, p.136)

According to Mattingly, narrative time is different than the chronological account that is often the basis for most narrative theorists. In contrast to story time, that seeks to present events linked across time in a chronological fashion, Mattingly (1998) argues that narrative time actually seeks to distort time, “prolonging a few precious moments, skimming a month at a time, entire years, intimating the ending in the beginning, blithely shifting scenes and times and sequences in order to further the plot” (p.35). To further this distinction between narrative time and chronological time in storytelling, Mattingly (1998) further comments that,

Life is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart (p.45).

Mattingly’s distinction between story time and narrative time has encouraged us to shift our thinking away from the mere telling of stories and toward the telling of poetic narratives, narratives that offer “meaning through evocation, image, the mystery of the unsaid, unfolding events in a suspense-laden time in which one





wonders what will happen next” (p.8). This ‘what will happen next,’ ‘sitting on the edge of your seat’ quality to a good story is something that any reader of a good novel knows well. It is what keeps us up late into the night because we simply can’t put the book down. We have to turn the page. We all know what this is like in our experience of readers of a good story. The question for us as narrative therapists is, “How can we tell a story in such a way that the reader of the story, the client, experiences this same ‘sitting on the edge of their seats’ suspensefulness that begs them to ask not only ‘what will happen next’ but more importantly, ‘what will I do next?’”

Mattingly again offers important wisdom here, suggesting that suspense and surprise in stories about human lives require a “certain breathless questioning...a continual and what then? And what then? puzzling... In this puzzlement, the audience share with the characters a stance of openness toward the future which stretches before them unknown and still potentially shapeable” (Mattingly, 1998, p.38). In the case of Insider Witnessing Practices, since we are intending to tell a story on behalf of another person, with that very person as its witness, the audience and the character is one and the same, leaving them open toward their own future in all of its now potentially shapeable possibility.

It might be obvious to you, reader, that it is impossible to disentangle drama from suspense and suspense from drama. Drama requires suspense and suspense requires drama. And the key ingredient to it all is the production of desire. Here again we turn to Mattingly (Mattingly, 1998),

A therapeutic (narrative) plot only seduces to the extent that it emerges in an unfolding life story, gives some hope for life that is still to be lived...A therapeutic (narrative) plot occurs in a kind of gap, a space of desire created by the distance between where the protagonist is and where she wants to be. A narrative possibility cannot be within easy reach. Narratives involve confronting obstacles, taking risks, facing enemies, overcoming dangers and the like...There must be something worth doing. A gap, in other words, is





only of narrative import if there is suspense about the outcome and that means some hope for success, some reason to take a risk. Of course, to hope at all means taking a risk, making oneself vulnerable to desire (p. 70).

I recently sent this quote to David Epston and he commented “That is quite remarkable! Nowhere has it been better said than this. Every student of narrative therapy should have this in **bold print** over their desks/computers.”

Suspense and Surprise in Practice

In order to offer you an example of bringing suspense and surprise into practice, let’s return to my very first IWP interview with Megan’s Jennifer and another of my somewhat flat, drama and now suspense-less, questions.

Initial Question #2

The following question is in response to a comment by Megan’s Jennifer about indicating her desire to ‘continue the forward motion’ of the conversation and the growing anticipation that she was experiencing regarding ‘the many things that I still want to do and experience in life that might just be possible now.’

- We’ve been looking back a little bit on the history of your determination and strength and ability to be the kind of person who arrives at her destination ahead of schedule without turning back. As you look forward in your life, maybe the next year or two years, what do you think might come into your life as a result of your commitment to look forward and your skills and ability to not look back and to arrive ahead of schedule?

Revised Question #2

This is a fairly common question that I would have asked prior to apprenticing myself to David’s questions and this emerging new dictionary of narrative therapy. In fact, I remember being quite pleased with this particular question when I transcribed the interview and sent it off to David. But, you guessed it, this too was a question that David nominated for MORE DRAMA, or in this case,



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





suspense. While my initial question was looking for the ‘what will happen next’ in the story, it was clearly lacking in suspense and surprise, or as David might say, ‘narrative drive.’ “Where is the drama? The suspense? The excitement? The sense of beginning, middle, and end?” (Mattingly, 1998, p.63). Let me, again provide a sequence of revised questions that might do more to heighten a sense of suspense, surprise, and wonderment about what just might be around the corner.

- Jennifer, in our conversation today we have charted a history of a person who has somehow managed to trust her own knowing and wisdom about what is best for her life and her body, even in the face of denials by parents and experts. And not only that but, you became your own health advocate at the age of 12 and were somehow able to convince the doctors to listen to your counsel. And now, even in the most difficult of times, your moral strength and conviction has once again come to your aid and allowed you to take your life back from the grips of anxiety ahead of any time frame that anyone could have predicted. Is it at all possible that all of your efforts and labors on your own behalf, that extend all the way back to your 6-year-old self, have created a momentum that is now propelling you forward in ways you could never have predicted?
- As you are standing here today, on the edge of tomorrow, with all of the energy and momentum of your history stored up, what surprises might be waiting for you and your life just on the horizon?

Hopefully these revised questions are an improvement over my first attempt. Although that is up for you, reader, to decide. You may have noticed the extensive summary before introducing the first revised question. My hope is to use the events of the past and present to tell a story of ever increasing momentum; an open story that beckons a person to live into the near future; a story that begs the question, “And just what will I do next?”





Setting the Scene: Of Agents, Place, Detail, and Vivid Particularity

“Narrative form is based on the vividness of events in themselves as well as on their contributions to the plot “(Mattingly, 1998, p.85)

At a workshop in Fargo, North Dakota several years back, David Epston shared a transcript of a conversation with a young woman who had been removed from her home due to mistreatment and neglect on the part of her parents. As is not uncommon in such circumstances, this young woman had serious struggles at school and her future looked bleak. Somehow, during her time in the treatment home, she found her way and developed a particular love for working with children. At the age of 18, when David met her, she had already graduated with a certificate in early childhood education. This, of course, seemed remarkable to David and he quickly engaged the young woman in a conversation about the history of this unanticipated and against the odds achievement. After the history of her achievements had been brought into light, David asked her to revisit the exact moment when she received her certificate with considerable detail. He even asked her to describe what the certificate looked and felt like in her hands. And then he asked “And was it a sunny day?” A bit perplexed, one of the members of the audience asked, “A sunny day? Why does it matter if it was a sunny day?” And, as now become common place for me, David’s response had me sitting in wonderment. “Narrative has been great with time but terrible with place.” David went on to talk about the importance of setting the scene with sufficient detail that people can imagine into the scene, to see themselves acting on it and to bring the sensations of the moment into present.

Setting the scene through a vivid description of the details and then putting that scene into motion is critical to good storytelling because it creates a “heightened attention to the moment” (Mattingly, 2010, p. 144). And from this place of heightened attention to the moment, “human actors take center stage” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 109). Mattingly continues,



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





Stories always show what happens as action, so that even if fate seems to prescribe a certain direction of the plot, the specific events which occur are always linked to the intentional actions of the characters (p.109).

And from this action-focused place, the person at the center of the story is put in particular circumstances that show the person as a moral agent actively shaping the events as they unfold across time. Again, Mattingly (2010) is helpful here,

Characters confront situations that call for action; they are key shapers of story event, and their responses to what happens are the focal point of narrative attention. Characters reveal who they are and the motives they have in and through their action and suffering (p.179-180).

Given the importance of detail in setting scene and place, we might need to learn to slow down the rush to meaning in our work with clients. If we jump too quickly to meaning, for example, asking people to name the values and intentions that might inform a particular unique outcome, before we have sufficient detail to set the scene in motion through its vivid particularity, action is lost. And when action is lost, so too is the opportunity to reveal a heightened sense of motive, agency, and desire (Mattingly, 1998). Here is an example of the power of vivid detail in setting a scene in motion in ways that reveal a person as a moral agent actively shaping the events of her life. In preparing for an IWP interview about a year ago, as my colleagues and I at the Calgary Narrative Collective, were gathering information about the person had been up against in life, the therapist told a story about a time when the client was dropped off in a field by her parents as a form of punishment to teach her a lesson about the consequences of disobedience. But what if the therapist didn't inquire further? What if the therapist didn't ask for the details of the scene? What time of year was it? Where did they drop you off? How deep was the snow? What did you see when you looked up? What time of day was it? What did you do? And what did you do next?

As we inquired further about the details surrounding this moment, here is what we found out. We learned that the child was only six years old at the time, that it





was in the middle of winter after a recent storm that left her standing in waist deep snow. All of these details matter greatly if we were to tell this story in a way that would allow the client to engage in a moral reading of this particular event and to reveal her motives and desires that informed her remarkable and surprising response. Fortunately, the therapist knew to ask for even more. And what did this 6-year-old child do in the face of being abandoned in waist deep snow in the middle of a winter's night? After the slightest of pauses to assess the situation, this 6-year-old child stood up, scanned the horizon and upon seeing a row of lighted houses asked herself, "Maybe someone in one of those houses will love me?" And immediately started making her way to find out.

And now, with the scene and place gathered in vivid detail we can ask a question that sets the scene in motion and displays Patricia as a moral agent moving through the scene with desire, purpose, and hope, doing something that a 6-year-old probably has no business doing. Against the dramatic backdrop that sets this scene in motion, heightened levels of significance become possible for Patricia.

Here is how the scene played out in the act one interview with Loree, Patricia's therapist, playing the part of Patricia for the purpose of allowing Patricia to become a compassionate witness to her own story.

Tom: When you were 6, in that field, and you saw the insult clearly: "Oh, I guess they don't want me" and you looked out and saw the lights and thought "maybe someone else will" what did you do?

Loree's Patricia: In that moment?

Tom: Yeah, what did you do? Did you just imagine it, did you sit there?

Loree's Patricia: No! I decided I would go find out; and started walking towards the houses that I could see. Yeah, I started walking and





thinking "yeah, one of those houses might want me and I'm going to go see" I guess. I know I didn't stand there. I just kept going.

Tom: Did you somehow will—willing your little 6-year old's feet and legs to go find... what were you wanting to go find? What were you willing yourself toward?

Loree's Patricia: Probably finding a home. A family that wanted me...that could see me, at home I was totally invisible, and ironically, totally scrutinized—so I was either invisible or scrutinized at. For every action or nonaction. So, I thought there might be a place where I could just be. Not scrutinized but seen.

Tom: I'm still stuck on you being in this field. Just because, it seems to me from the retelling that you didn't say—well as most 6-year-old might say "I must be the terriblest person to be left here" but you, you somehow said: "They must not want me. Maybe someone will there in those lighted houses". What kind of a knowing is this that you as a 6-year-old maybe had no business knowing? That got yourself up, and your feet moving. What kind of a knowing was this? Knowing about yourself?

Loree's Patricia: Yeah, I think it might surprise me too. That sometimes that stopped—how did I make it? But when you say that—as long as I can remember I had this sense that I could rely on myself. I could rely on myself, and when you say that it feels like even then I had that sense; but somehow—yeah, that I wasn't bad. I wasn't dropped off because I was bad...

After watching the interview and seeing her actions set in motion in this way Patricia said...



What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





You know actually I've never put that together before—those two stories about the lights in the distance. It hadn't occurred to me that there was a throughline in that. That a philosophical thought developed around it, went all the way back, you know to see those lights in the distance. So, it's interesting...I became very philosophical, at the age of 6, in the most profound sort of experience sitting in the middle of a wintery field, and seeing the lights in the distance...I didn't hesitate. I set out in waist high snow, to find a place where someone would see me and love me. My vision was clear. The throughline goes all the way back.

I return to Mattingly once again here, “A dramatic moment commonly involves agents acting in ways that are at odds with the scene, generating all sorts of Trouble that must then be resolved in some fashion” (Mattingly, 2010, p.45).

Certainly, Patricia, at the tender age of 6, was acting in ways that were at odds with the scene and because of the careful attention to detail on the part of her therapist Loree, we were able to generate all sorts of trouble with the Problem Story and the unfair conclusions that it led her to draw about her identity as a person. Clearly, she was a moral agent in her life whose actions were full of a knowing and desire that were well beyond her years.

Two weeks after the interview took place Patricia had this to say about the effect of seeing her life played out in such vivid and dramatic detail.

It offered me a bit of distance and allowed me to think as an adult about the child I was. When I was watching the story of my life unfold, especially about the circumstances of my childhood and the snowy field, it was if I had feelings filtered through feelings. Hearing about the child in the story, who was me, and all that she had been through...the unfairness shone through!

There was an arc to the interview. A story that unfolded and it painted a picture of the unfairness of it all and I could see the innocence. THIS CHILD



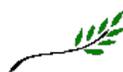


WAS INNOCENT...just trying to grow, to develop, to find a place to belong, to be loved.

So, reader, this is where the story, the story about learning to tell a good story, ends. Or perhaps it is more of a beginning. A beginning look at how to re-center good storytelling at the heart of narrative practice and some of the ways that it has required me to reimagine the ways that I ask questions, and in particular, to take the time to set scenes in motion, through a vivid particularity of the moment, in ways that offer people a sense of themselves as moral agents actively shaping the unfolding events of their lives. Creating an image of a person as an active moral agent is, after all, the purpose of narrative therapy in the first place. In the words of Michael White, narrative therapy seeks to provide a “historical account of the person’s ability to intervene in her/his life... an account of **personal agency**, an account of what could be called **the person’s agentic self**. It includes details about what the person has been up against in the performance of this personal agency, and against this background, it emphasizes the significance of...the steps the person has taken toward having more say about how their life goes” (White, 1995, p. 143).

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What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process





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What is a good story and how do we tell one?
Narrative therapy as a counter-storytelling process



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Questions for Preparing for an IWP

Sanni Paljakka & Tom Stone Carlson

This document grew out of a pressing need to find the means to talk about our clients in our consultations with other therapists and colleagues. In a time of heavily manualized and intervention-focused therapies, it became clear that we have to purposefully reach for another way of thinking and telling of our client work. We needed questions and ideas that could counter the current training and consultation traditions featuring a poverty of story-telling, a streamlined degradation of language used to describe our clients' lives, a dearth of regard to the detailed contexts of our client's lives, a prohibition against in-session note-taking of clients' expressions, and a mis-education of attention toward stories of broken identities and failed relations. The preparations for an IWP with each other, with our colleagues, with student therapists and seasoned therapists alike, became an adventure of principled and Narrative counter-practice to clichéd and common psychology and social work practices. This document grew out of the necessity to reach for the tacit counter-practices of Narrative therapy, and make them slightly more explicit.

Current and Pressing Moral Dilemma

- What is this person's most beseeching question about living that brought them to therapy?

Consider your first meetings with this person. What were their own expressions for their hopes for therapy at this point in their lives? What was the impetus, the encounter, the experience that mobilized this person to wish to take time to consider it in a therapy context? Search the person's expressions of both hope and suffering, and consider what kinds of moral deliberations the person is currently deeply involved in. Is it possible that the timing of seeking therapy is neither accidental nor happenstance, but due to pressing philosophical and moral considerations within an experience of grave ambiguity or even distress or





mistreatment? What is this person currently, vividly, amazingly, - reaching for or trying for in life?

Some examples of such questions posed in initial therapy sessions in our own work include:

- If I were to evaluate this on moral grounds, is my partner's treatment of me reasonable?
- If one more person tells me to say goodbye to my children, I will take my life. -How do I go on living when I feel forgotten by the universe?
- My life isn't "progressing," I don't seem to be able to "get it together," am I a waste of space?
- I feel this anger rising more and more often, but as a woman, a woman of colour, I am not afforded entry or permission into experiences of outrage.
- I just can't seem to take care of myself, be gentle with myself.
- I am being sexually harassed at work, but what hope do I have that it would be different elsewhere?

Each of these examples points to a person who is currently standing on the edge of either constituting themselves and their lives and relationships as thoroughly failed or broken, or considering their experience of anguish a possible moral insurrection-in-the-making.

Up-Against Backdrop

- What has this person been up against in their life?

Consider the following quote from Michael White (1995) who spoke of the significance of providing "some historical account of the person's ability to intervene in her/his life... an account of personal agency, an account of what could be called the person's agentive self. It includes details about what the person has been up against in the performance of this personal agency, and against this background, it emphasizes the significance of...the steps the person has taken toward having more say about how their life goes (p. 143)."





Think back and look over your session notes of your therapy conversations thus far, what is the problem story? Please note that common place descriptions like “Depression” (or equivalent in DSM speak) are only a short-hand or stand-in for the “problem story” – and neither is a one-word externalization like “The Critic” (or equivalent in Narrative speak). Descriptors like “Depression” or the “Voice of the Critic” might be the tip of an ice berg of a very long history of abuse, and can only cause further curiosity and concentrated attention as to what kinds of experiences in life would constitute such “despair and worthlessness” that go by the de-contextualized (un-storied) name of “Depression.” Ask yourself: does this word do justice to this person’s suffering in life?

Our clients can’t afford shorthand when it comes to their experiences of suffering in our world. Another Michael White quote: “...in the culture of psychotherapy, most of the interactions between therapists and people who consult them are informed by the discourses of pathology. These discourses inform taken-for-granted ways of speaking about people’s lives and relationship practices that have the effect of marginalizing and objectifying people who seek help. What sort of requirements would be necessary to undermine this potential for marginalisation and objectification?” (White, 1995). Miller Mair puts it this way: “Much of our language in psychology is an embarrassment.” Elizabeth Alexander writes, “Language is degraded from the highest perches, and public words regularly carry meaning that reduces groups to crude and false stereotypes.” Therefore, instead of crude, reductionist “shorthand,” we are looking for “long-hand:” an experience-near, compelling description of what the person has been up against in life in the person’s own unique dictionary. We need to know the problem story at the level of the word of the person or in the person’s vernacular.

We will ask you in the interview, “are these the person’s words or yours?,” “can you read to us from your session notes, transcripts, or therapeutic documents what the person’s words are?” We will also want to extend this telling beyond a few words and ask you for particular stories and images that this person has evoked in order to help you step into their experience of suffering.





The “problem story” is usually a lively mix of unbearable experiences (for example, being abandoned as a child, and assaulted later in life), their effects on a person’s thoughts, emotions, body, and freedom of action and relationships (for example, panic in particular situations in daily life), as well as the particular identity conclusions that have been exacted of people (for example, “I am a weak person who does not cope well”). Dominant cultural ideologies, or “master narratives” play a powerful part in the construction and tightening of identity conclusions around a person (for example, “we teach people how to treat us”, or “women ought to ask themselves what they did that invited an assault”). We are seeking a re-telling of all these details in our conversation with you.

If we do not get this part right, this “concentration of attention” to detailed descriptions in the person’s own haunting words, we cannot ask any person to trust us to tell a story on their behalf. This is a matter of power and justice in regard to storytelling rights. Every person that we have interviewed about their IWP experience so far has told us that hearing their own unique and authoritative descriptions of their suffering taken up by a room-full of therapists powerfully contributed to their felt sense that this was *their* story and brought them a sense of safety and dignity and knowledgability throughout the proceedings; -their story telling rights were carefully safeguarded. Due to this attention on people’s own descriptions and imagery, our insider witnessing conversations thus far have taken us inside most varied and surprising landscapes: realms lions and cages, landscapes of train tracks, images of imprisonment and travel visas, juxtapositions of tender fierceness, a particularly beautiful row of lighted houses on a winter’s day, “mountainous girls” cutting “corset strings” and packing “hope chests” with insurrection, etc. In our conversation with you, we hope to take the imagery that was haltingly worded and hard-won for your person in describing what they have been up-against, and set their actions into motion in precisely this arena.

Re-read Michael’s quote above and consider: it is in contrast to the backdrop of the “up-against-ness” that the steps (Michael calls them “agentive” steps) that people have been able to take shine with significance. The secret is that the counter-story lives in people’s responses to what they have been up against. Embedded in the stories that have most undone, stripped, aggrieved, unjustly





injured, angered, and betrayed a person to live their desires, their will, their substance, what they have always stood for and bled for and fought for in this life. Problem stories know this all too well. This is why they work so hard at exacting particularly sinister identity conclusions that are directly related to what people have been up against. Problem stories work in the arena of what is most prized or venerated in people's lives and use what people have been up against to spoil people's identities, relationships and futures.

Master Narratives

- What are the dominant ideologies or “master narratives” that are behind the particular identity conclusions that the problem is exacting on the person?

Consider this quote from Michael White “...the culture of psychotherapy is not peripheral to mainstream culture – not exempt from dominant structures and ideologies, and it plays a central role in the reproduction of these structures and ideologies (for example, just take the link between the misogyny of dominant culture and the mother-blaming of the culture of psychotherapy). In light of this, could we trust that therapists would not also be complicit in this reproduction, and that they would not unwittingly contribute further to the very forces that provide the context for the problems that people seek consultation over? Certainly, such trust would be misplaced. So, what processes might be instated to address this vulnerability to the reproduction of some of the negative aspects of dominant culture?” A master narrative represents the prescriptive template for living, responding, and moving about in the world that grows out of a particular dominant discourse or ideology.

Hilda Lindeman Nelson writes that “master narratives” “damage identities” by rendering people untrustworthy in others and later in their own eyes and by constricting people's freedom of movement. In our experience, “master narratives” parade prominently in entirely vague yet completely totalizing accusations against the character of the person. Master narratives might also be called “stock plots,” “ideas of least (cultural) resistance,” “totalizing templates,”





or “conversational cul-de-sacs” to understand the identities and actions of groups of people. The -isms in our world like racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, capitalism, and neoliberalism provide powerful back-up to the master narratives that shape how others see and relate to people’s experiences and understandings. Master narratives operate like a collection of normative gazes that simultaneously prescribe and prohibit certain ways of being in the world. When a person inevitably resists such prescriptions in their acts of living, the master narratives push back, bellow, discipline, punish and try with all their might to bring the person back in line. For example, some of the master narratives that we have encountered in our conversations with clients, for the purposes of IWPs, sound like this: “You are just another woman who loves too much,” “Be charming, be pretty, be decorative, don’t ever talk back,” “The problem with you is your co-dependency,” “What you are asking for is reserved for white women only,” “You are too fat and disabled to love,” “You aren’t confident enough,” etc.

In our conversations with you we will not only consider people’s identities and the particular isms that might be at work in their lives, we will seek to name and call out the particular “master narratives” that are powerfully conspiring to constrain this particular person in their unique context. A client language this as giving words to “the low hum of the patriarchal choir in her life.” We will seek to hear and understand the specific words of the hum in your client’s life.

The practices that we will actively seek, in conversation with you, to call out master narratives might include questions like:

- Is there a master narrative at play here?
- Does it come with words?
- How can we understand repeated acts of mistreatment in the client’s cultural context?
- What master narratives might be at play that give others permission to treat this person in this way?
- What is the master narrative’s particular charge against this person?





Clients who have experienced an insider witnessing practices have encouraged us to continue our efforts at unmasking master narratives in this way and “counter-mock” the master narratives.

If we understand that master narratives work to limit freedom of movement, then our client’s steps of movement despite and up against these constraints take on heightened significance. Given the powerful charge that master narratives bring against people for transgressing their particular normative templates, for a story to effectively counter it, the counterstory needs to strike at the very heart of the master narrative.

Counterstories

- What are the possible counterstory lines that might have the effect of sowing suspicion on the problem story?

Consider Michael White again, “The most powerful therapeutic process I know is to contribute to rich story development” (White, 2004). “Some stories have the capacity to eradicate a problem story.” Thinking back over your session notes from your conversations with this person, what are the particular cracks that have appeared in the problem story? As you are sitting with your session notes, transcripts, or therapeutic documents and remembering the stories that have been told, what has most moved you? What has enchanted you about this person’s life? What has endeared you to them? What actions of theirs will you never forget? Have there been moments that you, as a therapist, have perhaps experienced “vicarious resistance”? (Vikki Reynolds). Counterstory cracks may also come to you in the form of unexpected companions in this person’s life, expressions of surprising embodied triumphs of spirit, very fierce or very quiet acts of moral outrage, wisdom that, according to the problem story, this person had no business having access to, halting acts of generosity, magnificent reimagination of ordinary life moments, and tenacity in designing a life according to their own purposes.





Counterstory cracks are stories that depict action and the setting in which the action took place (“strengths and resources,” or any equivalent in psychology speak are not a counterstory. A single word like “courage” in narrative shorthand is not a counterstory yet.) In order for a counterstory to do justice to the person, we need to tell it complete with the events, actions, words, people and the details in the scene. Consider Cheryl Mattingly (1998), “Characters confront situations that call for action; they are key shapers of story event, and their responses to what happens are the focal point of narrative attention. Characters reveal who they are and the motives they have in and through their action and suffering” (p.180). Imagine how insulting and alienating it would be for us as therapists to gather together in vague praise of the person (this person is so amazing/courageous/strong, etc.) Our clients cannot afford such an indignity on top of what they have already suffered. Our clients deserve the justice and dignity of a dramatic retelling of the counterstory of their life that shows the person acting as a competent and trustworthy moral agent actively shaping the events of their life.

As these counterstory cracks are retold and linked together to form a “throughline” extending far back into the person’s history, we will invite you in our conversation to consider, “In light of all that this person has been up against, just who is this person that we find ourselves standing in the presence of?” The singular purpose of the insider witnessing conversation is to set in motion a counterstory against the backdrop of what a person has suffered in order to present it back to them for their thorough deliberation. In other words, the purpose of our therapeutic endeavor is to risk a telling of the events of a person’s life and to invite them into a moral reading (Mattingly, 1998) of this telling from a position of “outsight” into their lives. This “outsight” can occur when the story-telling rights and dictionaries to suffering are carefully upheld and when the damning identity conclusions of master narratives are, for but a moment, outed and hushed, and the person is invited to speak as both an author and authoritative moral agent on their own behalf.





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On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters

Or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter?

Sanni Paljakka & Zhen Zheng

The content of this paper was part of a presentation at the Narrative therapy conference What's Love Got to Do with It? in Calgary in March 2018. The conversational tone was purposefully kept intact in the written version. This paper was co-authored, vetted, and edited by Zhen Zheng.

Over the past 2 years, I have found a question afoot in my work as a narrative therapist. As someone proudly proclaiming an identity as a “narrative” therapist for a bit longer than the past 2 years, one might think that I should have stumbled over this question far longer back. But not so. The question was brought to me by David Epston and it asks, “what is a counterstory and what does it counter?”

This question stopped me cold. For many days, I was unable to go about my therapy work in my usual manner, which, for me, meant that I was unable to write the therapeutic poems to my clients after our conversations. -You have to understand the whole of my hubris: not only had I been calling myself a “narrative therapist,” but had also claimed to be a “burglar of problem stories” by way of my poetry-writing, inspired by T.S. Eliot’s idea of a poems’ chief work to divert the attention of “the house-dog” while the imaginary burglar goes about their business.

But now I sat in my office and the empty pages that were supposed to be filled with words from my therapy conversations were looming white and expectant in front of my restless mind, asking me, “what’s it going to be, you, shall we change then?” Reluctantly, I stepped off my well-worn tracks and gave myself over to the sweetness of supervision by this question. Here is the account of the supervision:



On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters
Or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter?

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 47-84.





Do you remember how Michael White once commented about therapists “loitering with the intent to commit a crime?” (Epston, D. Personal Communication). With the arrival of David’s question, I knew that my days of comfortable “loitering” (without the last part of that quote) had come to an end.

“The most powerful therapeutic process I know is to contribute to rich story development”, Michael White wrote (White, 2004). But what is a “rich” story and what poverties is it meant to redress? In other words, what does a “rich” story have the power to counter? And if I, in my work as a therapist, was meant to do more than “loiter” around “riches,” what might I do?

Stéphane Breitwieser, one of the most prolific art thieves of our time, who has admitted to stealing 239 artworks and artifacts from 172 museums, would advise: “focus. Note the flow of visitor traffic and memorize the exits. Count the guards. Are they sitting or patrolling? When do they rotate shorthanded to eat? Check for security cameras and see if each has a wire. Work in the daytime, with no violence, no dash to a getaway car. Be friendly at the front desk. Buy your ticket, say hello. Perform your work like a magic trick, sometimes with the guards in the room...” In other words, Breitwieser tells me to study the scene and the space, and all those that come and go through it.

So then, imagine: Imagine that my work as a narrative therapist were akin to the work of an accomplished and studious and intelligently focused art thief. Imagine that there were artifacts, scrolls, historical letters, paintings, sculptures, tools, portraits and objects of immeasurable power and precious value wrongfully held by owners, operators, and guards at museums and galleries and other privileged spaces all over the world. Imagine it were my job to return these pieces to their rightful owners, my clients. Imagine that the owners and operators and guards were the problem stories and the dominant or Master Narratives and ideologies that held the master pieces of our clients’ lives captive and hostage in plain sight. And imagine the beauty of the master pieces, whether they be pieces of art or artifacts, - imagine





standing in front of them and studying them, and knowing all at once that here it is, the wonder and heartbreak and grace under pressure of a human life. Imagine I cannot sleep until I find a way to remove the screws and release it from its base or frame to give it back to the person who painted, shaped, wrote, and formed it in the first place. And imagine that throughout, I was listening attentively for the sound of the guards' shoes on creaky wood, marble, or carpet.

Returning to the central question of what a counterstory counters, the summary of my learning so far is thus:

1. Stories take rich and powerful root in our souls, for triumph or ruin, for our freedom of options or the foreclosing capture of our movement in the world, for homecoming or lonely alienation, for our felt trustworthiness or our public stripping, for the imaginative expansion of our horizons, or the congealment of our futures, for our confusing corruption or our moral clarity.
2. In the great story-telling venture of therapy, not all "problem stories" are created equal. The problem stories that do not seem to yield easily are backed up by the by the usual "low-hum of the patriarchal choir" and by the misogynist, neoliberal, self-seeking, failure-promoting, medicalizing, queer-suspicious, racist, ableist and difference-loathing Master Narratives of our time. Master Narratives provide individuals the ideological backing to give themselves permission to remove or grant "access" and "entry," to allot or withdraw "speaking rights," to confirm or revoke "credibility," to respond with care or with discipline, to show regard or suspicion for persons or particular groups of persons. Master Narratives inform our tacit assumptions and our every-day treatment of people by providing us the "paths of least resistance" in our thinking that conform to our training in the cultural norms of our time. Master Narratives, - the guards -, are thus the great "story stealers" for all stories that do not conform to favoured norms of our cultures.
3. It follows, then, that we must pay close attention to the selection of





“alternative stories” as to their power and riches and tenacity to counter Master Narratives.

In this paper, I will attempt to answer the question of what a counterstory counters from a few different angles. A philosophical angle with the help of Hilde Lindemann Nelson, a fabled angle with the help of Ivan Krylov, and lastly but most significantly, from the angle of my position next to Zhen Zheng, who generously humoured and joined me in the discovery of these ideas in her life.

As a foreshadowing to Zhen’s character, - guess what she said to me at one of our early meetings when I was labouring to describe to her the intentions of any counterstorying ventures (without talking about robberies or artworks of any kind at that time).

She quietly heard me out, and said, in her usual keenly astute manner (she had just returned from a study-trip to Paris): “what is this. Are you wanting to take me to Louvre?”

Yes, Zhen. Let’s you and I go and rob the Louvre.

Not all problem stories are created equal.

With help from Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2001), I have been studying the guards who watch over and patrol the precious and powerful pieces of artwork, the most breathtaking of our clients’ stories. Lindemann Nelson describes the guards as “Master Narratives.” Master Narratives, she says “infiltrate our consciousness: damage is inflicted when the person accepts the dominant stories of who they are or take the dominant norms as the unstated standard against which they are to measure themselves” (p. 126) She also speaks about the “real effects” of constriction and boundedness: “There is a disconcerting lack of appreciation of the very real ways in which powerful people’s representations of who we are can constrict our freedom of movement” (p. 53). When “powerful people” invoke Master Narratives and tell particular stories of us that define who we are and how we are to be and that are seemingly backed up by every representative of our culture, it





isn't so simple to re-describe, refuse or re-frame those stories.

In looking back over my years of writing poems for my clients, I saw that I had sometimes staged very beseeching protests of the trespasses and denials that my clients had suffered in their lives. Together, we had organized many a "demonstration" with articulate banners outside the museum doors, and we had managed to annoy the guards, which had always caused rambunctious laughter and a sparkle for my clients. I will not denounce my early efforts, as laughter is always a fair beginning and a gift reserved for free spirits. But I am clear now that we could go beyond a spirited demonstration and protest!

What if particular kinds of problem stories (especially the ones who don't appear to quit), are such because they intermingle and breed with Master Narratives to not just "damage identities to make them incoherent or painful" (p. 106) but literally hound out people, out of town (maybe out of University to a treatment facility far out of the city) out of their knowledge, out of their lived experience, out of their imagination, out of their bodies, out of their spheres of action and what they most value in their lives. And if this is true, we need counterstories that can resist such effects, not any kind of alternative stories will do, they have to be counterstories that are in direct relationship to the Master Narrative, maybe live at the heart of the Master Narrative, and therefore have the power to counter them.

Not all alternative stories are created equal

With the help of a fable by Ivan Krylov, I took a measured look at what stands to be lost in the face of the pressure and damage of Master Narratives. In the following fable, the riches are a nightingale's songs. This fable hopefully illuminates what a Master Narrative is and what it does, and what a counterstory is and what it does.

A Donkey (in the original, an Ass) happened to see a Nightingale, one day, and said to it,



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'Listen, my dear. They say you have a great mastery over song. But I trust my own standards only, and I have long wished very much to hear you sing, and to judge for myself as to whether your talent is really so great.'

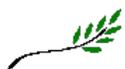
*On this the Nightingale began
And through her cadences she ran
How tender and most soft
Anon her voice she raised aloft
She whistled in a thousand ways
Chanted and cajoled the ways of our days
She sobbed and cried soft sorrows into being
And cooed tenderly at the time that is fleeting
She trilled and warbled a steady shower
Of tiny notes over tree and flower
And murmured to all the promise of the reeds
To enchant us to the beauty of our deeds.*

At once, all listened to the favourite singer. The breezes died away, the feathered choir was hushed, the cattle lay down on the grass. Scarcely breathing, the shepherd reveled in it, and only now and then, as he listened to it, smiled on the shepherdess.

Then the Ass, bending its head towards the ground, observed, 'It's tolerable. To speak the truth, one can listen to you without being bored. But it's a pity you don't know our rooster (in the original, our cock). You would sing a great deal better if you were to take a few lessons from him. He has a voice that really keeps folks quite awake.'

Having heard such a judgment, the Nightingale hung its head in sorrow and took to its wings and flew far away.

The Master Narrative, the dominant story invoked by the authority of judgment bestowed upon the donkey, is a stock plot of what a bird ought to do in this world, the kind of song that is valuable, productive, and effective in our world. Apparently only one kind of song counts: the one of the rooster, that serves a utilitarian purpose that everyone immediately understands: to





keep people awake.

What can the nightingale say against this judgment of her character and her purpose in the world? It isn't so easy for the Nightingale to argue, is it? With what right do we think we can count on the Nightingale to eloquently defend herself and say "yes, but what about the cooing, and sobbing, and chanting and warbling, what about the reeds and the smiles of the shepherd?"

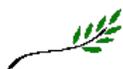
It isn't so easy for people to defend themselves against stock plots and judgments that are widely recognized and accepted.

And think of the effects of the donkey's judgment upon the Nightingale's song: "she hung her head in sorrow and took to her wings and flew away." Is she hounded out of town, the way Lindemann Nelson described? -Behold the power of the Master Narrative: to make someone an outcast in one fell swoop, with incoherent, untrustworthy or perhaps inferior purposes in life.

We can only hope that wherever the Nightingale flew off to, another world was possible for her, another story that might effectively counter the foolishness of the donkey and his judgment, another story that might love the Nightingale back to her life and song. And this other story better be prepared to speak truth to power, it better address the Nightingale's song directly, and not get sidetracked with some other alternative story about her pretty flying skills. We cannot stop at trying to distract or console the Nightingale with alternative stories about her feathers or flying, when she has been so hurt about the judgment about her song and confused about the standards she was measured against. No, the Nightingale's counterstory has to be precisely about her song, and it has to restore her warbling and cooing and sighing back to her and unmask the stupidity, arrogance, and baseness of the comparison against the rooster.

To summarize, here is my learning from the supervision session by David Epston, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, and Ivan Krylov:

1. Counterstories are identity-constituting stories that have a necessary





relationship to Master Narratives

2. The relationship is one of resistance
3. Master Narratives resisted are those that are generated by oppressive forces within an abusive power system and which impose an identity that marks its members untrustworthy
4. Counterstories set out to repair the damage that has been inflicted on an identity by an oppressive Master Narrative
5. Counterstories aim at freedom of agency (Lindeman Nelson, 2001).

A Lioness, A Killer Whale, A Phoenix: Zhen's Story **A practice example of counterstorying work**

I met Zhen at a women's group I was facilitating with colleagues. I quickly came to know Zhen as a philosopher (in fact, a straight A student of philosophy) and a story teller with the capacity to move. Here it is, one of the definitions of a "moral character: a person with the capacity to move others" (Epston, 2018, p. 18) And never mind that she moved *me*, but she moved the women in the group.... here are some excerpts of our conversations reflected in my usual poetry format of how the other women responded to Zhen's presence and her stories:

*"Zhen's passion to fight
lights my fire..."*

*"When I listen to Zhen,
I make up my mind:
Somewhere between Zhen's determination
And the constraints of my life
I decided to be brave..."*

*"Zhen, I have heard you speak of defying this
And it does something to me:
I want to rise up and fight this.
Purposefully, intentionally, consciously:*





Rise up, like stand up..."

Can you already hear the first notes of a nightingale setting up to sing here? Someone is lighting fires, causing bravery and an intentional sense of rising up, for the women in the group.

So naturally, I was a bit curious. Who are you? Who is this woman? Who can inspire women at a women's group, that can so easily become a

*Garbage bin of sadness
Or a little factory of life-skill production
They can so easily lose
All contact to real people.*

*I wish to be part of a group
Where something happens each week
That makes us feel
Like we can survive the time in-between.*

These are Zhen's words as she is reflecting on her experiences of therapy groups. Just who is this woman?

In short order, I came to learn some things about this woman and her life. I came to learn that quite aside from her inspiring ways and her astute observations, her very life, the fact that she is alive today, is a bloody triumph of the human spirit. I will not belabour all the details of what Zhen has been up against in her life, but a few words will do: as first daughter of 2 girls born in China to a woman of limited means, Zhen was abandoned at a young age to live with her grandparents. At times, Zhen's grandparents treated her kindly, taking pride in Zhen's academic successes and urging her along to claim a space in the world. Zhen remembers how her grandfather taught her to ride the bike by running along side her and how her grandmother announced her stellar grades to the neighbours. However, Zhen was also the recipient of vicious physical abuse at the hands of her uncle, and of sexual exploitation by the men in her life.





At age 13, Zhen begged her mother during a visit to take her with her to the city and promised that she would not be a burden in any way, and that she only wished for a safe place to sleep and study, but mom could not oblige her. Zhen had to wait more years until she could escape, and at the first opportunity, escape she did. She met her future husband, and they moved to the city and later to Canada.

Here are some transcriptions of Zhen's words about these relationships and her discernments about the matter of love in my usual poetry format:

Three Stories of Love

“My grandmother did not love me
 Because I am a girl.
 My grandfather loved me
 -And it is *complicated*.
 I envy a love without complications.
 But also:
 I would like to say that I too
 Am a complicated person.
 So
 I don't care what kind of love it is
 As long as it is love.
 I realized this when my grandfather
 Sent me money
 Because I said: “I want to get educated.”
 I realized this when my grandfather
 Sent me money
 To buy alcohol
 Because he found out I could not sleep at night.
 What this means to me is that he supported me
 In *whatever* I wanted.
 He loved me so much
 He didn't judge me.

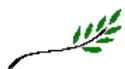




Love isn't dependent
 On being a good student,
 Being a good person,
 Love means...
 I no longer judge this person morally.”

“...As you are speaking
 I am thinking of my husband.
 When we came to Canada,
 We were very poor,
 So we cut each others' hair.
 You see, these days he can afford a hair-cut,
 But he still insists I cut it
 Even though I never improved at it!
 So from time to time he will look at me
 And say “I need a haircut.”
 And then he sits down in the bathroom
 And I start clipping away
 And the snow falls outside the window
 And he grows very quiet
 And all you can hear is the clipping of the scissors
 And a closeness
 Between husband and wife
 That is beyond any words.”

“I am a Martial Artist
 In a world full
 Of ballroom dance.
 The foxtrot is a beautiful dance
 With its polite





Steps and rehearsed gestures.
 I watch them and marvel
 -Only I can't dance it.
 If love is a dance
 And only a dance
 May I ask
 With a respectful bow
 And raising my eyes to meet your eyes
 My opponent, my teacher, my student, my friend
 Can love be a fight?"

I wonder, do you hear a nightingale now, dear reader? And if you do, let me tell you how this nightingale met some donkeys and roosters. Or asses and cocks, if you will.

Zhen went to University here in Canada. She embraced University life, the learning, the reading, the grappling with ideas with an unsurpassed passion. Her mind was soaring, and she made great friends in the form of professors and other students as well as Michel Foucault, Martin Luther King, Virginia Woolf, and Vincent Van Gogh. Many students and professors delighted in her ways of thinking and expression, and she quickly became a straight A student of philosophy. The remnants of the effects of the terrors of her old life sometimes visited her to cause anxiety when she was studying and writing exams. In addition, Zhen's particular-ness in wanting to express herself well, and her refusal to be held captive by the constraints on her language and ideas by her ESL status, meant that she needed some accommodations at University for taking a longer time to write essays and exams. But no problem, right?

Wrong. For continued successful study despite some obstacles, Zhen relied on academic accommodations, and this in turn meant that she continuously needed medical doctors to sign notes regarding her need for accommodations and some cooperation between doctors and her professors. And in those exchanges regarding her accommodations, it





became clear that not all professors and not all doctors were in favour of anyone being a Martial Artist, especially in our Canadian ballroom dance kind of context.

Here are some examples of exchanges between Zhen and her doctor during these times in Zhen's own words in my usual poetry format.

I am sitting with the question:

"do you have significant difficulties 95% of the time?"

And I look at my doctor

Who wants me to check something off.

I say:

"I have a better idea.

Let's write on the form:

Please send detective to live with this person

To find out about her 95% of the time."

-But he didn't think I was funny.

Who knows what it is like when I feel so down about myself

After an appointment.

When I ask myself: why did I say these things to him?

Don't I know

There are those who are waiting for me to make a mistake

And use my words against me?

I went in there feeling high, feeling good

And told him "I don't need this help anymore"

He said I had manipulated him.

It hurt a lot.

I refuse the word "manipulate"

I am Strategic.

Soon there weren't just letters that were about giving a student more time with her assignments, soon there were professional words for what was wrong with Zhen, and these words grew into stories about her identity that





were printed in official files. A reputation was born.

Zhen is not a Martial Artist, she is a trouble-maker.

Zhen is not astute and respectful and witty in questioning power, she is paranoid.

Zhen is not determined, she is obsessing.

Zhen is not innocent in her wish to engage with ideas, she is manipulative.

And might these stories about Zhen's character and her efforts in life have something to do with Master Narratives? One of the Master Narratives that is informing these stories is a story about appropriate behavior for women, and in particular, women who are not white. In Zhen's own words, the requirements for women, and women of colour, in the medical and academic settings sound something like this: *"Be simple, be happy, be pleasant, be charming, be pretty, be sexy, be positive. Say 'I'm sorry' and 'thank you.' Don't question, don't point out bullshit, don't use the word 'bullshit', don't ever ask 'why?' Don't question rules, don't try to insist that you have ideas and ethical positions and an interest in all matters political and philosophical and that you enjoy debate. And most definitely, don't be complicated. And for heaven's sake, don't talk back when the men make pronouncements about you."*

Do you know what happens to women, and in particular, women of colour, who refuse these standards of "ladylike" behavior? Zhen was perfectly aware of how others might perceive her unladylike behavior, and that she was "courting persistent misreading" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 26) by her refusal to accept these mainstream standards of how a lady should behave.

There is another Master Narrative here, and it comes to us delivered straight from the Bible of normal and abnormal behavior. Zhen was given diagnoses.

The story that started growing was that Zhen's thoughts aren't "real," they are psychotic, her emotional responses aren't "real," they are manipulative, her iron determination to succeed in University isn't "real," it's too intense,





her way of engaging deeply with ideas and arguing about them isn't about her intelligence, it is treatment-resistant. In short, Zhen's character and actions could be summarized as expressions of these disorders.

These stories were delivered to Zhen in writing, and I had the dubious pleasure to read some of these assessments. One memorable example that diagnosed Zhen with Psychosis based on a Rorschach test came with this pronouncement: "Zhen is not fit to be a University student." What does this sound like to you? How about: "There is a disconcerting lack of appreciation of the very real ways in which powerful people's representations of who we are can constrict our freedom of movement" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 53).

Or: "Identity is a question of how others understand what I am doing, as well as how I understand what I am doing. If other people perceive my actions to be those of a morally trustworthy person, then they will permit me to act freely. Both others recognition that I am a morally responsible person and my own sense of myself as a morally responsible person, then, are required for the free exercise of moral agency" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 22).

Here she was, this woman whose intelligence and academic competence were not in dispute by anyone, and who still faced an assault of questioning of her "fitness" to be part of the University community because of something far murkier: her "ways of engaging" with people in power and the fact that she did not conduct herself demurely or otherwise appropriately enough in these engagements. Her doctors did not appreciate her questioning of her diagnoses, her research into the origins of words, her passion to point out the flaws in the University system that served to silence and oppress her, and her insistence on continuing to debate the questions and assessment tools that were held sacred by the professionals involved.

What could any of us do, when Zhen's personal problem story became so intermingled with Master Narratives that were widely circulated as a reputation, that she stood to be hounded out of town, to be





excommunicated from University, to be disciplined, treated, and quarantined against her will by the power of a Master Narrative?

At the women's group, we had already witnessed her telling of some alternative stories, and we had immortalized her "protests" of her treatment by powerful others in the form of outsider witnessing responses as well as letters and poems. Her stories of protests had been deeply moving and inspiring of all of us and had changed the course of other group members' lives. And yet, Zhen returned to her life each week as well as more encounters with the identity-damaging narratives that were circulating about her, and she was barely holding on. Week after week, she was re-telling stories of her exchanges with doctors and professors, crying, and asking: "is this me? Is what they are saying about me true? Sanni, what does the word 'manipulative' mean, what does it mean when he says, 'you Zhen are the common denominator in all your problems?'"

Here is Zhen's own summary of the effects of this treatment of her:

*...In my pain, I am a teacher.
But this gift has been dismissed by so many
Who say I am broken as if I did something wrong
Who say I am broken as if I were an old car.
I looked into this black hole and the black hole looked back at me
And my humanity started fading out
Under the pressure to forge a tuna can mind.
But I am not a car and I read their report
And I cried...*

Lindemann Nelson reminds us why verdicts of our mental states ("medical gaslighting") may be particularly difficult to resist: such verdicts may be "evidence-resistant precisely because the person no longer trusts herself to exercise her moral agency competently, because she no longer regards herself as mentally competent" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 31).





It was at this point where I thought that maybe staging “demonstrations” in the form of “protest poems” to the guards at the museum was not enough. What if there were a way to tell a story about her “ways of engaging” with powerful people that could contest their verdicts of her, or at least sow some suspicion of their assessments of her character, and perhaps even restore her interest in her own actions and efforts that had been so maligned?

We tried to tell a counterstory. Not an alternative story that would be about some aspect of Zhen’s life that wasn’t under assault like her marriage, but a counterstory that would strike at the heart of the Master Narrative about her engagements with her doctors and professors. We prepared meticulously for this endeavour: I read and reread all the poetry that I had written for Zhen, sifted through all the metaphors that she had come up with, and all the stories she had told about her life, her struggles, and her ideas in her own words on power and on loving interactions with others.

Below are 3 excerpts of this counterstorying interview that my colleagues Tom Carlson and Tiffany Saxton and I conducted and videotaped, and subsequently showed to Zhen. In this interview, Tom and Tiffany are interviewing me “as Zhen” (which is reflected in naming me “Sanni’s Zhen” in the transcripts). The entire interview takes place in the landscape of a metaphor Zhen herself had used to describe her relationships with those people who had some power over her, like some doctors, psychiatrists and professors: she called them “the white-maned lions.” This interview was well-prepared for in terms of my knowledge and use of Zhen’s own unique dictionary, and yet entirely unrehearsed and spontaneous in our wondering aloud about Zhen’s ideas and motives and her moral character in her interactions with said lions. Please have a read.

Excerpt 1

Sanni’s Zhen: I remember once making a joke to Sanni at group about being a little cat and going up to the lions cage and



On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters
Or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter?

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 47-84.





rattling it and running. But there was something about the women's groups, I told them later, that because of the way they heard me, because of the way my words meant something to them, that I don't think I'm a little cat. I said maybe I've become a lynx [Tom laughs slightly].

Tom: Is a lynx a bit more than a cat?

Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. I'm not a kitten. I've been taught to apologize all my life for the way I am. I don't know if it's okay to be a lynx, it feels like it's okay [appears really emotional and tearful at this point as she finishes her sentence].

Tom: In the groups it's okay to be a lynx?

Sanni's Zhen: Yeah.

Tom: Mm-hm. And is it okay right now?

Sanni's Zhen: It's okay right now.

Tom: Did you have a sense as Tiffany was reading that poem, did you have a sense of perhaps yourself being a lynx a bit more than a kitten?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes. [smiles as she answers]

Tiffany: I'm curious about what makes for lynxness? [Both Tom and Tiffany chuckle slightly]

Tom: Versus catness or kittyness?

Tiffany: Yeah! What grows a kitten into a lynx?





Sanni's Zhen: What grows a kitten into a lynx? I think it happens unseen. I think it happens by way of practice, and I think it happens – one cannot do it alone. We can never become the lynxes of our stories. We need others. I need others to see me and to tell me you do not have to apologize for having grown in that way. Maybe even laugh and delight about the lynxes ways. But if the lynx always just tries to be a kitten that's kind of – to shrink back into a kitten. That's terrifying. The punishment of that hurts.

Excerpt 2

Tom: Have these white maned lions with their power of their words and their pens forgotten that they are white maned lions? Have they forgotten in the sense that they expect to be treated by others like little cats without claws? What happens when you protest against the white maned lion?

Sanni's Zhen: What happens is they show their teeth, they snarl, and they throw insults at you when you're walking away already. -Not all of them.

Tom: Some of them?

Sanni's Zhen: Some of them.

Tom: Do they get upset at you when you try to treat them as a big cat?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes.

Tom: Yeah, if they are upset at you for treating them like a big cat as maybe they should be treated, do they expect you





to treat them in soft ways, subordinate ways – not subordinate, but just accept whatever they deliver you?

Sanni's Zhen: They want – yes – they want deference.

Tom: Deference – yeah. So because they're lions what does that mean in terms of how you should be with them and how they should be with you?

Sanni's Zhen: We could have this – it said in the poem *not* a dirty fight, but we could have this encounter. We might roar at each other. Show off and enjoy it. Enjoy each other. We could be in each other's company in respect.

Tiffany: Is that your hope behind and maybe intention behind treating the big lions as the big cats that they are?

Sanni's Zhen: See the thing is, the lions are in a cage. They're not free. I am. But I am. I can go. I can leave. I can come back, but they stay put. So in a way -- I think about the little cat that might come after me or has to sit there and hold their paws all nicely and say please and thank you or cross or open their legs, whatever the lions wish. And that's why I do it, I do it for them, for the little cats - but a part of me, a part of me is brave enough to think that if the cage bars could just be shown, not just to the women, to the kittens, who have to consult them but also to the lions themselves.

Tom: Even to the white maned lions?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes! Could they be free? Could they come out? Could this be a different world? - But lions do not like it when you point out that they're in a cage and that I am a free.





- Tom: Do you know what this cage is that they are in these lions? What is the cage kind of keeping them from maybe?
- Sanni's Zhen: The lions have a human soul, but they've forgotten.
- Tom: Is that what cage is?
- Sanni's Zhen: [Nods head in agreement] They hide behind structures and systems and hierarchies and rules. They pretend that all those things are life, but they are the bars of the cages and we can be so much more than that.
- Tom: Is that why you keep going back, so that they might somehow, that their humanity might be restored to them in some way?
- Sanni's Zhen: [Becomes tearful] Yes.
- Tom: And not only will they stop hurting other kittens, but that they will stop hurting too?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. It's a fake caged life made up out of letters and systems, hierarchies, rules. I don't think we were meant to live like that.
- Tom: In cages?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes. Boundaries, they love that.
- Tom: Have they tried to put you in a cage?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.





- Tom: Your whole life have they tried to put you in a cage?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.
- Tiffany: Has it been a cage built for kittens or was their consideration of the bigger cat that might one day come?
- Sanni's Zhen: Nope, they did not see me coming. [Tiffany and Tom laugh heartily]

Excerpt 3

- Tiffany: A life of more honor, an honorable life? Is that the kind of life that you've been living Zhen, is a life of honor, not just for others, but for yourself as well?
- Sanni's Zhen: [tearfully] I don't know how else. I can't quit.
- Tom: You can't quit being, living in a way that honors life?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes (quietly).
- Tom: Humanity?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head in agreement] That's why I couldn't sign the behavior contract. How do you sign –
- Tom: Is there no honor in that?
- Sanni's Zhen: No [shakes head readily]. How do you do these things?
- Tom: You have not been willing to give up your honor?





- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.
- Tom: Even in the face of threats? We might remove you from school if you don't dishonor yourself?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head in agreement] I guess I never knew that [almost whispers, speaks very low]
- Tom: You never knew that that's what you were doing.
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. I thought I was just angry.
- Tom: You thought you were just angry when you decided to refuse?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head]
- Tom: Is this something that goes so against what you believe in life, what's important to you, that you couldn't bear to dishonor yourself?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. My signature on a page like that would go against everything.
- Tom: In the same way that you can't bear to see lions dishonor themselves?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. They write up those things the lions.
- Tom: But you still go back to them and offer them their honor?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. Love is complicated.





Tom: Because love is complicated [smiles greatly].

Counterstories are stories that define people morally and are developed for the express purpose of resisting and undermining oppressive Master Narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). In our interview, we attempted to undermine the Master Narrative of how Zhen ought to behave as a woman, and the Master Narrative of how her actions are manifestations of mental disorders with the hope that the counterstory of her responses to the white maned lions may allow Zhen some freedom to dissent from the interpretation and conclusions that the Master Narratives had invited in her life.

I have been unwilling to dishonour myself, I have been unwilling to dishonour other kittens, I have been unwilling to dishonour even the lions. Love is complicated. People are complicated. I am complicated. Will you not fight and dance this life with me, in a spirit of mutual respect and honour? I bow to you, as a true Martial Artist in this world.

I was very nervous to show Zhen this videotape. Zhen was tearful and quiet through the viewing of the videotape and declining invitations to comment in the moment in favour of watching the recording in full and keeping her own counsel. She later recounted how she had driven to a motel together with her husband for a business trip immediately after viewing the recording. She said that she found herself hesitating to take her usual sleep medication at night, because “I wasn’t sure yet what this was, but I have a feeling I want to stay awake for it.” Shortly thereafter, Zhen requested (and received) a full transcript of the interview, as she is, of course, most in her element when she can interact with a text rather than a videotape, and she brought this highlighted and annotated transcript to our follow-up meetings. Zhen immediately grasped the heart of the interview, the idea of “restoring a person’s honour.” She researched the meanings and origins of the words “restoring” and “honour” in dictionaries and my colleagues and I negotiated these meanings together with her in many follow-up meetings.





In one of these early meetings she exclaimed to my colleague Loree Stout: “I don’t know if they know this, but they can have a political effect.” Zhen had gone and insisted that both the full transcript of the interview as well as some letters that my colleagues and I had written to her be included in her medical and academic files. She said “There is now a radical difference in the accounts of who I am, an idea of me as a character in the Cuckoo’s nest, and a counter-idea of me as a lioness, and I can bring these ideas together in my file, and this will force whoever reads my file, to consider, to question, to use their critical thinking skills to ask themselves – why are these accounts so different?”

Shortly after these initial conversations, and Zhen’s pouring over the transcript of the recording, we set up a meeting with Zhen to interview her about her thoughts. This is the unedited beginning of a transcript of this conversation with Zhen:

Tom: So we have been trying to do this with everybody, Zhen, where we could have a conversation today that is more focused on research. We maybe don't normally have these kinds of conversations but we are really trying to look at, - the best we can - some of the effects of the IWP interview. We are asking you to help us understand some of the ways the interview works. The way it influences you. And I will ask questions that will help with that.

Zhen: I keep thinking about it. So I told Loree how the interview really influenced me in my life I knew something was there but before I wasn't seeing it clearly because I don't know *what it is*. I know it's profound. I'm just trying to speak up more about it.

I keep thinking there is University Zhen and then the Zhen I saw in the interview. My whole life has been actually been about University Zhen, all of my goals. But I had this





idea that maybe University Zhen was missing something...

Can I tell you an example: So I was with my professor a few days ago. He said to me "Zhen you are a University student. At the University, we respect "rational." He used the word *rational* and he told me very clearly "we as a university, we only respect rational decisions." And then I kept thinking "Is this something different? He is talking about a rational Zhen, but I am thinking about what feels authentic to me."

We were actually talking about a philosophy paper I need to hand in and I was asking for an extension because I also need to write my human rights application. So the professor is telling me "uh, Zhen. I want you to make a rational decision, you have a paper to write and this is a contract between you and the university. You have a contract, you need to be rational and we want you to prioritize the essay because of the deadline."

So I told him, "okay, but intuitively, I want to prioritize my human rights because it's *more important* for me. Because all my heart is, -I'm very intuitive toward justice." And he said "No, Zhen. Your decision to prioritize human rights is irrational and we do not respect irrational. Why? Because we know you have mental disorders." -Actually, I appreciate the professor, I am close to him and he knows me very well. He said--"Because I know you, the decision to prioritize your human rights case is because of your having anxiety, because of these disorders."

You know, I became University Zhen because I wanted to deepen or widen, or enhance my autonomy. I went to





University to learn knowledge, to learn how to be rational, how to engage in critical thinking. Because I thought that would be the way to enhance my autonomy. But now I just keep thinking there's a difference. But what is it? What's different? And I had this epiphany—or maybe it is a kind of ...transcendence. It is my conclusion now that it doesn't matter. *I still have my autonomy*, it doesn't matter if the university says "you are irrational. I don't give you autonomy, so you don't have autonomy."

I claim that it doesn't matter if I'm "irrational" or "rational" in another's eyes, especially Western eyes. I still have my autonomy, my own "rational." The University says we don't respect the decision by the irrational state. *We don't honor that*". But I say "I claim [said with force as she pounds fist into hand] you must honor me."

Because I think my autonomy is about the ability to have self-regard, self-direction—and to have the ability to make decisions because they are *good for me* [pounds fists to emphasize each word]. My decisions --*they are mine*. Not because they are imposed by the state, or by psychiatry, or the university—and then I have imposed them on my mind – the decisions, *they are mine*.

Tom: They are yours.

Zhen: And what is more important is that not only am I making decisions, but I have the freedom and the capacity to *act* [pounds fist] on it. To do something about it, not just I think about what is good. This interview helped me to realize that I claim, that my decision must be respected, honored.





It doesn't matter if it's irrational or rational. First of all, who has a say in what is irrational? I don't believe psychiatry knows more than me. And secondly, if I say as long as I can remember, I have always been in this state, the OCD, what was it, the anxiety, the dissociating...*If I am always* in this state, then *that it is my state*. And I don't need to be fixed or cured from my state. So I learned something, but I am not sure if I can articulate it.

Sanni: So are you saying that in some way in this recent conversation with this prof, are you saying how you are noticing how something different has come to you, I suppose, in a very *real* conversation. And because of remembering a different Zhen, that then you could claim something in this way? Is it possible that, on this day of this argument with this prof you saw Zhen interacting from a different place, altogether?

Zhen: I don't need to be, I don't need to be *fixed*. I don't need to be *cured* in order to make a good decision, so the decision can be accepted, can be honored by others. This is about my claim to make a decision for myself. My decision is good solely because it is mine.

Tom: It's because the decision belongs to you? When you were watching the interview, was that in some way revealed to you? That you already have this autonomy? That you already don't need to be fixed? When you were watching the interview and later reflecting on it was this like a revelation?

Zhen: Right, to reveal--something already in me. The revealing what is already there, but was forgotten.





- Tom: There is a philosopher who talks about this phrase "moral character"--
- Zhen: "moral character" [repeats Tom's words thoughtfully]
- Tom: --this is your, the character that has always been with you. This enduring character that has always belonged to you, that's--that is your autonomy that you're talking about, right? This so-called irrational Zhen, um, this person who rises up, right?
- Sanni: A lioness.
- Tom: --a lioness, right. That--that's always been there. But all that came to you like a revelation, like "Ahh!" this is who I am?
- Zhen: Right
- Tom: Is that what it felt like for you, Zhen?
- Zhen: Right, it is a revelation because I have been--how do you say--under the school bullshit too much.
- Tom: The school bullshit? [Laughs]
- Zhen: I think by reading the interview and by seeing really what is different. What does the different mean to me, I thought about it. That is, I *truly* understand what is autonomy.
- Tom: Does the interview and thinking about it all the while afterwards--because you've been thinking about it a lot,





right? Has it given you a capacity to act? To act on your own behalf?

Zhen: Yes, to *demand*! [said with force]

Tom: To demand--

Zhen: Their respect. To *demand*—that they honor me even though my decision comes from so called irrational state. *I demand you must honor me.*

Tom: yeah, yeah. And have you been like--I'm just curious how that happened, and I'm wondering if you were kind of in some way wrestling with wanting to embrace this difference? And somehow, in this moment, with the prof you realized you have the capacity [slaps hands as Zhen had done before] to act. To demand respect. To have your own, as you said, "the ability to have self-regard" right "to have self-direction".

Tom: Did seeing the interview help you claim respect for yourself? Your own respect.

Zhen: Yes. Yes, because before I always thinking, that there was something wrong with me--I needed to be fixed. I needed to be cured--I need—treatment. So I can be respected. And now I say, I don't need to be fixed.

Tom: Mhm. I already am. Is that one of the things that was revealed to you? That, you did not need to be fixed? You are, you are well enough as you are. In the so-called irrational--version of your life, right?

Zhen: And that I claim this so called irrational state. I claim that,





this is my state. I think they are using, how do you say-- paternalistic interference, right? The husband, the father the doctor the professor, the “paternals” always say "Zhen I want you to be rational, because it's *good for you*--We have to interfere, *we want to fix you, we want you to be cured, because it's good for you*"

- Tom: Yeah
- Zhen: I want to say, "bullshit!"
- Tom: Yes, right. Is it, is it rational to want to claim your rights as a person?
- Zhen: Yes. It is rational to claim, this is my right. *Regardless* whether I have OCD, depression, I have anxiety, I have dissociation—regardless whether I am female, *regardless* it is rational, I claim my right. I have this epiphany!
- Tom: Yes, that is an epiphany.
- Zhen: You know, before I always knew my life. But by watching this interview I knew this is my life but --I revisited my life for the first time.
- Tom: Wow. That--that's a philosopher statement too, Zhen.
- Sanni: There is such beauty in this sentence, Zhen, I don't know if you realize--to revisit something, we have already visited, right? To revisit--we are revisiting--you're putting language on its head by saying "I revisited my life for the first time"--
- Zhen: Yes. *It became so real to me*





- Tom: It became real. Yes. Yes.
- Sanni: Zhen, do you think this practice is worth doing, for this reason that I can somehow bring it to life, how badly I would like to tell people what their lives mean to me.
- Zhen: Yes. Yes, it is like this. It is like, you people always say "you are superwoman, you can move the mountains" And it is good to hear it, and maybe I believe that. But this is *like I really move mountains*---you know what I mean?
- Tom: Yes. Did you see yourself moving mountains?
- Zhen: Right. I saw myself move mountains. I keep telling myself, "I can move mountains, I can move the mountain"
- Tom: So in this interview, you saw yourself acting in ways that actually did move mountains.
- Zhen: Yes
- Tom: And then you--
- Sanni: *Remembered.*
- Tom: --You remembered.
- Sanni: And revisited--the moving of mountains.
- Tom: That you could move mountains. You became a witness to your capacity to move mountains.
- Zhen: Yes I--I claim to be a, how do you say-- I claim to be a fish--I will explain why that is--





- Tom: [laughs] Okay
- Zhen: --because you know the university is like the factory, assembly line—They say "come to the university! Come to the university! We open your mind! But they pulled my mind, like a fish, they pulled me into a tuna can. And then they said "we are good. Come to us, we are good. We open your mind" But I want to say "*I don't want to be a tuna can! Even though you can open the can. I want to be a fish!*" I want to be a freely swimming fish in the ocean. I don't want to be a canned--tuna can in the factory.
- Tom: People are convinced that they have open minds but they are inside a tuna can?
- Sanni: Zhen for me this is the most surprising thing, because remember what we talked about. Pretty much the whole year at the women's group we talked about the metaphor of the water, and of safeboats and your feeling how you were always drowning. And holding on, but almost drowning. But how come you're a fish now!
- Tom: A fish freely swimming around!
- Sanni: What happened?
- Zhen: Thank you! Thank you, I remember the metaphor in the group. I was always saying how I am struggling with the water. And some people were my safe boats that I could hold on to.
- Tom: I have--the crazy idea-- were you struggling to swim and Sanni and Loree were the graspable form. But afterwards,





you became the graspable form. And you could swim freely, without a life boat.

Zhen: I think I've become a killer whale.

Sanni and Tom: [laughing at Zhen's metaphor]

Sanni: Not just any fish either

Tom: You're a *killer whale*.

Sanni: This is the most surprising twist to the metaphor. Because before, we spent an inordinate amount of time trying to imagine different things, like swimming into the harbor and resting. And I remember there were rest points, and there were these fake banana peel donuts--things that always kind of, caved in on you. And then there were the safe boats. But there was always this person with this sense of exhaustion, like how exhausting it was--to stay alive. To not drown. But would you have guessed that this metaphor would change so dramatically? That--would you have guessed it at the time that you might have become, in a year's time--

Tom: A killer whale. [softly, with reverence]

Sanni: --a killer whale.

Tom: Swimming freely.

Zhen: I realized, during--during this week, I am a killer whale.

I watched Zhen pound her fist into her hand every time she said the words "I claim" during this interview. I was moved beyond words about the poetry of





the repeated “I claim’s” and remembered the Savage’s famous series of “claims” to Mustapha Mond, the controller of the Brave New World in Aldous Huxley’s dystopian universe.

Zhen taught me an invaluable lesson about any counterstorying ventures: their goodness can only be judged by a person’s spontaneous claim of their masterpiece once it is taken down and returned to them from the museum wall.

Here is the poem that grew out of this interview with Zhen, and reflects on her series of claims:

And so I sat down with a lion
 -A likeable lion-
 And he said to me
Zhen, be rational
We cannot respect irrational.
There is a name for the irrational
And it is called Mental Disorder.

I might have said
 “I’m sorry. And thank you.
 Thank you for helping me.”
 But I knew something was there.
 I knew something was different.
 Sanni’s Zhen and Zhen’s Zhen joined forces
 And out came my words like a great surprise
 I never prepared for.

I. Claim.
 I claim autonomy.
 I claim my decision.
 And more.
 I claim my ability to make a good decision.





I claim my ability to recognize my state.
 I claim my ability to have self-regard.
 I claim freedom.
 I claim my capacity to act.
 I claim brilliance.
 I claim good ideas.
 I claim all that I have lived
 And have yet to live.
 And, my dear lion,
 There is more:
 I claim your respect for me.
 I claim them all.

Against all the paternalistic interference
 And their foolish pride in offering to open
 My tuna can mind
 And their invitations to discipline my identity

I claimed my lived experience.
 I turned my lived experience into a living thing.
 Sanni's Zhen's belief in me turned into a living thing.
 I travelled into this Zhen's future
 And you know who I became
 What is it!
 What is this!
 A killer whale swimming freely in the ocean.

I have struggled with water for years now
 Barely hanging on to safeboats
 Struggling alongside the banana peel donuts
 Always almost drowning.
 But this week
 I turned my own metaphor into life
 I became a graspable form





I became a killer whale
 Swimming freely
 Descending upright among the staring fish.
 And who could have known
 That this was possible.

The very next day
 I quietly handed in my human rights application
 And it now has been stamped and received.
 What change of fortune
 What surprise
 Is coming for me now
 I don't know.

But I have seen a glimpse of my form
 In the mirror
 After my eyes adjusted.
 I am not a tuna can mind.
 I am a killer whale
 Swimming freely.
 I claim what I see.
 This is all I have
 But this -
 Turns out to be a very great deal.

Dear Reader,

Who is this woman and what is her masterpiece we set out to steal from the Louvre?
 Is she a philosopher? Is she a story teller? Is she a student? A moral seer in relation to power? Is she a bloody survivor?
 Is she a nightingale, a kitten, a lynx, a lioness, a tuna can, a killer whale?
 Is she a lover, a dancer, a Martial artist?



On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters
 Or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter?

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 47-84.





“I claim them all,” she said, upon their return to her hands.

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The View from the Top of the World

Tiffany Saxton, Co-Director, Calgary Narrative Collective

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

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

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

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





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

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

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





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

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

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





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

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

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

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

Transcript of Follow-Up Interview

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



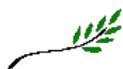


- Tiffany: Did the poems somehow or other deepen the strong foundation of hope that we talked about during the Act 2 (two)?
- Donna: Especially when I was listening to Tom as a man because those words – I found it like ‘you’re just bullshitting’ you know? Because I don’t buy that from men. Because I’ve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





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





- Donna: I would say what really surprised me most was the authenticity. Let me put it another way, the rightness of it and I could get it. When I was watching you as me, you even looked like me and how I look down. Oh my god, it was really weird to see myself in you. I didn't realize that I was so soft spoken until I heard Tiffany's Donna speak.
- Tiffany: Were there any particular words that my Donna said that surprised you or that you would have never thought of putting it quite that way?
- Donna: I think when you were talking about all of my traumas. When I heard that, I knew in that moment, for the very first time, that these things really did happen to me. It set it in stone. When I've talked to other professionals, I always told them, 'Oh I had a wonderful childhood,' whenever I was asked about it. Just putting the pieces together now, I thought holy shit, I was really trying to put something over on them, wasn't I? It was as if I was trying to convince them I know that I am a really bad person. I didn't believe I deserved anything. I didn't even deserve to be on this earth. I would blame myself for everything that went wrong in my life.
- Tiffany: Since the Act 2, did thinking over how my Donna told what happened to her give you an opportunity to think differently about yourself?
- Donna: Yeah! Within about a week, I could actually feel like my brain was starting to shift. It makes my stomach kind of flip a bit too.
- Tiffany: Was there a sensation of movement, like losing your balance?
- Donna: Yeah! It was like okay, here we go. It was like being on a big ferris wheel ride. Oh boy here comes this ride.



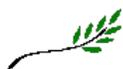


- Tiffany: Was there a different sensation when you were at the bottom of the ride to when you moved to the top? At the top of the ride, did you get a different perspective?
- Donna: Up until now, I have always felt my head is over here and my brain is somewhere else. But now, my head and my brain feel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





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





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





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





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





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





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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

February 26, 2020

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





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





“Render the Tacit Tangible”

Or: How Insider Witnessing Practices Address Power by Raising the Means to Speak

Sanni Paljakka & Malidi Hanuse

The content of this paper was part of a presentation on Insider Witnessing Practices in Los Angeles, California, in 2018. The conversational tone was purposefully kept intact in the written version. This paper was co-authored, vetted, and edited by Malidi Hanuse. The comments that Malidi wished to emphasize appear in textboxes embedded in the paper.

The ways in which we as Narrative therapists pronounce the word “power”, I sometimes half-expect to stumble over it some day and say “Hello and: a-ha. So we finally meet. And I see, such is your shape, your texture, your pain, your healing.” This is utter folly of course... but I dare you to listen for it in any round of self-respecting post-structuralists and maybe you’ll know what I mean.

Sometimes I have been tantalized to add the word “power” to a sweeping shit-list of fetishized, thingified, and mortified words that are used to frighten the living daylights out of a “trying” Narrative therapist.

Malidi: Mmm. Yes!!!

Questions about power are often posed in generalized terms, i.e. “but what about power?” or, “how did you attend to power?” and in those formats, become unanswerable and shed vague and self-conscious anxiety in their wake.

Malidi: I was thinking about how certain question can serve to further oppression: stifling enquiry.





For example, I was posed these questions in response to the presentation I gave about Zhen's life (see the previous paper in this issue), and I wondered what exactly I was being asked. It seemed to me I had shown, in detail, how to center a focussed attention on questions of power relations in Zhen's life and how her positionality as a woman, and a woman of colour had led to the binding of her freedom of movement and her storytelling rights at many junctures in her life. I had also shown my efforts to restore and amplify her words, her voice, and her narrative power above the dominant discourses with their disastrous effects on her life. I had done so by a careful study and representation of her knowledge and lived experience in the poems and metaphors she had endorsed (that had been dismissed by powerful others), as well as by the faithful representation of the transcripts of our conversations with her and about her, and most importantly, her responses to these efforts. The concentrated attention on Zhen's thoughts and her experiences, and the focus on these as the heart and soul of the presentation made it clear that I never thought myself in a position to judge the effects of my storytelling efforts, and that her deliberations on the real effects of my reaching efforts were all that mattered to me. Centering and studying our clients' responses to our work in this way is what it means to try to answer the question of "what our doing does." And yet I was posed disembodied questions regarding power, and therefore came to wondering whether speaking of power relations has grown so experience-distant as to be confused with something stationary, like an identity category, for example. I had a sense that perhaps I was asked, not for complex elaborations as to how to remain always-already suspicious as to my narrative power and its assumptions next to my clients and to show, in detail, how I reached for more justice in haggling out and fighting for clients' storytelling rights, but that I was asked for some glib words that would lend themselves to check-boxes to tick off in our anxiety about our power as therapists. But power relations are not a check-box nor an identity category, nor an object, but a purposeful reach, a negotiation, if you will, every unique conversation at a time, every particular person at a time. At the heart of Insider Witnessing Work stands the demand to come to understand how exactly a particular person has been up against and hurt by powerful people





in their lives who lean on the “Master Narratives” (Lindeman Nelson, 2001) of our time to give themselves permission to treat a person in a particular manner. It is the work of Insider Witnessing, in particular, to understand and resist these ways of relating. We already have no shallow alibis when it comes to the examination of relationships and our effects on our clients. Insider Witnessing work seeks to further remove the possibility of such alibis with the very questions it asks therapists to consider. The work of addressing power relations cannot be “told” in few words, it must be “shown” in the conversations themselves.

In the context of power relations, I yearn for a conversation that might take place in all the detailed particularity of a context and its people and in a sense of curiosity about our practices of power as therapists. May we take our own and each others’ critical capacities very seriously.

Malidi: I want to highlight this. This sentence called me into engaging openly with this paper.

“Power is not an essence,” Foucault reminds us. – it is not as simple as a statement about one’s social location, an examination of skin-colour, or even one’s prowess in “convincing” another – although all these might be beginnings of considerations. But I would like to step beyond simplicities and speak of “relations of power” in the details of a particular relationship.

“Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... Power is not an institution, and not a structure; Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared... Power is exercised.” Such writes Foucault (1990, p. 93-95) about power relations. Shored up by Foucault, I would like to claim to be curious about the particulars of this “exercising,” within relationships and their effects on our lives.

David Epston and Michael White have long invited us out of our traditional





therapeutic covering-up-our-practice places, out of words like “neutrality”, or “not-knowing positions”, or the effortlessness of simple “negative, repressive descriptions of power” to consider other places to stand and practice from that might help us assume responsibility for the “real effects” of our interactions. (For a review and critique of the hiding places, see Catrina Brown (2007) “Situating Knowledge and Power in the Therapeutic Alliance.”)

Brown (2007) concludes her chapter on power with these thoughts: “It is my view that if we wish to avoid inadvertently reifying dominant social discourses and social relations, we need to be reflexive in our conceptual practices. Holding on to a politicized practice requires therapists to come to terms with their own knowledge and power” (p. 19).

Malidi- Sanni, you are a welcome colluder here. I appreciate the enthusiasm with which you come into this space. It is important for me to acknowledge that I am white passing and that this affords me a certain amount of privilege.

This is where I hope to pick up the thread by asking “how?”. Or, in David Epston’s style: “show me.”

First, let me back up just a little. I recently had a joking conversation with a client about the fluorescent lights at our therapy office, and she spoke about “fluorescent lights sucking her soul out - and not remembering any times when creativity or something of the extraordinary came to her under the shine of fluorescent lights.”

Building on Foucault’s and White and Epston’s arguments, it is my assertion that our therapy conversations are arenas of power relations and their effects, in much the same way that they take place under metaphorical (and often real) fluorescent lights.

Malidi: Underline this!





We cannot escape our lighting issues by rhetorical wheedling even if we were to resolve to practice under candle light only -no fixes or lists can help us check off the matter of power relations at the therapy door.

Malidi: !!! Here I thought to myself. "This is a real page turner." I love these first pages. It is engaging and makes me feel like I want to collude with you. I hope you will collude with us as well.

But how do we sincerely avoid the second, sinister step in lighted conversations: the *denial* of other people's experiences of the lighting conditions in the rooms we inhabit with them? -In any practices of wrongdoing, there is the initial trespassing, but how are we to live when the second step to a trespass is a concentrated denial of said trespass?

And how do we as therapists endeavour to set up conversational conditions that seek to un-deny trespasses at every turn? Such endeavours are set against the backdrop of a whole tradition of a therapeutic ethos that has endowed therapists and their like with the authority to pronounce their conversation partners' exact position on scales of normal and abnormal, (Malidi- A suspicious binary indeed!) to have the last say as to the rightness of perception, memory, and sanity of the "other." Good intentions by themselves will not do here!

Surely these lighting conditions set the stage for "sweaty endeavours" around what Sara Ahmed calls "sweaty concepts." Ahmed is arguing against the rigid distinction between *descriptive* and *conceptual* work and asserts that a "sweaty concept" might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is "trying," and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty."

Well, let me both *describe* and *conceptualize* a scene, taking place in broad





daylight this time: 3 white therapists, 2 of them experienced and 1 of them a man (neither of the latter categories describes me, by the way), set up the room to interview a client, a young woman of indigenous heritage.

Malidi- Sanni, you are a welcome colluder here. I appreciate the enthusiasm with which you come into these spaces. It is important for me to acknowledge that I am white passing and that this affords me a certain amount of privilege.

And if this does not alert the power police, it gets worse: this interview is meant to be a follow-up reflection on an Insider Witnessing Practice, in which a group of white and passing-for-white therapists portrayed this young woman's life and asked questions and told stories about her moral character.

According to the traditional repressive-only notions of "power", there is only one possibility here: abandon all hope and run! If power is a stable and oppressive one-way lighting system, there is no hope for the interviewee to have life, say, agency, or authority in this room.

Sabrina Benaim writes in *Depression and Other Magic Tricks*:

*she is the sugar cube,
and this is the cup of
darjeeling – she
dissolves,
faster
than
you
think
she
will.*

As an aside, I think of this poem often in my therapy work with women. I think of the Master Narrative reserved for us as women





- Sanni: Yeah, Malidi you were just talking something about “colonizing spaces without even checking in with people after.” Where “some people tell other people how they are feeling...” One of the questions we have—in some ways this may be in this way of recognizing your authority to speak to us on matters of power - and I do realize this is a terrible way of asking because you’re sitting with three white people *again*... But I am wondering if you *were* free to speak about power relations or even the sense of “here we were in a room speaking about your life” and wondering about whether in that you might have felt “checked in with” or “told how you are feeling...” I am wondering how this was for you. Whether you felt you had a say, - and this is where you are our consultant, Malidi, to make this better for people who come after you—
- Loree: She’s wondering where you’re going...
- Sanni: I’m sorry, I’m not asking a good question.
- Tom: Well you’re introducing the question.
- Malidi: You’re, like, making sure that I know (said warmly, to Sanni).
- Sanni: So the question is what was it like for you to observe - I don’t know how many white people were in the room speaking about your life - and then trying to present it to you —what was that like for you and is there something you want to tell us about guiding that in the future if we were to undertake interviews like this interview, to make it a bit safer—or





Tom: So it's not colonizing.

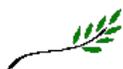
Malidi- Just really realizing now how important this has been, it has given me a space to feel safe combating what I see as colonizing, without fear of being called "too much" or "reactionary." Wow! I didn't experience feelings of being colonized, my language at the time and way of speaking was respected and replicated so well by my therapist. I felt colluded with not colonized.

Sanni: Yeah, so we would never step into that space and pretend we know how others feel.

Loree: And I was wondering too, maybe more specifically, of what it was like for a young white woman to portray your life...

Tom: ...For your life to be portrayed by a white, young white person. Because these are matters that are important to us. One is that the telling not be a colonizing, regardless of if a person is the same race or not. But yeah, what was that like for you to have your life portrayed?

Malidi: It's funny because I don't think for me personally I would say that it was problematic because I really trust my therapist and I respect her and everybody here at the Collective. I think everybody here is open and we are safe to be open to criticism or being wrong. We can find better ways to do things, - but that can't really be faked to be *open* to this discourse. I think that maybe just doing what Sanni did and saying "we want to be challenged by it, tell us, we aren't going to be offended if this feels wrong." I think just acknowledging that is important, and especially with a lot of people that maybe—even just anybody, just





to be able to acknowledge it *when it feels off* or like injustice. To acknowledge that before speaking. I think that what I like about this is, because I feel you know why I like it here, you guys are my people, you know I can say and talk about theory and in relation to my own life. Things I learn in school where if you don't know about it I can send you whatever—it's like, not everybody is equipped to do that or has the privilege to do that. But if you find ways to invite... - like you are always inviting the protest or the contestation.

Sanni: I think there is something you are saying—I'm wondering if I can take it, or we might take this up? You said the one thing that might be important to us in the future, and correct me if I am wrong, is acknowledging that before speaking. And you used a phrase "when it feels off." I think this is another way of inviting the protest or the contest? Even before we start speaking, but this phrase, and I love this phrase "when it feels off" can we use that in the future?

Tom: Did you feel like you had that in the interview?

Malidi: Yeah I did. I feel like you guys are really good at picking up on - she's not like "okay let's talk about what I want to talk about" which is great for me because it's like you guys are open to following what I want to talk about. But I also like when you guys actually tell me before what you are thinking because it brings up stuff for me. It's collaborative, it's very cool.

Sanni: But the words to the invitations are important?

Malidi: And I think it's like—I don't know, for me I try to find





things—I started therapy with the intention of becoming more articulate about how I feel, and how I incorporate it into my schooling and everything. Because I like when they talk about Michael not being—because they talk about the tacit a lot, and not being comfortable with the tacit. I was thinking and maybe sometimes I think maybe for your—for clients it takes a longer time for these tacit things to be rendered tangible.

Tom: That’s great, tacit things to be rendered tangible. Sanni you might want to write that down (said playfully, as Sanni is obviously already excitedly writing). Did that happen for you in some way?

Malidi: Yeah, I use tacit as a place holder. And sometimes for me when I say “tacit” I mean obviously this is the structure we live under. I feel bad about this, tacit, like *obviously* the world is fucked and the patriarchy sucks. You know, and then I say it almost like a place holder for me. For me tacit is like the systems rendered visible, that’s what it is for me. Which I just realized now.

This interview continues to follow up on Malidi’ thoughts about the “tacit”, about “colonizing spaces”, “patriarchy” and specifically, her experiences of what made it possible to make the hair-raising statement of “trusting” us. What were the practices that created this “trust”, against formidable odds one might add, and what might we as therapists learn about such practices?

Malidi- There is so much consent happening always. That seems to be a huge factor for me. I don’t think that consent, at least in my experience, is taught in a robust way, and through these experiences I was amazed by the multitude of possibilities for consent giving and boundary making.





After this conversation, I returned to my copious hand-written notes that I took of Malidi's words while we were speaking and transcribed the notes into a poem. I was too excited this time to wait until a face-to-face meeting to read it aloud to her, so I sent it to her over email prior to a meeting. Malidi laughed about the subject line of the email that read "A few instructions on power, holy shit Malidi."

Behold the poetic transcript of my hand-written notes taken from the interviewee's own words in this very same conversation:

**Instructions on the Matter of Power by Malidi
because *obviously* the world is fucked and patriarchy sucks**

*Malidi- It seems so twee to say this it like this, but also, another tacit
placeholder*

In many spaces
What is tacit
Is rendered invisible
And no one is accountable.

And so we go around
Under surveillance, tone-policed, undermined
Colonized, mocked, alienated:
Too crazy too angry too irrational too loud
Too this too that...

Do not be satisfied with tacit
Take it from me:
Tacit is the place holder
For my articulateness.

And now I will tell you *tenderly*
How not to be an asshole:





May you show curiosity in my ideas
 May you want to be challenged
 And may you tell me *that* before you start speaking.
 May you introduce four little words:
When this feels off...
 And twelve more words:
This is not the only way we have to speak about things.
 May you invite my protest!
 May you write my words
 May you be open to following
 May you not talk over me.
 May you get excited
 -Enthusiasm helps you all!-
 And may you cry
 Over my words and my life.

And then maybe
 May you see
 How it all breaks down power.

My dears
 Behold your means
 Or shall I say power
 To render the tacit tangible:

Counter-mock all the white maned lions
 With an intention of tenderness, you all.
 Look to my articulateness
 And yours
 To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it.
 Make no mistake
 This is belonging work:





It is a gift
The opposite of alienation.

*Majidi- A beautiful and challenging exchange...
disalienation*

And then behold:

I can emerge
Equipped for my own bystander intervention
And fierce in my threads that have continuity backwards and forth
And with *more* say rather than less.
Because when people see me
When I didn't even know I hoped
To be seen
I can step into the panopticon
And climb all the stairs into the tower
And hell,
Behold my life.

*Majidi- I love the tower imagery because it
also reminds me of the ivory tower and the
tower tarot*

You listened.
And all the sightlines afforded me
By your listening
And by my vantage point in the tower:
It is proof,
Proof of work, yes
But that's nothing yet.
It's the damn
Proof of life
You all.

I read this poem to Majidi at a meeting a few weeks later. She told a story of where and when she had first received them over email, and her laughter and delight in response. "Oh, I do make sense," she quipped. I asked her what it might be like for her if I read it to other therapists and we spent some time negotiating how it might be introduced lest it be dismissed as "decorative" or "just a beautiful addition" to theory, rather than pulling its own weight as a qualitative representation of our co-research. She had some





rather stirring words for practitioners in regard to a possible dismissal of her ideas: “if this is too difficult for them to understand, if they can’t, then perhaps they shouldn’t be practicing...?”

I will side with Malidi here and let her words stand as an authority to themselves. The worst thing to do in response to a poem might just be to wax poetic about it? So therefore, I will keep my commentary brief.

There were 2 interactions in the interview that Malidi addressed specifically to me that I want to point out. The first can be found in the transcript excerpt above, in which Malidi comes to my aid in phrasing a question about her experience of power relations with us. Obviously, I am struggling to word a question, and instead, I deliver a rather inarticulate preface, and almost lose my place and courage to turn statements into an actual question. “You’re like making sure that I know,” Malidi responds to my halting, sweaty effort. This mattered to me above all else, that despite my inarticulateness, she was willing me on, casting my efforts in an honourable light.

Malidi- If therapists aren’t able to have space to work through their ideas in order to thoughtfully engage, I don’t think that would work for me, you and Calgary Narrative Collective have been with me for a while and I would be wrong to expect all the answers... we still live under a system that doesn’t equip us to over throw it... revealing power and naming power is. a. process. for all. of. us. everyone has blind spots.

The second piece is a moment when Malidi is asked to reflect on the details of how she might have experienced “having a say” when meeting with us. In response Malidi points to me and says “she is writing, is she not? She is writing down my words right now. What does that tell you about whose words matter here?”

I want to focus your attention on the following lines:





...Look to my articulateness
 And yours
 To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it...

Much has been written by Michael White and David Epston and others how we as therapists cannot afford to take up a “neutral” or “not-knowing position” as this would render us ineffectual to address the oppression and dominant cultural story-lines in our clients’ problem stories:

“If therapists wish to challenge oppression, they must challenge those stories that are grounded in dominant discourse. Power cannot be left out of an approach to narrative therapy if it is to be accountable. In politicized work, practitioners are positioned in making sense of clients’ stories. Practitioners on the side of social justice cannot take a neutral stance with regard to power” (Brown, 2007, p. 6).

And look how beautifully this idea is phrased here: “look to my articulateness and yours to finally name that which oppresses me.” However, Malidi goes beyond and adds: “AND that which roots me, such that I can see it and feel it.” In the same way as we cannot afford to take a neutral stance in response to stories that are grounded in dominant discourse, we can also not take a passive stance in the construction of counterstories, here named as “that which roots me.”

As part of an Insider Witnessing Process, Malidi had experienced the re-telling of the counter-stories in her life by her therapist in front of the Insider Witnessing team. This re-telling did not happen lightly and was prepared for with faithful attention to Malidi’ own dictionary, imagery, and imagination that she had shared with her therapist in their sessions prior. Could such an attempt be an imposition, yet another attempt to colonize her life? Absolutely. However, this was not Malidi’ experience, and as with all





therapeutic matters, we cede the last authority to her to tell us of the “real effects” of such an experience. The most significant part of Insider Witnessing Practices is the review of the stories that were told about a client by their therapist together with the client. In this review, and the many conversations that follow, every one of the clients’ words and responses matter. The initial stories told by the therapist about a clients’ life are but the means for the real story to be told, which is the clients’ own thoughts and responses upon considering the therapists’ version. All the work of the Insider Witnessing Interview leads to this moment, when a client reviews the stories told, and responds. It is in this moment in particular, when narrative power is ceded back to the client, and all of us hold our collective breaths to hear and write down what she will say next in her adjudication of the stories.

In her words then, rather than being an imposition, or in her own words, an “alienation”, Malidi describes it in the following manner:

...I can emerge
 Equipped for my own bystander intervention
 And fierce in my threads that have continuity backwards and forth
 And with *more* say rather than less.
 Because when people see me
 When I didn’t even know I hoped
 To be seen
 I can step into the panopticon
 And climb all the stairs into the tower
 And hell,
 Behold my life...

Breathtakingly, she is taking us into a world within worlds to turn Foucault’s panopticon into something we could not have imagined. I ask you readers, has she not climbed the stairs to the tower, and turned the tower itself, the very heart of surveillance and monitoring, into a triumph?

She goes on to say:





...You listened.
 And all the sightlines afforded me
 By your listening
 And by my vantage point in the tower:
 It is proof,
 Proof of work, yes
 But that's nothing yet.
 It's the damn
 Proof of life
 You all...

Insider Witnessing Practices place persons as witnesses to their own lives, as re-told by a trusted other. Malidi is telling us that this position, becoming a witness to one's own life, "equipped" her, and afforded her "sightlines" and a "vantage point" that she did not expect. Her word "proof" has emerged in many of our follow-up conversations with others who have experienced this practice: proof of care and attentiveness on the part of the therapist: "All that I have told you over the course of our meetings, it did matter. And you were not doodling. You were listening." And if our lives are witnessed by others, and if we behold that our living has moved another, to tears, to change, to inspiration, and if this can be shared back with the person, in a *convincing* manner, how might their lives appear to them afterwards? Here I walked, and my walking *substantively* mattered to another.

I propose that it might be right here, in this crux, that Narrative therapy can re-emerge as the anti-therapy it perhaps set out to be. So much of the traditional therapeutic endeavour concerns itself with the control of person's lives, the creation of docile bodies invested and inseparable from the cultural ideologies, the dominant narratives, of our time. Therapists and clients endlessly skirt a game in which therapy conversations revolve around the question "what should I do?", or phrased in another manner, "how ought we live?" – to which the therapist provides a more or less coherent answer, depending on their particular therapeutic persuasion.





Catherine Foote and Arthur Frank write: “Dominant discourses tell people what to do, and people who have been told then bring to therapy their chaos that what they are being told to do isn’t right for them....The objective is to witness this chaos and accept it while showing the client how it works: how dominant discourse necessarily creates lines of fault, and how the client has had the strength of conviction not to assimilate her or his experience to the dominant discourse. When the client is placed outside of dominant discourse, and no longer knows what is to be done, when any sense of what is to be done is understood as an external imposition that creates another line of fault, the person has reached that “true” position of strength and possibility that Foucault calls ‘no longer knowing what to do.’ That position is no more difficult and dangerous than life already is.” (p 183)

Malidi- Underline this!

Insider Witnessing is a practice that staunchly sets out to “not solve anything”, but instead, asks of a therapist to act as a witness on a client’s behalf. A therapist is asked to retell the clients’ particular stories of what they have been up against in life, - events through which, thanks to which, and against which the counterstories of their own responses shine through. Over the course of my involvement with Insider Witnessing, I have asked myself, why does this feel so different, so joyful and unburdened to take part in this practice as a therapist? Perhaps this is because, for once, we are intentionally and purposefully setting out to side-step any considerations of what “people ought to do” in favour of telling a story of the beauty and extraordinariness of what they have already known to do, especially given what they have been up against in life. In watching the interview, clients do not conclude that they have been given a single instruction of how to live their lives. There is freedom here, in what Foucault calls “no longer knowing what to do.” And we need therapists who can remember freedom!

Tom Carlson might rephrase this rather striking line “no longer knowing what to do” with an incitement to ponder the make-up of “good stories:” a good story, he might say, has the effect of a person starting to wonder, with





curiosity and tenderness towards their own lives: “what might I do next?” In the words of a one of our clients who experienced this practice: “Whatever I do next, I want to be free to choose my choice.”

Majidi- This feels important to me because it demonstrates the intention of creating a space where clients can be equipped with this reflection on their own stories and reveals the intentions and invisible labors of the therapist. I felt like my moral character was demonstrated with no instructions on what to do with it. That was left entirely up to me. It gave me access to the multiplicity of where it can be applied in my life.

There are a few unique ways in which Insider Witnessing as a practice is set up specifically to address relations of power. I will discuss, and more importantly show, 2 of these ways below:

1. Negotiation of Informed Dissent

Over the course of our work on Insider Witnessing, we stumbled upon and thereafter purposefully embraced a practice of negotiating “informed dissent.” Majidi supervised our stumblings by pointing out to us “you are always inviting the protest or contestation.” In fact, Majidi instructs us to “to acknowledge” our wish to be “challenged” “before speaking,” and to speak the words “when it feels off” (notice that Majidi does not say “IF it feels off”). This instruction by Majidi made it very clear to us that we need to move beyond the realm of “negotiating consent,” and even beyond the realm of “inviting contestation” to a “privileging of dissent.”

The following transcript excerpt occurred soon after our conversation with Majidi and shows the many different ways we tried to set the stage for dissent. This may be considered one way of showing our particular “how” on this day, but definitely not a “how-to.”





Tiffany: So, we've met twice before now, and the first time we met—I told them (Tom and Sanni) a little bit about what you've been up against. What some of our work had been like. I shared some of the poems I wrote for you with them. We visited for probably a couple of hours, it was quite a long time. And then from that—we went away and Sanni wrote a poem, which is something you know a little bit about, based on our conversations. And then we got together a second time where these guys interviewed me as you. So not some kind of cheap imitation of you, but kind of my best and most hopeful knowing of you. So, it's pretty hope-biased, which is intentional. But it's not something you have to accept—feel free to contest it "No this is a little much. I don't quite buy that"—feel free, please.

Client: “That's not how I would have answered.”

Tiffany: Yeah, - “that's not how I would have answered!”—yes! What we would like to do is play that interview for you, and kind of like a movie, you know? But it's a movie you can stop if you want. So, it's almost if you have a pause button in your hand. Please just say “hang on there, I've got something to say. I don't agree with that”—

Tom: Or just start talking.

Tiffany: Or just start talking, you don't have to say stop. Whatever, interrupt or not, you don't have to do that either. You can just sit and watch it—you can say “I've had enough for today” whatever fits for you. You have—you are in complete charge of how this goes—

Sanni: I might interrupt at times too, I might stop it and see how





you're doing and how it's going. You can freely direct me "no, no, no keep going." Or "actually I'd love to add something", yeah. -Also, my phone is going to ring at 11:30, I have to move my car, but I will try to be very inconspicuous—

Tiffany: Maybe we could pause it at that time, - are you a smoker?

Client: Yes

Tiffany: So, there's—

Tom: Smoker's break?

Tiffany: We could have a smoke break.

Client: I'll have a smoke break, that sounds good. I'll have to go up to the second floor because I meet my sister for smokes [laughs]

Tiffany: Well there might be smokes around here.

[overlapping chatter and laughter]

Tiffany: Okay, and - first, very importantly, does anybody want a snack before we begin?

Tom: Probably.

[laughter and chatter as individuals move about]

Sanni: Okay. We have done this a few times with people, and I want to tell you that people have had responses like "this





is so weird!" right? So if you say that, you find yourself in good company. And there is nothing you can do to offend us, - in fact, any lively response, even if it's "shit, fuck I hate this, can we stop this?" is welcome. [laughter]

Tom: You don't have to be polite.

Sanni: Yes, you don't have to be polite or constrained by things, because this IS a weird thing that we did together. And we don't care if you hate it, or if you are intrigued by it - we care about whatever response you might have, and we WILL take up your response, because that's what matters.

Malidi- I starred this is my notes because this is such an important aspect of informed dissent as not just encouraged but that when it happens it will be welcomed and enhance the overall IWP.

I'm trying to explode the constraints of politeness around you. And you don't have to share your thoughts here either. You can be completely quiet the whole time and say "I'd like to talk to Tiffany later, please. When you weird people aren't around." [laughter]

Tom: Some people find that they want to talk during this, while others are like "I'd rather just take it in" and any of those is fine.

Client: Okay, thank you.

Tom: We've overdone it? [laughter]





- "I'd like to talk to Tiffany later, please. When you weird people aren't around."

In an effort to negotiate active informed dissent, we are giving the client quite a few options of actual words for said dissent because of our appreciation of how heavily the collective gazes of previous therapists (and other authorities of proper personhood) might be resting on our client in the moment of this conversation with us.

Malidi- Relating to "Informed Dissent". I love how this is a positive, empowered, constructive, productive framing of something that is usually dreaded or cast in a negative light. It is being acknowledged as useful and generative instead of stifling.

Invitations to disobedience and dissent are novel, especially given that we work with women who have all experienced the usual misogynist punishments that happen to women when we claim our speaking rights - in Malidi' words: "under surveillance, tone-policed, undermined, colonized, mocked, alienated, too crazy, too angry, too irrational, too loud, too this, too that..."

If we are asking clients to break rules of politeness and reverence of the therapist together with us, then we might just have to be willing to demonstrate our comfort with irreverence in a substantiated manner. Rambunctious laughter from our clients is often the response and gives us a cautious green light to proceed for the time being.

Malidi- I love that as I read through this paper I will write a comment then you will address it from your perspective.

As we proceed with the viewing of the taped interview with the client, we continue to seek dissent and ways for our client to have "more say." More and more, we have turned away from simply asking "how is this going?" or





“what do you think of this?” towards: “how did Tom do with his question here?” or “how did Tiffany do with her answer?” or “is there anything here that is of interest to you?” or even “did we get this wrong already?”

The secret is that the Insider Witnessing interview was constructed over many days of pouring over the clients’ words and stories and imagery, and a concentration of attention on the exact words and the particulars of a clients’ tellings of their life to their therapist – but by the time we show this taped interview to the client, none of us any longer care what it was that we said. The only care in the moment with the client is “and what will you say *now*?” What parts of this feel meaningful or moving to you, what parts do you disagree with, what makes you tearful and why, and what on earth does this get you thinking about NOW?

The secret is that Insider Witnessing is simply a device that seeks to raise a person outside of their story for but a moment, and for them to take a position on their own story from a novel and rare position of oversight. And all that matters is what they will say next.

Malidi- You all turned my goggles on myself in a way that was countering negative self-talk and give access to routes to self-compassion.

2. Observance of Story-telling Rights

In our interview we posed many questions to Malidi as to why she had evaluated the Insider Witnessing interview positively and her best guesses as to what particular practices within the interview had contributed to her appreciation of the efforts. We asked her to consider other participants in the future and advise us on the practices we might want pay close attention

Malidi- ...this, if it comes up and the client wants to, could be apart of the practice... giving them the chance to make a set of rules. Rules on how to set boundaries around what works and doesn't for themselves.





to in our hopes to make ourselves useful to other clients in the future. Malidi outlined the following instructions for future interviews:

May you write my words
 May you be open to following
 May you not talk over me.
 May you get excited
 -Enthusiasm helps you all!-
 And may you cry
 Over my words and my life.

Malidi is speaking about her story-telling rights and how they were observed in the Insider Witnessing interview. This is something each one of our clients has remarked on, the practices of faithful listening, writing, and following our clients' stories. You listened! The labour of love of an Insider Witnessing interview is not for the faint of heart. Our clients cannot afford broad strokes, privileged theorizing, or unsubstantiated story-telling by the therapists involved. In our preparations for these interviews, we rely heavily on the clients' own words for what they have been up-against, and work exclusively in imagery that clients have proposed to their therapists in their previous sessions. The stories that are told in the interview aren't invented, they are the stories that clients themselves have told in their sessions with their therapist. Again, and again, in our preparations, we ask therapists: whose words are these? What exactly did your client say about this? How exactly was it said? Is there a story your client told about this experience, and can you re-tell it in the clients' words and in all its particularity? An Insider Witness interview requires a return to the (almost lost?) arts of note-taking, transcripts, recordings, session notes, therapeutic letters, and poems that will tell us of our client's suffering in their own dictionary and imagery. Without our clients' words, we have no story that anyone should have to suffer to hear.

Below is a poem that grew out of our preparations for the interview with Malidi's therapist, written by Tiffany Saxton. In our poetry writing on behalf



How Insider Witnessing Practices Address Power by Raising the Means to Speak

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 102-135.





of our clients, in lieu of other summaries, both Tiffany and I have taken comfort in the words of the poet Neil Surkan (2018): *Words fail us when we need them to say exactly what we need them to say. Poetry reminds us that we are at our best when we risk everything with our second-best words on behalf of the life of another.*

Tiffany's poem represents an overview of the work of the preparation for our interview with Malidi' therapist. It outlines the story threads that were introduced and considered and retold at length, the companions that were part of these threads, the characters and moments and Malidi' own positions and declarations throughout her life in her own words. It will hopefully give the reader an idea of a concentrated attention to the details of Malidi' life:

A Bibliotherapeutic Exchange or a Momentary Parting Gift or Calling On All Old Souls

My grandma and I sometimes lose our way when we wander,
 Her spells of friendship enchant people into offers of hot chocolate and a ride home;
 We cast circles of warmth and safety and deep connection.
 After the funeral, I helped Grandma Gene undress and get into bed,
 As she did for me from a time before I can remember.
 To each other, we are perfect.
 Sitting in the dark, in solidarity with my grandpa-dad, unalone in the despair;
 Sitting and waiting at the window,
 Longing for you to help and love yourselves.
 My gut refused to be colonized by drinking the potion.
 Won't you join me in this generational protest
 Called by the ancestors who came before and those who are yet to come?
 Won't you join me?

Muggles struggle to connect
 To the magic-conjuring portals of pain and despair and anger;
 My therapist and I, together with the other generalists: Foucault, bell hooks
 and Judith Butler





Are willing to be possessed by our obscurus;
 Will not have our anger at injustice managed.
 We belong
 to the tacit dimension.
 Won't you join us?

I light a smudge in church
 To cleanse and reclaim ground zero of my ancestors' suffering.
 I use the power of my white-cloaked voice
 To chant incantations with a guardian angel at choir;
 Together, we cast spells of comfort and healing.
 Kent Monkman and I issue an invitation to decolonize
 to all Anglican priests who don't think the sun shines out of my ass;
 We zoom out
 and still see the Mounties and nuns tearing children from their families.
 Wakeupandbedisturbedious are the magic words;
 Won't you join us in lifting the curse of enslavement?
 Won't you join us?

I am the old and other-worldly soul, calling out the chef
 Who spread his legs wide
 And mansplained to me the modification of a burger.
 I summoned my powers, as I paced the room in my badge-laden cloak,
 A badge for valour, another for honour;
 Held to account by my obscurus.
 I refuse to forget,
 And connect
 through the residual pain of my ancestors,
 traced back through my grandmother's grandparents
 and find generations of belonging.
 We are committed to not being complicit with atrocities
 Won't you join us?

I felt the weight of the philosopher's stone, zoomed out,





and all who stand with me were revealed.
We always have plenty of room and you are most welcome.
Won't you join us?

Upon hearing this poem, Malidi commented: "It's just insane! How well you already know me and get me just by talking to my therapist. And not just an overview, but you get the bigger parts too. It's crazy! You captured the threads that run through my life in ways that even I wouldn't have been able to see it on my own."

Malidi- I can't imagine the kind of mental and emotional energy that doing a genuine IWP takes, to be able to fill so many other people in so that even Tiffany, before even meeting me, could write me a poem that rang so deeply true to me and continues to bolster me when I reread it is amazing. I feel kind of verklempt answering these because I am just remembering and feeling the connectedness which the IWP has made me feel and how that has carried forward in my life. I can now feel my opinions and how I choose to present them are valid, my personal experiences are my expertise, and that is enough.

Malidi- Hell yeah, also, holy shit all of you at the Collective. All of you make me feel seen in such a meaningful way, sometimes it feels self-indulgent.

Enough said.

A Conclusion

What if we tried a thought experiment to return to some of the ideas regarding power that were raised in the introduction to this paper? - What if I told you that one of the therapists who was involved in these interviews was of similar "social location" as Malidi and was therefore purposefully





given a central role in all the preparations, and our interview itself? Would this reassure you? I say it shouldn't! The ability to speak of Malidi's or our own "social location" is but the thinnest of beginnings: what does Malidi's social location tell you about what exactly it is that oppresses her?

Malidi- I highlight this because I had starred it in my notes because it acknowledges that understanding context alone isn't understanding the client and that it isn't so simple and there is a lot of questions and exploration that must happen for that which oppresses to fully be realized. To boil a client down to their social context is to deny their agency.

Not enough! And this, the concentration of attention on what, in particular, oppresses - and roots - a person in their own life, is exactly what the work of Insider Witnessing is about. Social location checkboxes are but the thinnest trace of a history of a person with its fullness and complexity and depth. Insider Witnessing work requires the fullness of a history, rather than a checkbox, to command a therapist's concentrated care and attention. If it were otherwise, we would run the risk of glibly objectifying our clients once more.

In the great game of power relations in therapy there are no alibis. No resting places, no proven prerequisites, no words of assurance. There is only this: one conversation at a time, one utterance at a time, we begin again, the sweaty work of attention, care, and effort to raise our clients to have more say against the details of that which is oppressing them.

Malidi- I highlight this because it reads in a way that I find meaningful, because, like the above highlight, it acknowledges the constant work and discomfort with the hope of empowering clients to own their narratives, boundaries, and power to change things how they feel they wish to, or not.





This work begins with quiet questions of what hurts you and how? What is the worst of it? Have I understood it or just replicated it? And have I also seen your joy and triumph against that which hurts? Have I heard what you have been able to live and say and do, in spite and in the face of everything, and can I tell of it? In Michael White's words, "I think that whatever 'good' therapy is, it will concern itself with establishing structures that will expose the real and potential abuses of power in the practices of the good therapy itself" (As quoted in Denborough, 2009).

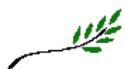
The wish to refuse subjugation of another human cannot begin to be achieved by "reifying social locations" or by any other generalized analysis of power. The wish to refuse domination is to care to understand, in a particular person's life, the specific means and ways and words by which this person has been made a subject and to join them, personally, in the specific means and ways and words in which they have mounted a refusal.

Malidi- I highlight this section because of Sanni's loving words that demonstrate her complex practice and constant adjusting she takes on in order to validate the client in their refusals and validate them through mirroring back the parts of themselves that have enlivened her and made her feel like colluding with them.

In Malidi' own words:

Malidi- Lovingly arranged into a poem, by Sanni and demonstrates things she also found powerful in our conversations, which are collaborative and become so lively through our mutual trust, respect and engagement with each other.

Counter-mock all the white maned lions
 With an intention of tenderness, you all.
 Look to my articulateness
 And yours





To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it.
 Make no mistake
 This is belonging work:
 It is a gift
 The opposite of alienation.

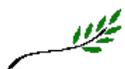
Malidi- I look forward to continuing to work against alienation from myself and that which affects me. Socially locating someone is not as simple as it sounds. It is a starting point from which to understand the particular ways that I have been oppressed in my unique experience of life. This experience allowed me to perceive myself from a vantage point I'd never experienced before. I am moved by how I've been equipped to be compassionate to myself. I wasn't instructed to show myself compassion, my worthiness of that compassion, especially from myself, was demonstrated in the IWP. I have met and spoken with several other women who have experienced an IWP. Meeting these women and seeing their transformations was powerful. The fact that many of us have gone on feeling empowered to protest and fuck with the powers that have oppressed us is a testament to the empowering nature of a well done and genuine IWP.





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

Loree Stout

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

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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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

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

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

What does love have to do with it?

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

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



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Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



practices that love.

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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



Significant personal and professional life-shaping encounters

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

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

Being interviewed about transport

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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

Tom: Right, there is no explaining...

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

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

Loree: I'm thinking about that.

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

Loree: It is deserving of ranting.

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

Loree: Yeah





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





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

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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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





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





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

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

Loree: Like ...Remember me?

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

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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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

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

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

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



Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



form.

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

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

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Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



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Insider Witnessing Practices and Effects on Therapists:
Becoming other than who we were at the start and who we might not have been



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 136-151.



***“No Tom, we are not the justice league:
The justice league is imaginary, you know
And we are real.”***

Observations on the real effects of Insider Witnessing In our clients’ words

Sanni Paljakka, Tiffany Saxton, Loree Stout, & Tom Stone Carlson

This paper is a beginning sketch of our participants’ words in response to experiencing an Insider Witnessing interview. It is based on our recorded and transcribed follow-up interviews, as well as our clients’ spontaneous letters and documents back to us. Every quote in this paper is a verbatim representation of our clients’ words.

Many of the papers in this special issue already contain case-studies of the “real effects” of the practices of Insider Witnessing on particular clients. This practice has been shaped by every person whom we have interviewed, and each one of them has made a unique contribution to the character of the practice going forward. The real effects of Insider Witnessing on our clients are by now inseparable from the ways our clients have supervised us into taking it up with the next person.

It has been a summary privilege for us to witness our clients joining us as shapers, contributors, supervisors, evaluators, co-researchers, and co-authors together with us. It is impossible in this paper to represent all that we have come to know through our clients of what becomes possible when we as therapists join our clients as witnesses on their behalf. We have tried and formed and discarded and re-formed questions that we might ask our clients that might give us a fair idea of what this was really like for them and what it got them thinking about in their lives.

For example, early on, we asked our clients to evaluate the value of an Insider Witnessing interview in terms of therapy hours: If you compared this session to



Observations on the real effects of Insider Witnessing in our clients’ words

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 151-165.





previous sessions, how many therapy sessions would you estimate this experience was worth to you?

We stopped asking this question after un-printable and un-reportable answers such as “light years,” or “9 years of therapy,” “it’s invaluable to me”, or “it’s like the Visa commercial: it’s priceless!” -Did I tell you that our clients just happen to be some of the funniest and fiercest women around?

The follow-up interviews after the Insider Witnessing happen between the therapist and the client, without the presence of other members of the witnessing team. From time to time, clients have requested to meet with the team in addition to speaking about the effects with their own therapist. The following are some of the questions that we have played with for therapists to ask their clients after the witnessing:

- Would you mind sharing what it was like for you to see your life portrayed before your eyes by your therapist?
- As you were watching the portrayal was there anything in particular that was said that really surprised you?
- As you were watching was there anything in particular that you found yourself relating to or agreeing with, or protesting and dissenting that you had never considered before?
- As a result of watching the portrayal of your life did you come away with any new appreciations for yourself and your life?
- It has been common for the people who have participated in these interviews before you to tell us that they felt like they had traveled a great distance during the interview and in the weeks that followed. Would you say that your experience was similar, or different?
- Were there any points or realizations that seem particularly important to you to pursue further either on your own or in this therapy?





The expressions of the effects of participating in an Insider Witnessing practice by our clients that are quoted in this paper speak for themselves and are purposefully highlighted without additions of conclusive theoretical pronouncements on our part. It is too early to narrow down the considerations of what Insider Witnessing makes possible in our clients' lives, and more thorough study and co-research is necessary in order to illuminate such considerations in the future.

In order to facilitate some appreciation of the below expressions, however, I would like to remind the reader of one significant matter: all of our clients who participated in these interviews have histories of experiences of serious trauma in the form of physical and sexual abuse, violence, and mistreatment as well as histories of many years of therapeutic treatment. It is against this backdrop that we were humbled to wonder together with our clients about the achievement of uttering expressions as the ones printed below.

The decision was made to organize the countless expressions taken from our transcripts, poems, and our clients' written documents back to our team into categories of ideas and notions that repeated over and over again across each of their experiences. These expressions by our clients of what happened to them and why they think this happened have a lot to teach all of us about the venture of therapy. They have certainly changed my therapy practice irrevocably and educated my attention to the means by which grand stories of shame that have been made to take root in a soul by repetitive mistreatment and the Master Narratives that give permission for the continuation of the mistreatment by powerful others can be made to hesitate and yield. In my own practice, I have taken up this generous supervision by our clients regarding the effects of Insider Witnessing to all of my daily encounters with clients. The expressions that were most common among the diversity of thoughts fall into the following categories:





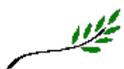
1. Spontaneous expressions immediately afterwards
2. Epiphanies regarding my suffering
3. Claims of my respectworthiness
4. Why I think this touched me so:
 - a. Someone really cared
 - b. For once, I was not inside my life but on the outside looking in

Each comment below denotes a different speaker.

1. Spontaneous Expressions Immediately Afterwards

- *I was skeptical, but when I walked away, like I said, the first words out of my mouth when I saw my sisters was, "you have to try this."*
- *I walked away, sat down in my car, and I thought, "man, I've got this." Meaning the rest of my life: I've got this.*
- *I walked away and sat in my car for an hour, unable to drive home just yet. I journaled instead. This is the beginning of what I wrote:*

*"I walk out and to be unaffected is impossible
 She cries my tears and feels my pain
 Maybe I am not alone
 Maybe I have a right to my sadness
 And something
 Shifted like the tectonic plates were moving..."*
- *We drove to the hotel and I remember not wanting to take my sleep medication that night. I'm usually so anxious about being able to sleep in a new place. I thought: "I don't know what this is, but I want to stay awake for this."*





- *After the interview I went home, and I was trying to explain it to my dad. The analogy that I was using was the it was like this warm bath of sunlight, like comfort and caring, and kindness. And he said, the clouds opened up and sun was shining down on you. That was the perfect analogy.*
- *We spent almost three hours talking and watching the video. It was both tiring and enlightening for me. Tiring in a good way. At the end of it, I felt at peace somehow and the way we talked about me and my thought processes made me think about myself with a renewed sense of pride. I wrote a poem for you all after watching that. Here is the beginning of it:*

*“Trudging through the snow
 searching through tear smeared eyes
 imaginings evoked by distant lights
 he says I’ve been in this field before
 and I have
 more than once
 more than twice
 if the lights are worlds within a world
 each wonderer of a world left their porch light on
 signaling a home within which to belong
 she thinks of a light house
 reaching me at sea
 more than once
 more than twice...”*

2. Epiphanies Regarding My Suffering

- *I had an epiphany! I had an epiphany about this paternalistic interference in my life. I want to say "bullshit," I want to say paternalistic interference can never, it can never be justified! When I saw this, and when I thought about what is different in it for me, what is important to me, I came to the conclusion paternalistic interference can never, never be justified.*





- *When I saw this, I suddenly thought, I thought “who did this to you!? Who beat this out of you? Who made you feel like this is not something that requires acknowledgement?”*
- *When I am talking (about the childhood circumstances) I have feelings filtered through feelings. When they are saying, and hearing about this child and what she’s been through -the unfairness shone through!*
- *When I saw this, I thought, maybe I didn’t create this, maybe it’s not my fault. They stole my magic, my power from inside me, they tried to fill it with shame. They tried to keep me from myself, and tell me how to live, how to feel, how to act, how to be. They tried to bury me alive, lull me to sleep, wrap me in this ill-fitting, expensive cloth and make me ashamed of my nakedness. Then I would always be clothed and never feel at home in my own skin, I would never be at home, because I don’t have one. And when I cried, they said, quiet down, don’t be such a baby there’s no place for that here.*
- *When I saw this, I realized fully the place I lost all agency for the first time in my memorable life and I say let it never be twice.*
- *You see, my life taught me to see myself as a broken person, forever trying to climb out of that hole and stay despair in the attempt.*
- *Like I mentioned before, I was finally able to see my struggles and the ways that I had been mistreated in life without all the negative feelings attached to them or perhaps it was more like there were new feelings, feelings of compassion and pride, now attached to my life and my history.*





- *The other thing is I like I never saw myself exactly clearly before. And like—and then I never gave credence to the problems I was having, like I always thought that I was being a wimp. I think I said that to you several times. That I was a victim, that I just you know, need to suck it up kind of thing. And then I think like watching that portrayal was, you know like the things I went through were really painful, you know? And my therapist was expressing that pain and showing me that, that pain was a very real thing.*
- *When my therapist told the story, it felt like “this really happened.” This really happened to me. And I thought to myself, “here we go.” And something shifted, like the earth shifted underneath me.*

3. Claims of My Respectworthiness

- *I think like it's like I'm unapologetically myself right now. I feel so free, it's like the same thing I said to you last time. I felt complete freedom.*
- *I think it allowed to stop being so hard on myself. After she recognized all the baby steps I'd taken over the last few years or even a lifetime are huge and it's okay for me to be proud of myself and happy with who I am. I didn't really get that before.*
- *You know, I was like "I didn't realize how kind of cool I am. I'm kind of like a different person, I'm kind of like my own person."*
- *You guys helped me realize how brave I've been throughout all of the stuff I have been going through. And how that like—even though I wanted to die in situations, that brazen rebellion inside of me is probably what kept me alive.*
- *Regardless of the depression or the anxiety, or being female, I claim my right to make decisions that are mine. Not because they are imposed on my mind, but because they are mine. And more importantly, not only am I*





making decisions, but I have to freedom and capacity to act on my decisions. I have the ability to make good decisions for me. I don't need to fixed or cured in order to make a decision that can be accepted or honoured. I claim respect for my decisions.

- *"Through the smoke and mirrors I can see myself*

I can see myself through the lens of someone else

I can see how I matter

I can see that my opinion has clout

*I can see that the sweat the blood and the gouges have all been worth it
Or at least are seen.*

Maybe they have a place

And maybe the blood is not just mine.

I can see my strength my fragility

I can smell my sadness

And so I breathe deep and fully

And I feel the fire in my belly and I rise

And I rise to fight

I rise to fight for myself

To claim my space in this world"

- *There was an arc to the interview....a story that unfolded....it gave me a picture of that unfairness and reminded me of the innocence. That child was innocent.*
- *What stood out to me was the daring of it. I was always thinking that I was too afraid to go after things. And someone saying "perhaps it was daring...?" Okay, let's pull it out of the "scared socket" and put it into the "daring socket" and have a look at that. Am I a daring person? Let's look at everything I have done in my past and everything I am doing right now. Am I daring? Damn straight I am.*





4. Why I Think This Touched Me So:

a. Someone Really Cared

- *They're the ones that have been listening. They're the ones that are taking notes and it's like "They're listening to you!" It's like proof, it's like "see?"*
- *Seeing other people moved by me, my existence has meaning.*
- *When she was portraying me, she was outraged, - their empathy is so touching, so apparent in the room. It made the experience one of safety. The process wouldn't be as positive without the empathy that I could feel. It is the cornerstone of what you are doing there. It is the distinction between feeling investigated versus supported.*
- *Yeah, like I didn't even realize you were paying that close of attention. Like, I was like, "okay people pay attention," but you were paying really close attention to me, as a person.*
- *I think it was like really interesting. I think it was very accurate, which I was—[sighs] Well, you know that I always complain that no one was really listening to me, so it was actually really touching to me that you actually are listening. And truly like trying to help and grasping the struggles I was going through.*
- *It was like – I think it was – I think I said it when we were doing it and I think after the first or second question and I said, "Oh my god you were listening. You were taking notes." It was really touching [tearful] and it really meant a lot that I was heard. I think sometimes you feel like you go to counseling just to talk and let stuff out, but the experience of doing this Insider Witnessing really proves the relationship bonding that you have with the counselor and*





therapist, if they truly want to make a difference and help. That's kind of what the whole process kind of showed me.

- *I can't even begin to tell you what it means to me to see my therapist crying about the injustice in my life.*
- *It just felt so special. And I think about you, and you wanting to do that for me. And how much it's helped me. I'm just like, fuck dude, these people care so much!*

b. On "Outsight"

- *It is like this: you people always say to me "you are superwoman, you can move the mountains." And it's good to hear it, and maybe I believe that. But watching this was like "I really moved mountains." In the interview, I actually saw myself moving a mountain.*
- *It relates to you, and it's just like—I don't know, watching your character on TV. I don't know how else to put it. Except the story is about you. I don't know why people relate to things more when it's on the outside, when it's obscure, it's on the outside of them and not within them. Like they can't see it going on with them, but when you are sitting on the outside looking at it, and you're seeing something—you're like, "that person is really like a heroine. That person is like, wait a minute—that's me!" [snaps fingers] Snap.*
- *And it was the first time that I had heard my story, outside of myself, right? Because you're used to hearing your story inside of yourself, and you don't know how that is being portrayed on the in—the other person, the interpretation of it on the other side of it, right? So, it was really interesting to see the interpretation come back and see the pain, in that, and that pain*





is real. And that, you know it was interesting to see, you know, that anger. And that anger was real, and it was validated.

- *It offers a bit of distance... It made me think as an adult about the child I was.*
- *Watching it from the outside, you can see how people have something they always have in them. It's not that they never thought about it, it's something they've been equipped with--it's something that's always been there, but hasn't always been acknowledged or given a word or whatever. But it has always been there. And you can see it, when you are on the outside.*
- *It's weird, to hear it as an outsider looking in. It is like reading a story. And you think about all the adventures that the person went through. And you're tying in the memories to all of that. It's kind of crazy to hear it in that form. People have told me that "you're one of the strongest people they know" and I don't get it. I've just survived. Gone through the motions. But then you hear it like that, like you are a hero in the story. Going through all these adventures. And it's just like, "wow." It's crazy to think about. Because it is actually me.*
- *It was very much like reading a book about the character and feeling for them and understanding what they're going through. I was feeling love and care about this girl they were talking about – who is me! That third perspective really allowed me to give those compassionated thoughts to myself.*
- *From the outside I could see that I am not too big not too small or too loud or too quiet - maybe I am exactly who I need to be and where I need to be. And maybe that's the point.*





- *Somehow, listening to your words, my efforts appeared differently to me: my baby steps rose up and grew tall right in front of my eyes.*
- *Watching my therapist portray me helped me detach myself from the problems I was experiencing. From this outside perspective, it was easier to sift through the events and the feelings that had previously been attached to them.*
- *Watching them talk about me in this way allowed me to see myself with new eyes. I was able to see myself from a distance and I found myself agreeing with the choices I made throughout my life; those same choices that used to bring shame somehow brought a new sense of pride and conviction that I have always known what's right and wrong and this IWP experience actually confirmed it. I have a good moral compass in me, and this helps when I have bad days.*

Conclusion: A “Poetic Transcription” Of A Group Interview

A few words from us to describe an IWP

Or:

Are there any therapists trailing up the mountain?

Tell me

What powers live in words?

And tell me

What powers lie curled up in the word powerful

To describe This

That has happened to us?

Can you taste the strength of the awakening of this word

From sleep

To test the true measure of its wings and its fur

Once again.



Observations on the real effects of Insider Witnessing in our clients' words

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 151-165.





Words are falling out our mouths
 And leaving a trail of new growth
 Up the mountain
 For others to behold and walk on.
 In our pain, we are teachers.
 Do you know this power?

This gift has been dismissed by so many
 Who say I am broken as if I did something wrong
 Who say I am broken as if I were an old car.
 I looked into this black hole and the black hole looked back at me
 And my humanity started fading out
 Under the pressure to forge a tuna can mind.
 Tell me, do you know this power too?

But I am not a car and I read their report
 And I cried.
 And I am never not broken and I found words
 To refuse my capture
 And I swore.
 Do you know this power?

And then one day someone really listened
 And cared for my words instead of doodling
 And held them up for me to see
 And put them in a play.
 -You can't walk out of this play!
 You have to see it to the end
 You have no choice but to see yourself.
 Hell, you're the star
 And have wildly inspired a roomful of women.
 Do you know this power?

And now:



Observations on the real effects of Insider Witnessing in our clients' words

Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, 2020, IWP Special Release, pp. 151-165.





Am I the butterfly or am I the dreamer?
 Am I Zhen's Zhen or Loree's Sue or Tiffany's DonnaSueZhen
 And how awake is my humanity while I have been doing it?
 How have I made this moral choice?
 And why did these changes occur?

I saw my compassion
 And I saw my kindness
 And they came cracking through darkness
 And breaking free
 And transcending my every effort.
 And so the light swallowed the darkness whole.
 Tell me truly
 Do you know such power?

I revisited myself for the first time
 And
 I have been humbled
 I have been reminder-ed
 I have been awakened
 I have been restored
 I am fucking trying
 I am leaping and flying
 I am spreading this shit
 And dreams and want and desire
 Wait on my every move.
 Man, I got this.

No Tom we are not the justice league
 The justice league is imaginary you know.
 And we are real.
 And do you know this power?





Insider Witnessing Practices, Trauma, and Neuro-Affectional Reauthoring

Jeff Zimmerman & Tom Stone Carlson

Introductory Comments by Tom Stone Carlson

Over the past three years, David Epston and I, along with our colleagues Sanni Paljakka, Tiffany Saxton, and Loree Stout from the Calgary Narrative Collective have been immersed in the study and development of an emerging practice in narrative therapy called Insider Witnessing Practices. We came together to as partners to see if the promising early outcomes of Insider Witnessing Practices, reported in the inaugural release of JNFT, might hold outside the resource rich and fertile ground of a university-based clinic. The Calgary Narrative Collective (CNC) is a non-profit frontline agency operating on a shoestring budget and the good will of the therapists who work there. If Insider Witnessing Practices could thrive in the resource strapped and stony soil of a non-profit agency like the CNC, then it just might be a practice that could travel anywhere. Second, the work that the therapists at the CNC do might be categorized as primarily trauma based, working with women who have suffered violence and abuse at the hands of men and whose lives are often under the influence of particularly gripping problem stories. While not by design, the majority of the initial 20 clients who experienced Insider Witnessing Practices were women who had experienced violence and abuse. It became immediately apparent to us, based on our early interviews with our women co-researchers, that Insider Witnessing Practices held promise as an approach that had the capacity to help persons 'unsuffer' themselves (David Epston, Personal Communication) from the intense feelings of shame and blame that they had been recruited into as a result of the abuse they have experiences. We approached Loree, Sanni, and Tiffany at the CNC to see if they might help us study, expand and reinvent Insider Witnessing Practices (IWP) as a trauma-based practice. And expand and reinvent did they ever, but that is a story for another time.

One of the surprising things that we learned from our early co-researchers is that there was a distancing effect that occurred in the IWP interview that





allowed them to see, feel, and hold regard themselves as if they were another person. This was possible as a result of the way that IWPs invite people into the position of a witness or audience member to a dramatic portrayal of the counterstories of their lives as performed by their therapist. Over and over again in our follow up interviews, our co-researchers commented that this view of their stories and themselves from the ‘outside’, as if they were another person, allowed them to experience something truly rare; a radical version of witnessed ‘self-compassion’; something that had mysteriously eluded them despite their best efforts and well-intended comments from friends and loved ones that it wasn’t their fault. Miranda, our first co-researcher, couldn’t have put it any better when she said,

I strongly believe it is never a young girl’s fault for being sexual abused in any way. No matter what she has done. I have always felt that way. But in my mind I was the one person who deserved to be treated like that. But in the IWP interview, you are watching another person act out your life and it’s almost like it’s so separated that it’s another human being. And I’m not going to sit there and tell some 13-year-old that was her fault. The separation from myself and the story of me being told by Emily (my therapist) allowed me to be compassionate to myself without it being me. I allowed myself to be accepting for Emily’s Miranda, I have to accept it for Miranda’s Miranda. How can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me?

In addition to their experiences of radical self-compassion, our co-researchers kept referring to their experience of IWPs as having a tangible, almost physical, effect. Not only did they feel differently *about* themselves, they reported feeling differently *in* their bodies, as if the story that they witnessed took up residence and inhabited their bodies in a real or substantive way.

While we were certainly curious about our co-researchers accounts of the tangible and embodied effects of IWPs, we set it aside for the time being in favor of theorizing about how the distancing effect of outside-ness made





something so allusive as self-compassion possible. However, the very first IWP interview at the Calgary Narrative Collective, and the subsequent reported effects, made these tangible, embodied effects impossible to ignore.

Donna (the first person who experienced an IWP at the CNC and our first co-researcher there) in an interview two-weeks after her IWP experience, surprisingly commented that during the interview, as she was seeing her life portrayed by her therapist Tiffany, she could feel her brain “shifting” and “turning” and “righting itself.” And after the interview, in the two weeks that had passed, she reported that her brain had “grown bigger” and there was “more space” for things like reading; something she could never do because she immediately forgot anything she had read because there was simply “no room for anything else but the bad.” In addition to the physical effects of the IWP interview on her mind and brain, Donna also commented it had a re-belonging effect on her spatial relationship with the earth with her feet now feeling, “Firmly planted on the earth,” something Donna had previously experienced as always “slippery,” “shifting,” and “unsteady.” If we weren’t paying attention to the physical and tangible effects of IWPs before, Donna brought our distractions crashing down to earth.

How were we to make sense of Donna’s dramatic account of the “righting” effect that the IWP interview had on her brain and her body’s relationship with the world? Of course, we were familiar with the work that Jeff Zimmerman was doing related to neurobiology and narrative therapy, so I decided to reach out to him to see if he might be interested in joining us in looking into what was going here. We were particularly curious to know Jeff’s thoughts about how (1) the performative nature of IWPs and (2) being a witness to an embodied portrayal of the one’s life by the therapist, might contribute to these unexpected ‘mind and body changing effects’ of this practice. Our proposal was for two-fold. First, we invited Jeff to engage in a study of all of the transcripts that were part of Donna’s IWP experience including,





- The Act One interview, where I interviewed Tiffany as Donna in a dramatic re-telling of the events of Donna's life.
- The Act Two interview where Donna became a witness to this retelling through the watching of the recorded Act One interview in the presence of Tiffany and myself.
- Two post-IWP interviews where Donna reflected on the effects of her IWP experience on her life.

Second, we asked Jeff to theorize about the 'embodied effects' of IWPs from his understanding of Interpersonal Neurobiology and Affective Neuroscience, using Donna's experience as a sort of case study. To our delight, Jeff excitedly agree to our proposal.

So reader, here is what you have in store for the rest of the paper. First, Jeff will provide a brief introduction to his interest in and understanding of Interpersonal Neurobiology and Affective Neuroscience and how it all relates to narrative therapy. Throughout his explanations and theorizing, Jeff will use verbatim accounts from Donna's experience from the transcribed interviews. Additionally, I (Tom) will add my own thoughts and comments throughout in italics.

Jeff Zimmerman

My intention in studying Interpersonal Neurobiology and Affective Neuroscience has been to use these discourses to shed light on new possibilities; all discourses bring forth some-things and not other things and thus have real effects on what gets noticed and how things are understood. My hope has always been that armed with these understandings, Narrative practices could be developed to address that which can be seen through these new and different lenses. Interestingly, Insider Witnessing Practices turns out to be such an example, although it emerged from practice ideas and not theory.





My studies of these emerging discourses have led me to privilege the role emotions play in both how the mind evolves and how change occurs; what is exciting to me is how IWPs appear to be a process that results in an evocative affective “interchange” between therapist and client and interviewer. Before I get too ahead of myself, though, perhaps it will be useful to share some (hopefully) helpful backstory to my thinking. Throughout the rest of the paper, to illustrate my points, I will include some excerpts from the various interviews done with Donna and her therapist Tiffany:

- 3/25/17: Act 1: Tom interviewing Tiffany as Donna
- 3/25/17: Act 2: Team interviewing Donna
- 4/19/17: Follow-up: Tiffany interviewing Donna
- 4/28/17: Follow-Up: Tiffany interviewing Donna

Hi Jeff! It's Tom here. I thought I might offer a very brief description of IWPs to help readers with some of the terminology that will be used in the paper. Insider Witnessing Practices is a performance-based therapy that invites people into the position of an audience member or witness to a dramatic retelling of the counterstories of their lives. IWPs consist of an Act One interview, where the therapist is interviewed as the client in what is intended to be a hope-biased portrayal of the events of the person's life. This interview is recorded and is shown to the client during the Act Two interview. I should say that prior to the Act One interview, the therapist and interviewer meet to gather the material that will be used for the portrayal. During this Pre-Act One interview, great care is taken to get a detailed account of what the person has been up against in life, the actions and events and stories that make up the counterstory of the person's life that specifically demonstrates how the person has acted as a moral agent actively shaping the events of their life, and a gathering of the client's unique vocabulary or dictionary so that the portrayal is experience-near to the person and honors their own local knowledges and wisdoms. When the therapist is interviewed as the client in the Act One interview, the words, actions,





and events of the person's life are faithfully retold in a way that sets these actions in motion. As in a play or a film, the characteristics of good storytelling is used to situate those events and actions in a dramatic story that contains a particular narrative arc that is intended to reveal the moral character of the person who has been driving the story all along.

While the events and actions of the person's life are faithfully retold, in the Act One interview the therapist who is portraying the client is asked questions by the interviewer that seek to offer up novel interpretations of these events in ways that might do justice and honor to the hopes and intentions that may have been guiding the person in their effort to live a life according to their own purposes. You might say that during the Act One interview, the therapist takes up an embodied retelling of the person's life that is situated in a commitment to do right by the person and that is on behalf of their own best hopes for the person's life. During the Act Two interview, the client is invited to watch the portrayal as if they were an audience member to a performance of their own life story. It is important to note here that IWPs are intended to take place in the realm of art or performance and, as such, it is not meant in any way to constitute an accurate or authoritative account of a person's life. Because the Act One interview is intended to be more art, the therapist is not tasked with 'getting it right' or somehow making a copy of the person's life. Knowing that this is intended to be more of an artistic rather than true re-presentation of a life, the therapist and client are free to play with the interpretations that unfold during the interview. The client, as an audience member to this performance, is, in effect, sitting outside of the story, and is in a better position to weigh, consider, question, claim or reject the meanings that emerge during the performance. One consistent comment from our co-researchers is that this position of an audience member/outside observer to their own story, somehow gives them more say over their lives and reverses power relations in surprising ways. See the paper by Paljakka, Carlson, and Mercedes in this issue





for more about how IWPs challenge traditional power relations. Hopefully, this brief interruption was helpful. For more information about Insider Witnessing Practices please see [Carlson & Epston \(2017\)](#). Back to you Jeff!

Theory

In Narrative Therapy, we have long acknowledged the idea that we have multiple identities or versions of the self; in “Neuro” talk this is referred to as different states of mind. These are clusters of neurons that are grouped together to form neural networks which mediate the emotions, arousal responses, moods, thoughts and experiences of the self that are contained in the state. The brain needs these states to operate efficiently in different circumstances; as such, they are context dependent. Sometimes, the switch between states is fluid, sometimes versions emerge that are more rigid or chaotic. Those neural networks with more experience behind them are thicker and so more influential. Strong affective arousal has a major influence in the formation of these states; the stronger the affect the more the brain “pays attention” and devotes resources to respond to it. These important affective experiences and their arousal effects become part of each of these states. In addition, under the influence of affect that is too difficult to handle, our nervous system, in an effort to manage the affect, reacts in a manner that has been shaped by our individual experiences. In other words, our experiences shape what kind of arousal responses occur in each state we are operating in. These arousal responses are mediated by the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) which has two branches, a Sympathetic branch which amps things up (flight or fight) and a Parasympathetic branch which damps things down (freeze or faint), and all of us might show one or the other or both in various contexts.

What also evolves in each of these states of mind, based on the experiences that helped form the state, is a window of affective tolerance, an amount of affect that can safely be tolerated before our arousal responses are triggered. We all have these windows and they are different for each of us





and different in different contexts. When I am with clients and in my “therapist” state, my windows of tolerance associated with this state have an influence on how much and what kind of a client’s affect I can handle before being triggered into some kind of response to manage my own arousal. Inevitably, this then influences my ability to create an experience of embodiment for the client, as to do so requires that I stay present and affectively responsive to them. For example, when I am working with someone with an extremely low amount of affective output, the energy in the room can be so low that I might have to work hard to hang in and bear it without my mind wandering away from the moment. What I am saying is that the affective responses (or lack thereof) of the client I am working with has real effects on me, and I can accept or turn down the invitations to respond in particular ways depending on my own level of affective tolerance in this context. An understanding of the kinds of invitations that are presented by (what for me is) overly high or overly low affect helps me to be on alert to respond to them in a way that allows me to stay attuned to my client. How I respond to these invitations is critical to the work as some of my responses could inadvertently support the Problem. In my personal relational life, it might be a different story, as I might be more easily triggered, and the invitations might be harder to turn down. And as you can imagine, those experiencing relational trauma have tiny windows in any context involving other people.

Another idea is that we all live in an energy flow that influences us both internally and interpersonally, and that this flow is shaped by intra-personal, interpersonal and environmental effects. Our usual response sets are maintained by this flow, which can get rigid or chaotic (multiple streams at the same time) under the influence of the Problem. The “flow” influences the probability of occurrence of particular internal and behavioral responses, making some responses more likely and others less likely to occur. Gregory Bateson referred to a phenomena like this as “restraints,” an idea that influenced Michael White’s early work (e.g., Michael thought that externalizations helped loosen the grip of these restraints). As an example, if we’ve had experiences that have loaded our memory banks with easily





triggered “bad” affect, we might find this flow taking our minds repeatedly to thoughts of being worthless or guilty, when these thoughts “fit” **the affect that is invading our bodies**. Indeed, after affect arises in the body, the left brain puts together a story which fits the affect well (the left brain is only concerned with “fit”) but is without regard to all the possibilities out there, leaving certain experiences on the cutting room floor. The specific content involved in these stories is influenced by personal experiences and the master narratives/dominant cultural discourses that are available to and acting on us. This fitting function of the left brain fits well with dominant Narrative Therapy theory. At least that’s what my left brain is telling me now.

Inviting out affect for the client can trigger a change in this flow of energy; as I have said, affect is a signal to the brain to pay attention. Affect also brings in the right brain which has a much “bigger picture” (i.e., mediates more broad-based information) than the left brain; the left brain’s job in the moment is only to come up with a story. Bringing forth affect allows the right and left brains to work in an integrated fashion, and this could shift “the flow,” changing the probabilities and sending the mind in different directions. Furthermore, this shift is critical to working with the effects of trauma, as what we hope is that space can be opened up for a more in-the-moment influenced flow of experience, as opposed to one that is more predominantly past influenced. In other words, integrating affect with thought, and facilitating a change in the client’s ability to perceive the current moment leads to a different flow, to different constructions, and to a different pattern to the mind’s organization.

Furthermore, experiences that are unbearable (i.e., trauma), are locked away in special synapses in the brain and are set off in a way that make them unaffected by future experience; however, they remain very influential memories that can shape reactions without awareness. The “trauma influenced self-version” contained in these memories consists of the affect and arousal responses of the traumatic experience, and the resulting conclusions about them-self. With any trauma, one additional complication is that the mind can divert the individual away from consciously processing





the event while it is occurring, so that what gets experienced is purely on an affective level and felt only in the body. In other words, traumatic experience can become raw emotion that is unstoried; it never makes it to the hippocampus, preventing it from doing the work of integrating emotions with narratives. One effect of this is that a “bigger picture,” a context for what has occurred, is lacking.

Ecker (Memory Reconsolidation Therapy) believes that these special synapses in which the trauma memories are stored can be unlocked by bringing forth the original (painful) emotions contained in the memories along with the concomitant conclusions about the self, about relationships and about life in general that are influenced by these strong affective experiences. He suggests that if brought forth three times and juxtaposed with three alternative experiences (what we would call Unique Outcomes, or as I prefer, **Unique Outcome Moments**, highlighting the need for them to be grounded in embodied experience), these memories become available for what we would call restorying. The client can then be invited to take a position on the effects of these different types of conclusions influenced by the different types of experiences (i.e., the Problem or the unique outcome). One theory is that EMDR also accomplishes the same result by influencing the brain's ability to manage the painful affect, allowing emotions to become more easily integrated with thoughts. Repeatedly juxtaposing **embodied externalizations** with unique outcome moments could also have the same effect. The critical point here is that the painful affect must be allowed to enter the conscious experience of the person and not remain “hidden” in the body.

However, because the brain protects us from threat, even the threat of experiencing painful affect, it is difficult to access these affective experiences. Anxiety/ fear gets triggered by the brain in the face of invitations to address the traumatic memories...

Donna: Yeah because my little girl and me have found something that she feels is going to help, and then you're able to grow up from





there. But I think not until you take the fear out of that little person. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

...and has the effect of inadvertently inviting the trauma influenced version of the self to react to the invitation to emerge with the arousal response contained in that state. As, for example, most abuse is experienced at the level of life threat, the brain responds to that kind of threat by strongly activating the Parasympathetic branch of the ANS (used by the brain to handle life threats) effectively dampening the flow of energy and information away from this material in an effort to protect the person and their nervous system from having to experience the trauma induced emotions again (in some circles this is referred to as dissociation). In effect, these emotions are thus left without representation in the conscious mind, and thus unavailable to be restored.

Donna: And what makes them tick and I think for me I've been going around like in a total fog. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

Donna: Yeah! There's still a part, even after all these years because then my mind went back to one of the first times I met my psychiatrist and he asked me, what kind of a childhood did you have? And I said, I had a won—I think I kind of went like that, "Oh, I had a wonderful childhood." (From Act 2)

Unfortunately, the effect of this brain "practice" of not allowing representation of the affect to exist in our minds leads to an overall "Deadened Lifestyle". Because the brain generalizes, (i.e., learns from experience in order to make predictions about the world), both affect and interpersonal contact is reacted to as a threat. This comes at a cost, as there is an energy drain and the person can seem and feel lifeless; in the room with them you might even begin to feel tired as there is little energy. Interestingly, one way time is viewed by modern physics is that our experience of it involves noticing change; thus there is a timelessness to the experience of abuse as the person's affect never changes.





Donna: Or having to look over your shoulder, for me its – as I’m older now I’m not constantly looking over my shoulder, but psychologically I am. I think that’s one reason you have trouble going forward is because your mind is turned around backwards. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

Donna: I don’t know... It’s like I had a real fight in my – my dad was the driving force in my brain and he was driving my brain, now I’m driving my brain. (From Act 2)

Therapies for the Problem

Various strategies are used to try and address this “state” of affairs. Bromberg’s (2011, 2017) recommendation is to have the therapist share their own strong feelings/reactions when they arise, hoping to invite the client to react similarly. He believes that these affective interchanges have an intimate effect, and strongly invites clients out of their ANS mediated affective stupor. Bromberg suggests that this process creates a change in their here and now perceptual reality, a perceptually different (not conceptually different) experience that doesn’t fit their current narrative frame. In other words, by inviting the client’s experience into the present moment and relationship, the client moves more into the here and now and out of the “dissociative fog,” and the client’s ability to “perceive” affective material increases through this process. Donna, commenting on her experience of witnessing Tiffany’s embodied performance of her life provides an example of what I am referring to here.

Donna: Because it just, like I just feel connected to you, which I don’t think ever felt connected. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

Bromberg goes on to suggest that therapy is about, “seeing and being seen rather than an ideational process in which one person is being seen ‘into’ by another,” that what you get when you try to see into someone is one of their





not-embodied (my words) self-narratives (we Narrative types would likely agree, despite thinking about this a bit differently). Bromberg believes that through the kind of personal relational process he is advocating, over time the relationship becomes more alive and the client has an experience that sends a message (to their brain) that neither affect nor people are dangerous. Bromberg refers to Jerome Bruner's (1990) work when suggesting that something becomes an "act of meaning" when sensory input engages the mind's subjective experience while interacting with others, that otherwise what you are exchanging are just words that are not being meaningfully perceived. He notes that the question of "what's happening between us in this relationship" becomes the central one, as opposed to "what does that mean to me or to you". It is important to highlight that those practicing from this point of view are now explicitly acknowledging that embodiment is a dyadic process. An interesting side note for us here is to wonder if the usual Narrative practice of someone asking questions from the therapist position and clients responding with their own experience is truly a dyadic one? When a Narrative Therapist shares their experience in a more personal way (e.g., through situating), it might go a long way to constructing a more balanced dyadic process.

It follows from this point of view that another useful practice is to ask, "What's it like for me to be asking these questions of you" type questions of the client, in an effort to get them more into the here and now with the therapist. The hope is that doing so will bring affect into the relationship and subsequently bring forth the "trauma-shaped" identity. Doing so will also pull the rug out from under the "Problem-shaped" identity that takes over to both manage the therapeutic relationship and avoid bringing-forth the painful affect. In general, the therapeutic goal is to allow the client to re-experience the painful affect in affectively tolerable doses (Schoore, 2012), slowly freeing them from what Bromberg suggests they had to do to themselves to live with what was done to them.

Donna: I just also had – when I was reading some of the poems and watching you portray me, it's like this turned something very





evil and dirty into something livable. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

Donna: I think it's like I was trying to find good people in this world to make it. To be able to live. (From April 28 Follow-Up)

Doing this kind of work (or perhaps with all therapies that are effective) requires the therapist to be very closely attuned to both their own and their client's affective shifts. Here, the goal is to scaffold the development of affective tolerance. This allows the therapist to provide safe affective encounters and avoid re-traumatizing the client. This is critical, as those experiencing abuse are already hiding; fear and shame makes it painful to be seen and they need to be assured through a careful process that where they are at any moment in time is seen and that it is safe to come out. "Safe enough" affect that is triggered by the therapist offers several possibilities. First of all, it opens up a flow of subjective experience between the two people, allowing the relationship to become a support for a new direction in a powerful way. And it allows for the possibility that that therapist's affect will collide with the client's affect creating a dyadic experience that is very influential (see Zimmerman, 2018 for examples of the effect of what Bromberg's calls a "**safe surprise**," an authentic experiential moment where client and therapist both share their experience of something that has occurred between them and new meanings emerge). Despite all the helpful and interesting ideas here, I say, "Phew," as a therapeutic process it seems like a whole lot of long-term work.

IWP may be accomplishing a similar result with a more efficient and elegant process. From my point of view, an interaction is structured where the therapist (hopefully) embodies the client's experience providing an affective response which is witnessed by the client. I'm left wondering if embodiment occurs more safely even for some therapists in this IWP process than when they are face to face with their client and responding from their usual therapist identity. Also, from my point of view, the therapist's responses as the client (in the act one interview) are shaped both by their experience of the client AND their own personal experiences, giving them an authentic





affective feel. My guess is that as the client is witnessing the therapist's responses, they are more safely (than usual) triggered into their own affective experience which was previously unavailable to them. What I am suggesting is that by the therapist embodying their perception of the client's state in an un-calculated (and so more affectively real) manner through being interviewed, **it allows the client to be in a position of assuming the therapist's position**, from which they can more safely re-experience their own painful affect, and perhaps from a state with a wider window of tolerance (i.e., from the therapist's window).

Donna: I would say what really surprised me most is the authenticity – the rightness of it like I could get it. (From Act 2)

Tiffany: What I got down is that you said, "I think that you took on me in the IWP with Tom, but it has had a reversal. I took on you I think. You were representing me, so I was kind of representing you. Groundbreaking to get out of you, you have to find someone to get into, into their personality or their being."
(From April 28 Follow-Up)

Once the affect is brought forth, the Narrative questions that follow invite a re-authoring of the identity conclusions that are associated with the painful affect; this process could open up those special synapses and allow not only new identity conclusions to be available, but also allow the contradictory experiences the client has had since the trauma to become available to them. The old experience, now storied, becomes remembered in a different way, its affective influence consciously mediated and available to the client for continued processing. Bromberg noted that Bruner suggested that with developmental traumas, a person requires the development of language first (in this case to learn to attach language to emotions), to acquire further language later as a bystander. Perhaps through IWP, the client learns to language their emotions and then can experience further emotional understandings, and eventually change in their cognitive frames through subsequent experience.





(From April 28 Follow-Up Interview)

Donna: Well I think we as children we model observes against our elders and so I think this is like you're a child again, you're a really child.

Tiffany: A real child. [repeating Donna's words back to her slowly with deliberateness as if in a trance]

Donna: Yeah! Like you're a real true child, so you don't have any childhood of all of that garbage [sounds tearful/emotional]. So now you're like a real child.

Tiffany: So somehow – oh, sorry, I'm welling up – this is very moving to me [sounds tearful, is on the brink of tears/crying, seems to be holding back at so she can ask Donna her question], are you saying that somehow through this experience you've recovered some of your lost childhood?

Donna: Yes [sounds tearful and emotional].

My working definition of therapy is: "A new emotional experience in the context of a relationship," and IWP provides that in unique ways, extending the relational system. In the Follow-Up Donna said, "I am able to remodel myself in you," and I hear this as her taking on and experiencing what was happening in a version of Tiffany, at least while she was watching the interview.

In my opinion, one key would be for the interview of the therapist to be as affectively evocative as possible, with the emotional material perhaps repeated multiple times (or at least three). This type of interview would also provide a critical (from my point of view) training experience for therapists in experiencing and sharing affect in their future work. Implications for Narrative and other therapies could include:





1. Therapists need to show affect to be seen.
2. The practice of “situating” may be especially helpful if heartfelt and affectively revealing.
3. Curiosity may be particularly useful when embodied by the therapist.
4. For therapists acts to be “meaning-full” and meaning inviting, perhaps “under the guidance of text” should be thought of as a more affective thing. Should how I, as a therapist, affectively experience the client’s response be reflected in the next question I ask them?

IWPs set up a structure for Donna that illustrated to her how Tiffany has been hearing her responses and experiencing the affect that she was fearful to encounter. This process likely set up a version of Bromberg’s “safe surprise” and triggered a perceptual change and therefore became an “act of meaning”. Specifically, I am suggesting that the structure of the interview allowed Donna to experience both the pain of the original experiences. See the following excerpt from the Act One Interview.

Tiffany’s Donna: Oh yeah, she would say things to my friend, “Bring Donna over for some tea. I’ve made some squares. She’s treated like a slave in that house, you bring her over.” And just knowing that, that made a difference.

Tom: As I’m hearing you say that, her acknowledgement of how you were treated and bringing you over, as you look back on it now is that a pretty tender moment?

Tiffany’s Donna: Yeah, I didn’t know that people knew or that they cared, if they knew.

Tom: Do you think that she somehow knew that you were suffering?





Tiffany's Donna: She knew something. [Repeats herself as she's thinking about this] She knew something.

(Another Example)

Tiffany's Donna: That's when my mom also stood up. That's when my mom said – because my dad was beating me and that's when my mom stepped in and said, "Stop. Stop. You are going to kill her." So my mom and I both kind of stood up at the same time [crying – very emotional at this point]. I didn't remember that.

Tom: Is it okay if I call this a remarkable moment when you stood up and called him a pig and called upon that sense of justice and rightness that was in your gut?

Tiffany's Donna: Yes. Yes. [Crying and wiping away tears]

(And now see Donna's response from the follow up interview below and how she begins to accept the repair that Tom and Tiffany offered)

Donna: Yeah! And he's saying the things he's saying and in my mind I'm sitting here, but my mind is looking around in the back there, 'Who the hell he's talking to?' (From Follow-up)

(Another Example from the Act One Interview)

Tiffany's Donna: I think she would say thank you for opening my eyes and I'm sorry they were closed for so long [tearful], they had to be [crying with a lot of emotion and spoke her last words a bit softer].





Tom: In looking back at all of that, in all that you went through, all that you weren't given and all of the things you deserved that you weren't given by people who should love you, whose job is to love you, --

Tiffany's Donna: [Crying and wiping away tears as Tom speaks]

This is Tom again. I thought I would offer a bit more context to this exchange that might help readers appreciate the significance of this moment. What preceded the above exchange was a retelling of a dramatic moment in Donna's life when she, at the tender age of 13, found the words for what her father had been doing to her and stood up at the dinner table and pounding her fists, yelled, "You pig! You pig!" This remarkable moment of bravery on her part was met with an immediate punishment by her father and she was almost beaten to death at his hands. As she was lying on the floor, feeling the blow of her father's kicks against her body, to her great surprise her mother stood up and intervened for what might have been the first time in Donna's life. "Stop! Stop! You are killing her!" As you can imagine, there was a great potential for this moment to be storied in a way that shows Donna as a moral agent who acted out of remarkable bravery and her own convictions that she deserved so much more. And it was also a moment that offered a strong possibility for repair in her relationship with her mother who was likely influenced by her daughter's bravery and to stand up to her husband on behalf of the life of her daughter. As you can imagine however, because of the trauma caused by her father's immediate violent response, this experience was left unstoried for Donna. At least in any way that might reveal her as a moral agent engaging perhaps the bravest of moments on behalf of her own life. It did, however, become available for a different kind of story as her father, mother, and brothers repeatedly told Donna that her actions that fateful night had ruined the family. Thus, this remarkable moment of Donna's courage and bravery was turned into a story of blame and deep shame.





As we prepared for the act one interview, we knew that we couldn't let this story of blame and shame have the final say in Donna's life. It was our greatest hope that through the safety of Donna's relationship with Tiffany and the distance that being in an outside or witness position provided, that we could offer Donna a way to affectively restory this dramatic moment in a way that did justice to the remarkable bravery displayed by her 13-year-old self. Or said slightly differently, the structure of the IWP offered Donna the rare opportunity to see this particular event unfold but from a position of safety as an audience member to a performance where someone else was telling the story. In effect, Donna was watching someone else, someone that she loved and cared about, tell the story of this dramatic moment in her life. And because it wasn't herself that she was seeing, she could feel and relate to herself as if she would another person. Thus, providing her with the opportunity to watch the events unfold, that have previously been storied by feelings of blame and shame, with love and compassion.

I thought it might be helpful to see how this all unfolded in the actual interview that lead up the beautiful exchange between Tiffany's Donna and Donna's mother.

Tom: How long has that been with you, this bone deep sense of rightness and justice?

Tiffany's Donna : I think from the time I first stood up to my father because I knew fathers wouldn't do that, that moment I knew, I called him a pig. I'd had it.

Tom: Wow! [Astounded to hear Tiffany's Donna standing up to her father] Do you remember how old you were?

Tiffany's Donna : I think I was 12 or so, maybe a little bit older.

Tom: Wow [spoken softly as in if awe]. Would it be okay for you to tell me a little bit about that moment? Or if you'd





prefer not to that's completely fine, as long as I know it's a moment that you stood up to him that's okay.

Tiffany's Donna : Yeah. My friends and I were walking home from school on a wall or a fence, F-U-C-K was painted and my friends started giggling and I didn't know what that meant and they told me what that meant and I couldn't believe it. There was this word for what was happening, happened to me – [look of disgust on her face]

Tom: Was that the first time you made the connection?

Tiffany's Donna : Yeah. [Look of disgust on her face] And then I went home...

Tom: Did you feel that in your bones in that moment?

Tiffany's Donna : I felt it in my gut [puts hands over her stomach] – something was really wrong, really wrong. I tried to – we sat at the dinner table and I just couldn't, I just couldn't anymore and I think my dad might have said something and I stood up [hands in fists as if pounding a table] and I called him, "You pig!"

Tom: Wow. [Spoken softly, almost whispered]

Tiffany's Donna : And things got worse after that, it shifted from one kind of abuse to another after that.

Tom: When you stood up...

Tiffany's Donna : That's when my mom also stood up. That's when my mom said – because my dad was beating me and that's when my mom stepped in and said, "Stop. Stop. You are going





to kill her.” So my mom and I both kind of stood up at the same time [crying – very emotional at this point]. I didn’t remember that.

Tom: Is it okay if I call this a remarkable moment when you stood up and called him a pig and called upon that sense of justice and rightness that was in your gut?

Tiffany’s Donna : Yes. Yes. [Crying and wiping away tears]

Tom: That remarkable moment when you stood up – where you standing up in that moment for your own rights?

Tiffany’s Donna : Yes.

Tom: For what you had always deserved?

Tiffany’s Donna : [Nodding in agreement] And for what my brothers deserved too.

Tom: Was that behind it as well? As you’re looking back now was this a moment that was a bigger moment, a moment of protecting not only yourself, but your brothers and perhaps your mom?

Tiffany’s Donna : I think all of us, yes. [Wiping away tears]

Tom: As you’re remembering now that it was also that moment that your mom also stood up, do you think that your remarkable moment of bravery was what allowed your mom to stand up?

Tiffany’s Donna: I think it might have been, yeah.





Tom: *Did you teach her?*

Tiffany's Donna : *Yeah. [Smiling with happiness on her face – almost like a beam of happiness/sunshine coming through her face]*

Tom: *Provided a way for her to perhaps say what she's always wanted to say?*

Tiffany's Donna : *Yes and maybe something in my standing up awoke something in her – sort of a realization of, 'I need to protect this girl.'*

Tom: *If we could in this moment, if it were possible to have a conversation with your mom and possible to have a conversation that was completely stripped from all of the constraints and ugliness of violence and abuse and her histories of violence and abuse, so there was nothing that would encumber this conversation but love, what do you think your mom might say about what you offered her in that moment when you stood up?*

Tiffany's Donna : *I think she would say thank you for opening my eyes and I'm sorry they were closed for so long [tearful], they had to be [crying with a lot of emotion and spoke her last words a bit softer].*

If you can, for a moment, imagine what it was like for Donna to hear her mother's words offered back to her in the safety of the tearful and loving words of Tiffany's Donna. It isn't hard to imagine why Donna would later say, "it's like this turned something very evil and dirty into something beautiful and livable." And here is Donna's response from the act two interview when she watched this all unfold.

Donna : *[sobbing sounds, crying heavily]*





Tom: Where you able to make out what Tiffany said there when she was imagining maybe what your mother might have said? Did you catch that?

Donna : I can't really remember, but it was very nice [sounding emotional as she's speaking].

Tom: I think it was, 'Thank you for opening up my eyes and I'm sorry they were closed for so long. They had to be.'

Donna : Oh! [takes a big gasp as she hears Lori repeats Tiffany's words back to her. Donna is sobbing heavily at this point and taking deep sighs] This is very difficult. [Crying heavily] This is very hard to process. It's definitely cathartic [crying heavily and taking deep breaths/sighs].

Tiffany: Do you have a felt sense of that catharsis somewhere, my Donna talked about a weight lifting but I'm wondering what you're noticing?

Donna : Yeah! It's like a reconnection. It's like finally – I'm finally [crying] in sync with my mum [sobbing heavily]...it's quite a healing process and another something – a bigger picture to absorb.

I think that this is a perfect example of powerful affectional reorienting, that Jeff mentioned above, that IWPs make possible, the integration of the left and right sides of her brain.

Something else that should not be overlooked here is the powerful role that the relationship between Tiffany and Donna plays in this affectional reorienting. Because Donna knows Tiffany as someone who loves and cares about her, she is much more likely to see and hear the events unfold within the safety of this loving relationship. Thus, the previous trauma version of the





events that have been filtered through blame and shame are now being filtered through love and compassion for Donna which allowed her experience feelings of self- endearment. If the relationship between the Tiffany and Donna was not one of love and care such affectional restorying might not have been available to Donna. In this way, the relationship between the therapist and client is likely critical to the transformative potential of an IWP interview.

Yes Tom! I believe that the relationship is necessary for allowing the relationship between Tiffany's Donna and Donna's Donna to emerge, making it possible for Donna to take the questions and affective responses in, and creating a context which allowed Donna's hurt version to be safely present in the room, in the moment, and so become narratively "real".

Donna: I think when you were saying about the different traumas and that and when I heard it was almost like, this was set in stone – like this really did happen. (From April 28 Follow up)

What a contrast to what she might have experienced in more typical therapy situations where she was likely more emotionally disconnected in the self-protective way that was usually the case for her, preventing her authentic participation. A powerful enactment between Tiffany's affect and Donna's was made more possible in this situation than it would have been if they were face to face, and this allowed Donna to experience the child version of herself more safely and from a new perceptual position. Again, this could have unlocked those special synapses I spoke of, which would have the effect of allowing the trauma influenced version access to experiences she had subsequently in her adult life. Memory retrieval (particularly of emotional memories as opposed to memories of emotions) is inevitably memory changing; allowing a story that would take in the bigger picture of the events of her life to become available to her. In addition, the ability to experience the painful emotions likely allowed Donna to become more present, and shifted the flow of energy and information in her mind. Very





exciting!

Now if we could figure out a way to do this in the office in our everyday work... David Epston and Karl Tomm's internalized other interviewing done in a much more affective way comes to mind, as does "empty-chair" work (i.e., the therapist as client in the chair), but I am now just playing with possibilities. It seems important to me to find practices that allow the client to perceive emotional information they might not so easily perceive with the usual question and answer process. And it leaves me wondering what part Michael's questions played in the effect he had, and to what extent his affective responsiveness made the critical difference?

Mind

What effect might an IWP experience have on the mind of a client, particularly one who has experienced abuse? New affectively based relational experiences can influence individual subjective shifts in mind, leading to an "altered flow". This altered flow would have real effects on the way energy and information flow evolve in the mind and these effects could be profound. Energy would be freed up for forward movement and less tied up in managing the past and staying disconnected. And the probabilities of the direction of the flow of mind would shift, meaning new directions were more likely and old ones less likely, allowing for new possibilities of feeling, thinking, and behaving.

(Here is an Example from April 28 Follow-Up)

Donna: I don't see any of it present so when you're looking back and you're seeing it, it's like I'm not seeing all of my crap there.

(Another)

Tiffany: And now?





Donna: And now it's—I'm not saying that I'm, but I feel like I'm on this path that's full of like flowers and beautiful trees and birds are chirping.

(Another)

Donna: Like I was saying about the mind its shifting.

Tiffany: So that doesn't seem logical or ordinary to you or to be expected, that was surprising the mind-shifting piece?

Donna: The mind actually shifts like on its – this your axis –

(Another)

Tiffany: -- what difference might of that made to your learning ability?

Donna: Like I said it turns the mind.

An additional effect would be how the relationship to ones-self or selves would be experienced differently; simply put, how you would feel in your own skin would be different. Also, the “deadened” sense that dissociation brings with it would be gone.

Donna: Up until now, I have always felt my head is over here and my brain is somewhere else. But now, my head and my brain feel like they are coming together. And now I actually think that I'm not the terriblest person on this earth. The processing in my brain must have changed things. (From Act April 19 Follow Up)

In my own work and teaching I have been focused of late on what I have been leaning from my personal meditation practice about influencing the flow of mind. I've become quite interested in Dan Siegel's work on “awareness;” my own





meditation work is very influenced by Dan's Wheel of Awareness practice. All this has left me wondering if the IWP process creates an almost meditation like focus for the client, one in which the client becomes, in Dan's words, aware of their own awareness? Indeed, clients are witnessing a reflection of their awareness performed in a highly evocative manner. My own experience of being "aware of your awareness" involves being separate enough from it that you can peer into it almost from below (this is similar to from above; below is an artifact of the Wheel practice). If IWP is having a similar effect to what I am describing from the Wheel practice, then it could effect a shift in the probability curve of the flow of their minds, by placing the client in a more open position, and so pulling their mind away from its usual plateaus and peaks (Dan's words). You might imagine, using this metaphor, how those that experienced trauma might have plateaus and peaks of their mind from which are difficult to move away. While externalization works well to create an awareness of awareness of sort, and loosens the automaticity of plateaus and peaks, with big, bad Problems it's a different story.

Dan believes that being aware of your own awareness takes your mind to a place where it is almost a blank slate, similar to the Buddhist notion of original mind. Meditation involves focusing attention; what we are describing is focusing attention on your focus of attention. With my own clients I sometimes have them breath and picture in an effort to help them come down from the plateaus and peaks that are Problem supporting, thereby opening space in their mind to intake new experience. I often discuss beginning a meditation practice with my clients; those that take it up report very helpful effects. In addition, being focused on what is happening in the moment facilitates embodiment and creates a context for the emergence of presence. Being present allows the client (and therapist) to take in what is being said in a more meaning-full way, allowing for the kind of perceptual change discussed earlier to occur. In this state, you are less likely to remain in the left brain territory of only words and concepts, instead you enjoy the flow of affectively rich experience, both internally and between





each person.

(More from April 18 Follow Up)

Donna: When you were telling Tom about the things that happened to me. And it really took me awhile to think about it because it was just really hard to hear– I had to really concentrate and focus. It was like – I would say almost like taking a spaceship to Mars.

Tiffany: Is this what you were referring to earlier when you said that this provided a foundation of hope that was now set in stone?

Donna: Yeah. (answers quickly). You know what I went from a mind stance of ‘I don’t belong here,’ ‘I don’t deserve...’ To being like almost... here it goes again Tiffany. My mind is turning a bit now. But I am fully present. My brain is shifting a little bit. Whew!

Tiffany: Is that okay for you? Is it shifting in the right direction for you?

Donna: Yeah! It’s just kind of like it’s a pendulum – I actually feel it turning. It’s like I assimilated myself to the earth rotating on its axis...

Tiffany: Where were you before?

(later)

Donna: Yeah! I was thinking I was way out in left field when I talked to mental health professionals before. And now I think I’ve made a 180-degree turn

(Another from April 28 Follow Up)

Tiffany: Who are you then if I’m taking...? Oh, I see! So if I’m taking your





spot, are you saying that – it would make sense that you would take my spot. Aaah. Aaahhh [seems to have a new found understanding of Donna’s experience] I hadn’t considered that before because we talked initially about how I’d said to you, “I found you with me even more present with me than I had before.”

Tom: Others have said something very similar and have also added a simultaneous sense of being firmly rooted on the earth while somehow standing above it looking down at their life.” One person we interviewed, who knows quite a bit about post-structuralism and Foucault had this to say, ‘The IWP gave me a panoptic view of my life. It was as if during the interview I had climbed up the steps of the damn Panopticon and could behold my entire life before me. There were no guards there. No prison. Just me and a 360 degree view of my life with me at its center.’ I sat in reverie as she took the metaphor of the Panopticon and flipped it on its head” (From a personal communication, 11/13/18).

Interestingly, this last comment is similar to the kinds of comments Dan Siegel reports receiving from countless individuals who complete the aware of awareness portion of his Wheel practice.

As I am writing this, I am wondering about how we could determine if indeed clients are invited into such a meditative like space?

It’s Tom again. It is interesting that you bring this up Jeff. I believe that what you are referring to here as being in a meditative like space, or being aware of your own awareness, is similar to what we have referred to as outsidersness (a term we have borrowed from Bakhtin) or oversight which I will only briefly mention here. However, we have been theorizing quite a bit about what it is that has led to these dramatic effects that Insider Witnessing Practices make possible and we have come to the conclusion that this practice offers people a view of their lives from the outside. Rather than being inside their stories, the structure of the interview allows clients to be on the outside of their





stories looking in. From this outside looking in perspective it makes it much more possible for people to take up an observer or self-reflexive position in their lives. Our clients/co-researchers commented that their IWP experience had a “distancing effect” on their lives or in other words, being in the position of a witness or audience member to a performance of their lives offered them a view of their lives from “afar” or “above.” Miranda, put it this way:

During the Act 2, I felt that a level of detachment occurred for me. I was looking at someone else’s story. I felt differently about my own story because it didn’t feel like it was me. Seeing myself this way allowed me to feel compassion for myself even though it wasn’t me. It was my story, so how can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me.

For me it was like- this is your life right here in front of you but it’s almost like it’s so separated that I was another human being. I think it’s that visual trick of the Act 2. It’s like you’re seeing someone else. It’s so weird to think about it that way, but that’s exactly how it felt. And I think that’s the power behind it. It’s just so mind-blowing!

I wasn’t looking at my adult life rather a little girl’s life. And I’m not going to sit there and tell some 13-year-old that sexual abuse was her fault. The detachment was so important because I could feel for myself, the way I would for anyone else- sympathy! I allowed myself to feel things that I had not yet felt for myself because it wasn’t me. I strongly believe it is never a young girls fault for being sexually abused in any way. No matter what she has done. I have always felt that way. But in my mind, I felt like I deserved to be blamed for what was done to me. The separation from myself and the story of me being told by my therapist Emily, allowed me to be compassionate to myself without it being me. During the Act 2, I allowed myself to be accepting of Emily’s Miranda so how could I not be accepting of Miranda’s Miranda.

The structure of the IWP interview allowed Miranda to achieve a safe enough





distance from the trauma story's version of herself which made it possible for her to affectively transform her own regard for herself from self-blame to self-compassion.

Another co-researcher Rose put it this way:

I don't know how to put it—I don't know why people relate to things more when it's on the outside, when it's obscure, it's on the outside of them and not within them. Like they can't see it going on with them, but when you are sitting on the outside looking at it, and you're seeing something—you're like, "that person is really like a heroine. That person is like, wait a minute—that's me!" [snaps fingers] Snap.

And it was the first time that I had heard my story, outside of myself, right? Because you're used to hearing your story inside of yourself, and you don't know how that is being portrayed...the interpretation of it on the other side of it, right? So, it was really interesting to see the interpretation come back and see the pain...and that pain is real. And that, you know it was interesting to see...that anger. And that anger was real, and it was validated.

I think that there are at least two critical things here that the outsideness makes possible for people. First, it allows people to step outside of their stories and to enter into an observer position in relation to their lives. Within the structure of the IWP interview, however, they become more just observers, they become witnesses to their own lives and the ways in which they have acted as moral agents actively shaping the events as they unfold. And second, because people are on the outside watching a story of their life being portrayed by another person, and the safety that this creates, it makes it possible for them to affectionally restory experiences that had previously been too difficult due to the effects of trauma.





My experience, Tom, is that in addition to being outside my own story, I am outside of all stories and have an almost loving openness to all people, places and things.

Entering the Conversation

At this point, I would like to show an extended part of Donna's follow up interview two weeks after her IWP. I will insert comments from time to time to highlight points that seem particularly relevant to what I have discussed in this paper so far.

(From April 19 Follow Up)

Donna: It was actually life altering. It was mind changing...

Tiffany: Mind changing (spoke softly and slowly as if surprised or in awe to hear Donna's words).

(Jeff: At times, over the last several years of my meditation practice, "all of a sudden" I began to experience myself or situations differently; while there was a process over time that lead up to these moments, perhaps here, for Donna, it was triggered more dramatically. As I have been suggesting, often the difference in flow of mind has to do with a lessening of implicit negative affect through being able to experience it more directly, creating a sense of freedom in the moment. In my case, this change allowed me to experience more comfort interpersonally, and gave me access to a more up-to-date picture of myself)

Donna: My mind sort of became a slow globe...

(Jeff: This is a beautiful new metaphor, as the scene is bright and the flakes move freely through time.)





Donna: ...that was turning in my mind. Wow! It was actually like a turning in my mind. This has happened once or twice before but this time it was very prevalent. I could actually feel my mind...my brain reprocessing.

Tiffany: What did it feel like?

Donna: Oh, it's scary, it's very scary. It's like being on a swinging bridge.

(Jeff: Most people report feeling uncomfortable, even scared when directly experiencing a new state of mind. This is even more the case when the new involves experiencing old affect in their minds for the first time. Sometimes this can occur during meditation as well, as you are opening space to experience your experience. With the kind of support Donna is receiving from Tiffany, clients can be helped to move through this liminal period.)

Tiffany: A swinging bridge?

Donna: You know those bridges you walk on crossing a river in a canyon. My mind was sort of turning on a pedestal. I could actually feel it turning inside my head.

Tiffany: And what does that turning indicate? Was your mind turning toward something or away from something?

Donna: I think it's stabilizing the right and left hemispheres of my brain...

(Jeff: This is so insightful as the right and left are now working together, the effect being that affect (right brain) is more integrated into the new narrative that the left brain is putting together, resulting in a more life- full story. Donna later told Tom that she felt a shift in her right hemisphere, the primary place where affect is processed.)

Tiffany: Wow! (like she almost can't believe what Donna is saying)





Is it a processing thing that you are talking about?

Donna: Yeah!

Tiffany: Really?

Donna: Yeah, it's almost as if it is realigning the brain because my brain. Before the Act Two, my brain just can't comprehend anything like that because I used to respond negatively to any comment all the time. But in the Act Two to sit there and actually see this man and you talking, I almost wanted to ask, 'Who the hell are you talking to?'

(Jeff: Donna is beginning to be able to imagine integrating different versions of herself. In Narrative speak, you might refer to this as a migration of identity process.)

Tiffany: (Laughs) So you're looking over your shoulder – who are you talking to. You said that early on...

Donna: I thought to myself, 'I must be in the wrong room. They can't be talking about me.' I always thought I belonged in the room for bad kids or bad people.

(Jeff: It would be safer in another room... but the invitation to trigger the exchange of affect would be less evocative.)

Tiffany: Do you mean a trouble room?

Donna: Yeah, the room for bad people, the really bad ones.

Tiffany: Donna, are you saying that seeing your life portrayed by your therapist by Tiffany's Donna somehow turned something?





Donna: Absolutely! Actually, my brain actually shifted on my head.

(later)

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

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

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

Tiffany: Was there a different sensation when you were at the bottom of the ride to when you moved to the top? At the top of the ride, did you get a different perspective?

Donna: Up until now, I have always felt like my head is over here, and my brain is somewhere else...

(later)

Donna: And actually my head feels bigger.

Tiffany: Did you just say that your head feels bigger?

Donna: Yeah, there's more brain matter.

Tiffany: Did this, somehow grow your brain and warm your heart at the same time?





(Jeff: It would be interesting to speculate about what this means...perhaps a less “deadened” Donna is more able to notice the sensations from her body in her mind.)

Donna: Yeah! I can now sit and read a book and I can really process what I’ve read. Before I had a real hard time reading something and remember what I had just read.

(Jeff: Again, Donna is able to be more present to what she is doing in the moment and not so distracted by the noise from the past)

(later)

Donna: Yeah! It’s like I am able to stand up to the fear. I’ve actually had a few conversations with my dad [who died many years ago] and told him, ‘You’re not fricking messing with me anymore. I am done with you trying to screw my brain around!’

(Jeff: Donna is becoming able to feel and manage the strong affect involved in her past experiences.)

(later)

Donna: It’s like I am standing up there on top of the earth and can just feel the earth rotating around. That’s what’s going on inside my mind. As a matter of fact, it was going around pretty fast there for a while and I had to like pull off on the side of the road cause. I had to concentrate really hard and then it like slowed down...

(later)

Donna: It’s the words... His words leaving and being replaced with the different thoughts.





(Jeff: Entering a new affective territory influences the story the left brain is generating.)

Tiffany: If the old words leaving and the new ones are coming, what are the new words that are replacing the old.

Donna: The new words are my different hopes, dreams and beliefs. Before it was almost as if there were two people fighting inside my head. Like people are in your head fighting.

(Jeff: Like different states/versions, one past influenced by the trauma experience, and the other involving more recent experience.)

Tiffany: Who are the two people who were fighting in your head?

Donna: I think it's the real you and then the one that was driven out.

(Jeff: What else needs to be said!)

In Summary (Jeff)

IWP has proven to be one of the exciting new developments in Narrative Therapy land. Given the kind of anecdotal reports received from participants that reflect a shift in (what I would call) their flow of mind, the developers of the approach were curious about what perspectives my Neuro-Narrative work would have to offer to explain this phenomenon. I have tried to provide multiple ways to look at what was happening, all influenced by Neuro related discourses. I hope you readers have found these perspectives interesting and thought provoking. As suggested earlier, any discourse makes some things more visible and others less visible; this is true about the Narrative lens as well. Can we Narrative Therapists turn to other discourses to shine a light on what we are seeing and still preserve the fundamental values inherent in our work? I believe we can, as long as we stay in touch with what





I believe is the cornerstone idea we have lived by, that all practices and ideas are accountable to their real effects.

The brain is an affectively programmed organ, hard wired by multiple affective systems that influence our behavior in ways that promote survival and safety. Nevertheless, our minds are programmed through experience (our software), leading to the many combinations of ways of being we witness from others around us. Having a model that helps make sense of how both brain and mind work, allows me to pay attention to different aspects of the work than what the Narrative lens encourages. These include: making sure that everything I do with clients stays affectively grounded; using breathing, meditation and focusing practices to facilitate opening the client's flow of mind; remembering to organize the conversations in a manner that helps unlock memory systems; and that the relationship between client and therapist needs to have a bidirectional flow of experience. Furthermore, I believe that "under the guidance of text" can lead to a different kind of hierarchical process if we are doing such guidance without being truly present to our clients and sure that our own responses are embodied. It is my opinion that IWP structures these less discussed but critical aspects of the work.

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The coming together of the LA Insider Witnessing Team

Larry Zucker, Michelle Chong, The Los Angeles Insider Witness Team

I first encountered Insider Witnessing Practice when Tom Stone Carlson and David Epston presented it at a workshop in Vermont in June of 2017. I was instantly excited by two elements of the work: I saw its tremendous potential as a means of training narrative therapists, and also hopeful about the difference an Insider Witnessing experience might make in the lives of some of the people we serve at the Southern California Counseling Center (SCCC.)

SCCC is a non-profit counseling center and training facility where pre-licensed or para-professional therapists provide counseling under the supervision of volunteer licensed professionals. Trainees are typically there for two years, but at SCCC we serve many people whose lives have been up against a lot in life and whose identities severely compromised. The resulting hopelessness they feel is often overwhelming, and often contagious. Their often-novice therapists are frequently infected with that hopelessness, and begin to lose faith in their abilities to help. This is damaging to *their* identities as therapists.

Given that the work is organized around “hope biased interviewing,” my first thought was that it might benefit the clients most by how it acts upon the therapists: to learn to conduct an interview that brings forth a richer “counter-story” is to learn to traffic in a counter-story of what therapy can be. What if through Insider Witnessing Practices therapists can learn to better hold hope?

With that wish and better training in mind, I formed a team at SCCC to investigate Insider Witnessing Practice in September of 2018. Since then, we’ve been meeting alternate weeks for two hours. Each meeting we study transcripts and tapes of Insider Witnessing that have been completed by Tom, Sanni, and other teams that they’re working with, and we’ve begun to experiment with conducting Insider Witnessing ourselves. We initially brought Tom and Sanni to Los Angeles both to train our team, and to present Insider Witnessing to the broader community of Los Angeles narrative therapists. We then began to experiment

LA IWP Team



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with doing Insider Witnessing on our own, and had completed all three stages of one Insider Witnessing interview when we brought Tom and Sanni back to LA to do a second Insider Witnessing interview with our team in February, 2019, to help us develop the work further. We've learned to "let go" a bit of the illusion of "getting it right," and give ourselves more space to be creative, playful, and more willing to reveal how we've been moved. Initially, I was a bit worried that Insider Witnessing was trying too hard to have a grand impact on the client, or risks taking excessive liberty with the telling of another's story. However, we've come to understand Insider Witnessing in ways that were not initially apparent to us. We've come to believe that the value to the client likely resides not so much in the dramatic retelling, but in the degree of 'outsideness' that the work creates for the client, a chance to view their life from further outside than normal therapy conversations—or even Outsider Witnessing Practices—allow. We now feel that the portrayal doesn't have to fully represent the life of the client, rather, that the portrayal has to be moving to the client, that we have to create an experience where they are moved by their own life as they look at it from a higher altitude.

What has Insider Witnessing taught us about what makes a re-telling moving? When I train, my initial job is to coax therapists down from whatever well-intentioned Panopticon they've learned to occupy unawares, so that they can get closer to their clients lived experience while becoming more accountable to the political nature of our work. I've long used various forms of embodied interviewing, as developed by David Epston, Johnella Bird and others to help therapists get closer to their clients' lives. When a therapist is interviewed as their client, as is the case in Insider Witnessing Practices, their empathy grows exponentially. But in Insider Witnessing, where the embodied interview is going to be later witnessed by the client, their commitment to making sure they come as close as they can to understanding the clients' experience grows exponentially as well. This responsibility to represent well radically impacts the way therapists' interview, take notes, track story threads, and enter the world and unique vocabularies of their clients.

Given the name, *Insider Witnessing Practice*, one might think that this is where the power of Insider Witnessing resides: that a therapist becomes enough of an





‘insider’ that *their* account of their clients’ counter-story somehow breaks through the din of the problem saturated story so that the client can see themselves afresh. But I don’t think this is the key. In fact, I think this mistaken understanding has led some to worry that Insider Witnessing might risk being itself colonizing in its organization around a therapist’s—rather than a client’s—tellings.

Rather, I think that the key lies in what it might mean to someone that their life is considered worthy of a bit of poetry and theater, that they are granted the position of being a valued critic of the performance, and—at least for a moment—*their* performance is not what is being evaluated. That their therapist wants to do their life justice, is willing to put herself in a position of falling short of that, and is clearly personally moved by their story is likely at the heart of why Insider Witnessing seems to have a profound effect on many of the people who’ve allowed us into their lives in this manner. Whether such an experience has a lasting effect is something I look forward to studying much more carefully as we develop and research these practices with our clients at the SCCC. I believe that when you read to paper that follows, which focuses mostly on MC’s account of her experience of witnessing her life as “performed” by her therapist Michelle, you will see why our worry has decreased, our confidence and excitement has grown, and we are very enthused about the work on MC’s behalf that Michelle and Tom and Sanni present here.

MC’s Song: My first attempt at Insider Witnessing and it’s surprising and shared effects by Michelle Chong and MC

I participated in Tom and Sanni’s *Stories that Sing: Beauty, Love, and Poetics in Narrative Practice* workshop in Los Angeles in June 2018. While watching one of their videos of an Act I interview, I was so moved by the way the therapist embodied their client with such compassion and care, and I immediately thought of my client MC. At the time, I had been working with MC on and off for about three years. She was one of my very first clients I started to work with as an Intern at SCCC, and she later followed me into my private practice after I became licensed. I have learned and grown so much from working with MC. She is very





special to me. Together, we have navigated some difficult conversations about ideas MC read about in a Psychology class about ‘co-dependency’. MC felt some of her experiences were validated by this notion of co-dependency, but remained distraught by some of the ways that this notion strengthened the grip of the problem story that she was somehow to blame for struggles in her intimate relationships and that she was not good enough to live any other kind of life. In our work together, we discussed her relationship to these ideas, but I struggled to help MC experience freedom from their weight and the ways in which they constricted and confined her.

After studying Insider Witnessing as a team for about six months, Sanni and Tom planned a return trip to LA to go through an entire Insider Witnessing experience with one of our clients. I nominated MC for the Insider Witnessing interview in hopes I could share with her how moved I’ve been as a witness to the life that she has lived, and most of all, that she might, through a retelling of her own life through my eyes, gain a deep sense of appreciation for the courage and bravery that she has brought to bear in reclaiming her life from the neglect and criticism that she faced as a young person. In preparation for Sanni and Tom’s visit, I introduced MC’s story to the team and together we began to study her life in hopes that we might be able to tell a counter-story on her behalf. One of the things that we have learned in our study of Insider Witnessing practices is the importance of getting a detailed account of what it is that the person has been up against and the events that might make up the counter stories of her life. This detail matters because good storytelling relies on showing a person as a moral agent, actively shaping the events of their lives as they unfold. As we were preparing for the Insider Witnessing interview, I realized that I needed to know more about the events of MC’s life that had built the momentum necessary for her to reclaim her life from neglect and criticism. To do justice to her story, my retelling of her life needed to do so in a way that showed her moral deliberations at every turn.

Fortunately, we had a few weeks to prepare for our Insider Witnessing interview and I had the opportunity to study the counter-story of MC’s life in greater detail. To help us prepare for their visit, Sanni and Tom sent me a document with





questions that might help us to explore what MC has been up against in her life, the master narratives that might be behind the particular identity conclusions that the problem is exacting on her, and the possible counter-story lines that might have the effect of sowing suspicion on the problem story (See Questions to Preparing for an Insider Witnessing Conversation in this issue). These questions were immensely helpful in my process of better articulating what MC has been up against in life and the counter-story that has been behind all her efforts. Armed with these questions, I poured through all the notes from my conversations with MC, dating back to the time when I was an intern and spent hours reviewing them. I needed to not only know the events of her life, but I needed to be intimately familiar with her own words and unique dictionary for describing them. Upon finishing my study of our conversations, I sent a document to Sanni and Tom with stories from MC's life that detailed what she had been up against using images drawn up from her words. Studying MC's life in this way created a collective excitement among us all as we embarked on this work to engage in a witnessed retelling of MC's life. When we all finally gathered in Los Angeles in March, we spent an entire day studying MC's life even further and gathered the events together in a way that might, when retold, do justice to her story and show her as an active moral agent in shaping the events of her life. It wasn't until we had undertaken all of these preparations that we felt ready to record the Act One interview where I would be interviewed as MC and retell the events of her life in her own words. MC would then join us the next day as a witness to my retelling during the Act Two interview. Before sharing MC's experience of my retelling, I think it is important to share a little context about what MC has been up against in her life.

MC's parents separated when she was seven years old, and she and her two siblings went to live with their mother. They grew up very poor, and their mother struggled with meth and alcohol and was unable to look after them. MC heard a lot of criticisms from her mother and siblings about not being good enough, not pretty enough, not skinny enough, not smart enough, and that she would never be enough. She said it felt like "being backed into a corner" and all she could do was scream back even louder. When she tried to express herself, she was criticized again for being too much, too emotional, too crazy, out of control, and a





big baby. She felt like as if there was no way out of the corner. From these experiences, MC concluded she was flawed and there was something wrong with how she was “hard wired.” She believed she was not worthy of love and she was destined to “end up like my mother”.

MC’s older brother was kicked out of their home by their mother, and MC was left to look after her younger sister. At the age of ten, MC got her sister dressed, out the door, and ready for school every day. Not only that, but she paid the bills “so the electricity wouldn’t be turned off” and woke her mom up to go to work, or called in sick for her when she was too strung out to get out of bed. While the moral character of such a person was easy for me to see, MC struggled to see anything other than a person who was living in “survival mode”; an understanding that had the effect of explaining away the significance of her own efforts and the moral deliberations that made this all possible.

In her early teens, MC had had enough and she started looking for a different life. She started stealing, drinking, using meth and “any other drug I could get my hands on.” During this time, her mother went to jail and MC and her sister were bounced around from different friends and family homes. It was a very unstable time and MC’s drug use got so intense that she overdosed and was hospitalized at the age of thirteen. After that incident, MC and her sister were put into a group home, but they ran away to live back at their mother’s place where they could continue to party and use drugs. Over the next five years, MC continued this life with drugs. She felt a constant presence of paranoia and was frequently accosted by the police. These experiences kept telling her that she was underserving of anything else. And then, one day, when she was about seventeen years old, something amazing happened. As MC found herself passed out in the back of a car with a bunch of other people passed out and strung out around her, she realized these people weren’t really her friends, but just her “drug buddies” with whom she had nothing else in common. She thought to herself: “This can’t be my life. This can’t be forever.” And she decided right then and there she would end her relationship with drugs. Soon after, she reached out to her father with whom, up until this point, she had a very estranged relationship. While this was terribly difficult for MC, it paved the way for a new life and to reconnect with her father’s





side of the family. This event had always moved me and spoke to a unique and unparalleled resolve to live, and it was my hope that that the significance and beauty of this moment might be amplified to MC as one of amazing triumph as she took up the position of a witness to this particular hope biased retelling of her life. How could we retell the events of her life, the very events that she recounted to me in our work together that had somehow become evidence of her failures and of not being good enough, in a way that showed a moral character that had shown an against the odds fierceness for life? These were the questions that guided my hopes during the Act One interview.

MC met with Sanni, Tom, and me for the Act II (the showing of the recording of my Act One performance of Michelle's MC) on the following day. MC shared that she didn't really know what to expect from the Insider Witnessing experience. She knew she would be watching a video but she had no idea just how profound the experience of watching it would be. During the beginning of the Act II, MC paused the video to share some of her initial responses.

"It's weird to hear it as an outsider looking in... It is like reading a story and you think about all the adventures that the person went through, and tying in the memories to all of that. It is kind of crazy to hear it in that form. People have told me that "you are one of the strongest people" that they know, and I don't get it, I have just survived, gone through the motions, but then you hear it like that, like you are hero in a story going through all these adventures and it is just like WOW! It is crazy to think about because it is actually me."

A couple days later, when MC arrived at our regular evening session she was beaming with ideas and emotions about her experience. She talked about how the way she had viewed herself for such a long time was now different, "like looking through a new lens". She described this new lens as the difference between merely acknowledging something, compared to truly accepting it.

"I took away so much from Sunday...my whole thought process that I've had for a very long time of having to conform and be something for somebody else...having this new kind of lens after Sunday, just kind of put the picture in place or the





puzzle piece in place...that was a twist that I didn't know and didn't expect...going through it was so moving and so profound...the rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts and internalization that has happened in the last 48 hours..."

When I enquired about what she meant by 'internalization' she said:

"It's like, we go through these things all the time. We're in here all the time talking about things that I should be proud of myself for, the work that I'm doing and the progress that I'm doing, and it's all talked about all the time. And I try to remind myself and check in, but sometimes...it's hard to see that and feel it deep in as knowing it's you. I see it, and I get it, but it's not like feeling it, and internalizing it, and accepting it...it's not like getting in, you know?"

Something about seeing her life, portrayed by me, in the form of a play or drama allowed these feelings of strength and pride to get inside of her. As if viewing it all from the outside made it possible for her to feel pride for the person in the story, which just happened to be her own self.

Another thing that MC commented on more than once was that watching the story of her life in the Act Two was similar to seeing herself as a character in a book. What seemed particularly important to MC was that this telling of her life, as opposed to the one that has been replayed over and over in her mind by way of the problem story, was told "with great love and care" which allowed her to feel love and care for the character who was the center of this particular telling.

"It was very much like...reading a book about the character and feeling for them and understanding what they're going through...I was feeling love and care about this girl that they were talking about, who is me...that third perspective really allowed me to give those compassionate thoughts to myself, instead of me having to tell my mind like, okay, stop with the negative talk or whatever. Like you're good enough, you're good enough! It's like one thing to have the conversation inside, but it's another to have it externalized and think about how you feel about those characters, about those people that you love and care about, and yet it's you. It was very profound...to be able to connect the love and the compassion





that I have to others but to really accept it and internalize it for myself. It wasn't like just an acknowledgement. It was very much inside of me. All of it was just very profound...words can't even explain what I feel... Oh my god, I can't even believe it. Nobody will ever understand how I feel now...It almost feels like another world...I can't...I can't...I can't verbalize it."

The day after Act II, MC was already able to bring these new appreciations of herself into a situation at work. There had been a high level of stress at work lately due to the arrival of a new president of the company and a number of impending layoffs. MC commented how her experience of the Insider Witnessing interview transformed her experience of her first formal one-on-one meeting with the new president that next day. Before her Insider Witnessing experience she was almost overcome by the thought of this meeting and had considered calling in sick. However, after the Act II, she felt "surprisingly calm, content, and assured."

"I guess the way that we could probably describe it...like a bubble sort of, but not in a like a sterilized way, kind of bounce house type of way...where it like didn't even matter. I think my ability to go in there and say what I wanted to say, and not be reserved...it was very much of just 'be open and honest and true to what you have to say". And that's what I did...I walked away from that feeling better because I had spoken my truth and said what I needed to say. And you know, just allowed it to flow...I felt really, really good after that...even though nothing has changed in the situation at work."

One of the themes that emerged during the Act II interview was MC's counter-story having 'a fierceness for living'. And MC talked about how she was able to connect with Fierceness during her meeting with the president. She talked about how Fierceness is now a part of her: "...to feel and know that this [fierceness] is who I am, and that is what I exude, and that's what I have to offer and can give...it was very motivating for me to come from that place...it was very connected in a sense of knowing my true self..."





- Michelle: So it sounds like you're saying that you feel perhaps connected to that fierce character who is you?
- MC: Totally.
- Michelle: And holding her in these situations?
- MC: Yeah, totally. It is like, I made a friend... But it's me. It's so weird to describe it I like that, but that's how it feels.

After MC returned home from the Insider Witnessing interview, she felt compelled to write about her experience so that it could never be erased from her memory. Here are her words in their entirety:

"I'm still reeling from the Insider Witness practice I did with Michelle yesterday. It was one of the most moving moments of my life. Sitting with two strangers who knew me so intimately was a bit intimidating, but the kindness and respect they showed me was unlike anything I've ever experienced. To have Michelle in my corner, knowing this was her gift to me made me feel so incredibly happy. Through their kind of words and warm eyes, they were able to show me what a special person I am, how I'm strong enough, and smart enough, and beautiful enough. I am enough. I have never in my entire life been more proud to just be me. Thank you.

As I reflect on all the discussions and watching myself unfold, the more profound my experience becomes. It's like a rush or a wave of contentedness. When I think about the feelings of inspiration and love and gratitude I have when I look at those around me, I feel that way here and now, except it's about me. I'm in awe of myself and it feels so good to just sit in the space of me, surrounded by others wanting nothing but the best for me because they know me now, not some fabricated character that I have to live up to... but because I was that awe-inspiring all along and the IWP helped me to see that."

MC referred time and again to how her Insider Witnessing experience offered her an "outside view" of her life. She likened it to "a loving parent's view" of their child.





“Probably the best way that I can explain it, even though I don't know, like the way that a parent looks at their child...just being there. The love that like exudes from them...you want to squeeze them...They're so cute! You just want to squeeze them to death. That's how I feel [about me]. I can't even believe it. This is just...I'll never ever, ever, ever, ever, ever forget this feeling and how it touched me.”

The effect of coming to see her own self through loving eyes is particularly significant given that the problem story was one of her never being quite good enough, and that she was somehow not worthy of being loved had gripped her life for so long.

After her Insider Witnessing interview, MC couldn't wait to share her experience with her family, especially her father. Here is MC's attempt at describing what the experience was like as well as his response.

“...it turned into this warm bath of sunlight...like comfort and caring and kindness...he was like ‘the clouds opening up and sun shining the sun down on you!’ ... that was a perfect analogy...my dad just had this like huge grin on his face the whole time I was talking about it. You can just see how happy he was. And I was just living in that moment and explaining to him and being so proud and happy...and he was beaming...I could just imagine if I were to put myself in his shoes and see the struggle that I've gone through, and him seeing how that's taken effect on me, and taken a toll on me and my life and my relationships, and then hearing me explain how I felt and how the experience...changed me. He was just like a kid in a candy store. It was so nice to see him be so happy for me...that felt like a really special moment too. So already it's bleeding out in other areas of my life.”

During the Act II, MC's ideas shifted and she came up with new language to describe her counter-story as “living life on my own terms” and that it is more of a *curating fierceness and love* by expressing her feelings, saying her thoughts and opinions, and moving more freely “out of the corners.” A huge part of MC's





counter-story is about all the expectations weighing her down like boulders on her back, and how she has been able to break free out from under them.

“...that was a really eye opening thing for me on Sunday...expectation and obligation has been such a huge, huge, huge like black cloud I guess, or weight on my shoulders, you know? And sometimes you get used to having the weight on your shoulders and you don't realize, you know, or sometimes somebody stuck another rock on top so it feels even heavier on that day. And so like after Sunday, it feels like not only did I shed the weight, but I was able to like actually realize like, 'Holy crap Dude!', you've been feeling like shit for a really long time because you had this like 200 pound whatever on your shoulder and your neck, but you just were used to it. You're like, well, isn't this how everybody lives? Everybody feels like this. Right?”

One of the ways that the problem story had convinced MC to make sense of her actions as a young person caring for her sister and watching over the household was to explain it all away as “I was just surviving.” This interpretation removes any sense of herself as a moral agent in her life and undermined her own ethics, resolve, and fierceness in life. After MC watched the retelling the events of her life, with her actions and moral deliberations at the center of the telling, Tom asked MC if this notion that she was just surviving does justice to the life that she had lived. MC recounted the effect of this question in the following way.

“And I was thinking about what he [Tom] said...doing a disservice to say ‘just surviving.’ And that made me feel very empowered and very strong... I use the analogy of the book...that was my life I lived and I was just surviving and yet if I were to read my life story in a book, I would be thinking, ‘Oh my god!’, this is so crazy and so inspiring and like motivational and like everything could have kept her down and yet she's still going through it. So much more than surviving.”

Once again MC talks about how the Insider Witnessing interview gave her a glimpse of her life from the outside, like reading about an inspirational character in a book and then realizing that the person who inspired you was actually you.





Here MC takes this analogy a step further by saying that her Insider Witnessing interview was akin to watching a movie about her life.

“...it was like rewinding everything in my movie of just starting from the beginning and being like, okay, no wonder...Sunday helped me realize, me curating and me making these decisions and surviving and doing these things...I feel like, it's like a Christopher Nolan movie with all of this hidden imagery and Easter eggs [hidden surprises that a director puts in a movie] and all of these little things that were going on and there's so much going on with the main plot line that you're just following along and there's all these interesting characters and nuances with the characters. And then there's this big twist in the end and you're like, what the hell? And you go back and watch it the second time and you're like, how did I miss all of this? That's how Sunday felt. Like my life, I watched as a movie just going through the motions of getting to the finish line or the end, which was Sunday, and then we rewound it and watched it all over again and we're picking out all of like the hidden, little details.”

Towards the end of our follow up interview, MC talked about the parallels between the counter-story that emerged during the insider witnessing interview and one of her favorite childhood books, *The Never Ending Story*. As her therapist for so many years, to see her connect with the beloved character, Bastian, whom she has looked up to for so long and to experience a “revelation” of her own moral character was decidedly awe-inspiring.

“It's like you were always you, and you were always as good as you could be and enough and that's how you should be. And so when I think about Sunday and I think about the book analogy and reading the chapters and how close that book was for me my whole life. And I reread it all the time and like truly identifying and relating to that character now and seeing myself go through all of that on Sunday and do all those things and feeling like at the end what a good feeling that is to know and accept and understand that you were good enough all along. It's a very scary, like weird parallel that that book just happened to be my favorite. Maybe it was my favorite because I saw myself in it and I just didn't acknowledge it.”





For the purposes of this paper, MC chose to change her name to ‘MC’ which stands for Moon Child, another pivotal character from this book. MC explained to me that because of Moon Child, Bastian was able to go on this special journey and reflect on his life and what was really important to him. MC sees a parallel between Moon Child and Insider Witnessing where the Insider Witnessing interview was her catalyst to reflect on her journey and realize what has been important for her all along.

A few personal reflections about my experience- Michelle

As MC’s therapist, I am blown away by the effect the Insider Witnessing interview had on her. It exceeded all of my expectations. I hoped it would be a moving experience and that it would provide me with the opportunity to show my care and regard for MC but I was amazed at the profundity of the experience and how the outside perspective of her life that was achieved in the Insider Witnessing interview served as an unveiling of her moral character as a person, someone who has fiercely loved her entire life. To hear her exclaim in delight: “And now I love myself!” was astonishing. We have been working so hard for so long, naming and mapping all of the problems enacting on her life but never quite able to release her from their grips. To witness her calling them out and shutting them down with such fierceness after the Insider Witnessing interview was beyond anything that I could have hoped.

When I attempted to embody MC in the Act I, I felt like I was in a trance of intense focus and presence. All my energy and attention were on Sanni and Tom’s words and doing right by MC. Immediately afterwards, I couldn’t remember much of what I had said, and I wondered if I had done enough to honor her life and the way that it has moved me all these years. The next day, watching the video with MC during the Act II, I was able to become a witness to MC’s experience of my attempt to retell her story. Even though I had been interviewed as Michelle’s MC, I was so moved by her life that it became clear to me that I had somehow taken on MC’s Michelle and her ethics and moral character in my own life. The Insider Witnessing experience was intensely moving for me and for days I struggled to find words that could do justice to what it had done for MC and me. I echo Tom





and his colleagues' earlier description of a "being in a wordless state." I feel very connected to Michelle's MC, like I made a friend as well. She's there, like a deep and powerful frequency that I'm tuning into. MC talked about not wanting the feeling to ever go away, and that got me thinking about what our next sessions would look like, and where we might be in six months. I know the intense emotions will naturally subside, but now we have shared this experience together, it cannot be erased. It's a part of our work together and how we make meaning. I did not expect how much I would carry Michelle's MC into my own life afterwards. Michelle's MC has shown up for me when I'm dealing with gendered and racial power dynamics and instead of doing what is expected of me, I hear her calling them out and telling me I can say 'yes' to a different way of being in the world. The intensity of emotions may be settling down but the ideas, practices and promise of Insider Witnessing are radiating more powerfully than ever.

"And on that note, I would like to end by giving MC the final say as the co-author of this paper, "I think it [the Insider Witnessing interview] was a gift to myself...almost like some part of me said, 'I've been waiting for you! You're here! You finally read the signs.'"





Norway IWP Team

Andreas Breden & Luna

The Story Begins...

My very first encounter with Insider Witness Practices (IWP) was when I met Tom Stone Carlson at a Narrative Therapy Conference in Trondheim, Norway, several years ago. Coincidentally, meeting Tom was also a “meeting” of our respective great great-grandmothers, as we came to discover a connection we had due to the fact that our great great-grandmothers were both born in the same rural village. I came to realize this connection during the workshop when Tom shared that his great great-grandmother was born in Trondheim and moved to Vestnes (about a 5-hour drive from Trondheim) shortly after her birth. During the presentation, I contacted a friend who lived in Vestnes, and was rapidly able to locate the family farm of Tom’s ancestors. I still remember the look of surprise on Tom’s face when I came up to him after the presentation to tell him this discovery. Long story short, I put Tom in touch with his second cousin who still lives on the farm and Tom immediately postponed his flight home so that he could make a sentimental journey to his Norwegian ‘home’. Needless to say, Tom and I have been fast friends ever since.

In addition to our friendship, I approached Tom with ideas and possibilities about narrative supervision for myself and my colleagues at my workplace. Subsequently, we met monthly for about a year, studying narrative therapy together through case stories using Tom’s pedagogy “Learning Narrative Therapy Backwards” (Carlson, et al., 2018). My colleagues at that time were quite unfamiliar with narrative therapy, but during this year of supervision, our overall understanding of narrative ideas and practices deepened at a speed I’ve never experienced before. None of us will ever forget reading and talking about Tom’s story “*There’s always a puppy (and sometimes a bunny)*” (Carlson, et al, 2018). In this story, Tom retells David Epston’s puppy story from ‘Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative Therapy with Children and their Families,’ and the influence that David Epston’s story had had on Tom over the course of his career.

Norway IWP Team



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Somewhere during that time, we developed an interest in trying out IWPs at our agency and after some collective study, we decided to invite Tom and his colleague Sanni Paljakka to Trondheim to work with our team and to give a workshop for the other colleagues at my department. Tom and Sanni met with our IWP team over two days, during which I experienced first-hand the effects of Insider Witnessing Practices in my own life.

The first of these experiences took place at the workshop. On that day, about 15 of us met to help us prepare for IWP work. Tom and Sanni started out by introducing themselves before turning to the rest of us. Everyone was asked to remember and share a story when someone had acted as a witness to us in our own lives and had done so in manner that had raised our spirits.

The story I remembered on that day was about a ski trip I made in February some years ago with a friend of mine and his two dogs. We were on a two-week trip on Finnmarksvidda, which is a Norwegian prairie that is covered with snow, assailed by harsh winds and temperatures as low as -40°C . On this particular day, we started out in the morning in sunshine and -15°C . Both dogs were full of energy, as were we, after a good night's sleep in the tent. This day, I had Thule as my dog companion, and he was pulling a sled with some of our gear. We made good progress, having the wind behind us the whole day. As time passed, we noted that the wind had increased and it was getting harder and harder to see our tracks behind us as we ventured on into the vast white landscape. Our lunch consisted of a few slices of bread and cheese and a litre of water. We both insisted the other one drank the whole litre, since skiing during winter is very demanding and one easily becomes dehydrated, even in such a cold environment. After lunch we had to put on our hoods and goggles as the wind whipped up the snow and made it harder and harder to see. We had been walking for a few hours after lunch. Even though both Thule and Kangia were Greenland dogs and used to extreme winter temperatures, pulling a sled was tiring them. In fact, we all were becoming fatigued. The wind was now so strong that we had to yell to each other to hear. The dogs were trained to lay down and relax while they could, and at one of these short stops my friend and I considered whether we had to put up our tent or proceed to our proposed destination, which was a Sami 'gamme.' A





'gamme' is a small hut made of earth and wood. The 'gamme' we were aiming for had a stove and two beds, and after having slept in a tent and sleeping bag for a week, we were anticipating even the barest of comforts. Thule suddenly got scared of the howling wind gust and pulled himself out of his harness. We were then only a few hundred meters away from the forest trail on which the 'gamme' was located. I was almost exhausted myself after having walked the whole day on skis, and the daylight was fading. I mustered what remained of my energy and leaped forward, grabbing Thule by his collar, forcing him back into his harness. My friend said to me: *"I don't think we can make it to the 'gamme' tonight, Andreas."* But I was undeterred and declared, *"Yes, we can!"* I sturdily walked on into the forest while gently holding Thule by his collar. If Thule were to run away, it would have been critical, since we then would have to put up our tent in the open without any protection from the wind and the snow. The wind on Finnmarksvidda can be so strong that it can easily rip apart even the strongest expedition tent. And the wind had increased to a dangerous level. Needless to say, we made it to the 'gamme'. While my friend tended to the dogs, I lit the fire in the stove and started cooking dinner. Tom and Sanni helped me to make sense of my actions in a new light and tied it to my moral character as a person who persists when times get rough. A few weeks after this workshop, I understood why Tom very much wanted Sanni to come to Norway when I received an e-mail with a personal poem to each of us. Here is the poem Sanni wrote to me from my own words:

*First, I wrestled down the fear of my dog in the snow
 And then I heard the fear in my friend's voice.
 But into the fear all around, I said, walk, my friends, walk. We'll sit around a fire
 tonight.
 That evening
 Around the promised fire
 He said I am really glad it was you who was with me
 And his words were warmer to me than fire.*

I'll get back to this story after telling you about another experience. This other experience took part at a time in my life when I decided to go to therapy. The only therapist in a several mile's radius was a psychoanalytic psychologist. I liked my





therapist, which I think is necessary to have a good experience of therapy. If I hadn't been fond of talking myself, the therapy experience left something to be desired because my therapist almost didn't say a word. Another part of the therapy was to lay down on a couch, just like the one Freud had. Being afraid to lose control it took me five sessions before I even dared putting my left foot on the couch. My right one still very grounded on the floor. The focus of these sessions was to let me have time and space to talk and through this, gain new insight, and thus meaning, of earlier experiences in my life. I wondered about these practices at the time, as I questioned whether I could have done much better through talking with my mother, brother, or good friends.

Sanni's poetic words had another kind of therapeutic effect on me. They were warm, like the fire in the 'gamme.' And they filled my whole body, not just my brain and part of my heart. Reading the words was an experience of being lifted out of my body and thus getting an opportunity to look back at myself with new eyes. Admittedly still my own eyes, but not the eyes I usually see things with. Even though I knew what had happened on the ski trip, I now had the opportunity to look at myself and my actions in another light. I could rationally see what I had mastered before I received Sanni's poem. But after reading the poem I also could see my mastery on a meta level and an emotional one as well. The emotional level is hard to describe, but it feels like being able to look at myself through enhanced lenses of pride. And I refer to this level as emotional because it not only consisted of meaning but it also came with a bodily feeling. I can rationally see that I was brave and strong but hearing the poem I could also feel it in my bones. It was like Sanni's poem took this experience that was inside of me and turned it into a permanent site from which to see myself, perhaps through lenses biased by strength and bravery.

My second experience with Insider Witness Practices happened two days later. At that time, I was working with unassisted minor refugees and in the evening after the first day of the workshop, sadly, two of the minors were killed by one of their friends. As you can imagine, this terrible tragedy impacted everyone in the department. Despite all of the emotions that we were experiencing, a group of us still wanted to go through with the second day of focused IWP training with Tom





and Sanni. Because of the tragedy, and the lack of availability of office space, we had to meet on my balcony without any materials that we had planned to use for our workshop. We decided to improvise and we agreed to do a live Insider Witness Interview with me as the subject. Tom and Sanni interviewed me about my life, pausing from time to time to allow other team members to join in and contribute to the counterstory that was being developed about my life. It was surprisingly easy for me to step in and out of the two different positions that I was asked to occupy – that of the subject of the interview and a team member who contributed to the reflections on my own story. The two-hour interview flew by. To me it felt as if it had been merely a matter of minutes. It was a very strange feeling stepping in and out of the two positions; however, I suspect it afforded me to experience what I would call ‘extreme witnessing of oneself’. It was like peeling an onion layer by layer. Each layer brought tears to my eyes and yet I was to discover another layer beneath it.. The tears were not sorrowful, but rather tears of self-compassion. Having trustworthy and kind people around me made it a safe place for me to step in and out of the different possibilities and story threads of my life that we considered together. I was able to both witness myself, ask questions to myself and reflect upon my own experience at the same time. It was as if my inner and outer dialogue joined together in a way I’ve never experienced before. A few days after the workshop, Sanni sent me yet another poem about the story that emerged during the interview. The last part of the poem is below:

[...] I learned the ways of anger
 Only to find the steps to peace.
 I shouldered the call of protection
 Only to find it wasn’t a burden:
 It was all as light as the rare smile of a 4-year-old boy
 In all its innocence
 And wonder
 After all.

The Story Continues...

After changing jobs, I started working at the Family Therapy Office in Trondheim





in August 2018. In Norway, we have public and free Family Therapy Offices where people can seek help for all manner of relational and family concerns. Fortunately, there is still considerable autonomy for the therapists working there and I was permitted to continue exploring narrative ideas and witnessing practices in my new position. A year later in August 2019, Sanni and Tom returned to Norway to the Family Therapy Office where I work. It was a busy week of exciting work. We did three IWP interviews as well as a workshop regarding Sanni and Tom's couple's work for all of my colleagues at the agency. One of these IWP interviews was with a client of a colleague of mine, Magnhild Fiskvik. Before the IWP interview with Magnhild's client Luna, Sanni, Tom, and I met with Magnhild to prepare to tell a counterstory on behalf of Luna's life. We spent about 90 minutes together, getting to know Luna through Magnhild's eyes, paying close attention to Luna's own words and the details that had shaped her life so far. Our study of Luna's life was used as a backdrop for the videotaped interview in which Sanni and Tom interviewed Magnhild as Luna. The video was recorded in order to show it to Luna. With Luna's express consent, I would like to center and highlight Luna's account of this experience:

Luna's Story

I am a woman in my 30's and have been living in Trondheim, Norway for the past 10 years. The reason I moved here is because it's far away from where my family lives. As you will soon find out, this is a large part of my background. In addition, Trondheim is known as the place to receive one of the best IT educations in Norway. I was born and raised in Norway, but my family took long trips to Pakistan every year. My grandfather first came here in the 70's with his wife and my dad. My mom came to Norway when she married my dad and I was born a year later. Fast forward to today; I ran away from home when I was 19, because I didn't approve of their traditional ways of raising a daughter and the effects that these practices were having on me as a young woman.

I first heard about Narrative Therapy and Insider Witness Practices when my therapist asked if she could represent my story through a portrait of me to three other therapists. I must honestly say, at first, I wasn't sure about this practice as it





sounded far-fetched. To be honest it sounded a lot like alternative medicine to me since I studied Computer Science and am mainly rational in my ways. I would never have considered it or found out about this practice on my own. At the same time, I was starting to realize I needed help to get out of my “destructive ways” and at the time I didn’t have the right tools or the right way to acknowledge them. My “destructive ways” had much to do with what we in Norway call “Janteloven:” this term first appeared in 1933 and speaks of “the inherent evil within mankind and their power to make each other small” (Sandemose, 1933). No matter what I did, I felt as if it would never be good enough and I really never trusted myself. I felt under such pressure by my closest family, especially my mother, and their very particular expectations of me and I was failing miserably to measure up to them. I remember being a little nervous when I said yes to the interview, but I’m very glad I did, and the main reason for doing so was my trust in Magnhild.

Some weeks passed by and I had forgotten about the interview. In the meantime, I was able to get a psychologist through my work. What I didn’t realize was that this psychologist also used narrative therapy. He told me about how to detach myself from the problems and it became easier to analyze my problems from an outside perspective. This way of thinking was new to me and it made me understand narrative thinking and hence be able to fully embrace what lay ahead of me. When Magnhild contacted me again about the interview, I was excited, but also nervous for what was to come.

My IWP Experience- Luna

I was a few minutes late that day. I took the bus from work and usually it takes a little over 10 minutes to get to the city, but there was a lot of traffic that day. This made me very stressed as I value being on time or, in fact, showing up five minutes early before an appointment. Upon arriving at the office, I was greeted by four nice and talkative people, Magnhild, Andreas, Sanni and Tom, in the hallway. I was nervous in the beginning but after talking with all of them I was able to relax. The energy in the room was good; it was a light atmosphere and nobody was stressed by my arriving late. They all had a chemistry that gave good





energy to the room and made me relax and feel free to be more like how I want to be.

First, we got to know each other a little bit and I told them about my work and how I got here. I was surprised when they said that the interview they had with my therapist was over an hour long, but I quickly understood why. My therapist took her time and answered all their questions exactly as I would. It was a surreal feeling. Watching the video of my therapist portraying me, I was surprised by how often she used my own words and when asked to respond to questions that we had not considered together, I was even more surprised that she actually said things that I would have said if I had been asked that today. It felt like I was watching my life as a movie. Normally, when I think about my past, everything gets foggy and the memories race, like watching a movie at 'fast forward'. But during the IWP interview, everything was going in slow motion and I was able to see my life and my struggles from a different perspective. But this time, in the slow motion of it all, the memories of my life became much clearer, like I was able to see the events of my life unfold before me in vivid detail. My therapist, Magnhild, told me after the interview that at some points she wasn't sure about what I would have said but she used her intuition and answered as she thought I would have. The strange thing is that she hit the bull's eye every time.

Watching my therapist portray me helped me detach myself from the problems I was experiencing. From this outside perspective, it was easier to sift through the events and the feelings that had previously been attached to them. The interview also helped me to see that my rebellious spirit had a long history and had been there all along. I was able to connect the dots and to fill in the blanks that I didn't know were missing. It gave me a feeling that all my achievements hadn't only been because of luck, but also because of my gut feeling about what is right and wrong. During the interview, my convictions really shined through.

As we were watching the recorded interview, we paused the video multiple times to allow me to process it all and to add my own words and feelings to the experience. This was my first time talking about my past life without getting emotionally overwhelmed. We spent almost three hours talking and watching the video. It was both tiring and enlightening for me. Tiring in a good way. I felt at





peace somehow and the way we talked about me and my thought processes made me think about myself with a renewed sense of pride. While they were talking about me, it felt like to I got to know myself better.

This session made me think about myself as I think about others and their problems. Like I mentioned before, I was finally able to see my struggles and the ways that I had been mistreated in life without all the negative feelings attached to them or perhaps it was more like there were new feelings, feelings of compassion and pride, now attached to my life and my history. During the interview, Sanni and Tom often talked to each other about me as witnesses to my life. They wondered with awe about how I was able to see what was right and wrong and make moral judgments about my life at such a young age. Watching them talk about me in this way allowed me see myself with new eyes. I was able to see myself from a distance and I found myself agreeing with the choices I made throughout my life; those same choices that used to bring shame somehow brought a new sense of pride and conviction that I have always known what's right and wrong and this IWP experience actually confirmed it. I have a good moral compass in me and this helps when I have bad days.

Seeing my life portrayed by Magnhild was like meeting myself for the first time. It allowed me to see it all with a bit of distance and from a new vantage point. This was so important. Let me explain it this way. I am a gamer and my favourite types of games are all adventure-based. Often in these games, you can see the main character from behind. You can see the back of your head and how you interact with other characters. The IWP interview was like that for me. It felt like I was playing a third-person game, almost like seeing my life in the midst of my actions. I don't know how to explain this but it felt like I was somehow choosing my own actions as they played out before me. When Magnhild retold a specific event from my life, I was able to replay it in my head and I was able to evaluate my actions in surprisingly new ways, using my moral compass to revisit my life.

Since the interview, it seems like a new path was opened up for me. It seemed like I was living my life with new eyes and it was a bit overwhelming at first to feel like I now had more control over my life.





Some Thoughts about Theory- Andreas

Wittgenstein once remarked that philosophy “ought really to be written only as “poetic composition.” Both Luna and I decided to write about our experiences with witnessing in a story-telling format. It is my hope that both our “compositions” will reveal something about the “philosophy” of Insider Witnessing to the attentive reader. I (AB) strongly advise that Luna’s written composition about her experience be considered to speak substantively for itself. Her reflections offer the Insider Witnessing Team in Norway a rich supervision into our future endeavors with witnessing and a “reflecting surface” for us to continue to reach for the language to speak about our hopes and intentions regarding the “real effects” of our efforts with our clients.

I wish to highlight my beginning reflections about both my own and Luna’s experiences with the therapeutic venture of Insider Witnessing– I will do so with the contrast to the experience of the therapeutic venture of the Freudian couch on my mind.

I have been thinking about Luna’s words in the above reflection:

during the IWP interview, everything was going in slow motion and I was able to see my life and my struggles from a different perspective. But this time, in the slow motion of it all, the memories of my life became much clearer, like I was able to see the events of my life unfold before me in vivid detail.”

Luna’s remarks reminded me of a quote by John Shotter: “what Wittgenstein’s dramatic, poetic forms of talk achieve is to put certain moments in the spontaneous flow of our talk on ‘freeze frame,’ so to speak. They can create what, paradoxically, we call an ‘arresting’ moment or a ‘moving’ moment – moments that ‘strike’ us.” It is my sense that both Luna and I experienced a slowing down of the “spontaneous flow” of talk and our lives, and in these “freeze frames” were able to see significant moments in our lives from different angles. It was as if we were permitted to view them again and relate to them in ways we couldn’t if they were moving along with the rapidity moments normally pass us by. I believe that





this, above all, is what IWPs make possible. By situating the client as a witness to a dramatic telling of a counterstory of their life, it puts these moments inside a “freeze frame” and allows the client to view their lives in slow motion, and with what Pillow (2019) refers to as “*lenticular lenses*.”

Listen to these expressions of what that these “lenses” opened in front of Luna’s eyes:

- *It gave me a feeling that all my achievements hadn’t only been because of luck, but also because of my gut feeling about what is right and wrong. During the interview, my convictions really shined through.*
- *I was finally able to see my struggles and the ways that I had been mistreated in life without all the negative feelings attached to them or perhaps it was more like there were new feelings, feelings of compassion and pride, now attached to my life and my history.*
- *I was able to replay (significant moments in my life) in my head and I was able to evaluate my actions in surprisingly new ways, using my moral compass to revisit my life.*

In order to have hopes for such effects as above to come true in the witnessing work, I have come to appreciate and understand Tom’s insistence that as therapists, we have to know our clients well enough to be able to speak about their lives in a way that is recognizable to our clients. We have to be able to tell the stories of what our clients have suffered in sufficiently rich detail so they would see the telling themselves as a “righteous” portrait.

The requirements of therapists in Insider Witnessing interviews, namely, to know their clients well, to be able to speak recognizably and righteously about their clients’ lives, including their suffering and their convictions that “shone through”, are in contrast to the requirements that psychology has traditionally placed on therapists. I am reminded of William James’ critique of psychology in his *Principles of Psychology* from the end of the 19th century (as reprinted in Shotter, 2012): “

“The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of





nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even where the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook.”

Participating in an Insider Witnessing Interview means to strive to give the client the opportunity to see the whole river at once. And the feelings and thoughts that are about to emerge, but have been suppressed by current discourses, are given an opportunity to arise from the water and reveal themselves to the client. Luna could suddenly see the pressures she had been placed under, and the ideologies regarding the shaming and mistreatment of daughters that had come to surround her growing up. Against the current of these pressures, she could see the decisions she had made in favour of rebellion and freedom in a “different light.” Out of the river emerged her own moral code in these significant moments, and suddenly pride and compassion came to her as she revisited her own moral decisions in slow motion.

Insider Witness Practices are not a therapeutic way of assessing, diagnosing or reporting the client’s problems within the frame of the majority of the perceptions of how and what therapy should be. Insider Witnessing interviews don’t aim to explain, theorize or justify. They describe how things are from the viewpoint of yourself and the emerging telling is not dogmatic, but to be tested, to be weighed and. accepted or rejected by the client. According to Shotter (2012) Bakhtin said that each voice being uttered creates an anticipation of “*that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.*”

In a world in which therapists either say very little, or otherwise are expected to explain and theorize about clients’ lives the venture to “create stories” instead is unconventional. And in the end, as with any story, it is up to the audience members, in this case, our clients to complete the story themselves.

Having been trained in systemic therapy where one should try to be as neutral as possible this was one of the things that surprised me most when I first saw Tom





do an IWP interview. Perhaps I am connecting the therapist's posture and manner in such "hope biased interviews" with the manner I embodied in staking out the route to the game on a howling winter's night. Remaining neutral, instead of stepping into active hope-biased responses in that moment most certainly would have meant a very cold night for me and my companion. Shotter (2012) claims that "the thoughts we embody in counting, weighing, and measuring are only applicable to dead phenomena" since no living thing can be fragmented or broken into smaller pieces without dying. Explaining, theorizing, or justifying is perhaps just other words for counting, weighing and measuring." The language of psychology is a language that disconnects us from the very phenomena happening around us, the river in which we are flowing. We need a language that is relating us back to the world we experience every single moment. Insider Witnessing one means to such a language that might suggest a more living and fluid world than we sometimes are misled to think it is.

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