



Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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

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Editors' Note

We are excited to announce another release of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy. This release will highlight the practice of apprenticeship in narrative therapy as well as a personal reflection on re-engaging with narrative principals.

The first two papers, "Wayfaring: An Apprenticeship in Narrative Enquiry" and "Becoming Skilful: A Conversation 'Within' an Apprenticeship in Narrative Enquiry" were written by Frances Hancock and me (David Epston). In these papers, Frances and I (David) share glimpses of our apprenticeship relationship and expand on the "process of enskilment" for practice-based pedagogy.

The third paper, "Re-engaging with 'the Person is not the Problem, the Problem is the Problem': Neoliberalism, Narrative Therapy, and Relationship Counselling", written by Michael Edwards, speaks to Michael's re-engagement with narrative principles to address the ways neoliberalism had entered his therapeutic practice in order to re-orient his practice-vision.

We hope that you enjoy the release as much as I did.

Sincerely,

David Epston



Narrative Therapy Training Opportunities

Apprenticeship in the Artistry of Narrative Practice- with David Epston

Immerse yourself in this unique year-long apprenticeship in David Epston's narrative therapy practice. This is the only place in the world where you can learn directly from the co-originator of narrative practice together with his closest colleagues. We use a unique pedagogy developed over decades for teaching advanced narrative therapy practice. Nowhere else can you experience such intensive training that takes place within a very detailed study of your own therapy sessions and that of others.

This is a boutique learning experience, with between 6-10 apprentices in each cadre.

The course will take place in an online learning community made up of like-minded, skilled narrative practitioners from all over the world. For more information go to: <https://narrativeapprentice.com/>.

Three Interviews with David Epston

Counterstorying, Wonderfulness Enquiries, Witnessing Practices & Possibilities from the Future- With David Epston & Kay Ingamells

This course demonstrates David's innovative teaching methods to teach the craft and art of narrative inquiry training using immersion learning through transcripts and internalized other questioning to focus on three interviews: 1) David's well-known interview and follow-up seven years later with Sebastian; 2) David's interview with counselor Viola who has met 8 times with 16 year old Joel, and then 5 minutes in, he begins to interview her as Joel; 3) David's interview with social worker Karen as Jane and then as Jane's son Tim. Each time, David and his close colleague Kay Ingamells review a recorded interview, alongside a transcript, paying close attention to questions and reflections. Relevant papers, essays, commentaries and opportunities for registrants to contribute are integrated throughout the course.

For more information go to: <https://reauthoringteaching.com/narrative-training/ce-courses/buses-dont-run-yet/3-interviews-david-epston/>.



Wayfaring: An Apprenticeship in Narrative Enquiry

Frances Hancock¹ & David Epston²

Introduction

When I was a child my father, who is a botanist, used to take me for walks in the countryside, pointing out the way that all the plants and fungi – especially the fungi – grew here and there. Sometimes he would get me to smell them, or to try distinctive tastes. His manner of teaching was to show me things, literally to point them out. If I would but notice the things to which he directed my attention, and recognise the sights, smells and tastes that he wanted me to experience because they were so dear to him, then I would discover for myself much of what he already knew. (Ingold, 2000, p. 20)

In his book, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, social anthropologist and philosopher Tim Ingold (2000) recounts how while growing up his father taught him botany during their countryside walks together. His conclusion (above) is worth repeating for it goes to the heart of apprenticeship learning, which is the subject of this essay: “I would discover for myself much of what he already knew”. Under his father’s tutelage, Ingold became increasingly attentive and responsive to living things around him.

The wonders of self-discovery eventually led Ingold to his pedagogical considerations on “enskilment”—the idea that “learning is inseparable from doing” and requires “a practical engagement in the world” (Ingold, 2000, p. 416). Here, Ingold emphasises that learning by way of enskilment is embedded ‘in place’ and requires guided attention so one can become familiar with a task or a

¹ **Frances Hancock** is a Research Fellow in Te Puna Wānanga School of Māori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland. She maintains a consultancy practice with individuals, groups, organisations and communities, doing commissioned storywork projects and offering guidance. Email contact: frances@ardra.co.nz.

² **David Epston** is the co-originator with Michael White of what has come to be known as ‘narrative therapy and community work’. As well as doing ongoing research and writing, he continues his work as an apprentice through an innovative apprenticeship programme, Narrative Practice (<http://www.narrativeapprentice.com/faculty.html>). Email contact: David Epston at: bicycle2@xtra.co.nz.

skill. The role of the educator or seasoned practitioner, which in this essay we call ‘the apprenticer’, is that of “educere”, meaning to lead someone out into the world (Wood et al., 2021, p. 3). Their task, Ingold suggests, “is not to explicate knowledge for the benefit of those who are assumed, by default, to be ignorant but to provide inspiration, guidance and criticism in the exemplary pursuit of truth” by way of self-discovery (Ingold, 2000, p. 8). The less experienced practitioner is encouraged to attend to things directly, as they are, in the context in which they are watching, listening to, and feeling them (Ingold, 2000, p. 5). Over time, such efforts guide their pedagogical journey toward the “practice of wayfaring” (Ingold, 2011). To wayfare, Ingold says, is to become knowledgeable and to “trace a path...that others can follow” (Ingold, 2011, p. 162).

In this essay we retrace the path of our apprenticeship in narrative enquiry. We say ‘our’ apprenticeship because we both learned from each other as the process of enskilment became ‘our’ teacher. In this apprenticeship, I (Frances) became the apprentice, and I (David) became the apprenticer—a term invented and introduced to us by North American narrative practitioner Peggy Sax (personal communication, July, 2003). Our apprenticeship spanned a decade, from 2003 to 2013, and during the first five years we communicated almost daily via email. Looking back, our evolving pedagogy embodied Ingold’s process of enskilment and practice of wayfaring. Our explorations below illustrate how David was able to ‘show’ and ‘guide’ me (Frances) in the craft and art of narrative enquiry. How did David do that? He traced a path that I could follow.

Histories of learning

I (Frances) first met David through his extensive publications (such as Epston, 1998, 1999; Epston & White, 1992; Freeman et al., 1997; White & Epston, 1990). I was captivated by the ways in which he and his colleagues put narrative ideas and practices to work on a range of problems. Intellectual rigor, ingenuity and exhilaration permeated their playful inventions. Artful enquiry led them ‘to go far fast’, enabling meaningful and uplifting outcomes. Their work not only spanned but also connected the interests of individuals, families, groups, organisations, and communities. I was especially drawn to their deep concern for ethics *and* politics in their relationships with the people they worked alongside. The more I read, the more I wanted to learn.

I am the kind of person who learns by listening and by doing, so perhaps I am well suited to apprenticeship learning. Before meeting David, I had previously worked in diverse roles across sectors. In some settings I worked with seasoned practitioners whom I now consider my apprentices. I believed they had something to teach me, even if I wasn't exactly sure of what I hoped to learn from them. A group of Sisters of Mercy I lived with for two years imbued my practice with their Mercy ways of thinking, being, and doing. During a two-year stint as a government adviser, an adept policy manager honed my craft as a writer. My relationships with Indigenous peoples—some of which now span decades and endure to this day—continue to educate me about what it means to be-in-right-relation when inhabiting Indigenous-Settler relationships. Along the way, I realised I was always-already grounded in place and deeply engaged in/with different social, cultural, economic, physical, and spiritual worlds.

My only child arrived when I was forty, prompting me to explore new opportunities. I was originally trained in social work and psychology (at Massey University) and in theology and ethics (at Harvard University). My shelves were full of books on writing, poetry, and memoir as well as texts from my academic studies. Now a new subject clamored for space: narrative therapy and practice. Yet, I was neither a counsellor nor a therapist, and I had no ambitions to become either. Instead, I wanted to pursue new ways to enact my vocation as a writer, while maintaining a necessary footing in the world of paid work with which I was familiar: organisational/community development. But I had no idea how to proceed.

In 2002, while on parental leave, I began attending a narrative interest group in Christchurch, where my family was then based. Hoping for inspiration to guide my way forward, in May 2003, I attended a four-day introductory workshop on narrative therapy practice, facilitated by David, at The Family Therapy Centre in Auckland. I felt excited boarding the plane. I was off on an adventure, but not one I could have ever predicted.

The provocation of narrative enquiry

At the workshop, David warmly welcomed all the participants – mainly school counsellors, social workers, and therapists in private practice, as well as my friend and I who, as community development practitioners, were outliers. Some participants were well versed in narrative ideas, while others were just becoming

acquainted. David relished our questions and observations. Within the first hour, he also offered a provocation that caught my attention.

“I can counsel you to despair or to hope, which would you prefer?” After pausing, he added, “I prefer to think of myself as a practitioner of hope.”

In that moment I encountered a kind of intellectual and moral awakening. I interpreted David’s question to mean that enquiries matter; they influence the stories we tell of our lives, the sense we make of our lived experiences, the range of possible futures we might imagine for our lives, the identities we claim or reject, the works of justice to which we commit ourselves, and so on. His question not only drew my attention to the larger purpose of my lifework, but also to the power I could exercise, as a writer, by crafting narratives of hope.

David’s description of himself also startled me. Here was someone who had, with his colleague Michael White, co-originated a field of professional practice and academic study. Burgeoning interest in narrative therapy and community work had created opportunities for David that traversed international training and speaking engagements, research and writing, as well as a thriving therapeutic practice. I expected David to introduce himself by way of a professional identity such as an educator, researcher, writer, supervisor, therapist, and so on. That David identified himself by way of an ethical stance or orientation in, of, and to the world—as a practitioner of hope—challenged me to reconsider my own identity in light of my ethics and politics. I was hooked.

David offered another thought that sealed my interest.

“What I can do is ask good questions and it has taken me 25 years to learn how to do that,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Humility knows its own measure, I thought, scribbling his words in my notebook. Sitting there, with two university diplomas to my name, I could not imagine how I could learn to ask good questions within the restrictions of the programmes and pedagogies with which I was familiar.

Sensing possibilities

As the first session ended, my wandering mind returned to those earlier apprenticeships I had taken up outside of the academy and a new thought took hold. At morning tea, I posed my own provocation:

“David, have you ever considered taking on an apprentice?”

“Yes!” he said, his face lighting up as he engaged in the conversation. “Lately, I have been thinking that apprenticeship is how the craft and art of narrative enquiry ought to be taught.”

We conversed for a while about the merits of apprenticeship as a practice-based pedagogy. David suggested the analogy of a master class in musical performance, which enables the passing on of artistic capabilities between skilled and aspiring practitioners.

Without realising it, we were already playing with ideas and language to support an apprenticeship in narrative enquiry. Even in its infancy, our conversation emphasized practice-based learning—in particular, learning by doing, in situ.

“I am an ethnographer,” David continued, further illuminating his interests.

From there, curiosity somehow led us into a discussion about ‘tacit knowledges’ (Polanyi, 1958, 1998), a term unknown to me but which I sensed was at the heart of David’s intellectual passions.

“Such knowledges are a kind of ‘know-how’ born of experience but are often hard to put into words,” David said. “Narrative enquiry brings those tacit knowledges to voice, so they can be considered in conversation.”

Yes, I thought, my unarticulated knowledges, whatever they are, lie in my very bones, which are holding me up and guiding me as I speak.

Then, David suddenly left the room. Just as quickly, he returned, with an armload of books for me to read on exactly the subjects that interested me, without my knowing what my interests were (Cruikshank, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Nelson, 2001; Polanyi, 1958, 1998; Schon, 1983; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). David proceeded to weave the loose threads of our conversation into a fabric of

meaning that not only made sense but also respected my relational, ethical, and political sensibilities.

Sensing possibilities, I pressed on:

“Could I become your apprentice?” I asked boldly, as if an assessment of the merits of my request was not required.

“We would need a project to work on together,” David said thoughtfully, as if he had already considered the matter or maybe he was making it up as he spoke.

“I’ve just been asked to undertake an organisational review,” I persisted, with all the confidence of someone who had found what they were looking for—their next teacher—and wasn’t about to let go of such an exciting prospect. “Perhaps we could work on that assignment together?”

“Write me a letter, telling me more about yourself and the project, and what you might hope to gain from an apprenticeship together,” he requested.

Over the following days, using videos to show the craft and art of narrative enquiry, I noticed that David often behaved more like a participant than a workshop leader. He would sit on the edge of his chair intently watching a video of himself interviewing someone else. I suspect these were videos he had seen many times before. But it was as if he was watching them for the first time and seeking to learn from the exchange he was witnessing, as much as I and other workshop attendees hoped we would. In other words, David gave every impression that he was learning with us. I had never had an experience quite like this before or seen ‘learning in collaboration with one another’ demonstrated in that way.

This guy is passionate about what he does, I thought. As much as he knows, he wants to know more and doesn’t assume he knows it all.

Another striking insight stayed with me. During the workshop, David encouraged us to view the people who consulted us as our ‘co-researchers’ and regard them as ‘the authorities on their experiences’ (Epston, 1999).

“Our collaborative task is to generate a kind of ‘knowledge agency’ that enables those who consult us to exercise the authority to express themselves in terms of

their knowing or know-how,” David explained. “They assume the right to be the knower and their knowing to be authoritative.”

His explanation offered an intellectual provocation against (by then) my seven years of formal academic training. That training had consistently privileged expert knowledges in the form of theoretical/philosophical, professional, technical, and scientific learning.

When I returned to Christchurch, I wrote the letter that David had requested and sent it to him via email. I had already learned that a good apprentice does what they’re told and makes it a priority. Doing so shows respect for and sustains the interest of their apprenticer. In the letter, I recounted my histories of apprenticeship learning and expressed my desire to learn how to ask good questions. I was interested in the “mystery and manners” of narrative enquiry conversations, a phrase I borrowed from the North American short story writer Flannery O’Connor (1984). I wanted to deepen my understanding of what it meant to be an ethical practitioner, critically aware of power relations affecting the groups and communities with whom I worked. I also wanted to learn how to ‘write my own practice’, as a source of learning for myself and others.

An apprenticer’s response

I (David) was intrigued by Frances’ letter and excited by the idea of our working together. During the workshop, she showed me that she not only relished narrative ideas but also had the capacity to play with them and see where they would take her in her work. She showed me she had patience with herself, unlike many others who approach learning a practice, as if they were acquiring a commodity. Also, she badgered me but in a way that caught my interest. In saying that, she must have also known there is such a thing as too much badgering. I must have been willing to risk that this apprentice would lead me to be a better apprenticer. And perhaps, too, she was unafraid of such a relationship, which she spelled out to me. Perhaps in her previous apprenticeships, she had grown comfortable with such arrangements.

I had previously performed the roles of supervisor, mentor, and consultant, although already our discussions had reached beyond these descriptions. Exploring the relevance and versatility of narrative ideas and practices across different disciplines and professional realms had long interested me and reflected

my own eclectic reading habits. Here was an opportunity to consider whether the intimacies and intricacies of a practice that had originated in the therapeutic realms of mental health, psychiatry, psychology and social work, could be ‘made over’ and articulated within the fields of organisational and community development. Some essays had already headed in that direction (such as Barry, 1997; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Sax, 2000).

Yet, while I felt enthusiasm for the notion of apprenticeship, I was somewhat uncomfortable. I had studied its venerable tradition and had previously trialed some version of it with an aspiring narrative therapist Jo(sefina) Viljoen who was based in Pretoria, South Africa. As Frances and I now considered the terms of our engagement over email, I addressed my concerns to her.

“Frances, you certainly don’t seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of apprenticeship, whereas I am, and I am wondering why. I do know that the practice that evolved between Jo and myself was as close as I can think of to that tradition. For example, both parties are so close to the practice at hand in contrast to the comparable distance in conventions surrounding clinical supervision/consultation. I also know, along the way, my curiosity got the better of me as I saw something happening in front of my eyes (on my computer screen) that I found somewhat hard to believe. I was able to ‘see’ my craft being enacted as Jo, herself, became a party to it. At times, for example, she would read my enquiries aloud to the person she was working with and record their responses so she could type them up and email them to me. In a manner of speaking, she was handling my craft, time and time again, much like a senior surgeon might take over at a certain point in a surgical procedure because it was ‘risky’, ‘difficult’, or ‘just unknown’ to the apprentice surgeon.”

My discomfort remained clouded, until a subsequent email exchange illuminated its source. I connected Frances with Jo via email, hoping she might learn from Jo’s experience of working with me. I subsequently introduced them both to my North American narrative colleague Peggy Sax. In a shared email exchange, the four of us agreed that we could not countenance using the term ‘master’ given its historical association with slavery. Peggy suggested ‘apprenticer’, a term she had invented, which we immediately embraced.

How the apprenticeship worked

We (Frances and David) agreed to go forward and see where our apprenticeship might lead us. We began a series of email exchanges that became our main means of engagement with one another and remains so until this very day. We also enjoyed occasional phone calls and periodic face-to-face meetings at David's office, a local café or, in later years, at his home. We had no grand plan for how the apprenticeship would work. Instead, we were led by our interests and availability, and by opportunities that came our way.

A site of pedagogical engagement

Our first foray was the organisational review I had mentioned to David when proposing an apprenticeship. In 2003, we were invited to undertake a review of St John of God Services (SJOG) across Australasia, focusing on its mission of hospitality. The commissioning body was the Australasian Province of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God Brothers (the Order). This Catholic religious order sponsored health, community, and disability services in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The Order welcomed David's role as a supervisor and as a co-researcher/outside conversationalist. I would manage the contract, conduct interview-based and documentary research, as well as draft the final report.

Inspired by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2000) research on 'messengers of respect', we conducted a transdisciplinary study of people working in different SJOG roles and settings across Australasia whom we described as 'exemplars of hospitality'. During onsite visits, David encouraged me to seek out 'insider knowledges' as a way to identify practitioners who had earned the reputation of being 'exemplars' or 'messengers' of SJOG Hospitality.

"David, what exactly do you mean by the term 'insider knowledges'?", I asked via email, having never encountered that notion before. His reply offered a succinct and captivating explanation that would anchor our future work together.

"Insider knowledges are local, particular and at times unique as they often arise from imagination and inspiration, not the usual technologies of scientific knowledge-making," he explained. "Because they are, in the first instance, the intellectual property or otherwise of the person(s) concerned, outsiders cannot rightly claim either invention or ownership of such knowledges. 'Insider knowledges' are modest and make no claims beyond the person(s) concerned.

They do not seek any monopolies of ‘knowing’ but sponsor many kinds and ways of knowing. ‘Insider knowledges’ do not provide grand schemes as they are far too humble for that ... and are carried best by and through stories” (Hancock & Epston, 2008, p. 486).

David’s method worked. Depending on insider knowledges led me to quickly identify and invite 11 exemplars of hospitality to join our study. Excited by the prospect of reflecting on the heart of their practice, they all agreed to participate. I conducted an in-depth face-to-face interview with each one and witnessed them at work. I later returned my extensive interview notes, reflections, and interpretations to them in the form of a letter that I crafted as a ‘story-in-text’ (Hancock & Epston, 2008). I used these ‘stories-in-text’ to seed email conversations with our exemplars over the next four to six months and, during this time, we had up to 50 email exchanges with some exemplars.

I (David) relished the opportunity to consider how to translate narrative enquiries into the medium of email conversation, which was central to the research design. I had access to the ‘stories-in-text’ that Frances had composed. I studied these texts and interpolated my own enquiries into Frances’ existing questions, explaining my thinking as I went. This pedagogical process sparked a fresh round of conversational exchanges with the exemplars.

I (David) soon realised in working with Frances that I had been tutoring myself while working extensively over email in my clinical practice and with supervision of and consultation to colleagues. The convenience and adaptability of email conversation had allowed me to embrace long-distance requests. In speaking with Frances about the intimacies and intricacies of email conversation, and in particular the craft and art of good questioning, I was bringing them into my own conscious awareness for the first time. A key insight I uncovered for myself and conveyed to Frances concerned the practice of schmoozing. I advised her to schmooze a little in and around the questions she wished to ask exemplars via email, so her enquiries wouldn’t come across as taxing or testing. I explained to Frances that schmoozing is a Yiddish term that translates into something like a warm, amiable conversation and conveys an ‘interested’ tone.

I (Frances) could often hear David’s voice echoing in the questions I posed to SJOG exemplars. I learned to read and reproduce David’s tone by engaging with him intensively through email conversation. When I got in the groove of narrative

enquiry conversations with SJOG exemplars, questions kept appearing, seemingly from nowhere. It felt like we had entered what David described as “the unknown land that is unrepresented by language and thought”.

“That is a great question; I never thought about it like that before,” SJOG exemplars often replied, describing the conversations in similar ways whatever their role or location. “That [conversation] was really useful—a different way of thinking.” “Your questions keep me on my toes!” “You’re making me think.”

Their comments told me I was on the right track; the conversations mattered to both of us and were sources of valuable learning.

Occasionally, during our email conversations with SJOG exemplars, I (Frances) paused to review the growing avalanche of text.

“I feel so moved by what I am reading,” I wrote to David one day, “and at the same time fascinated by it. I must keep reading!”

“That is a very telling sign,” he replied. “Questions must implicate the fascination and intrigue of the questioner. You become so interested that the question conveys your intrigue. You burden yourself with the intrigue of questions, showing a willingness and a readiness to assist, by providing yet another question pointing in a different direction, even if that leads to a dead end from which you are forced to turn back—as if everything goes somewhere. I share the burden of travelling in the unknown, but I invest that burden with anticipatory excitement.”

The next day, when replying to a SJOG exemplar, David signed-off his enquiries with this thought: “I can’t wait to hear your answer. Thanks, in anticipation.”

I (David) realized in talking to Frances via email that I loved to have my hands on the computer keyboard. One day I attempted to explain to her where this thought was leading me.

“Why? Because I sense movement as soon as my fingers touch the keys. The movement is not simply in my fingers. Something will come up. The idea of writing a book chapter fills me with dread. How do I do it? I had a history of pleasurable connection between the keyboard instrument and my creativity that had me ‘making a work of it’, making it up as I was going along, or in other words translating tacit knowledge into an externalized text—the ‘oeuvre of the work’.

When textualized, the conversation and its questions become a work-in-progress that can be worked on and developed by means of close review and considered reflection. In other words, the know-how of enquiry becomes accessible for review. People do not often look at their questions or even realise that their questions may not be questions. The intimacies and intricacies of questions are so rarely considered by comparison to the weight given to one's conclusions."

Our SJOG research project spanned 18 months and produced over 1,000 pages of research materials. We undertook this study during a period in which individual members of the Order faced allegations of sexual abuse, which were before the Courts and cast a looming shadow over its services. Project participants relished the opportunity to engage however, and many later said they had experienced "some of the richest conversations" of their lives. Three years after concluding the assignment, with the Order's permission, we recorded our journey with SJOG and traced our apprenticeship in narrative enquiry in *The Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organisation* (Hancock & Epston, 2008).

Other opportunities – a two-way street

During the SJOG assignment, David arranged for me to undertake an ethnographic study of a master's level course on narrative therapy led by Wally McKenzie, co-director of the Hamilton Therapy Centre. The course was jointly offered by the Department of Education (Counselling) at the University of Waikato (where Wally was an adjunct faculty member) and the then School of Community Studies, UNITEC Institute of Technology in Auckland (where David was a visiting professor).

With the approval of the University Ethics Committee, I acted as a 'pseudo-student' seeking to develop a participatory view of Wally's exemplary narrative therapy pedagogy, with David acting as an external supervisor. Witnessing Wally at work in the classroom helped me to see and appreciate the pedagogy or process of enskilment in my developing apprenticeship with David. Both men modelled values of hospitality, respect, curiosity, generosity, perseverance, and integrity. Through storytelling and role-modelling, they put their practice 'on show' for their students to examine, and expected us/students to do the same, as we explored together an ambrosia of possibilities offered in a narrative approach.

Over the following years, we (Frances and David) continued our apprenticeship by applying narrative ideas, practices, and ethics in particular sites of engagement, as well as co-authoring several practice-based publications. We collaborated on community and organisational development assignments drawn from my (Frances') consulting practice, including a seminar for senior government officials (Hancock et al., 2006), a community visioning project (Hancock et al., 2007), case stories of community-led approaches and social innovations (such as SECPHO et al., 2009), a strategic planning process for a community organisation (Hancock & Epston, 2013), and staff training.

Engaging as associates, we conducted email conversations with co-researchers in diverse roles and settings. In other assignments, I (Frances) submitted examples of my work (such as interview transcripts, workshop outlines, project briefs, draft reports, plans, and case stories) for David to work on. David continued to interpolate enquiries and comments in such texts for me to consider.

Learning along the way

After a busy day, juggling consultancy assignments with parenting duties, I (Frances) would email David some aspect of my work in the early hours of the morning and go to bed relieved I had done my homework, only to find a reply from him the next day with more questions or thoughts for me to consider. What kept me at the computer, working into the early hours, night after night, was more than discipline. David's passion for narrative practice called forth my own excitement and life purpose. Perhaps the real challenge was how to keep up with David; his pace was incredible!

The ingenuity of narrative enquire

Over time, I (David) sought to convey to Frances, by whatever means I could, that narrative enquiry conversations are unusual; that is their intention, for they seek to take you places you haven't been before and lead you to considerations you haven't yet considered. If they have an itinerary, it would be wanderlust! The enquirer must be willing to shepherd the conversation, seeing to it that it does not go astray or get lost, at the same time as leading it forward to fresh pastureland. These conversations require the enquirer to judiciously lead the conversation or alternatively to be led by the conversation.

When we met to review work-in-progress, I found myself discouraging Frances from referring to existing terminology to name the craft and art I was seeking to impart, although we both accepted that some referral was inevitable. I counselled her to take her cue from her work.

“Exciting horizons lie in the remnants of conversation that our conversationalists leave behind,” I suggested, “as well as in our own ongoing reflections on and in our practice.”

Over time, I (Frances) began to realise that in posing narrative enquiries to organisational and community practitioners, such questions have the effect of ‘showing up’ or ‘showing them’ their know-how.

“The enquiry happens in the context of the conversation,” I wrote to David. “It is not free-floating or plucked from ‘a question bank’ found in a handbook on organisational studies or whatever. Rather, each enquiry emanates from within or inside a particular conversation. Its very particularity and pertinence make it compelling. By contrast, a ‘tools and template’ approach can only take you as far as the list of prototype questions it offers.”

David’s reply went to the heart of narrative enquiry and our evolving apprenticeship.

“Travelling without an itinerary requires the interviewer to draw closer to the interviewee,” he observed. “Questions become more intimate, possibly even scary, but not so scary that they cannot be comfortably answered. In the dark you draw closer to find your way together. The interviewer’s questions are taking someone where they have never been before. There is considerable responsibility to ensure that no one gets lost or comes up against the hazard of bewilderment. If your interviewee loses their way, they may lose heart, feel humiliation or a loss of face, or lose touch with their newfound authority, which could cause them to question: ‘What right do I have to think I know anything? How did I get that idea?’”

“Narrative enquiry is best understood as an instrument of good conversation,” David continued. “It becomes the means to the expression of know-how. Questions invite the expression of another’s knowledge: knowledge which is in the making. The conversation ‘makes up’ or generates knowledge. This doesn’t mean it wasn’t already tacit. Tacit is ineffable; there are no words for it, yet. The

point of the enquiry is to bring the interviewee's knowledge into words: to articulate it and see where it goes from there or what it can do."

An unhurried pace and engaging manners

I (Frances) was learning through narrative enquiry conversations to better understand and appreciate the ways of knowing, being, and doing of the Other as a critical guide to action.

For that to happen, however, I had to attend to the setting or circumstance of knowledge-making by ensuring that there was sufficient space and opportunity to engage in a meaningful conversation. Here, again, David's guidance was crucial. Sitting together in a local café, he emphasized an unhurried pace and engaging manners.

"The pace must be relatively unhurried to allow adequate time for the conversation to continually open itself up and renew itself," he explained.

After pausing, as if to learn more from his own experience of the thing he was now reflecting on, and in that very moment engaged, he added another thought.

"The conversation continually excites and incites or, in other words, is stirred up again and again by the vivacity, congeniality, and curiosity we, as interviewers, bring to it," he said, finding his words as he went.

"Your choice of words here suggests a kind of passion or verve," I replied. "So, is passion a prerequisite for narrative conversations?"

"I believe so. Without an ethic of passion, the work becomes an intellectual exercise or 'a job'. You risk missing the heart of someone's story, the invisible but implicit upon which crucial meaning-making often turns. With an ethic of passion, a co-research conversation will insinuate itself into their life and yours. It will allow for innovative and bold risk-taking but not in a thoughtless or an unethical way. Here, I am thinking of passion not as a primordial essence, but rather as something that can be intentionally cultivated in a meaningful co-research conversation and through narrative pedagogies."

What an apprentice can teach

Studying examples of email conversations led me (Frances) to probe David for insights. Over email or face-to-face, I would ask him to please explain the reasons for this and that, and what is the point of ... and why did you ask that ... and what comes to mind when you read these questions ... and how would you describe this vocabulary ... and can I improve this text in any way ... and so on.

“I am a demanding apprentice,” I wrote in an email one day. And, feeling concerned that I might exhaust his patience, I promptly endeavored to account for my behaviour. “I am hungry to know more about the disciplines of a narrative enquiry conversation that have people go beyond what they know.”

“I relish the enquiries of my apprentice,” David replied cheerfully, “for you demand that I refer to my own unarticulated tacit knowledges, the very thing a narrative enquiry conversation seeks to articulate. What are these disciplines indeed!”

A political orientation to the work

We often discussed the political orientation that ‘inspirits’ narrative practice. David introduced me to the scholarly writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose work I found liberating. I quickly embraced Foucault’s idea that power is exercised through social relations, rather than being possessed by individuals or groups (Foucault, 1980, 1997). As a generative force, Foucault argued, exercising and negotiating power can enable people to craft lives of their own making as well as resist coercive repressive action. I became keenly interested in how narrative ideas, practices, and ethics can help to inform and shift power relations, so that those who are least likely to be seen and heard in society can exercise voice (and other forms of agency) to influence decision-making affecting their lives, concerns, aspirations, and futures.

Our apprenticeship also demonstrated positive and productive possibilities for pedagogical relationships in which an apprentice curtails the exercise of their power by showing themselves to be their own student and their apprentice’s colleague.

A vocation in service of others

Our apprenticeship encouraged me (Frances) to put my vocation as a writer to work in service of communities who suffer the effects of injustice but are often ignored and struggle to be heard in society. Exploring possibilities for narrative work with diverse groups and communities created opportunities for collaborative text-making projects. These projects centre local concerns, particular lived experiences, community/organisational knowledges, preferred practices, daring aspirations and social innovations.

I learned/taught myself how to craft and co-author case stories that make visible the elegance of the everyday lives and lived wisdom of the people/groups I work alongside. These narratives not only cultivate the shared commitments and aspirations of organisational and community members, but also help to inform their funding applications, social enterprise, and consultations with key partners. Joy is another outcome; the joy of being seen and appreciated, the joy of uncovering what you already know, the joy of having local knowledges articulated, understood, and valued, and the joy of communities owning their own quietly ingenious and wonderfully effective social innovations. Such assignments nourish my passion for creating narratives of hope that enact David's ethics of respect, generosity, and accuracy (Hancock et al., 2007; Hancock, 2019).

Becoming wayfarers together

Our apprenticeship also challenged me (Frances) to (re)imagine and live my way into transformative possibilities of being-in-relation with the communities with whom I work. Through our apprenticeship, we forged a process of enskilment that was at the same time a process of "be(com)ing" (Dam, 2023, p. 228) or, as Ingold says, "coming-into-being" (Ingold, 2009, p. 29). The seemingly inexpressible *and* material experiences of apprenticeship took me (Frances) to the threshold of my own limits, and beyond (Todd, 2014). I be(came), came-into-being as, a wayfaring narrative practitioner.

Over time, I (David) noticed that I was reading the text of Frances' email conversations, rather than interpolating alternative enquiries into the text or making other amendments. I had become so engrossed in reading the text that I forgot myself; I forgot that I was an apprenticer. We had become wayfarers working together.

Our apprenticeship lived on, in text, allowing us to return to it, to again reflect on our pedagogical experiences, “in action” (Schon, 1983) and afterwards, including now more than two decades later. It also cultivated a life-long friendship between us that includes our partners. It paved the way for us to enjoy political, social, and literary banter and discuss ongoing assignments. It has also allowed me to call upon David for moral support and wise counsel, knowing ‘he is that person who knows me and has my back’.

Last words

I (Frances) have searched everywhere for the letter I sent to David in 2003, outlining my desire to become his apprentice and what I hoped to learn from him. I am convinced I still have it, buried in a box somewhere—a pedagogical artifact waiting for a time such as this—but I cannot find it. Instead, I came across diary notes, email exchanges and other compositions that contain insights from and on our lively pedagogical exchange, some of which we relied upon when crafting this essay.

These records show how David met me where I was and, together, we forged our way from there. Starting out, I expected to sit on and watch from the sidelines, but I never did. David expected me to learn by doing in situ, as he himself does. He was convinced that narrative insights could invigorate worlds beyond the therapeutic realms he daily inhabits. Importantly, however, he didn’t offer, and frankly refused to countenance, ready-made answers. I hoped applying narrative ideas and practices to the fields in which I worked would become a source of fascination for us both. It must have—here we are co-authoring an essay together more than 20 years later.

I (David) continue to act as an apprentice and have worked with many apprentices over the past twenty years. With my colleagues Kay Ingamells and Tom Stone Carlson, I have co-developed a year-long apprenticeship programme in narrative practice that allows me to continue the kind of enskilment process and wayfaring practice I enjoyed with Frances. This programme offers a practice-based pedagogy, which we call “training through transcripts” and cultivates an online learning community of skilled narrative practitioners from all over the world. It enables them to discover and name narrative practices of their own as their apprenticeship develops (Epston et al., n.d.). The pace is less demanding than the one Frances experienced, but the work no less enthralling.



Over the past twenty years, I (Frances) have worked alongside many inspiring practitioners and gone on long learning journeys with some of them. Although I never refer to myself as an apprentice, I constantly return to my own “histories of wayfaring” (Ingold, 2009, p. 43) for guidance.

How would David approach a conversation or situation like this? I ask myself, when navigating challenging moments in my work. I am reminded of David’s humble, hopeful, hospitable, and generous way of being, which exudes respect for and genuine interest in the Other. Again, I am invigorated by his passion and his perseverance. And, immediately, I am relieved of the burden of being an expert on someone else’s life (as if that were ever possible or desirable). I sidestep the pressure of providing ‘all the answers’. I take a deep breath to ground myself. As I exhale, a helpful narrative enquiry bearing tacit knowledge finds its way from my bones to the tip of my tongue. In its annunciation, our apprenticeship lives on. David is with me.

I once asked David how he sustains his therapeutic practice along with frequent international travel for training and speaking engagements, voracious reading, diverse research projects and constant writing.

“The thrill of it all,” he said. “The joy of learning that someone has ‘seen’ or ‘knows’ something that they had not ‘seen’ or ‘known’ previously, that brings them some measure of joy.”

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Becoming Skilful: A Conversation ‘Within’ an Apprenticeship in Narrative Enquiry

Frances Hancock¹ & David Epston²

Introduction

In 2003 we embarked on an apprenticeship in narrative enquiry that became a 10-year journey and a life-long friendship. Frances became the apprentice and David the ‘apprenticer’, a term invented by our North American colleague Peggy Sax (personal communication, July 2003). Elsewhere, we have documented aspects of our apprenticeship to show how it worked and what we each learned along the way (Hancock & Epston, 2008, 2024). Here we re-present a conversation we had in July 2003 that weaves our lived experiences of apprenticeship with our evolving understandings of this practice-based pedagogy.

We say ‘our’ apprenticeship because we learned from one another. The apprentice immersed herself in the practice of the apprenticer, who at the same time immersed himself in the practice of the apprentice. Learning by doing assignments together, with diverse organisations/communities in different locations, the “process of enskilment” (Ingold, 2000, p. 416.) became our teacher. These assignments were drawn from Frances’ consultancy practice with individuals, groups, organisations, and communities.

The following conversation draws on and develops insights from our prior apprenticeships and reading as well as our own evolving pedagogical relationship. We explore themes that touch upon various possibilities and problematics of apprenticeship learning: apprenticeship as a venerable pedagogy, making a skilful forecast, taking the bait, finding out for yourself, the discipline of learning a craft, knowing from the inside-out, one’s disposition, interrogating asymmetries of

¹ **Frances Hancock** is a Research Fellow in Te Puna Wānanga/School of Māori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland. She maintains a consultancy practice with individuals, groups, organisations and communities, doing commissioned storywork projects and offering guidance. Email contact: frances@ardra.co.nz.

² **David Epston** is the co-originator with Michael White of what has come to be known as ‘narrative therapy and community work’. As well as doing ongoing research and writing, he continues his work as an apprenticer through an innovative apprenticeship programme, Narrative Practice (<http://www.narrativeapprentice.com/faculty.html>). Email contact: David Epston at: bicycle2@xtra.co.nz.

power, the authority of skilfulness, puzzling over things, the conundrum of finding apprentices, caring for words, and learning as much as you can. Our explorations help to show the relevance, utility and joy of apprenticeship for teaching and learning narrative enquiry. Apprenticeship learning in narrative practice continues to find novel expressions (Epston, Ingamells, & Carlson, n.d.), opening new pathways for this venerable, practice-based pedagogy.

Background

Our apprenticeship relied on email technology, although from time-to-time we met face-to-face to discuss work in progress. David had used email technology for several years to undertake supervision and consultation with colleagues overseas. Frances had harnessed email technology when co-authoring texts and doing consultancy assignments. Through our evolving narrative apprenticeship, we discovered that our email exchanges opened up a new world of learning, enabling us both to critically reflect “on” and “in practice” (Schon, 1983).

David was granted access to transcripts of interviews that I (Frances) had undertaken and, in some collaborative assignments, he acted as a co-researcher/conversationalist. He studied these texts and interpolated his own enquiries into my existing questions, explaining his thinking as he went. David also suggested other amendments and offered advice aligned with narrative practices and ethics.

In July 2003, not long after we began working together, we had a conversation ‘within’ our evolving apprenticeship via a series of email exchanges over several days. I later produced a highly abbreviated transcript of this conversation that David used for teaching purposes.

In 2024, we decided to prepare a more detailed record of our 2003 email conversation for publication. I reviewed all the extant data from this period—more than 80 pages of email transcripts—and quickly realised that the endeavor we had embarked upon was no easy feat. Upon closer inspection, I noticed we had returned to lines of enquiry again and again, across multiple email exchanges, each of us interpolating questions and comments, while along the way gaining and losing threads. Guided by a method of “composed/constructed conversations” (Hancock, 2018), I highlighted themes within the extant data, then stitched together conversational threads to create a coherent account. We both

took the liberty to do some light editing, but very little because we wanted our 2003 thoughts to remain as they were, in respect of who were then.

The conversation

Here we adopt the term ‘apprenticer’ to describe David’s role. In traditional craft apprenticeship, ‘apprentice’—from the Latin *apprendere*, to lay hold of, or grasp— is the term for a learner. The term ‘master’ describes the role of an artisan/seasoned/senior practitioner. We rejected the term master because of its historical associations with slavery. We considered other terms such as ‘an expert’, ‘an adept’ or ‘a virtuoso’, but they, too, promoted the ‘almighty’ knowledge and power of the senior practitioner. The term *apprenticer*, in our minds, embodies a more approachable pedagogy for narrative practice. Below, David also offers the notion of ‘skilfulness’ as an alternative to master/mastery. We begin by exploring the notion of apprenticeship, or apprenticing oneself to another, as a venerable pedagogy.

Apprenticeship as a venerable pedagogy

“Apprenticeship/apprenticing I suspect is one of the oldest and most venerable pedagogies and perhaps, for that reason alone, is out of fashion,” David observed.

“What an interesting challenge, then, for us to explore, through our conversations, the possibilities for revitalizing and applying this ‘old’ and ‘out of fashion’ pedagogy to support a developing narrative practice,” I replied.

“Yes! Very interesting indeed, as in some ways apprenticeship goes against a certain kind of grain, one that I know I don’t follow. For example, if everyone has ‘knowledge’ then shouldn’t advanced training just facilitate the expression of that knowledge? My short answer is this: Anyone has knowledge about the living of their life, but narrative therapy is a distinct practice, recently invented and codified (for example, in texts) and as such has to be learned the hard way like any other discipline. For example, I have a kind of expertise about the living of my life but if my computer breaks down, I immediately call an IT service for advice.”

“David, it occurs to me that in our current times it may seem almost novel to give oneself over to the rigors of an apprenticeship like the one we have embarked upon and for a work greater than oneself in the sense of being called to a vocation.”

“What a wonderful point, Frances. I strongly suspect in the last 20 years or so of professional history, it is harder and harder for trainers like me to seek or find learners willing to ‘show’ their practice to a more senior and skilful person/trainer. In fact, it has become almost impossible except in situations of extreme power, for example teacher/student–marker/candidate. That is one of the reasons I like teaching undergraduate programmes because people must do certain things, whether they like it or not, and perhaps don’t feel quite the same need to ‘hide’ their practice from overview/sight. But a vocation! Whatever happened to the sense of vocation? I like your definition of vocation—giving yourself over to a work greater than yourself.”

Making a skilful forecast

We would return later to the conundrum of how to find learners willing to show their practice, but for now we turned our minds to the challenge facing an apprenticer when a candidate arrives on their doorstep. Here I (Frances) dug into my own experiences.

“The role of the apprenticer requires a deep knowing about their craft and art, as well as an appreciation of pedagogy. They must be able to assess where the apprentice is in their learning. They must also be able to work with the apprentice to determine what they need/want to learn, while being mindful of the possibilities and turmoils that come with being human—in other words, what an individual/apprentice can/will tolerate. There is some trick in this divination but when you strike it right, it’s as if the apprenticer/apprentice relationship is sealed.”

“I like that—divination—a skilful forecast,” David replied. Seeking further clarification, he asked, “Frances, what exactly do you mean by the term ‘sealed’? I can guess but I suspect my guess would be very poor.”

“The word ‘sealed’ just came to me. My thinking here is that the apprenticing relationship is ‘made secure’, ‘guaranteed’ or ‘confirmed’ in the apprenticer’s divination or forecast of what the apprentice requires and is prepared for. In that prediction, the apprentice realises they have been ‘seen’ by the apprenticer. The apprentice thinks: I can get what I need from this person, even though I am not exactly sure what that is. The apprenticer’s skilful forecast encourages the apprentice to put their trust in the relationship. If the match feels right and is imbued with exciting possibilities, the apprentice is likely to persist until the

mystery of learning what they need to know is revealed. At some point both parties consent to the relationship in this way. I wonder if the point of divination is that point because not only does the apprentice know or intuit that the apprenticer can help but also the apprenticer finds they can/are able to do so. Importantly, both parties must be willing to engage. David, your willingness to assist me also sealed the apprenticeship.”

Taking the bait

David then recounted a story that reminded me of the first time we met. I attended a four-day introductory workshop on narrative therapy practice that he facilitated in 2002.

“Frances, a friend of mine talked about one of his apprenticers, whom he described as ‘being like a fisherman’. ‘It’s like you are the fish and his knowing is the bait,’ my friend said. He talked about it ‘being like adrenaline’—how a word from an apprenticer is enough to analyse or puzzle over for days and weeks, building up layer upon layer, until you go beyond your own boundaries and perhaps even those of your apprenticer.”

“Yes!’ I replied. “Your knowing was like bait. Suddenly, I was hooked! I knew within the first hour of the workshop that you had so much to teach me, although what it was, I couldn’t say exactly. But, perhaps, the greater appeal was your own passion for the work, as if you were still learning and wanting to learn – that is critical, because it levels the playing field in a way that deals with power. It also makes you more accessible or appealing as a teacher, to me at least, because it creates space for inventiveness, and how exciting to be part of that, if only by sitting on and watching from the sidelines.”

Finding out for yourself

David’s story of taking the bait stayed with me, as a helpful provocation. When I next returned to our email conversation, I tried to illuminate its relevance in the context of my experiences of apprenticeship learning.

“David, I can relate to the sense of excitement and adrenaline your friend spoke of. I might call it focused attention and drive, or ‘passion’ by another name. I find myself thinking about your ideas and use of language, and the learning process itself, as well as your generosity and your accessibility, including these notes and other resources and opportunities you send my way. I feel a sense of freedom and

determination—a seriousness of purpose fueled by a thirst for learning. I’m lapping it all up.”

“At the same time, I find myself navigating my way through a haze. I catch glimpses but lose sight again. I taste rather than savour. It’s like being on the edge of something great that you haven’t quite grasped yet and don’t quite know, but it is within your reach and holds the promise of the very thing you are searching for, even if that isn’t entirely or consciously known. Whole new possibilities for a hopeful and respectful way of working are inching their way above the horizon ahead. I find this intriguing because I had thought that I was already respectful and hopeful in my work!”

I reached for the idea of tacit knowledges (Polanyi, 1958, 1998) which, in an earlier conversation, David had described as “‘unarticulated knowledges’, or a kind of ‘know-how’, born of experience, but often hard to put into words” (Hancock & Epston, 2024).

“Perhaps, I am finding a language for the tacit knowledges I had stored up but didn’t know existed, and all the while worked on that basis to some degree or other. And, along with finding a language, comes fresh authority and freedom to explore newfound possibilities. I think I am beginning to express myself differently by using new words or concepts. I wouldn’t say I am hearing my own voice yet. Perhaps I am hearing your voice through me, but I am convinced that in due course I will find my own voice.”

Here David introduced the notion of “self-discovery” (Ingold, 2000) as a critical method of learning a skill or practice.

“Frances, I suspect you are distinguishing ‘instruction’ from ‘self-discovery’ or ‘finding out for yourself’,” he replied. “And I am pretty sure that is the methodology of certain pedagogies seeking to ‘pass on’ the practice of particular arts and crafts. The apprenticer obscures your view with ‘fog’, with both parties knowing that the apprentice will, in their own good time, clear it away. A skilled apprenticer is very purposeful here.”

“Only an experienced guide can know this,” I suggested, “which is why the apprenticer is the apprenticer, and the apprentice goes searching for that person—the one who has something to teach them.”

Later I wondered if apprenticeship is the work of finding your way through the fog or the haze.

“David, it’s like the words are waiting to be found, but for that to happen I must dive deep and bring them to the surface, as if at some point my language and knowledges became submerged.”

“Ineffable—beyond words or cannot be rendered into words,” he replied. “It has always astounded me in anti-anorexia work, for example, how those who cannot speak, once provided with the means to do so, have so much to say. Which makes me think that tacit knowing may just mean that the words to describe your knowing are not available to you yet.”

“That is a helpful definition. At any rate, it is all too easy to be complacent with language.”

“Agreed.”

The discipline of learning a craft

Our conversation turned momentarily to the idea of discipline as a critical factor in learning a practice. Earlier David noted, in passing, that since Foucault (1980) ‘discipline’ had become a problematic notion because it carries taken for granted meanings.

“I think the idea of discipline is important however, although some may resist it,” I suggested. “Here I’m thinking of assiduously applying oneself to one’s craft at whatever stage of engagement one is, be it as an apprentice or an apprenticer. To do a craft well, you must keep practicing it, honing it, mining and molding it. As you become more accomplished, you learn to honour and cherish the craft in your care. You develop and bring to voice or expression its mysteries, so they can become accessible to the apprentice. You might say that someone who becomes an apprenticer is a keeper of the lore and the practices of their craft.”

“And what do you make of other forms of apprenticeship that require people to endure some form of hardship or suffering?” David asked.

“There are, of course, punishing forms of apprenticeship,” I replied. “But I am persuaded by the advice of a Catholic nun, 40 years my senior, with whom I lived in my early twenties. She observed that there is enough difficulty in such a journey without resorting to harsh discipline. Her way of apprenticing was that of humour and laughter, of telling stories, and of gentle chiding.”

Knowing from the inside-out

David expressed a concern that perhaps he was not explicit enough in his pedagogical practice. In his workshop and within our apprenticeship, I had witnessed David teaching by example, in other words, showing his craft. We both appreciated that some learners might struggle to grasp the subtleties of such a pedagogy.

“David, perhaps showing and explicit rendering are important at different times in different contexts. For teaching courses or workshops, where time is curtailed, both are useful, I think. For apprenticing, showing is important. If the apprentice can work out the explicit rendering for themselves, by grappling with that which is being shown, then they will know the thing or the practice from the inside out.”

“For me, that knowing comes first,” David replied. “A knowing from the outside-in is pretty much useless in the context of an art and a craft. Perhaps even mischievous. For example, I can imagine someone asking the same questions about anorexia that I do, with contempt rather than compassion, and the line between the two, I would imagine, is pretty fine.”

“David, would you agree that knowing from the inside-out is easier to hold onto and recreate?”

“That is the critical thing—can the learner recreate their learning? That, for me, is the real test of apprenticeship.”

One’s disposition

David’s somewhat troubling insight, that the same questions could be asked with contempt or compassion, led to a new line of enquiry.

“Would you also agree that one’s disposition makes all the difference, in other words, the way a person is and the manner in which they convey an enquiry?” I asked.

“Frances, I like that word ‘disposition’!” David replied. “I received an email yesterday from someone with whom I have been consulting. She and her partner had been attending mental health services for 10 years, right up until the present, over concerns they have for their adult daughter. She said her partner (who she described as a very private man and very distrustful) trusted me after only knowing me for 15 minutes. I wonder what I did. How did I distinguish myself

from all the others whom they have met along their way? And that is not to say he said much in the days and weeks to follow, but I always knew he was along for the ride—his sparse comments indicated that to me. This is why I am interested more generally in the practices of hospitality. After all, I have always considered my clients to be my special guests and I am their host, and accordingly, it is incumbent on me, like any concerned host, to ensure they have a ‘good’, perhaps even ‘interesting time’. That is what I try to guarantee, an interesting time.”

“I think that is what you also offer your apprentices and workshop participants—an interesting time, and I suspect your hospitality practices are vital in conveying that sense.”

Interrogating asymmetries of power

Inevitably, the conversation found its way to the asymmetries of power operating in a pedagogical relationship. I had been considering a conundrum that David had put to me about how one navigates the asymmetrical power relations between the apprenticer and apprentice. Here I offered a tentative observation.

“Although the apprentice consents to an obviously asymmetrical relationship, I think the asymmetry is affected to some degree by a shared commitment to learning. After all, learning is a humble/humbling enterprise, so perhaps humility serves to countervail the asymmetry in the relationship.”

“This is a very striking point,” David replied. “The apprenticer’s power is humbled by the search in which both apprenticer and apprentice are engaged. The apprenticer curtails the exercise of their power by showing themselves to be their own student and their apprentice’s colleague.”

“David, that’s beautifully put. Another word might be ‘tempered’. Perhaps the apprenticer’s power is tempered by the search in which both the apprentice and apprenticer are engaged. The word tempered adds the idea that the apprenticer is exercising some control over the power in their hands. As if restraining its use to enable a relationship to develop amidst the asymmetry.”

“Yes, yes, that’s the word I was looking for, but couldn’t find. Tempered. Very apt indeed.”

This discussion reminded me of another email exchange in which David said he was initially puzzled by his own discomfort in becoming an apprentice. When I asked him to help me understand why he felt this way, he offered a tentative explanation.

“I suppose it has something to do with the relationship between the apprentice and their apprentice, and the implications of that,” David said. “Perhaps my discomfort comes from the obvious asymmetry of the apprentice and their apprentice. For example, I would be very reluctant to describe to anyone else that you were my apprentice or that you are apprenticing with me.

“Why would you feel reluctant, when I am so delighted to tell people (I mean, those who have ‘ears to hear’) and only ever receive delight in response? It seems important in my mind to state the case, as the case is; not to pretend otherwise or camouflage its substance. Am I missing something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” David replied. “But you are not in the apprentice’s position and cannot be accused of hubris. Perhaps the tension here is for the skilled person to make their skills available, so the less skilled person can assume them and in doing so diminish the asymmetry of the relationship. That is what ‘drives’ the relationship to where it has to go.”

“David, how might one address asymmetries of power in the apprentice-apprentice relationship in favour of respect?”

“Mutual respect provides a kind of envelope for the relationship in which the more skilled person can challenge the less skilled person, and vice versa,” he replied.

“Do you think certain relational qualities or political commitments can help to counterpoint possible impacts of the obvious asymmetry?” I persisted. “Humility came to mind above.”

“I don’t know about humility,” David replied. “I don’t consider myself to be humble, or perhaps I don’t know what you mean by humility in this case.”

“Whatever it is, I think a characteristic of humility is not to claim it.”

Here David introduced his preferred approach to countervailing asymmetries of power that may have unproductive or harmful consequences.

“I think I would prefer, perhaps, some notion of service to some cause, that the developing skills/craft are in aid of,” he suggested. “When I think about it now, those people who, in the past, appealed to me as apprentices were all serving some cause. I wanted to ‘see’ this commitment from the outset. Those who I intuited were serving their own self-interest or were self-aggrandizing were of no interest to me. But I can be blinded by anyone’s enthusiasm as well as the next person.”

“It would only be a momentary blindness, I suspect, like when you’re driving at night and are momentarily blinded by the headlights of an approaching car. People’s motivations readily display themselves within a short period of time, don’t you think? Self-interested motivations are quite hard to contain as are those dedicated to a just cause.”

“Quite right!”

We also considered the idea of ‘apprenticeship as an exchange’, as another way to countervail unintended effects of asymmetries of power. Specifically, a pedagogical exchange in which both participants—the apprentice and the apprentice—have something to give and to gain from the relationship.

“Notwithstanding the aged goodness and benevolence of the apprentice, perhaps a good apprenticeship depends on a mutually forged, two-way dynamic that tempers power relations,” I suggested, “so there is some kind of creative or productive tension.”

“I think I said something to that effect in the above,” David replied, “but not as succinctly.”

“I just find it more interesting when both parties are learning,” I continued. “Otherwise, the apprentice will merely be going through their paces, rather than marveling at, and garnering for their own trade, whatever slips of silk are to be found there.”

“Frances, where did you get that expression from, ‘slips of silk’?”

“It came to me as I was writing, I guess. I don’t remember reading it anywhere. I think what I am trying to convey, David, is that you sit beside me, metaphorically speaking, when you acknowledge your own learning, and always you do so with

delight. I see your practice of ‘sitting beside another’ as an expression of humility. And, perhaps, ‘the joy of learning’ also serves as a counterpoint to the asymmetry in the apprenticer-apprentice relationship, along with mutuality, humility, service to some cause and a pedagogical exchange.”

I had only been working with David for a few months, but already I had witnessed these and other relational qualities as hallmarks of his practice. In my mind, these qualities were also an embodiment of his authority as an apprenticer.

The authority of skilfulness

David now introduced the idea of skilfulness as a way to explore how authority can work productively to nourish the relationship.

“Does the apprenticer also act against their own authority by showing how their mastery or skilfulness comes about and, in doing so, demystifies it?” he asked. “Otherwise, their skilfulness can appear to be magic. But then again, magicians have to learn their tricks, although that is not to say that some aren’t more adept at the very same ‘trick’ than others.”

“David, even though the apprenticer acts against their own authority by showing how their skilfulness comes about, in the end their sacrifice can only increase their own adeptness as a practitioner and their authority as a seasoned guide. When the apprenticer assumes the position as co-learner, they open-up possibilities to forge new practices and to articulate the understandings that substantiate those innovations.”

“I am sure you are right,” David replied, his agreement encouraging me to carry on.

“They consent to pass on the very thing upon which their authority and status as an apprenticer depends: their skilfulness, as you put it. Doesn’t this require some measure of humility or generosity? How many skilled people are so sure of themselves that they are willing to make such a sacrifice? Doing so must spring from some sense of vocation or commitment to the work, otherwise it makes no sense in today’s commercialised world to pass on the mysteries of your trade.”

“Frances, you might see it as humility or generosity, but I would still prefer to think of it as acting in the service of, or duty to, the calling itself. In any case, the

approach you're describing doesn't quite jibe with notions of intellectual property."

"It surely doesn't!" I replied.

"I also wanted to ask," David continued, "can you have any sort of authority without some means of expressing or enacting that to which you are laying a claim? And how often does a practitioner find that they know more than they are able to express in words; although, on the other hand, they might be adept at showing what they know."

I was curious but uncertain about the direction of David's question, so I asked him to clarify its meaning so that we could get to the nub of his interest in authority.

"Frances, I suppose I am again thinking of skilfulness and the authority within a vocation that comes from that. I suspect skilful practitioners suffer prejudice in that the most common means to express that authority (such as texts/journal articles) do not necessarily indicate skilfulness in a practice. You can write about a vocation without ever having had much practice of doing it or never having done it. That is not to deny that writing up or describing skilful practice isn't worthy in and of itself. But if this is the main means of expressing authority in a vocation, then the very skilfulness that is gained via apprenticeship gets transferred to text, which can often strip the craft and art of its nuance and ingenuity. Perhaps it even de-skills it, in say attempts to manualize and franchise a practice."

In responding to David's concern, I returned to my own lived experiences, hoping they might instruct me.

"I have worked alongside many adept community colleagues who know their craft from the inside-out but very few write, present or publish on their practice—who has time for that? Academics may be able to research and write about a practice without being active in the field, but I also think their authority derives from the relevance and usefulness of their research and writing."

Later, David introduced the idea of prudence or practical wisdom as a vital characteristic of an apprenticer and measure of their authority.

"Can we consider for a moment what entitles an apprenticer to act in such a capacity?" he asked.

“I think your idea of skilfulness entitles an apprenticer to act in such a capacity. It seems like a useful umbrella term and conveys a sense of being reliably seasoned or wise.”

“Frances, this takes me back to a discussion I had with a colleague who reminded me of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, which is often translated as prudence or practical wisdom. Phronesis not only demonstrates various forms of knowledges such as scientific, analytical, tacit/know-how, technical and so on, but also exercises the seasoned judgement or decision making of a wise person.”

“Prudence/practical wisdom sounds like an essential requirement for an apprenticer and, by-the-by, we all need to practice more of it!”

Puzzling over things

As our third day of email exchanges came to an end, David assessed our progress.

“I think we are really getting somewhere here, don’t you,” he wrote, his ever-reliable enthusiasm arriving with his message.

“Yes, I’m finding this subject fascinating; there’s quite a bit to it, and as much as we have examined, there’s still more to explore.”

“Perhaps the longer you puzzle over something, the better it is,” David suggested.

“So long as the apprentice doesn’t become disheartened through a sustained period of puzzling—be it over their developing skilfulness or their current limitations,” I cautioned.

My comment struck a chord with David and, again, terminology spurred his thinking.

“Frances, you used the term ‘disheartened’ to indicate that which could endanger an apprenticeship. I have been so rarely disheartened in this work that I don’t think I have given it as much thought in relation to apprentices, as I might have. By that I mean as something an apprentice must ‘look out for’ and, if they become despondent, how they then refresh their interest. Here I am thinking about ‘the excitements’ of this practice and how might an apprenticer excite an apprentice. This conversation has really made me think about refreshing one’s imagination and perhaps the need to provide apprentices with the very means to do that as it may well not come naturally. I find so few practitioners who seem to carry around

with them an active or current interest that they are deliberating on. Perhaps I need to provide ‘tricks of the trade’. I will have to give that more thought.”

In another email exchange, we touched upon another source of ongoing puzzlement: how to apply narrative ideas and practices invented in the therapeutic realms of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, and social work to the fields in which I worked—organisational and community development.

“How do we creatively apply ingenuity to a realm that is different from the one in which it was developed?” I asked David.

“I suppose it depends on what the skill or practice is, as some may very well be bound up with their immediate context,” he replied. “But Arthur Koestler (1964) pointed out that creativity often comes about by bringing something from one context across the borders of another and, doing so, is considered to be an invention. But then again those who, say, attend daylong workshops expecting to take away skills for their ‘toolboxes’ are often disappointed.”

David’s last comment left me puzzling over how he approaches the workshops he facilitates to diverse audiences at home and overseas. Could a segue in that direction help us to puzzle over how to tackle broader concerns?

“However unnerving it is, I try not to be too specific,” he said. “I prepare by playing with ideas and allowing ideas to come to me. If I am very brave, I allow them to come to me right there and then, in the workshop, however that can lead to sleepless nights or fretful sleeps!”

“How do ideas come to you?” I asked, hoping for a magical answer.

“I often call it moping,” he said.

“Is it really moping, like brooding or languishing?” I replied, somewhat disappointed (she laughs!).

“I mean, expecting on a good day that ideas will come to me and on a bad day hoping they will come to me. When I feel vexed over how to introduce a training workshop, I return to these conversations. I also read the thesis of a former apprentice. I ‘find’ a way to proceed. If you play with ideas long enough and keep throwing them up in the air and, if luckily holding as many as you can spinning, sooner or later they ‘fall into place’ or ‘some place’.”

“David, I find if I prepare too much for a workshop, the spontaneity required for a good conversation gets sacrificed in the delivery of the presentation.”

“I agree,” he replied. “It makes it hard to do workshops with other people, as most others don’t have such comfort with spontaneity.”

“Perhaps, comfort with spontaneity is also vital for a lively apprenticeship and for applying ingenuity across different realms – being playful-in-relation-in-the-moment.”

The conundrum of finding apprentices

“How can I find apprentices who are not only comfortable with spontaneity in the pedagogy but also seek to engage their own practices in such a manner?” David replied, posing a conundrum that would lead us into an intriguing segue.

“I suppose you must find people of a similar bent, who are willing to tolerate some discomfort and believe that trusting themselves to spontaneity and to your guidance will reap its own rewards. David, to tackle this conundrum another way, may I ask, why did you agree to apprentice me?”

“Who knows!”

“Think hard, my friend!”

“Well, here is an attempt. ‘During the workshop, Frances showed me that she not only relished these ideas but had the capacity to play with them and see where they would take her in her work. She showed me she had patience with herself, rather than so many who approach learning a practice as if they were acquiring a commodity. Also, she badgered me but in a way that caught my interest. In saying that, she must have also known there is such a thing as too much badgering. I must have been willing to risk that this apprentice would lead me to be a better apprenticer. And perhaps, too, she was unafraid of such a relationship, which she spelled out to me. Perhaps in her previous apprenticeships, she had grown comfortable with such arrangements.’”

David’s rich reply suggested criterion for finding apprentices, to which we now turned our attention.

Relishing the ideas/practices

“So, David, would you agree that ‘relishing the ideas’ is a requirement for an apprentice?”

“That is a good criterion,” David agreed. “Relishing ideas/practices, for example, I really want to learn how to do that ... in some ways like that.”

“Yes, and with enough passion and delight to sustain one’s interest through the discipline of learning. Enjoyment is vital, otherwise why bother.”

“Indeed.”

Lending yourself to the ideas

“David, you also observed a capacity to play with ideas—and for some purpose—to ‘see where they would take her in her work’. Perhaps she was willing to lend herself to the ideas to see how they might refashion her and her practice.”

“I like the notion of lending yourself to the ideas,” David replied. “This provides me with an enquiry for my apprentice. Frances, how will you lend yourself to see how the ideas might refashion you and your practice?”

“David, during your workshop, I recall you telling us a story about a group of scientists. When someone comes up with an idea they come together in a room and practice what the scholar Peter Elbow (1986) calls “a methodology of belief”. They take the idea as far as their good minds will allow them to, believing wholeheartedly in its merits, to give it its best shot. By contrast, Elbow’s (1986) “methodology of doubt” would emphasize all the reasons why that same idea would likely fail. So, to answer your question, I suppose in lending myself to narrative ideas, I endeavour to take up a methodology of belief, to see where that playful journey takes me. Perhaps, it is courageous or intellectual risk-taking by another name.”

“Great discussion!”

Being patient with yourself

Now I posed a question to my apprentice that was nestled in the idea of patience.

“David, another criterion you highlighted was patience. ‘She had patience with herself’. Why is patience important? How is an apprenticeship served by patience?”

“Because learning of this kind never has an end. The more you come to know, the more you know there is to know. Looking back at when I was beginning this work, I marvel I had the nerve to even talk to people. So, I think perhaps there was some merit in my ignorance, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to proceed.”

An emphasis on learning

David’s comments had also highlighted a focus on learning, rather than certification.

“So, David, would you agree that an apprentice is someone who cares more for the practice itself, than for a certificate of achievement? In the sense, as you proposed earlier, that the practice itself has a life and is a subject to be engaged with, played with, and reinvented, rather than treated like an object or bought like a commodity?”

“Absolutely. This is a critical distinction, from my point of view, and one that irritates me when I meet students whose sole motive seems to be their grade. I sometimes think, in this age of endless qualifications that have usurped the authority of one’s vocation or calling, that no one will train with me unless I can give them a qualification.”

“Oh, do you mean I won’t be getting a certificate!”

“You won’t! And, Frances, that is the risk you are taking.”

The right amount of badgering

“David, you also identified ‘badgering’ as a criterion, which I like very much. It’s like, ‘This one won’t leave me alone, so I have to attend.’”

“But in a way that caught my interest and that is an important distinction. Why? Because your badgering was an expression of interest.”

“I had to exercise restraint however, because my enthusiasm could have gotten away on me. I imagine too much badgering would quickly become a drag, especially if an apprenticer had other apprentices. Also, there’s the temptation

with email communication to fire off a quick reply. Impetuosity surely embraced the invention of email technology.”

“Indeed. But impetuosity allows for a different kind of ‘thinking with others’; it interanimates your thinking. When another colleague and I were writing together, I encouraged him to send me a text the moment he got stuck, because if you’re stuck too long, you lose your momentum. I was very interested to see what momentum could do to writing. He later told me he wouldn’t want to write any other way now.”

Having something to offer

David had signalled another criterion that we had canvassed earlier: the apprentice has something to offer the apprenticer.

“The apprenticeship holds promise for both parties,” I suggested. “A desirable apprentice is one who helps to facilitate the very thing they come in search of; how else could the apprenticer learn their trade as an apprenticer.”

“Frances, that’s well put—the apprentice helps to facilitate the very thing they come in search of—but, in addition, I was thinking of the very art and craft of narrative practice, the vocation.”

Prior apprenticing experiences

Prior apprenticing experiences might also be a useful criterion because, as David had put it, they enable an apprentice to become comfortable with their arrangements.

“Some prior experience, one hopes, must help you to find your way into the groove of apprenticeship or, at least, teach you what to avoid,” I observed. “I hadn’t thought about apprenticeship as a social arrangement, which obviously it is. I suppose, too, following your workshop, my long letter to you was a statement of purpose and a rendering of my own histories of apprenticeship, which I hoped would invite your interest. That said, each apprenticeship is a unique arrangement, I think.”

“Frances, I hope all this indicates, as much as anything else, that the apprentice finds you [the apprenticer], rather than the other way around.”

“I believe, David, you just answered your original question. How do you find an apprentice? They find you.”

Caring for words

There were so many lines of enquiry still to explore and so much yet to contemplate. But a characteristic of our discussions required our attention. So often David would alert me to terms that caught his attention, such as ‘divination’, ‘sealed’, ‘vocation’, ‘disposition’, ‘tempered’, ‘slips of silk’, and ‘disheartened’. Words matter to David.

“David, so few people I know (other than poets and writers) care about words the way you do,” I observed, drawing attention to his intrigue over my use of certain terms. “My dictionary is in a hundred pieces, and I can’t bring myself to abandon it and buy another.”

“Frances, the next time you visit, let me show you my Oxford English Dictionary, which most people would have thrown out. It is spineless. Falling apart. But it and I have had so many happy times together, we really can’t part. It will always be on my bookshelf.”

“David, perhaps uncovering tacit knowledges relies on a special caring for words.”

“Frances, I like that, ‘a special caring for words’. A felicitous expression for this work and something that few people have, apart from poets, writers, etc.. It is something I try to teach people. But I don’t know how well I do that, and perhaps I am not explicit enough. I have at times referred to this work as ‘the poetics of narrative practice’. Perhaps I should pick that up again.”

“Yes, do that! Whatever it might mean, it sounds intriguing.”

“If nothing else, it invites a learner to look somewhere other than where, very likely, they had been looking,” he replied.

“David, I am curious, can you say more?”

“Frances, can I encourage you not to ask questions like this: “Can you say more?”, even if they are very easy ones. Why? They seem to place too much of a burden on the Other for your curiosity. To assist me to understand and be articulate with your curiosity, your curiosity needs to have what I might refer to as more ‘say’. Let me provide you with an example. ‘David, when you said, *it invites a learner to look somewhere other than where they very likely have been looking*, do you mean ... (x) or am I right in thinking you mean by that, something like ... (x)? And (x) = some expression of where your curiosity is taking you.

“This is important for email conversations,” he stressed. “I just thought I would throw in a little tuition! Hope you don’t mind!”

“David, there’s no time like the present to learn. I am always grateful for your guidance.”

David’s use of the adjective ‘felicitous’ had also caught my attention.

“Now that’s a word I don’t hear very often, so it awakens my interest. David, you have also taught me the importance of verbs. I noticed again the other day how significant verbs are when seeking to invoke novelty. I mean in the sense of making the reader read, rather than gloss over the text. Your verbs are very expressive; they jump out, require attention. You use them in contexts I wouldn’t ordinarily expect to find them and, often, they’re playful—all of this is truly creative.”

“Funny you should observe this, as recently I, too, noticed when looking at the ‘texts’ of my enquiries that much of their meaning came from the use of a more poetic and dramatic verbal form. As a result, quite recently in a workshop, I put up a question from an attendee and then asked everyone to ‘make your verb speak from your heart. The results were phenomenal; everyone ‘saw’ and ‘felt’ the effects of doing that. Did I do that when you came to my introductory workshop? In most professional ways of speaking, verbs are banal and could easily ‘put you to sleep’.”

“David, that is what I’m learning from our email conversations and by reading transcripts. I also notice you don’t thrash a good word to death and maybe you don’t need to because you have such a rich vocabulary. You aren’t complacent with language, rather you constantly play with words—you look out for them, look them up like old friends, enjoy them, find a way to weave them into conversation.”

“Yes, I am a word-o-phile. You are quite right. In my editing, I cannot tolerate a word being reiterated too often. Why? Reiteration evacuates meaning.”

“I hope the way in which you are able to revive and reinvent language rubs off on me.”

“It already has,” he said.

Learning as much as you can

Our conversation, which by now had traversed five days and created countless email exchanges, was nearing its end. David had an overseas conference to attend and had begun to turn his attention to preparing for it. Perhaps, his impending departure turned our attention to the matter of ‘moving on’ from an apprenticeship.

“Frances, although you welcome such an apprenticeship and tell me you have been very comfortable in such relationships in the past, when does the time come when you have learned as much as you are going to learn here?”

“I am not at all sure that you ever learn as much as you can learn in an apprenticeship. Sometimes you are called away by other commitments that require your attention, or you realise that you need to rest for a while to let all that learning sink in. In any event, I suppose, inevitably an apprentice must branch out to practice the craft they have so assiduously sought to develop and to test the limits of their own disciplined study.

“Moving on from an apprenticeship inevitably generates mixed emotions,” I continued, “but I have, for the most part, developed a deep affection for those who apprenticed me. They reside in my heart, in my memories, and in my imagination. I carry them in my spirit. When I find myself out on a limb or in deep water, I am warmed by their presence, strengthened by their skilfulness, and instructed by the wisdom of their teaching. I may call them for advice. I never completely let go or leave the relationship; rather, I find myself rekindling it again and again, albeit at a distance. Wisdom and seasoned practice, by its nature, invites continual engagement. Some people are with you for life.”

Concluding thoughts

Although in 2003, when these email exchanges took place, neither of us had yet read the philosopher Tim Ingold’s work on enskillment, certain ideas presented here resonate with his thinking. Our conversation differentiates instruction from self-discovery (Ingold, 2000) or, as David put it, ‘finding out for yourself’. It explores the creative possibilities of ‘learning by doing’ narrative enquiry through an apprenticeship. It revitalises the notion of ‘a vocation’ or ‘a calling’ in the professions, encouraging narrative practitioners to centre the purpose of their work in being in service of others.

How does an apprenticer find a learner willing to show their practice? They find you! The opportunity of apprenticeship is sealed when the parties recognise help is at hand and both consent to its requirements. Both must be willing to show their practice in specific contexts, for that is where skilfulness develops. Power asymmetries and dynamics are acknowledged and mediated through a pedagogical exchange in which both the apprentice and the apprenticer have something to give to and to gain from the relationship. Like other relationships navigating asymmetries of power, this one also thrives on productive tension.

Developing skilfulness in certain crafts, including narrative enquiry, requires ongoing practice however, and one can never learn all there is to know, even an apprenticer. That said, inevitably, an apprentice will branch out to test their learning and limits beyond the apprenticeship. How else will the apprentice and the apprenticer know what has been learned? But our histories of learning together remain available to teach lessons only they can provide. For skilfulness—perhaps authority by another name—becomes embodied in those who become seasoned and wise.

The practice-based pedagogy we evolved in our apprenticeship laid the groundwork for ‘training through transcripts’, which David later developed and now offers with colleagues Kay Ingamells and Tom Stone Carlson (Epston et al., n.d). The ongoing appeal of apprenticeship learning is demonstrated in those who participate in this programme—the apprenticers and their apprentices. Their testimonies speak to its relevance, utility and joy.

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Re-engaging with ‘the Person is not the Problem, the Problem is the Problem’: Neoliberalism, Narrative Therapy, and Relationship Counselling

Michael Edwards, he/him, MSW RSW¹²

Abstract

The author tells a story of how neoliberalism found a way into his counselling practice and had a strong influence in his work with relationships. He talks about how a turning point allowed him to both identify the presence of neoliberalism in his practice and to see the negative effects neoliberalism was having in his work with couples and families. He writes about how by re-engaging with the principle, ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ (White & Epston, 1990) he gained a renewed understanding of using narrative therapy with relationships, which helped to re-orient his practice-vision away from competition and suspicion, and towards solidarity, possibilities and understanding.

Keywords: neoliberalism, the person is not the problem the problem is the problem, relationship counselling, solidarity, outsider witnessing, friendship

Introduction

Before I begin this paper, it is important to situate myself for the reader. I have lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada all my life. I am forty-two years old. I am a cisgender male, in a heterosexual marriage with a cis-gender woman; we have two cisgender sons, ages six and four. When I was twelve I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and used methylphenidate until I was twenty-four. I love the Grateful Dead, and consider myself a Dead Head. I am also an advocate for improving public transit and active transportation in Winnipeg. I started my career as a Helper when I was twenty-three supporting people with intellectual disabilities. I have been a Social Worker and counsellor since I was thirty-one.

¹ Mike is a counsellor in independent practice who works with young people living in the child welfare system in Manitoba, Canada. He works and resides on Treaty One Territory, the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Anishinew, Ininiwak, Dakota, Dene and Red River Métis.

mike@michaeledwardscounselling.ca

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Both my parents' families come from settler-European backgrounds; my father's family came from Scotland and France to settle in southern Saskatchewan in the early 20th century. My mother's family came from Scotland and England and settled in southwestern Manitoba in the late 19th century.

Narrative therapy has played an important part in my life since my first encounter with it in a seminar course in 2009. I found the idea of using the narrative metaphor in helping work intriguing, as I had fond memories of listening to my grandfather's stories of adventures in his youth. For my Master of Social Work program, I used narrative therapy with men experiencing mental health concerns. I have worked hard to learn and live narrative ideas and ethics (Freedman & Combs, 1996). However, looking back on my career from 2023, there was a piece missing. I had struggled in my work with couples and families. Attributing this struggle to inexperience, I continued on. Yet, after ten years of working as a counsellor, I met with a family last March and realized that I needed to step away, as uncertainty and confusion had taken away confidence that I could help this family. I then knew I needed to take a closer look at my use of narrative therapy with relationships. After taking stock, I could see that over the years when uncertainty and confusion clouded my practice-vision during relationship counselling, I would resort to practices that individualized problems in the other. It was not until recently that I was able to see how neoliberalism was finding a way into my practice-vision. Knowing now what the missing piece was, I could see that I needed to renew my understanding of the principle, 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'.

This paper is about the use of narrative practices with couples and families. My purpose is to speak to beginner and novice narrative therapists so they can learn from both my misunderstandings, as well as the ideas and practices I've used to reorient to preferred directions. It documents these misunderstandings; the influence of neoliberalism in my practice; and the ways I have renewed my approach to focus on solidarity, possibilities, and understanding. By no means have I arrived at a place of true understanding; the ideas here came to life through the writing of this paper. Inevitably there will be setbacks, and these ideas and practices will continue to change and evolve.

The person is not the problem, the other person is the problem

When I started as a counsellor, I found it easy to relate and empathize with the person seeking counselling. In the beginning, listening was my primary focus as I did not feel confident enough to intervene in any significant way. Furthermore, people seemed to appreciate my listening, often telling me that they found our times helpful. As many beginner counsellors do, I was listening with the ears of a caring friend, and responded to their stories of hardships or injustice much the same way I would have responded to a friend's stories. This involved taking a position against others the person saw as acting against them. Often this would lead to 'side-taking' and gossip; where portions of the meeting were devoted to talking about how morally irresponsible the other was, and how the person seeking counselling could best cope with the negative personality traits of the other. Looking back, while I know participants appreciated my listening and having someone on their side, it seems likely these meetings further mired people in negativity, and made the relationships in question harder for the person seeking counselling.

Simultaneously, during this time I was learning more about narrative practices and started to incorporate its ideas and ethics into my work. I started where many new narrative therapists begin, externalizing the problem and the principle of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'. When sitting with individuals I started to externalize problems with some success. While there was clumsiness (which still exists to this day), I was able to convey that the person was not the problem, and asked questions that languaged the person as in relationship with the problem. This enabled new ways of dealing with challenges that would not have been possible otherwise. However, when it came to the part that others were playing in the person's life and the problems they were experiencing, I was still going along with portraying the other as acting in bad faith: the other person was still the problem.

As my understanding of narrative ideas and ethics continued to mature, I started to ask questions about ways problems were affecting the person's life and relationships, and what was supporting the problem to be a part of the person's life. I misinterpreted Michael White's idea of discussing the life support system of problems by portraying others as acting as a life support system for problems (White & Epston, 1990). I started to ask about ways other people were

“contributing” to problems, or “helping” problems. For instance, when a person was experiencing a problem such as Sadness, and told a story about Sadness that involved someone from their life, I would ask, “Were there any ways that this person was helping Sadness to be a part of your life?” or “in which ways was this person contributing to your experience of Sadness?” These questions kept conversations stuck in stories about conflict and encouraged blame and judgment of the other person.

As one could imagine, when meeting with couples and families, the practice of characterizing others as helping or contributing to problems increased the intensity of conflict among participants. Typically, the path these conversations would take was to engage with participants to externalize an initial problem and map the effects of the problem in the lives of participants. But once discussions turned to what was supporting problems, the conversation stayed at the individual level. My questions would characterize participants as either inadvertently or advertently helping problems to influence persons’ lives in negative ways. In turn, conversations would break down, confusion and uncertainty would set in, and hurt feelings would flare, leading to a strong sense of failure. From here, I would defer to what I deemed to be a more “efficient” form of relationship counselling, for fear of losing participants to dissatisfaction or impatience. This more ‘efficient’ form of relationship counselling involved resorting to problem-solving, where the couple or family attempts to resolve conflicts in front of the counsellor so that the counsellor can rule on what the problem “actually was,” diagnose the cause of the problem, and then teach participants how to communicate more “effectively” in attempts to solve the problem. When engaging in this problem-solving practice, I would “roll up my sleeves” to “get to the bottom of things” with couples and families. This created a level of chaos that made my intention of generating new and preferred stories impossible.

The influence of neoliberalism

Jim Silver (2014) described neoliberalism as,

“Neoliberalism involves turning more economic decision-making authority over to the private sector, especially large corporations, and correspondingly reducing the role of the state-especially governments’

social spending. Thus, neoliberalism may take the form of privatization, deregulation, reductions in government expenditures, reduced levels of taxation and the introduction of measures that make it more difficult for Canadians, and especially lower income Canadians, to receive various kinds of benefits, such as employment insurance, social assistance, social housing or retirement benefits. It is this way neoliberalism typically leads to persistent high levels of poverty” (p. 41-42).

In Canadian society, knowledges and practices of neoliberalism have become taken for granted and given truth status. Indeed, from a neoliberal worldview, maximizing monetary return on investment is deemed to be the highest priority. Each of us are constituted as an entrepreneur in the “free” market; as such, we are seen as in competition with one another, where to survive we should view the other as a threat (Freedman & Combs, 2020). Furthermore, from the neoliberal worldview the capitalist market is portrayed as a “level playing field,” where we all have equal access to the same privilege, opportunities and resources. As a result, there is an emphasis on “individual responsibility,” which tells us that when we encounter difficult life circumstances we should expect little in the way of government assistance. Experiencing poverty is seen as the outcome of character flaws; when people come on hard times they simply need to “pull up our bootstraps” and “work hard” to benefit from the capitalist market. Implicit is neoliberalism’s denial of issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, amongst others (May, 2014; Stanford, 2008).

Until recently, when looking through my practice-vision I was seeing the other as acting on their “competitive nature,” and promoted the notion that the other should be viewed with suspicion. This was a reproduction of the neoliberal worldview, and pitted persons seeking counselling against each other. Moreover, when this approach broke down with couples and families, I was guided by neoliberalism’s “market rationalization” and set out to provide a more “efficient” form of counselling (Sugarman, 2015). This led to a kind of “free for all” approach, where whoever had the power to dictate the story outside of counselling had the very same power to dictate the story inside counselling as well. Furthermore, when I would intervene as the “expert referee” and attempt to rule on what the problem “actually was,” diagnose the cause of the problem, and then teach participants how to “communicate more effectively,” I was doing so not only from my position of power as a counsellor, but also from my position as a white,

European settler, heterosexual, educated, cisgender male. Within this “free for all” setup, led by an expert practitioner representative of the dominant culture in Canada, it was unlikely that power differentials could be mitigated, nor was it likely that experiences which had been marginalized would be heard and understood.

‘The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’

The ethic of, ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ enables counsellors to connect the personal with the political. It offers to zoom out from the personal to encompass culture and politics. However, because of gaps in my understanding of this ethic, when engaging in relationship counselling my lens was stuck on the personal level. Neoliberalism has been accorded truth status in Canadian society, and as a result, it went undetected in this part of my practice. In turn, when working with relationships, the questions I generated placed blame and judgment on the other, and prevented me from working in full accordance to my preferred ethics and values with couples and families.

I was not at all comfortable with performing discourses related to neoliberalism in my counselling work, and how it was leading me to portray the other as the problem. After serious reflection and consultation, I realized I needed to re-engage with the ethic of ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’, and re-learn and re-understand this narrative ethic as it pertains to people, relationships, and problems. To zoom out of the personal to include the cultural and political levels of life, I needed a closer understanding of modern power, the constitutionalist perspective, and the narrative mode of thought.

Modern power, the constitutionalist perspective, and the narrative mode of thought

Michel Foucault, a philosopher and historian of systems of thought, offered the concept of modern power, which saw knowledge and power as inseparable. As such, where traditional forms of power operated through violence to punish subjects who disobeyed edicts of the state, modern power created and shaped life through knowledge and associated practices (May, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Starting in the seventeenth century, dominant culture discourses related to patriarchy, Judeo-Christian traditions, and capitalist economy were reinforced by the Enlightenment when discourses related to science were accorded “truth”

status. These scientific discourses acted on persons by turning them into “docile bodies” where people were categorized by differences based on dominant culture norms, measured according to these norms, and incited to act on themselves as objects that needed to be “treated” to meet these norms. Through “normalizing judgment,” people were incited to compare themselves and others to dominant culture standards in acts of self-surveillance (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). As such, modern power was an extremely efficient form of social control. In this modern form of power, dominant culture discourses marginalized knowledges and practices which countered those of the dominant culture (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). An example of a marginalized discourse in Canadian society has been practices and knowledges of Indigenous medicine which are portrayed in the European settler mainstream as a “less-than” form of medicine.

Michael White’s constitutionalist perspective was a progeny of Foucault’s philosophy of modern power. White (White, 1993a), along with others (Bird, 2000; Epston 1989; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Law & Madigan, 1998; Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016), criticized ‘truth’ claims present in the social sciences, specifically psychology, which posited human life could be studied objectively and that the human condition had universal characteristics that applied to all people and all cultures. These dominant culture claims and resulting normalizing judgments led to the marginalization of people and communities who were considered outside of a standardized range set by the ‘truth’ claims of psychology. The constitutionalist perspective described life as being shaped by culture and history, and that while science and psychology had been anointed with special ‘truth’ statuses, they too were cultural constructs shaped in this manner.

Michael White (1993b) wrote:

“The constitutionalist perspective I am arguing for refutes foundationalist assumptions of objectivity, essentialism and representationalism. It proposes that an objective knowledge of the world is not possible, that knowledges are actually generated in particular discursive fields. It proposes that all essentialist notions, including those about human nature, are ruses that disguise what is really taking place, that essentialist notions are paradoxical in that they provide descriptions that are specifying of life; that these notions obscure operations of power. And the constitutionalist

perspective proposes that the descriptions that we have of life are not representations of life as lived, but are directly constitutive of life that these descriptions do not correspond with the world, but have real effects in the shaping of life” (p. 125)

Modern power and the constitutionalist perspective enabled a new critique of the hegemonic status of science in the domains of personhood and human life. In turn, it became possible to separate from the logico-scientific mode of thought and move towards a narrative mode of thought (White & Epston, 1990). If life was constituted by descriptions of life, as opposed to our descriptions of life being representations of an objective reality, then narrative, stories, and meaning-making took on new significance. Through the narrative mode of thought, meaning became the central concept in human life and the development of personhood (Bruner, 1990). Meaning-making was achieved through the story metaphor, which provided a structure for time (beginning, middle and end), characters, settings, and points of view, while also evoking judgment and emotion (Bruner, 1986; Frank 2010; Senehi, Flaherty, Kirupakaran, Kornelsen, Matenge, & Skarlato, 2009).

Practice implications of re-engaging with ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ when working with relationships

I will never forget the day I realized I was portraying relationship participants as helping problems. I was sitting in a coffee shop not far from my office. Earlier in the day, I had met with a family, and had begun conversations about Betrayal and how it had impacted their individual lives and relationships. However, once the discussion turned to how the family was first introduced to Betrayal, my questions characterized family member’s actions as helping and supporting Betrayal’s admittance into their lives. In hindsight, these characterizations were carried by an assumption that it was a person’s nature to go against another if it was in their own best interests. Responses to my questions characterizing family members as helping and supporting Betrayal led to conflict and discomfort to such an intensity the meeting needed to be ended early. As I sat in the coffee shop, I experienced a strong sense of frustration as yet another opportunity to work with a family had ended in disappointment.

In those moments at the coffee shop, I reflected on what it meant to characterize

someone as helping a problem and what this said about my views on people and relationships. As I considered my work with couples and families, I realized that by characterizing relationship participants as possessing a competitive or suspicious nature, I was restricting my practice-vision and limiting what was possible in my work with relationships. But worse than this, I was portraying people I worked with as inherently self-interested and driven to sacrifice their relationships for an outcome to their individual benefit. Indeed, I was more drawn to the idea of life as multi-storied, with many possible stories derived from culture and history capable of giving new meaning to people's actions and identities (White, 2001). Todd May (2006) quoted Foucault speaking in support of Vietnamese refugees refused entry into France and the United States during the Vietnam War, 'We are all ruled, and as such, we are all in solidarity' (p.129). By seeing each participant in relationships as constituted by culture and stories, this opened up new possibilities for my counselling work with couples and families. Truly, if there was no stepping outside of culture, if it was the copying that originated (White, 1993a), this meant I could interview all participants in relationship counselling not only about their actions; but also, the history of ideas that had informed these actions, the people who had passed on these ideas, why these ideas and actions had seemed desirable when enacted, and what these ideas and actions might say about what the person gives value to (Madigan, 2019; White, 1993a). By asking about the historical, relational, and cultural origins of each participant's actions, even if these actions had been harmful, stories would follow that cast the person and relationship in new ways.

Working with couples and families

Since going back and re-evaluating my understanding of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem' and its use in relationship counselling, I have learned the importance of creating an outsider witness structure when working with couples and families (White, 2000). In the past, when attempting to have an unstructured conversation, or a 'free for all' counselling meeting, dominant culture approaches to conflict would take over. During these meetings, participants would yell and speak over each other, deploy arguments designed to win longstanding debates, or look to the counsellor for confirmation of who has been at fault for the problems the relationships had been enduring. All of these practices could be seen as representations of the influence of neoliberalism and its emphasis on competition as a way of life, its need for winners and losers, and

its denial of power inequities. As a result, in my previous counselling meetings with couples and families, whoever dominated conversations outside of counselling would continue this domination inside counselling as well.

As narrative practitioners, our aim is not to settle longstanding disputes, or even find solutions to problems, but to help participants come to new understandings of each other. A witnessing structure can assist in this as it provides structured time and space for each participant to speak and have their stories heard by others (Freedman, 2014; White, 2004b). As a participant tells their story, counsellors are able to ask questions helping persons seeking counselling speak to their unique experiences, and elicit new details and meanings based on what people give value to (White, 2000). When using a witnessing structure, one participant is interviewed by the counsellor, while additional participants are asked to step back from the conversation to listen. At the conclusion of the first interview, the interviewee is asked to step back into the listening position, while the participant who was previously in the listening position is interviewed about what they had heard during the first interview. This process can be repeated as many times as is helpful. Not only does this practice provide a framework that prevents 'free for all' counselling, but it also sets parameters that allow participants to listen and understand the others' stories without temptation to interrupt or contest. The witnessing process is intentionally structured so that the counsellor's questions can generate new stories, which in turn can be heard and 'made real' by an audience made up of partners or family members (Lindemann-Nelson, 2001). The reflections made during the re-telling of the initial story 'thicken' preferred narratives brought forth in the witnessing process by expanding on themes from the original telling and creating resonance between participants (Freedman, 2014; White, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2004a, 2007).

Jill Freedman (2014) asks those in the witnessing position to listen the way they would to a friend, 'How we want what is best for a friend, how we strive not to judge, how we stay in touch with what is important to them, how the listening is about them, not us, and so on' (p.14). This type of listening as a friend differs from the kind of listening by a counselor that was referred to earlier, which led to 'side-taking' and gossip about the other. Instead, by encouraging participants to listen as a friend we are interested in a perceptual shift, where a person goes from listening from the position of a competitor to listening from the position of an ally. Those in the listening position are encouraged to choose a specific friend

from whose perspective they can listen, someone all participants feel comfortable allowing into that role (White, 2004b). When people listen from the position of friendship, rather than competition and suspicion of the other, participants are exposed to new meanings that can be used to create a new path forward, whatever that path might look like. Using the position of friendship in couples and family counselling is in defiance of neoliberalism's competition and suspicion of the other. By encouraging a listening position of friendship, participants are adopting counter-positions of community, trust, equality and solidarity (May, 2014).

Here is an example of such a conversation:

Jeff and Nancy are cisgender partners in a heterosexual marriage. Nancy has three cis-gendered daughters from a previous relationship: Sarah, Cindy, and Meghan, all of whom are in their early twenties. Jeff and Nancy have known each other since childhood, but became partners later in life, with Jeff stepping in to take on a parental role with Nancy's daughters. Sarah, the oldest, has her own family and lives separately from her family of origin. Nancy, Jeff, Cindy, and Meghan live in a house together in Winnipeg. Nancy and Jeff came to meet with me due to a problem they called 'Miserableness'. This Miserableness issue entered their lives a year ago, due to differing expectations regarding how much young people should contribute to household work and when they should leave home to become self-sufficient. Miserableness had grown to such a size that Jeff had left the family home and was living at their cottage in Northern Manitoba, driving a four-hour daily commute to Winnipeg for work.

In setting up an outsider witness structure with Jeff and Nancy, I was transparent about my intentions. I explained that my purpose in facilitating relationship counselling was to help participants come to new understandings about their partner and relationship. I said that in my experience when meeting with couples and families, pervasive ideas related to competition and suspicion could interfere, and steer conversations in unhelpful directions. I also discussed how, when relationship participants were contending with conflict, participants often listened as if they were seeking evidence to strengthen their case against the other. I told Jeff and Nancy that I was interested in having a different kind of conversation than they were accustomed to (Epston, 1993). I believed that setting up an outsider witness structure could allow the person being interviewed to speak in

detail about their experiences while providing the listener with the opportunity to step back and listen in new ways.

Next, as a way to help the listener in the outsider witness structure relinquish listening habits related to competition and suspicion, and listen in new and more helpful ways, I explained that I was interested in helping participants listen to each other as a significant friendship would. At the outset, I asked both Nancy and Jeff to think of someone from their past or present who had listened to them with acknowledgment, understanding, compassion, or acceptance, with the proviso that this be someone their partner would feel comfortable allowing into the consultation process (White, 2004b). When asked about a friend who had listened with acceptance, acknowledgment, compassion, and understanding, Nancy identified her friend Christina, who had stood by her through health issues, and provided Nancy with support that had sustained her through these issues. Jeff expressed support of Christina's inclusion in the counselling, stating his appreciation that Christina had been a good friend to Nancy. In relation to the person who had listened to Jeff with acknowledgment, understanding, compassion, or acceptance, both Jeff and Nancy identified Jeff's younger brother Sam. Jeff talked about how when he was experiencing hard times he knew he could go to Sam's workshop, where Sam would listen and show unquestioned loyalty to Jeff. Since this practice of repositioning is not often found in the norms of daily life, during my interviews with the person repositioned to listen as a significant friend, I would remind participants to maintain that position by addressing them in terms of the cherished qualities of their friend's listening (e.g., "Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty") (Emmerson-Whyte, 2010; Lysack, 2002).

In our previous meeting, I learned that Jeff is mindful of Nancy's experience of mobility difficulties while maintaining the same amount of household duties; in light of this, he feels as adults Cindy and Meghan should be contributing more around the house to offset Nancy's responsibilities. Jeff views adolescence as a time when young people should be training to live on their own, getting ready to spread their wings and fly into the freedom of their own lives. He looks forward to this freedom allowing Jeff and Nancy's responsibilities to their daughters to change to enable Jeff and Nancy more time for their relationship. Jeff views paid employment as a way of life and expresses gratitude for his work, saying that everything he has is a result of his employment at the carpentry company he works for. Jeff devotes himself to his work as a carpenter, only taking days off

when his carpentry crew takes a week-long break during the summer.

The excerpt below is from my second meeting with Nancy and Jeff. I have just interviewed Nancy about her experience of challenges in the relationship, and have now turned to Jeff who has been listening to Nancy in the same way Sam would have listened to him. I started by providing a summary of my interview with Nancy and proceeded to interview Jeff about his reflections on what Nancy gives value to as a parent.

Mike: Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, Nancy and I talked about a lot. We talked about how this 'middle-man position'³ for Nancy started when Cindy came back from university. We talked about walking on eggshells,⁴ we talked about worry and depression, and Nancy checking in with Cindy to make sure she was safe.⁵ We talked about nurturance, and how nurturance and talking had made difficult conversations with Cindy possible, and that talking led to a place where difficult conversations didn't explode⁶ the way they would have exploded two years ago. We talked about the medication and how the medications's purposes were aligned with Nancy's purposes in that they helped Cindy to ground herself and have balance, which were things Nancy wanted for Cindy. She told a story about how Cindy was able to experience empathy for you where she was able to see how turning the house lights on in the middle of the night was disrespectful, as you had to get up early in the morning for work. Nancy saw this as a turning point for Cindy in regards to her relationships at home. We talked about how with Meghan Nancy has been allowing some space for mistakes, and how that's been helping Meghan to learn about relationships and how she wants to be in relationships. I had wondered if allowing space for mistakes was about the 'letting go to grow' idea we had discussed last session, but Nancy corrected me saying that she has concerns about Cindy and Meghan just moving out and having to fend for themselves. Nancy said using this

³ I would have preferred to use more gender-inclusive language here. Referring to a 'middle-man' reproduces dominant culture discourses related to cis-gender male dominance in the work place.

⁴ Expressions such as 'walking on eggshells', 'exploding conversations' and 'abrasive ways' could be indications of power imbalances that would be important to explore.

⁵ There were no signs of physical violence during my work with this family.

⁶ The metaphor of 'exploding conversations' was used in reference to times when Cindy needed to raise her voice to speak over invalidation and frustration.

approach with Sarah gave her grey hairs and how she is worried that a similar situation could arise, and so she is more interested in supporting Meghan and Cindy where she knows they need support, and that this was a way of helping them learn independence without so many grey hairs. And so, Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, of all this, what stood out for you from my interview with Nancy?

Jeff: It was good giving Cindy space to go to Athabasca U.

Mike: From my recollection that's the 'fend for yourself' approach that gives Nancy grey hair, would you agree?

Jeff: Yeah, I guess, when I was there I didn't see Cindy much, she was always in the basement because I was grumpy all the time, which was a part of the problem. I usually don't beat around the bush, so when I say something someone is flying off the handle.

Mike: I really appreciated Nancy's checking in with Cindy, and the nurturance she provided Cindy during difficult times, and making sure she was safe. She told the scary story about the knife, what would Sam have thought about the work that Nancy did to make sure Cindy was safe in that situation?⁷

Jeff: Sam would have thought that she did pretty good.

Mike: In which ways would Sam have thought she did good?

Jeff: To prevent someone from doing something stupid is good for the most part.

Mike: Would it be fair to say the nurturance and talking approach was helpful?

Jeff: Definitely.

Mike: In which ways was it helpful Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty?

Jeff: Nancy's way is better than Jeff's way because it is subtle and less abrasive

⁷ I increased my level of influence in this instance, moving the conversation away from stories about conflict and towards stories that speak to what is important to Nancy.

Mike: If it was less abrasive what was it?

Jeff: Gentle, softer.

Mike: The nurturing, talking, subtle softer approach, can you please tell a story of a time when these were helpful Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty?

Jeff: A lot of times, and it's not like there was this one time specifically, but through the years, she is gentle towards her and she can talk like that to her and I can't.

Mike: What part do you think the nurturing and subtle and soft approach has been helpful in getting Cindy to where she is today?

Jeff: It relaxes her and lets her think for herself.

Mike: Let's Cindy think for herself?

Jeff: Yeah like gradually, it lets her think for herself.

Mike: Can you help me understand what you mean? It lets her think for herself and make her own decisions, it helps her to think for herself and make informed decisions, or something else?

Jeff: Well good decisions yes.

Mike: I'm sorry for asking so many questions here Jeff, but I'd be really interested in finding a name for Nancy's approach to supporting Cindy, would you call it 'helping people make their own decisions' or 'helping people figure it out for themselves', or...?

Jeff: She has been 'guided slowly.'

Mike: Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, what has been beneficial for Cindy in Nancy's use of the Guided Slowly approach?

Jeff: It lets her open up more, lets her feelings out more instead of shutting down, because she needs a release.

Mike: I'm curious about what this says about Nancy, about who she is, about

what is important to her as a parent?

Jeff: That she is teaching them, and that she wants them to be independent... slower than I want them to be independent, but with fewer grey hairs. She wants to make sure they're safe.

Mike: Why do you think it's important to Nancy as a parent to make sure Cindy and Meghan are safe?

Jeff: It can be harsh out there, it's not the same as when we were young.

After checking in at the conclusion of this conversation, I learned from both Jeff and Nancy they had never spoken as openly. Nancy commented this was the most Jeff had been able to contribute to discussions about their relationship and family. After this conversation, Nancy and Jeff met together for lunch to continue the conversations we had started, which turned into a regular occurrence after our meetings on Saturday mornings. As a result of these conversations, Jeff and Nancy started planning for Jeff to return home.

By externalizing problems that both Jeff and Nancy were experiencing, we were able to limit the influence of blame and judgment in conversations. By separating both Jeff and Nancy from Miserableness and treating it as an entity created in their social contexts, this provided an invitation for Jeff and Nancy to participate in conversations as respected and knowledgeable participants. By externalizing Miserableness, we were able to unravel both participants' respective experiences of Miserableness in history and culture. This meant conversations about not only the origins of Miserableness in the context of their family, but also the longer histories of expectations and norms that had fed the problem of Miserableness. For example, Jeff talked about his history with work and how his devotion to paid employment had sustained him in important ways his entire adult life. We were also able to learn about Nancy's experiences with Sarah when Sarah was transitioning to independence, the mistakes that were made during this transition, and how Nancy was determined not to make these same mistakes while Cindy and Meghan were transitioning to independence.

Using a witnessing structure allowed the time and space necessary for both Nancy and Jeff to share their experiences in detail. Purposefully setting out the witness structure of an initial participant being interviewed, with the second participant

stepping back into a listening position, allowed Nancy and Jeff to share without apprehension of being interrupted or challenged. For the listener, the purposeful nature of the witness structure also took away the temptation for Jeff and Nancy to interrupt or contest, and instead allowed the person in the witnessing position to focus exclusively on listening. This structure enabled the counsellor to ask questions designed not only to understand Nancy and Jeff's experiences with problems, but also to generate new meanings and elicit the values that were implicit in Nancy and Jeff's expressions of Miserableness (White, 2000). For Jeff, this structure allowed him to go into detail, not only about his own relationship with work, but also about why he felt that work was a path forward for Cindy and Meghan. For him, this was a way of expressing care and desire for Meghan and Cindy to live a good life. For Nancy, this structure allowed her to talk in detail about the struggles Cindy and Meghan had endured, the worry and stress she experiences about how these struggles could impact Meghan and Cindy's futures, as well as the steps they were already taking toward independence. She also discussed how she was supporting them in these steps and the importance she placed on their safety.

Through asking Jeff and Nancy to take the position of friendship while in the listening position, this enabled them to listen from perspectives that were not trapped in competition. Differing expectations had led Jeff and Nancy to take sides in a conflict over what was best for Cindy and Meghan. This had led to cut-off and communication shut down, and resulted in Jeff moving to their cottage, two hours outside of Winnipeg. By inviting Jeff and Nancy's community into the conversation we created varied perspectives from which to view Miserableness and the effects it was having in their lives, as well as the counter-story of Safety. The community members invited in were members who had listened to Jeff and Nancy with acceptance, acknowledgment, compassion, and understanding (White, 2004b). For Jeff, this was his brother Sam. While listening to Nancy in the same manner that Sam had listened to him, this allowed Jeff to tune into a different frequency than he was accustomed to listening to. Listening to Nancy with Sam's loyalty enabled Jeff to tune into a frequency that transmitted the ways Nancy had been guiding Meghan and Cindy towards independence. Listening to this frequency also allowed Jeff to hear the theme of safety, and to join Nancy in the acknowledgment that the contexts young people experience today are different than the contexts they had experienced during their youth.

Conclusion

After an experience where I needed to bow out of working with a family due to misunderstanding and confusion, I realized that in my work with relationships, I was unintentionally pitting people against each other. Dominant culture discourses related to neoliberalism led me to characterize the other as possessing a competitive or entrepreneurial nature. When working with couples and families, my initial attempts to externalize the problem and map its effects and supports would break down when my questions portrayed participants as helping problems. Often, this characterization of participants as helping problems increased the intensity of conflict. In response, I would resort to problem-solving and 'free for all' counselling, which recreated the same conflict and power imbalances in counselling that occurred elsewhere. Following these realizations there was considerable disquiet in my practice life. In response, I returned to the beginning of my relationship with narrative therapy and re-learned the theories and philosophy behind the principle, 'the person is not the problem the problem is the problem'. Doing this led to the understanding that we are all constituted in culture and history. This renewed understanding meant that the ethic of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem' could be extended to all participants in counselling; meaning the counsellor could ask all participants about the historical, relational, and cultural origins of their actions. When working with couples and families, I learned that creating an outsider witness structure was essential to ensure participants had the time and space they needed to tell their stories. I also learned that inviting people's communities into relationship counselling and asking participants to listen in ways significant friendships had listened to them, limited the presence of competition and suspicion, which enabled trust and solidarity so that new stories and understandings could be created.

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