



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy

Ideas and Practices in the Making

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Content

Editors' Notes

- p. 1 Welcome and introduction to the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy (JNFT)
- p. 3 Introduction by David Epston to the three part series of Insider Witnessing Practices papers

In the Midst of Invention Papers

- p. 4 Insider Witnessing Practices: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part One
- p. 19 Insider Witnessing Practices: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Two
- p. 39 Insider Witnessing Practices: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Three:
Miranda: A Fighting Spirit's Journey to Self-Compassion

Storied Practice Paper

- p. 54 Deconstructing Denial: Stories of Narrative Therapy with People Who are Dying and Their Families



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy: Ideas and Practices in the Making

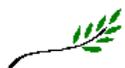
Editors: David Epston and Tom Stone Carlson

Editors' Notes

In 1992, David Epston and Michael White issued what has come to be known as a manifesto of sorts for narrative therapy. In their 'manifesto' David and Michael made the following declaration:

With regard to ideas and practices, we do not believe that we are in any one place at a particular point in time, rarely in particular places for very long. In making this observation, we are not suggesting that the developments in our work are sharply discontinuous- they are not. Nor are we suggesting that our values and our commitments are varying- they are not. And, we are definitely not arguing for forms of eclecticism which we eschew. However, we are drawing attention to the fact that one of the aspects associated with this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure... What will be the direction of this evolution? It could be tempting to make pronouncements about this. But these would be too hard to live by. And besides, our sense is that most of the 'discoveries' that have played a significant part in the development of our practices... have been made after the fact (in response to...our work with families), with theoretical considerations assisting us to extend the limits of these practices. We acknowledge the fact that it is always so much easier to be 'wise' in hindsight than in foresight (p. 9).

With this spirit of adventure in mind, we are announcing the launching of a new *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy (JNFT)* that will be dedicated to reimagining the future of narrative family therapy practice. It is our hope that JNFT will serve as a spark that reignites the spirit of adventure, innovations, and discovery that is so central to the commitments and concerns of narrative practice. In order to facilitate this, we have every intention that JNFT will operate more like an anti-journal through the publication of innovative papers that attempt to capture practices and ideas that inform them that are 'in their very making.' We are not seeking papers that are 'polished' or that attempt to present 'completed' ideas. Rather, it is our hope that JNFT will serve as a co-laboratory of invention, where half-baked and novel ideas and practices will be shared with the broader narrative family therapy community in the midst of their very invention. With this purpose in mind, JNFT will not operate like a traditional journal where





papers, and the ideas and practices within them, are already several years old before they are published. Instead, JNFT is committed to making the work of authors/innovators available as quickly as possible and encourage the participatory engagement of other innovator narrative family therapists who will engage directly with authors/innovators to study, explore, try-out, and expand the ideas to the furthest extent possible.

In this inaugural issue of JNFT, we are excited to introduce readers to three new innovative papers by David Epston (New Zealand) and Tom Stone Carlson (USA) and one new storied practice paper by Sasha Pilkington (New Zealand). The three innovative papers highlight the development of an exciting new performance based practice in narrative therapy called “Insider Witnessing Practices.” While Insider Witnessing Practices have only recently been introduced to the narrative therapy community, it is a practice that has been in the making for over 25 years under the careful guidance of David Epston. Insider Witnessing Practices represent the very latest in narrative therapy thinking and practice and are intended to serve as a counterpoint to Michael White's 'Outsider Witnessing Practices.' Early research of the outcomes of IWPs have been promising as clients have reported that this one session (90 minute interview) is worth 20 to 25 sessions of narrative therapy.

Storied practice papers will play a prominent role in JNFT. These anti-academic papers are written in the spirit of narrative storytelling and represent a way of writing that moves beyond a mere clinical description of practice through an “in the moment” storytelling approach that seeks to place the reader in the 'mind and heart' of the therapist. It is a style of writing that is intended to be a form of artistic expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) that seeks to “awaken the experiences” (p. 19) of the reader and allows the practice to “take root in the consciousness of others” (p. 19). The inaugural storied practice paper is written by Sasha Pilkington an experienced narrative therapist and storied practice writer. Her paper, “Deconstructing Denial: Stories of Narrative Therapy with People Who Are Dying and Their Families,” addresses the important issues that we face in our work with people as we attempt to honor the various ways that people meet with the challenges of death and the loss of a loved one.

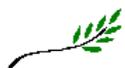




Introduction by David Epston to the three part series: Insider Witnessing Practices papers

This is the first of a series of three papers outlining the invention, development, and early outcomes of a novel approach to narrative therapy called Insider Witnessing Practices. I have been developing Insider Witnessing Practices for over 25 years as a counterpart to Michael's "Outsider Witnessing Practices." However, it wasn't until I stumbled upon some readings from anthropology and performance studies and my eventual partnership with my friend and colleague Tom Stone Carlson, just over two years ago, that the full potential of Insider Witnessing Practices was put to the test. The three papers in this inaugural issue of the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy detail the efforts that we have undertaken over the past two years to scrutinize every aspect of Insider Witnessing Practices through an intensive co-research process with student therapists and their clients at North Dakota State University, where this practice was developed. We are fortunate enough to have recorded and transcribed every single instance of Insider Witnessing Practices from its very inception, giving us the unique opportunity to scrutinize and study our practice in the midst of its very invention. Due to the collaborative nature of our co-researching process, we also have recorded and transcribed the accounts of the experience of each of the student therapists and clients who have participated in this practice. Needless to say, their accounts have been invaluable in helping us develop a vocabulary to describe and to attempt to account for the quite unexpected and very promising outcomes of our experience with Insider Witnessing Practices thus far.

The three papers in this series are intended to be read as 'companion papers'. The first paper is unique in that it is not intended to offer an explanation of this practice; rather it is meant to convey the spirit of adventure and wonder that we all experienced as we were immersed in the invention of Insider Witnessing Practices. I invite you to read this first paper with this spirit in mind and free yourself of any worry about trying to understand or comprehend what Insider Witnessing Practices are all about. It is a paper that is meant to be experienced rather than understood. The second paper offers a historical and a very tentative theoretical account of Insider Witnessing Practices. It also includes a detailed description of the practice itself, along with client accounts of their experiences of participating in this practice as our co-researchers. The third paper, provides an account of Miranda's experience of participating in Insider Witnessing Practices and its transformative effect on her life. It is written almost entirely in her words, taken from transcripts of her initial Insider Witnessing interview and subsequent follow up interviews as a co-researcher. As it turned out, Miranda was the very first person that Tom interviewed using Insider Witnessing Practices. The effect of this initial 90 minute Insider Witnessing Practices interview was so transformative for Miranda that her entire experience was turned into a dramatic play using verbatim accounts of her transcribed interviews that have subsequently been performed in various places throughout the world.





Insider Witnessing Practices: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part One

Tom Stone Carlson and David Epston

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with Emily Corturillo, Ana Huerta Lopez, Maria Guadalupe Huerta, Sara Raap, and Ashley Walsdorf

Abstract

This is the first of three working papers intended to introduce you to one of the most recent developments in narrative practice called Insider Witnessing Practices (IWP). Given the fact that we are still in the midst of innovating this practice, in this first paper, we have decided to offer the reader an account of the emerging history of the development of this practice. Our hope in this preliminary paper is to tell the story of this history in such a way that provides the reader with an insider account of our collective experiences as we engaged in the exciting and often unexplainable outcomes that resulted from our initial experiences with Insider Witnessing Practices.

Preliminary Results

Quite contrary to custom, we are commencing with, what we are referring to as preliminary results. We experimented in the Masters/Ph.D Couple & Family Therapy (CFT) Programs in 2015 and 2016 at North Dakota State University, which auspices The Family Therapy Center, a community based clinic in Fargo, ND. The Family Therapy Center welcomes clients from diverse and underserved communities at a sliding fee scale based on 'ability to pay.' The average fee for services is \$7 per session. Student therapists in the programs provide therapy services under the supervision of the clinical faculty in the CFT program.

We soon realized the results, even from day one, were beyond our wildest expectations and for that reason alone we immediately began archiving, recording, and scrutinizing each and every session plus engaging in regular follow up interviews one week and then six months after the Act II with everyone concerned. In some instances, we did far more. From the beginning, we sought everyone to join us as co-researchers and readily admitted that we were all in it together and that no one knew any better than anyone else. But everyone seemed thrilled by what was happening before our own eyes. Whatever enthusiasm we brought to this, it was matched by our co-researchers, students, and clients alike.

The clients who have participated in this practice have evaluated the Act II, on average a 90-minute interview, to be equivalent in value to at least 15-20 sessions of the narrative family therapy they had previously received with their student therapists. However, there is one





almost unanimous qualification. Everyone insisted, on the one hand, that even this high number was likely an underestimate and, on the other, that they would never have made the dramatic changes that occurred in the Act II no matter how many sessions they would eventually have had. Miranda, age 19, without being asked, evaluated each pause and the conversation that followed it to be worth one session. Other clients when asked have confirmed her evaluation.

Even more surprising for us, since this took place within the context of a family therapy training program, was the student therapists' evaluations. They evaluated their participation in the IWP process, which for them lasted on average 3 hours, was equivalent in value to one to two years of training in our family therapy program.

What were we to think of this? We often wondered whether this was merely beginner's luck or if all of us were besotted? Or if we were very likely risking making fools of ourselves for presenting IWP practice in public at such an early stage? We had many occasions to check with one another, worried if we were becoming carried away and were vulnerable to poor judgement brought about by unjustified optimism. Was this a winning streak which would soon end with the bottom dropping out of it? So far, in 16 independently researched IWPs, our beginner's luck is holding.

Befuddled and Bedazzled

We (Amanda, Emily, and Tom) met with Miranda on February 25, 2015, for the first Act II of what we have come to refer to as 'Insider Witnessing Practices', the obverse or counterpoint to Michael White's 'Outsider Witnessing Practices' (White, 1995). The session lasted an hour and a half. For all of us it had a profundity that was far beyond anything we had anticipated. After farewelling Miranda, we all retired to my (Tom's) office to unpack what had just taken place. Something inexplicable had taken us over. Each of us, although not entirely oblivious to the other, remained in a world of our own, a kind of trance and stunned silence that we were comfortable to remain in. The time as measured on our watches was thirty minutes but the time we experienced was more or less timeless. On the one hand, it somehow felt as if time itself stood still and on the other, it was as if time had run away from us. As we gradually withdrew from our respective worlds, we found ourselves remaining strangely speechless despite a desire to speak about what had just transpired. We all knew we had just passed through a singular experience but found ourselves longing for words to describe it. After a few failed attempts to locate words to describe what exactly it was that our hearts, minds, and bodies were experiencing, we decided to sit together in awe of the beauty of a moment that we would never soon forget. Tom later described it as being in a 'wordless state' for it wasn't that we couldn't speak but that the profundity of the experience was beyond the reach of our collective vocabularies.





While the hour was already quite late, Tom couldn't wait to let David in on the beauty of what had just transpired. And, while I knew that this was a practice of David's invention, I was also keenly aware that he had only up to this point been able to dream about its potential to transmogrify¹ experience. So, late as it was, I sat down at my computer and sent the following email to David in Copenhagen on March 26th.

Hi David,

I hope that your trip to Europe continues to go well. I wanted to give you an update on our progress with the IWP project. We did our first Act II interview tonight and despite the folly of our own newness to this type of interviewing, the result was beyond our wildest expectations. Words just can't do justice to the experience. I think that we were all (including the therapist and client) left speechless for a while after the interview. As Miranda was watching the portrayal by her therapist, Emily, it appeared to us that she was transfixed by every word of Emily's portrayal of her. She seemed most engaged: in fact, she looked as if she was entranced throughout the interview, when our conversations with Emily in the Act I went in directions that Miranda very likely would never have imagined. At such moments, we had to stop the recording several times to allow her to catch up with the 'surprisingness' (Bakhtin) of these conversations. And while she found many of these conversations strange, at the very same time she acknowledged that they had a certain familiarity. In addition, she insisted that Emily's portrayal of her in general was "right on." In fact, at the very end of the interview, I asked her a question, something like this, "After witnessing Emily's portrayal of you, you mentioned that there were many things that she got exactly right and other things that were not quite right; things that you would have said differently. And, there were other matters that she said that were completely new to you; matters that you had never considered before. I am wondering Miranda, in the end do you think that Emily got you right?" Her immediate and enthusiastic response was, "Yes, yes. She got it exactly right!" Next I asked her, "Would you say that even when she got it wrong or when she came up with something completely new to you that in a sense she somehow still got it right in spirit rather than factually right?" She said, oddly enough, even these discrepant portrayals of her were exactly right and that the whole experience has brought her to a place that she could never have imagined beforehand. She quizzed herself and us, "How did I get here?" We had to admit that we were as puzzled as she was, but we promised her that sooner or later we were determined to get to the bottom of this.

Emily was enthralled by the experience (as were Amanda and I). As a requirement of the course, we have the students write a reflection on the experience of both acts of the IWP process. I think that her reflection is powerful and speaks to the beauty of these interviews both as a way to transform the therapy process as well as a way to transform

¹ To transform in a surprising and often magical way





the teaching of narrative ideas. What really stands out to me, David, is that even our own limitations as interviewers due to our inexperience could not get in the way of the transformational nature of this amazing new way of interviewing. So, I can't agree more with your comment that this is definitely not fool's gold and we may be on to something that is worth so much more than gold.

Thank you so much for inviting us to be a part of this amazing project. I think it is safe to say that even this one Act II was priceless.

Gratefully,
Tom

As it turned out, David had just returned to his hotel after an exhilarating but exhausting day of training in Denmark when he received my email. His response, like so many others that have come since, shared his utter amazement at what he was reading.

Hi Tom,

Your phrase "beyond our wildest imagination" really invigorates me after a very intense, very interactive 9am-4pm teaching day. I know look forward with 2 days with colleagues at a Child, Adolescent, and Family Mental Health Service. I loved your expression of "priceless", a word that doesn't show up much these days in text. A priceless word! Tom, I have known or perhaps believed that this would be so but up until very recently, I have had no tangible evidence to support such convictions. I am so thankful to you all for having the courage to try something out that was new to you. If I am any judge, it is only a matter of a few more such interviews before you will be 'at home' with this and will be able to find your way around and I suspect find some as yet unknown avenues. Thanks!

Emily's comments are 'priceless' too. Please pass on my sincere thanks for their thoughtfulness. I really feel like I want to rush off to the US Patent Office and get a patent on this not to preclude others from it but to substantiate it. Recently, a 16-year-old I interviewed in Melbourne had this to say: "It was an insight on an insight." Please tell Emily I feel the same kind of gratitude to her for her comment, "Something happened here today that I could never possibly forget." This has really made my day!

Thanks again,
David.





A week later, Amanda and I had our second Act II with Sara and her clients Nicki and her 15-year-old daughter Payton. As we sat together preparing for the interview, Amanda and I confided in one another how the ineffable experience of the previous week was still imprinted on our minds and hearts. Neither of us had been able to shake it off as we went about our quotidian life over that week. While we both had a great deal of anticipation for our forthcoming interview with Sara, we couldn't help but to wonder, 'Was last week just a fluke or a once in a lifetime experience? Is it possible for this Act II interview to even come close to or approximate the profundity and beauty of the first?' We decided that we would be happy to settle for something that was even one-tenth of the magnitude of the meeting with Emily and Miranda, which would still be far beyond what we could have hoped for given our 35 years of experience as therapists over our respective careers.

Shortly into the interview with Sara, Nicki, and Payton, we knew that something remarkable was afoot yet again. And, even though we had been through this the week before, we were still unprepared for the overwhelming sense of what this meeting promised for everyone in the therapy room that night. After a fare welling of Nicki and Payton which included several reciprocal expressions of gratitude, we (Sara, Amanda, and I) returned to my office to do our best to try to unpack what had just transpired. Yet again, words seemed to fail us. From time to time, we attempted to say something that might give words to what we were experiencing and each time we tried, all that we could muster was an extended and collective exhalation. Finally, after fifteen minutes of a joyous shared silence, I wondered aloud: 'Is this the consequence of participating in a practice that is concerned with the dignification of others? Is this what it feels like to be in the presence of such immense promise?' At the time, I was unaware that this word was not in the Oxford English Dictionary. I just looked it up. We all concurred that this was likely the case and only then were we able to find other words to approximate what had been up to that point indescribable. Sara responded, 'I am not sure how to describe what I am feeling but it is as if my heart is bursting with hope. This is like nothing I have ever experienced in my life. I had no idea that feeling this way was even a possibility in my life, let alone in my work with clients.'

Once again, despite the lateness of the hour, I felt compelled to email David about another singular experience.

Dear David,

Amanda and I just completed our second Act II. And once again, words are simply incapable of communicating what the experience was like for all involved. Your enthusiasm (what you refer to as 'overenthusiasm') for the transformative effect of these interviews has definitely been warranted. In fact, I think that you could even afford to take on extra measure of overenthusiasm given our experiences so far. All of us, including the Nicki and her 15-year-old daughter Payton, felt an exhilaration brought





about by what this conversation seemed to promise for their immediate future and ours as well. The sense of hope and promise in the room was so strong that it could literally be felt. We were still wordless even an hour after the interview ended. The therapist, Sara, was overwhelmed by the experience, commenting that it was one of the most powerful and beautiful experiences of her life. She said her heart felt like it was exploding with hopefulness. I must say that my heart felt the same way and I think it is safe to say that Amanda would agree. Our hearts were moved beyond words in the presence of such extreme promise.

Gratefully,
Tom

David responded with the following,

Dear Tom,

I cannot tell you how tired I am. I made a mistake in my bookings thinking I would have a day off when I arrived last night. Instead I had to teach all day; very hot and humid here in Singapore. And because of the 5 hour difference, I awoke at 2:30am (7:30am in Copenhagen/Salzburg) and couldn't get back to sleep.

I cannot tell you how much my spirits were lifted by your email. Tom and Amanda, this is all verging on the unbelievable and I cannot thank you both and your students enough for starting to make this 'known.' In fact, if I thought IWP should be known, I am now convinced that should be so. Do you think IWPs could very well make the same difference that the one-way screen made to family therapy? And perhaps even psychotherapy at large? This is all like a very long dream of mine coming true. Got to go to bed but I was so elated that I read and reread your email and savoured it like one does the finest possible Bordeaux.

Warmly,
David

We have now completed 16 IWPs with students and clients and with each one we continue to be amazed at the transformative effects that it has had on all of our lives. Words like gob smacked, bedazzled, and befuddled became common place in our email conversations as our minds tried to come to terms with the beauty of what we have witnessed time and time again, as we have engaged in further IWP interviews. While both of us (David and Tom) are prone to exaggeration, we would like to assure the reader that our impressions were confirmed time and time again by both student therapists and clients. From the outset (See Miranda in the above), we have invited everyone who participated to join us as co-researchers. Our purpose in doing so was to collectively articulate such wordless experiences. We were aware that our clients





themselves struggled to find ways to capture the essence of what transpired during the Act II. The words that popped up depicted this practice as “magical,” “wondrous,” “beautiful,” and “dignified.”

This paper is a very preliminary account of the development of IWPs at North Dakota State University in partnership with David Epston. As much as anything else, it is a tentative attempt to understand what had befallen each and every one of us that first day and on every subsequent occasion. As such this paper will be a summary of all of its participants' impressions as supervisors/consultants (Tom, Amanda, and David), students (Ana, Ashley, Emily, and Sara), and clients.

When we (Tom, Amanda, and David) came together to explore how IWPs might be relevant as both a therapy and a pedagogy in a Masters/Ph.D. Couple and Family Therapy program, we had the distinct impression that we were embarking on a journey that would take us to yet uncharted territories in narrative family therapy. A journey metaphor is apt for us as we knew so very little about what IWPs might become. As David would frequently remind us, we were in the process of inaugurating something entirely novel, and we were making our way as we proceeded, not knowing exactly where we were going and certainly without any specific destination. Looking back now from collective vantage points, we can see that it was this ‘spirit of adventure’ that Michael and David had advocated for in as close to as they ever came to a manifesto (Epston & White, 1992). They declared,

With regard to ideas and practices, we do not believe that we are in any one place at a particular point in time, rarely in particular places for very long. In making this observation, we are not suggesting that the developments in our work are sharply discontinuous- they are not. Nor are we suggesting that our values and our commitments are varying- they are not. And, we are definitely not arguing for forms of eclecticism which we eschew. However, we are drawing attention to the fact that one of the aspects associated with this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure... What will be the direction of this evolution? It could be tempting to make pronouncements about this. But these would be too hard to live by. And besides, our sense is that most of the ‘discoveries’ that have played a significant part in the development of our practices... have been made after the fact (in response to unique outcomes in our work with families), with theoretical considerations assisting us to extend the limits of these practices. We acknowledge the fact that it is always so much easier to be ‘wise’ in hindsight than in foresight (p. 9).

As in the above, the discoveries came first and ever since we have been chasing after them with theory (this will be discussed in paper 2).





While we have been on our shared journey for a year and a half now, what we have discovered so far was primarily the result of an intensive three months of practice, reflection on our practice, and reflection on our reflection on our practice during the months of February, March, and April of 2015. During that time, between us we dedicated 30 to 40 hours a week engaging in Acts 1 and 2 with students and clients, the transcription of every interview, a detailed review of each transcript, and furthermore, what has been referred to as ‘engaged supervision’ (Ingamells, Epston, & Carlson, unpublished paper) on all early transcripts of IWP interviews.

Engaged supervision was invented by David some years ago as a form of apprenticeship for veterans who wished to commit themselves to not only the craft of narrative family therapy but its artistry as well. Briefly, this involves the apprentice, with their client’s consent, transcribing an interview and submitting it to as soon as possible to the apprenticer². The apprenticer after reading a very brief summary of the matter at hand scrolls down on her/his computer screen until there has been one exchange between the therapist and the client. For example,

Therapist: Hearing me read the letter I wrote you, is there anything you would like me to change?

Client: Yes there is. I need to tell you quite a lot has changed since then.

At this point, the apprenticer without reading any further enters into the second version of the transcript. After doing so, she/he scrolls down yet again to the next exchange and does something similar. This continues until the very end of the transcript and is then forwarded to the apprentice and to the client (e.g., this might not be so if the client were a minor or other discretions).

While intense, none of us experienced this time as a burden in any way. Rather, it was as if we had entered a liminal space where time seemed to stand still. It served as an incubator for our learning and theorizing of IWPs in a way likely would have never been possible outside such a laboratory of invention. We can’t underestimate the value of these initial few months. Of course, it was the transformative effect of each of the interviews that sustained us and pushed us forward. It was certainly an invigorating time that none of us will soon forget.

During this time, we (David and Tom) were in continual contact with one another via email. And, while we were literally a world apart from one another, we both felt a sense of urgency to respond to one another in the immediacy of the moment and not allow the natural ruin of time to tarnish the proliferating discoveries or ‘brainwaves’ as we referred to them that were happening. Given the eighteen-hour time difference between Fargo, ND, USA and Auckland, New Zealand, this was a bit complicated and meant working well into the night for me (Tom). Conservatively, we engaged in five or six email conversations each day during this time. And

² A word that David invented to describe the person who performs the apprenticeship.





these were not your ordinary emails, as each email consisted of pages of our deliberations. It was a time of heightened discovery and we found ourselves entirely enthralled with this practice and anxiously awaited one another's response.

We have spent the last year searching for some ways to adequately describe the transformative experience of these initial IWP interviews and theorize them. As we had decided that we would be engaged in a co-research project with our students and clients, I (Tom) invited David to come to Fargo to interview students and clients about their experiences of IWPs and to petition their assistance in finding a vocabulary to communicate this practice to others. We refer to this first set of interviews as the first round of a several round co-research process. After the Fargo co-research interviews with both student therapists and clients were transcribed, David reviewed each of the transcripts looking for their own unique accounts and theorizing that emerged during the interview and interpolated further queries directly into the transcripts. This amended version (Round 2) was forwarded back to the person concerned who responded as they saw fit in to the selfsame transcript (Round 3). This would be emailed back to David and these rounds would be continued until there was little else that could be said. As a qualitative researcher (Tom) with over 16 years of experience, I have rarely read clients and student therapists being able to put their experiences of therapy in such eloquent terms. Going from round to round in this way encourages elaborations that often become sheer invention.

Throughout this entire process, we also began searching for low theoretical explanations (Halberstam, 2011) for the dramatic outcomes. And, in honor of the spirit of the history of narrative therapy, we looked high and low for theories and practices that were on the borderlands between narrative therapy and anthropology. It was our hope that such a search would offer us some guidance or signposts in the uncharted territories of narrative practice in which we had ventured. While, on the one hand, the theoretical discoveries that we made along the way were entirely fascinating, on the other hand, in many ways they represented a return home to some of the originating ideas that informed David and Michael's development of narrative therapy in the early 1980s. And while these discoveries were fascinating, they will always remain secondary to the insider knowledges that emerged during our co-research project with our students and clients.

Ana and Maria: Magical Loving

Ana Huerta Lopez (then an M.S. student now a Ph.D. student) co-presented a workshop with us in Minneapolis in May 2015 and her mother Maria Guadalupe Huerta asked if she might attend merely to witness her daughter's presentation. We insisted that instead that she join us for the entire day. The following is a bilingual conversation between Maria, Ana, Tom, and David mediated by email and telephone calls. Maria was not allowed to proceed in schooling beyond age 11, but then migrated to the United States when Ana was a quite young. Ana was the first in her family to graduate from a University. David's interview with Ana in Fargo soon extended





to include her mother Maria. They were foremost in drawing our attention to magic as pertaining to IWPs, however we soon traced the cultural and historical genealogy of this magic to Mexico, in particular, and Latin America, in general. In that sense, magic here is of a different order than Anglo-American notions of magic as a technology of trickery compared to 'magical realism' a literature associated with Latin America. This discussion has been extremely provocative and parallels the reimagining of narrative therapy in Latin Americas by Marcela Polanco and her colleagues (Polanco, 2011).

Maria

Watching the IWP interviews in Minneapolis, I saw a certain kind of hope that personified a particular kind of passageway that could possibly lead to a better way of living. Within this passageway of hope you no longer experience fear, nor shame, but instead you embrace yourself and are now set free.

I know from my life sometimes there is not a straight clear or easy path. I saw in the interviews those who have traveled through disappointment, pain, and suffering to reach the end of their journeys. At the end of their journeys I could see that they experienced a healing despite the pain and suffering they had endured.

It was a magical love, endowed with such munificent and tender care that was dear to my heart and history of life. This was so palpable for me throughout the day. In fact my soul was rejuvenated and awakened and reconnected to what is important in my life.

In the IWP interviews, you discovered the magic of the other person. You came to an intimate knowing of your client and were able to express the magic that you felt in her presence. You were able to become intimately acquainted with the magic in your client and in her life. You listened to her without judgement, rejection, or shaming.

Ana

Magical love was something that came to my mind as well. It appeared to me that my mom's loving and daring spirit came alive on that day. Such magical love moves us to believe in ourselves and love ourselves wholeheartedly; such magical love influences us to experience the best knowing of ourselves and to honor those knowings. It becomes even more of a magical love when we can do the same for others. Magical love embraces hope and healing. In Mexican culture there is definitely more magic in the world compared to Anglo culture. Magical loving is the heart and soul of IWPs. This is how it comes to life and carries out such genuine transformations. I don't think there is anything more momentous and significant than to discover the magic of the other person and in return to express that magic directly to them. How incredibly astonishing! Is there anything more beautiful than this?





Both Acts are magical as they create new realms of possibilities. Until my mother drew my attention to it, I was not aware that I was doing magical loving. We may not be fully aware of it, but in the earlier interviews we have been seeking out the magic of the other and in Act I we begin to perform the magic we have gained from the other, but now on their behalf. In fact, I would say that we are performing magic in both Acts.

Much of the magic has to do with the hopes that we carry with us into these performances. As we perform these aspirations and desires for our clients in the Act I, the client then becomes witness to these hopes in the Act II. As a consequence, they become authors to their desired lives on their own behalf, but by means of their own magic.

What the IWPs make me think of in terms of my Mexican culture is connection. Here, all of our histories and chronicles of life come together as one entity of survival and sacred hope. Everyone involved in an IWP carries hopes from their own past, present, and for their future. This hope is sustained in this magical realm that for this moment is limitless and immeasurable. Every one of us through our own histories of life have joined together in this moment of fate with the client.

I believe that my mom has been key to my belief and recognition of magical hope, which has provided me with the space to be transformed and experience my life wholeheartedly. It is not only my own spirit that carries me through and awakens me every day, but also the spirit of my mother's undying love and fearlessness, and that of all my ancestors that have come before me. In the IWP, it was not only me that existed in those moments, but also the lives of those before me and those that will come after me. The IWPs connected me more deeply to the chance I have in my life to create a different history that stands against the suffering and oppression that so many of my ancestors have endured. Knowing that their presence is alongside me is what makes this so magical.

Sara: "Re-Storied by Beauty" (Samuel, 2015)

In response to the question that David asked (How would you rank the experience of the IWP?) Sara replied that it would rank in the top three experiences of her life. David then asked, "What other experiences from the stock of your experiences would you compare to this?"

I know that for me the family trip to Flathead Lake in Glacier National Park that we all took with my grandmother as her last wish before she passed away is the only comparable experience that comes to mind. I never thought anything in my life could ever compare to this. I remember all of us looking at this serene, peaceful, beautiful lake with the mountains in the background and being overcome by a deep seated feeling of tranquility. The Act II provided me with the same incredible depth of feeling that the stars were aligned and I was at peace at that very moment in time in my life. It was as if time stood still; or I was opening a whole new door in my





life; or I had finally solved a million-piece puzzle that I had been working on for a majority of my life. These are just some of the ways that I would describe this deep sense that I felt after our Act II.

Just knowing the impact that the IWP has had on Payton and Nikki's lives has provided me with such a profound sense of gratitude and fulfillment that I had the opportunity to be part of this experience! In addition, on a more personal level, I have known for many years that I wanted to be a therapist but it was not until that precise moment after the Act II that I felt the greatest sense of clarity about the direction which my life was taking. I am incredibly grateful to all of you for allowing me to be a part of this amazing opportunity!

Ashley: The effect on a newcomer therapist's confidence by participating in an IWP

Ashley when commenting on David's query as to how she guessed her client, Lisa, might respond to this question, "Has anyone so far in your life listened to you and heard you in such a fashion?" replied, "She would have said No, no one has. I think she did want to vindicate me in some way. I think she also didn't believe that the way that I listened was possible since she hadn't previously experienced it. I wouldn't say that she was incredulous but rather she was astonished that such listening was possible.

No matter what doubts I may have about my abilities as a therapist, I realized that I had provided her with what she needed from me, which was to be heard. In terms of me feeling like I was an effective therapist, that increased exponentially. She told me so, but even if she hadn't, watching her responses to my portrayal of her during the Act II would have been more than enough proof for me.

When I think of being a student therapist and having a supervisor in the room that feels kind of scary because 'oh my client's going to think that my supervisor is better than I am.' I found that no matter how many amazing questions my supervisors asked I was still a great therapist as a result of this experience because the way I represented her in the Act I. It was rewarding for me to see Lisa respond so zealously to my telling of her counter story, especially regarding the moral values by which she lived her life. I came to the conclusion that without me there it couldn't have been an Act II. In some ways, I was implicated in Tom and Amanda's great questions. Lisa could only say, "you were me" to me. I was the only one there who could have achieved this point of connection with her. I would say that their great questions were evidence of how great my relationship with Lisa really was and how much work we had done together and how great she is. No amount of greatness by our awesome interviewers could have trumped the greatness of our relationship.





Conclusions by our Client Co-Researchers

By way of conclusion, below is a very small sample of client descriptions of their experience immediately after the Act II interview.

It was like I opened a box of my life and had the pieces of it set out organized on a table which provided me proof of all of the accomplishments I had made and everything I made it through in my life so far. I have a huge new appreciation for myself. I am truly amazed by how far I have come. This type of therapy allows for the client to look at their life (especially their past) in a way that's never been done before. I always felt that my therapist Emily understands me, but I have never had a therapist show me that before in a way that is so true. The process of the interview helped me view myself very differently and provided "proof" of my successes, which was a way to ease into my self-worth. The Act II was like a sampler of ideas that I could think about and pick the ones I felt were most important to pursue both in therapy and in my own life. (Miranda, age 19)

I feel more in harmony with myself, as if I am more in tune with some sort of truth. Last week, the Act II took me by my hand and together we covered a great distance. I didn't feel forced or as if I was being pulled along too fast. But I felt like I was propelled forward. Now I feel as if I am now standing on my own ground but in the lead. What I found so powerful in all of this was an acceleration of finding new ways to consider my place in the world. (Lisa, 40's)

My therapist, Ashley, was very good at her portrayal of me, almost too good! I was surprised by a lot of my extreme my reactions regarding questions that were asked of me during the Act II about how far I had come in my life despite everything I had been through. In fact, I didn't realize how far I had come until I heard Ashley's Lisa saying it out loud. It was nice to see how far I've come. Just how far... FAR! The Act II allowed me to step back and see ahead, something I hadn't previously considered was even possible. Now I see great value in this practice. Please share this with everyone! I felt really connected to my Ashley's Lisa so much so that I knew that I had been truly heard by her during our previous sessions. This IWP experience was so worth it. I trusted Ashley a lot before, but this experience heightened that so much. (Lisa, 40's)

I gained a new appreciation for myself as a mother. Also a great appreciation for our therapist because she really knows us and was pretty much spot on with how we would react and answer questions. She was also spot on with how we would feel. It is great to know that she is on the same page with us. It shows how important we are to her and how important it is to her to take the time to really listen to us. This experience showed us that she really is the right person for us. (Jessica, 30's)





The way that Sara portrayed us was just very kind, comfortable, and easygoing. It didn't seem contrived. It just was easy. Seeing myself being portrayed, I thought to myself, I am very acceptable! I really liked myself as Sara portrayed me. But, because it wasn't me, I was free from my usual self-judgement. I didn't worry about what I looked like or whether I said things the wrong way. Because it wasn't me, I could just soak it all in. I remember saying to myself as I was watching the Act II, "Wow! I really like myself. That's how people see me!" And so I accepted the fact that I am likeable! In fact, I'm even pleasant! [laughter]. As a result of seeing ourselves from the outside, somehow we've been elevated to something that we didn't realize we were or thought we were prior to this experience. When Payton and I left, we both felt very uplifted by the experience. On the way out the door, we said to ourselves, "We just really might be that awesome!" In that moment, I knew that I was going to be okay and more importantly, I knew that my daughter would really be okay. In fact, Payton has made some very profound changes in her life that I credit to this experience. (Nicki, 40's)





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Insider Witnessing Practice: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Two

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Insider Witness Practices

This paper intends to introduce the history, theory, and practice surrounding a performative narrative practice which we are calling Insider Witnessing Practices (IWP). IWPs have been 25 years in the making. A precursor to what we are describing was a version of supervision and training known as 'prismatic dialogues' (Bird, 2006), which Johnella Bird and I invented in the late 1980s and early 1990s¹. This name was chosen for the same reason that a prism divides light into seven independent colors, but here the client's thoughts, actions, aspirations and feelings are divided into at least two distinct versions, the problem's story and its counter-story as told by the therapist. Johnella and I practiced and demonstrated this throughout New Zealand, Australia, and overseas. Over the years, a majority of my training at post-graduate programs was conducted in a similar manner to what we are now referring to as an Act 1.

I have now chosen to refer to the particularities of Tom's and my version of this practice as 'insider witnessing practice' to bring it alongside another performative practice that Michael adapted from Barbara Myerhoff (Myerhoff, 1982) and the performative anthropology of Victor Turner (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1986) and he referred to as 'outsider witnessing practices' (White, 1995).

We take this name, 'insider witnessing practice' (IWP), as the obverse or counterpoint to Michael White's 'outsider witnessing practices' (OWP) (White, 1995). It is our belief that the purposes of OWP and IWP are very similar (Epston, in press). How do we find ways for clients to apprehend and appreciate our respect for them? How does one dignify the other? Here clients, in a manner of speaking, take into their own custody the regard of another. In the case of OWPs, the regard is conveyed by strangers or outsiders; in the case of IWPs, the regard is conveyed by an intimate other (e.g., their therapist) (Bakhtin, 1993; Carlson & Haire, 2014; Levinas, 1981). Both OWPs and IWPs are descendants in a long line of similar performative narrative practices (e.g., consulting your consultant, co-research, the articulation and archiving of insider knowledges, performative letter writing, collective practices, relational accountability in couples, etc.).

¹ Elize Morkel(1999-to the present) has also taken this up in the western cape of South Africa.





Thanks to Kirsten Hastrup²

In 1995, I (David) chanced upon a chapter in a book of Hastrup's entitled "Passage to Anthropology." I vividly remember the very moment and circumstances where and when I first read it. Somehow I presciently realized that I had before me, in my hands, the wherewithal to extend what we are now calling Act 1 into a performative ritual that we dubbed an Act 2 in 2015 (Emily Corturillo). Let me tell the reader why I carried around this book for the next 15 years on every trip I took, which often afforded me spare time to study.

Hastrup tells how, in 1987, the Copenhagen theatre group 'Odin Teatret,' led by Eugenio Barba, approached her with the unusual proposal, not unlike that of an Act 1 of IWP, to create a theatrical performance "of my history" (Hastrup, 1995, p. 127). Not surprisingly, she was taken aback. He wanted to stage a play about an anthropologist who encountered the 'unreal' during fieldwork, which Hastrup had published about (Hastrup, 1998). He told her he had chosen her 'as a central character' of this proposed play. "It was not until much later that I understood what it meant to be a central character" (p. 127). What had caught Barba's eye was what she described as, "my shift between separate realities" during her fieldwork in Iceland where she met "the hidden people of the Icelandic landscape" (p. 127). Barba was aware of the risk Hastrup had taken by reporting "my experience as experience" (p. 127) in a scholarly text. Barba also began to enquire how Hastrup had become an anthropologist in the first place. She soon came to realize that his request that she provide their company with her autobiography, "provided a dramatic pretext for inventing myself" (p. 129).

She then started meeting with the entire cast of the theatre company. They asked varied and diverse questions of her such as, "What did you sing as a child? How do you call cows in Iceland?...took extensive notes and created a common language." Barba then requested that during the meetings with the company members that Hastrup tell them "the 21 most important events in my life" (p. 131). She found that "the events poured out in no obvious pattern, and I saw how my life had indeed been a process and not only a series of sequences...Writing myself produced me both as a text and as a person" (p. 131-133).

She remembered that "as the group became increasingly focused on the performance, I experienced an increasing degree of off-centeredness and could not see what role Kirsten was going to play. I was not given any clues about the actual performance...I had a feeling 'Kirsten' was taking on a life of her own." She was finally invited after some months to a rehearsal at which, "I watched, laughed and cried...Seeing Kirsten in all too familiar situations freed a set of feelings I would not normally allow myself to indulge...Familiarity was belied...because the context was alien, and because the dramatic effects used to stress particular points transcended my imagination. Most important I was represented by another woman" (p. 134).

² Dr. Kirsten Hastrup is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. Dr. Hastrup is the author or editor of over 40 book and 250 journal articles. She specializes in the area of anthropological fieldwork in Iceland and Greenland.





What might very well be pertinent to consider in IWPs was that her first response to seeing this representation of herself came as a surprise to her: "As it happened, when I first saw 'Kirsten' on stage, she was no longer me. She was not-me" (p. 134). After watching more rehearsals Kirsten wrote,

As the tears in my eyes would reveal, I was overwhelmed with the precision with which the group had grasped the essence of my stories. They had told the 'truth' about 'Kirsten' but it was not-me...It made me see myself more clearly than before. Through the selective fiction of not-me, my reality became focused. But there was a crack in the mirror allowing a separate reality to be seen: a reality of not-me. I was enchanted by it. The presence of other spectators entailed an astonishing reorientation to my view of Kirsten on stage: she was no longer not-me, but had become not-not-me. It is a general truth about performances that they catch their audiences by being not-real and not-not-real at the same time (p. 136).

Hastrup quoted the performative anthropologist Victor Turner to great effect, "The explicit focus on performances emphasizes the inherent reflexivity of the event. The performance arouses people's consciousness of themselves; it reveals them not only to the world but also to themselves" (Turner, 1982, p. 75). Hastrup continues, "I could neither identify with nor distance myself from Kirsten on stage. She was neither my double nor another. She restored my biography in an original way, being not-me and not-not-me at the same time. I was not represented, I was performed" (p. 141).

As a result of her viewing of her performed life, Hastrup concluded, "I became an invention to myself...Barba extended and challenged my identity in ways that are barely knowable, but which surely led me to courses of action that I would not otherwise have considered possible. Possibly I had actually become more of a character" (p. 144).

Thanks to Sara Lawrence Lightfoot³

Lawrence Lightfoot is a distinguished Harvard sociologist of education and pioneer of a qualitative methodology called the 'art and science of portraiture' (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1997). For me (David) her most distinguished titles are: *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture* and *respect: An exploration*. My debt to her extended metaphor of portraiture and portrayal on which she based her methodology is equivalent to that of Hastrup.

From these two experiences of sitting for portraits...I learned, for example, that these portraits did not capture me as I saw myself, that they were not like looking at the mirror at my reflection. Instead, they seemed to capture my 'essence': qualities of character and history, some of which I was unaware, some of which I resisted mightily,

³ Dr. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot is a professor of education at Harvard University. She has authored 10 books and been awarded 28 honorary doctorate degrees which should give some evidence of the high regard for her scholarship.





some of which felt deeply familiar. But the translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered and interpretive. In addition to portraying my image, the piece expressed the perspective of the artist and was shaped by the evolving relationship between the artist and me. I was never treated or seen as an object but as a person of strength and vulnerability, beauty and imperfection, mystery and openness. The artist needs to be vigilant in capturing the image but always watchful of my feelings, perspective, and experience (p. 5).

I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words...I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom and perspective of the 'subjects'; but I wanted them to feel as I had felt, that the portrait did not look like them but somehow managed to reveal their essence. I wanted them to experience the portraits as both familiar and exotic so that in reading them, they would be introduced to a perspective that they had not considered before. And finally I wanted the subjects to feel 'seen' like I had felt seen- fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected and scrutinized. I wanted them to feel both the discovery and generosity of the process as well as the penetrating and careful investigation" (p. 6).

Although narrative therapy is not entirely unfamiliar with the sheer grace and generosity by means of which Lawrence Lightfoot portrays "the character of the character" (Frank, 2010) in her various writings, she has inspired us to aspire to such respectful characterizations of those that we portray in IWPs. I can only hope that she might welcome such attempts at emulating her ethnographies of the person (See Lawrence Lightfoot, 1998, *Respect: An exploration*; See also Bochner & Ellis, 2016, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* for another qualitative methodology- auto-ethnography- worthy of similar emulation by narrative therapists).

I (Tom) first encountered IWPs at a day long workshop of David's, sponsored by the Kenwood Center in Minneapolis in May 2014. On my three and a half hour ride home to Fargo after the workshop had ended, I remember the distinct feelings of wonderment at what had been presented that day, the recordings that David had shown and the demonstration Act 1 interview he had conducted. Something told me that I had stumbled upon something that I had long since been longing for.

I have always believed that the practice of therapy was capable of so much more than what it proposes, which has often put me at odds with my professional advisors (Carlson, Corturillo, & Freedman, in press). I have been told that I was either a 'naïf' or a 'pollyanna'; nevertheless I persisted to swim against the tide of my professional trainings. As I was sitting in the audience at David's workshop, I could immediately feel the potential of IWPs, as far as David and Johnella had developed them, to provide a format for the realization of my yearnings. Despite my best intentions to grasp what was possible here, what was to come was still beyond my reach. Somehow, after a series of chance events in December of 2014, David invited me to join him in collaborating on the fulfillment of the invention of the Act 2, which would complete the IWP.





A Theoretical Discussion: Thanks Also to Gary Saul Morson⁴

Given the bedazzling and consistent results from our attempts at a completed IWP (Acts 1 and 2) from day one, which were entirely unanticipated, we sought refuge in many diverse literatures trying to figure out what in the world was going on here. How could these dramatic outcomes happen when we were such rank amateurs? We would have expected that we would have required an extensive trial period before we could achieve such results. We turned to the literature on performance studies, a longstanding interest, which we shared in Bakhtin and in particular, his translator/commentator, Gary Saul Morson (1994).

In the midst of our intense study, we discovered something that we were not quite prepared for. And that is that a therapy that purports to be a 're-authoring therapy' (White, 1995) must take place outside of a person's own story and that it needs to invoke what Morson refers to as 'narrative art.' Typically, in the daily living of our lives, we live 'inside' our stories. From the inside of our stories, we experience ourselves not as authors but as characters of "an already finalized script" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). As characters inside our stories, we have a limited capacity for freedom and agency beyond the freedom and agency that is already afforded us by the author of the story. Morson argues that 'narrative art' is required in order for people to move beyond the constraints of being an already finalized character and experience what he refers to as "authorial agency" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). He claims that for characters in a story to have freedom they must become their own authors. Similarly, the Nobel Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee confirm this in his debate with the psychoanalytic colleague, Arabella Kurtz:

I would agree and might even be persuaded to go further: to say that the therapist might aim to foster in the patient a freedom to be master of their own life-narrative; that the sense of freedom or mastery, and what can be achieved with it, may turn out to be more important than the story itself (Kurtz & Coetzee, 2015, p. 14).

In 'narrative art' (a novel, a performance, a dream, etc.), "I do not and cannot see myself as finished as I can sense another person. I experience myself as unfinalized, as able to make choices that will render untrue previous definitions of myself" (Morson, 1994, p. 89). In narrative art, as "in dreams or fantasy...I live into the yet-to-come world...I sense myself in the process of acting and making choices. I cannot be a mere character in my own dream...As the author of the story, I am freely shaping it, but as character I am on the same plane as other characters." Narrative art resembles "not a dream but a story about a dream. It depends on the author's outsideness" (p. 89). This notion of outsideness became a key concept for our theorizing of IWPs. Morson continues, "The author makes the world, a character dwells in it, the author is located outside the world...The author alone can *mean directly*" (p. 94; emphasis

⁴ Dr. Gary Saul Morson is a Professor of Arts and Humanities at Northwestern University. He is an interpreter and translator of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Morson has published 11 books and has received several awards for his writing.





added). By *mean directly* Morson is intending to make the point that only an author has the authorial agency to give direct meaning to the events that take place in the story.

The importance of achieving the status of an author of one's story cannot be underestimated when it comes to a therapy that proposes to be a therapy that re-authors lives. Morson further references the author in time; "the author exists in a different kind of time, one that makes the whole of the character's life subject to contemplation as it could never be in the character's own time. Once there is such a whole, then each moment of my life figures in advance.... Life in an artwork, but not as we experience it in reality" (p. 89-90). Our reading of Morson led us to conclude something that we had yet to consider: that only when life is experienced as an artwork, as a dream, from a place of outsidership, can a person achieve the status of an author of the story of their own life.

How then can we turn therapy into a work of art where the client becomes more than a mere character of her story, where she engages with her "yet to be storied world" (Adrian Montesanto, Personal Communication 2016), into open time and a place of outsidership where she can see the whole of her life as if in a moment?

For this to occur in a meaningful way, the client somehow needs to simultaneously be both an author of and a character in her own story. She needs to somehow occupy the same temporal space as both an insider and an outsider to her own lived experience. To accomplish this rather unusual task, IWPs draws heavily on the rituals of performance.

According to Schechner, "A person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting others- by entering a social field. By engaging in performance... the performer and the thing to be performed are transformed" (1985, p. 111-112). Ethnographers who use performance to present their data to an audience argue that by engaging an audience in a performance of the real lives and experiences of others, the audience members are able "to experience a way of deeply sensing the other and that the audience is pulled into a sense of the other in a compelling way" (Conquergood, 1985, p. 3). Those in the audience themselves are transformed as they become witnesses to a performance of the lives of others and are brought into relationship with them. They are moved emotionally; they are brought to tears, become angry and called to some response.

Imagine the exponential effect of the above when the audience and the performed are one and the same? For example, Alice, who participated in an IWP, summarized her experience in this way,

The next week after the Act 2 when my therapist Ana and I met and she gave me a copy of the Act 2 transcript I took it home and read right away. Nothing could have made me put it down. As I was reading, I found myself in awe of the person I was reading about. I was moved to tears as I read about the life of the person in the transcript. Later, I





realized that it was me who I was reading about and came to the conclusion that I had moved my own self to tears.

The Practice of IWP: Act 1

To assist you in envisioning an IWP, can you close your eyes for a moment and imagine that someone very close to you has planned a very special event for you to attend. The purpose of this event is for you to be honored although it is intended as a surprise. All you know is that something very special is about to take place. Your friend, partner, or parent picks you up and takes you to a very well appointed theater for the performing arts. To your surprise, someone comes to open your door and greets you as if you were an honored guest. At the entrance of the theater, you can't help but notice that people seem to recognize you and gaze upon you with genuine respect and admiration. You are greeted with an even greater number of acknowledgements of welcome all the while referring to you by name. "We have a special seat reserved just for you, sir or madam" says the usher, who kindly escorts you to a seat in the first row. A seat you are aware that is usually reserved for highly esteemed guests.

As the play begins, the events that are portrayed in the performance have a strange but uncanny familiarity. Soon, you become fully aware that the life that is being performed is your own. And the main actor in this performance is in fact impersonating you, once again, in a strangely familiar way. It is you but not you at the same time. A few more minutes pass and it has become clear that the performance you are watching is not just a summary of your life from inside your own story of yourself but rather it is a story that is being told from the perspective of someone who holds you in the highest regard; who intimately knows your struggles and what you have been up against in your life. At the same time, you are startled that the actor somehow is so familiar with your moral character and virtues.

And yet, because you are watching a performance that is both you and not you at the same time, you are able to 'see' and relate to your 'self' as if you were another person. Paradoxically being that person, you experience what Schechner refers to as "not me but not not me" you become a witness to your own life but from the outside. As an audience member to the performance of your life, you find yourself being pulled into the story and you are moved to laughter and tears by the life that has been courageously lived by its main character, who is simultaneously 'not you' but 'not not you.' As the performance comes to an end, the audience rises in applause of a life well lived. At first the applause is directed at the performers and then slowly, the audience turns its applause to you in acknowledgement and recognition of the person whose life was performed on the stage- your impersonated life.

What you have just imagined is what IWPs intend to do for the person portrayed⁵ in the Act 1 by inviting them to become an audience member of a portrayal of their life as performed by the

⁵ From here on, we will refer to 'the client' as 'portrayed person' or PP for short. This description is credited to our co-researcher and colleague Ítalo Latorre-Gentoso who came up with this apt term during our research of IWPs.





portraying therapist (PT) who is unashamedly biased by the promise that she/he holds for the near future of the portrayed person (PP).

IWPs are made up of two acts. In Act 1, the therapist ⁶ is interviewed by a veteran narrative therapist/supervisor 'as if' they were the client. However, this is not in any way intended to be a role play where the therapist tries to 'get it right' by xeroxing the client. Rather, this interview is meant to be narrative art and akin to Lawrence-Lightfoot's 'portraiture' whereby the therapist 'paints a portrait' that is biased by their promise of their hopes and is intended to reveal the essence of the moral character of the PP by entering into novel storylines within a dramatic context of the PP's life. In the words of Cheryl Mattingly, the Act 1 is "poetic imitation (the drama)...not a simple copy of events." (Mattingly, 1998, p. 28)

As a work of art or poetic imitation, the therapist portraitist (TP) has the freedom to respond in surprising and novel ways and it is wish of the interviewer to take the portrait to places where the TP and PP have not very likely gone before. As a work of art, the interview is also intended to be dramatic so as to recast the PP's story in compelling ways that capture their imaginations and invite them into a relationship with their own self that is informed by grace, generosity, dignity, self-endearment, and promise. The Act 1 is performed with the PP's explicit consent but without their presence and is recorded to be shown as soon as possible, preferably within two weeks, in the presence of the TP and interviewer. The Act 1 is usually 45 minutes in length. ⁷

Before we proceed with a detailed discussion of the Act 2, we will discuss some of what we consider to be crucial to IWP practice that distinguishes it from a typical narrative therapy interview. My (Tom) first attempt at an Act 1 was reviewed in an 'engaged supervision' (Ingamells, Epston & Carlson, in preparation) format by David. This meant he redid the interview, question by question, as well as offering additional guidance and encouragement. I still remember feeling some trepidation as I hit the button to send the transcript of my first Act 1 to David. However, I was pretty satisfied with what I considered to be a fairly competent narrative therapy interview. To my surprise, David returned it to me the following day. I anxiously opened his email wondering what grade he would give me. After comparing and contrasting our questions and reading his comments, I must admit that I had the distinct impression that I had a long way to go in learning the difference between a typical NT interview and one appropriate to IWPs. The most general impression that I had was that his questions were much more vivid and painterly than my own. Throughout my transcript, David offered the following encouragement over and over again, "More dramatic please, Tom!" After bandaging up my injured pride, I began to wrestle with what David intended by his call for the dramatic. At first I wondered if I was a dramatic enough person for the task ahead as I am reserved by nature. Then, I decided to consult my dictionary to take a closer look at what the word dramatic means. Here is what I discovered: "of drama, sudden and exciting or unexpected, vividly

⁶ Likewise, the therapist will be referred to as 'therapist portraitist' or TP for short, throughout the remainder of the paper. Again, we credit this term to Ítalo Latorre-Gentoso.

⁷ We should mention we spend approximately 30 minutes in what we call a 'pre-act one' interview to prepare the therapist and interview for the portrait. An example of the pre-interview will be provided in paper three.





striking, theatrical” (Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 1996). I soon realized that David’s critique was intended to be an aide for my practice rather a personality assessment. I decided I would re-read Hastrup and Lawrence-Lightfoot but now searching for how I might express the dramatic through my questions. As a consequence, I resolved to be a ‘portrait painter’ who would substitute questions for the painter’s brush. I decided to limit myself to and exclusively focus on the characterization of the moral character of the person whose life was being portrayed in the Act 1. I forsook any intention to problem solve. That was to be left for the subsequent therapy. This transition from narrative therapist to narrative artist/portraitist was critical for me in rethinking my practice.

Because the Act 1 is intended to be narrative art, it is unashamedly performative in regard to drama. As such, the questions that we use tend to be bold and colorful, propositional, prospective, and in the realms of ‘what could have been or what is yet to come’ (Morson, 1994). In general, these questions implicate a sense that something is afoot. Because IWP interviewing exists in the realm of performance, it frees the interviewer to be more wide ranging and freewheeling in their inquiries. The questions are meant to implicate both ‘surprisingness’ (Morson, 1994) and suspensefulness. Michael White’s most common references to what constitutes a good story were mystery and suspense. Similarly, Cheryl Mattingly (1998), a highly regarded scholar of narrative ethnography, highlights the importance of drama and suspense in the development of a compelling narrative,

It does so by dramatizing the gap between a protagonist’s expectations and the events that transpire, by keeping the reader [client] breathlessly suspended as she wonders what will happen next (and therefore experiencing not-knowing in an emotionally charged and entertaining way) (p.17).

The questions endeavor to have people consider matters that they have very likely never considered before. Because the purpose of the interview is to be speculative and that any response resides entirely with the client, the questions can afford to be both daring and somewhat reckless. Because these are one time only interviews, such unusual circumstances call for audacity.

In addition, in order for the PP to have a vision of the entirety of their life, the Act 1 must yield an emergent counter-history. To accomplish this, we use questions that extend the history beyond the ‘so far known’ in an effort to create a compelling history of the counter-story. Such counter-stories are best when they welcome people to take up residence in them almost as if they have lived there before (Compare sideshadowing of Morson, 1994). In fact, they may find they have very well been squatting there without title. Once again, there is something strangely familiar about a counter-story that wins the allegiance of the PP.





The Practice of IWP: Act 2

The showing of the Act 1 becomes the starting point for the second act of the performance. During the Act 2, the PP is invited to be a witness to the hope-biased portrayal that was performed on their behalf in the Act 1. Rather than showing the entire performance, the interviewer, depending on his/her prescience, pauses the recorded performance (either visual or auditory) time and time again at key points. The purposes of such pauses are two-fold: firstly, it allows for the meaning-making processes of the PP to be slowed down sufficiently to permit them to catch up to the novel storylines that the TP introduced in the Act 1, guided by the interviewer's queries. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the interviewer pays special attention to possible discordances between the TP's portrayal and PP's emerging story. Such discordant storylines, where the emerging counter-story of the TP and the problem's story of the PP are juxtaposed, represent fertile grounds for drama and heightened meaning making. Once again, Mattingly is helpful here, "Narrative drama is heightened through disparity between the narrator's point of view and that of any character. Narratives are built on a difference of understanding" (Mattingly, 1998, p. 38). Pausing at these disparate and dramatic moments allow the PP to attempt to resolve or reconcile the portrait contrived by their TP. Mattingly (2010) makes another critical point that is worthy of our attention, "A dramatic moment commonly involves agents acting in ways that are at odds with the scene, generating all sorts of trouble that must then be resolved in some fashion" (p. 45). Taking time to resolve these dramatic moments allows the PP to take the portrait over, make it their own and perhaps, even to start living in to it. In this way, the Act 2 is a dramatic co-performance where the PP is simultaneously the audience as well as an actor who actively revises the ongoing portrait of their life. In fact, all authority is ceded back to the PP. After all, whose life is it?

Metaphorically, the PP, at certain crucial points of the interview, is invited up on the stage adding their own lines and worrying over contested matters to the ongoing performance of their life, in which the discrepancies may now require some adjudication leading to some sort of settlement. On the other hand, such reconciliation may have to wait on time and the living of one's life. This is how the PP becomes both an insider and an outsider to their own story and the impersonated performance in the Act 1 becomes a real-life performance in Act 2. As a consequence, the PP is no longer a mere character in an already written story; the PP becomes the author of a story that is yet to be told, one that has the potential of the possibilities of the yet to come and is shepherded by the promising counter-story performed in the Act 1.

Let us take this opportunity to offer several reiterations given the reader's unfamiliarity with IWP practice. At the beginning of the Act 2, the PP is at first downstage as she 'sits' before a performed recording of the Act 1. As it progresses, she more and more, thanks to the guidance of the interviewer's queries, upstages the TP who is only too happy to go downstage. By the end of the Act 2, the PP has taken center stage whereas the TP has retired entirely from the stage. In fact, by the end of the Act 2, the TP and the interviewer have become the PP's audience and the PP is now again the performer of her life.





The Act 2 is by no means a mere showing or repetition of the Act 1: it is prospective in that it takes the portrayal as far as the imaginations of all concerned can envision. In the Act 2, the PP is 'primus inter pares' (first amongst equals). The PP is the adjudicator of the therapist's portrayal which she had authorized her therapist to proceed with in the first place in the Act 1. Considerable care is taken to gain such consent given that the therapist admits to relative ignorance regarding the practice of IWPs. The PP is guaranteed that the portrayal will be shown to them as soon as can be arranged and hopefully no later than two weeks. In summary, the PP authorizes the Act 1 and adjudicates the Act 2. As a consequence, the PP has the final word and reconciles any discrepancies between the two versions of herself. It may be that these divergent portrayals are irreconcilable for the time being. We are finding such reconciliations can take some months as not surprisingly the two versions- the Problem's story vs. the counter-story- can be very contradictory. The two versions can become juxtaposed as the PP takes actions in her life that are more consistent with and ratifying of the portrayed counter-story. On the other hand, we have known of such reconciliations taking place before our very eyes during the Act 2. No matter when this occurs, we have noticed that the PP's choose between the two judiciously.

Our Speculations So Far

What is it that becomes possible for clients as they occupy this unusual site of being simultaneously an insider and outsider of the ongoing story of their lives? While we are still immersed in studying these possibilities, there are three preliminary discoveries that we now wish to highlight. We want to emphasize that this does not in any way intend to be comprehensive as there are far more to come.

Heightened Experiences of Self-Endearment Due to Distancing Effect

Returning to the work of Schechner and Conquergood, one of the unique effects of performance is that it creates for the audience an experience of suspended disbelief. When witnessing a performance, audience members know that the performance is not real; that the events are not actually happening in the here and now. At the same time, however, audience members allow themselves to feel and respond to the not real performance as if it were real. Due to their willingness to suspend their disbelief, audience members often find themselves relating to the characters in the performance in ways that bring forth genuine expressions of compassion, care, anger, sadness, and affiliation. This is precisely the reason why scholar practitioners like Conquergood believe that performance is such a critical research methodology for the re-presentation of data, especially when it involves issues of justice and marginalization (2003).

What makes Insider Witness Practices of particular interest is that it draws upon the power of performance and multiplies its effect for the PP by locating her simultaneously as an outsider and insider. Because of the conundrum of 'not me' and 'not not me,' the distancing effect of this practice allows the PP to feel and experience levels of self-endearment and self-love that





are usually reserved only for respected others. After witnessing just the first few minutes of her Act 1, Sarah experienced something that she had never known nor felt before. She was struggling to find words that were adequate for the puzzling feelings that had overwhelmed her.

Sarah: [Sounding bewildered] It was really weird to hear the beginning part (of the Act 1), especially the stuff that I've shared with Ana. It's weird to hear that part.

Tom: Would you mind helping me to understand what kind of a weird it was that you were feeling as you were listening to what Ana had told us about you and your life?

Sarah: I think it just makes me sad [tears start to well up in Sarah's eyes]

Tom: Do you have any guesses about the direction of your sadness? Was it for anything in particular?

Sarah: Yeah. I think it was good to hear it.

Tom: Can you help me understand why you came to the conclusion that 'it was good to hear it'?

Sarah: I don't know. I think just thinking that that happened to somebody. I mean it really happened! It's just sad. [Tears are now freely flowing down her face]

Tom: As you were listening to us talk about Ana's knowing about your struggles, all that you have been up against in life and all that you have overcome, is it possible that you were able to relate to yourself and your life with new eyes?

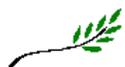
Sarah: Yeah. It's as if I heard that about somebody else. It makes me really sad to think that... But it actually happened to me... I guess? Because I've always been so good at putting up those walls, you know?

Tom: Were you having some feelings for yourself in that moment as you were listening to Ana's knowing of your struggles and triumphs that you may not have known before right now?

Sarah: Yeah, I think so.

Tom: What would you call those feelings that you might have been having for yourself?

Sarah: [Searching for words] I don't know. I guess... I guess just, I feel bad for myself. Not for myself, but perhaps sad.





Tom: Are there any others words that come to mind that might capture this feeling sad for yourself rather than bad for yourself?

Sarah: [Long pause to catch her breath. Tears still flowing freely] Yeah, compassion [said with a quiet but sure voice]. There it is. Yep. Yeah, definitely.

Tom: How was it that these feelings of self-compassion came to you? Did it have something to do with you watching and listening to Ana's telling about all that you have been up against in life?

Sarah: Yep. Definitely!

Tom: Would you say that to feel some compassion for yourself would be a good development in your life?

Sarah: Yeah, I think it's pretty big!

Tom: Pretty big?

Sarah: Yeah!

Tom: Do you think it might suggest something about where you've got to in life that you're now able to feel some compassion for yourself?

Sarah: Definitely. That's huge! I didn't have any when I first started this therapy. Absolutely none! Nope!

Tom: Is it possible that your capacity to feel compassion for yourself is part of the courageous and brave road that you have been committing yourself to that Ana mentioned to us?

Sarah: Mhm. [chuckles, crying and smiling at the same time as if a light has just turned on in her mind]

Tom: Is this capacity to feel compassion for yourself something that you would like to take a closer look at in your work with Ana? Would you be in favor of exploring the history of such compassion for yourself?

Sarah: [Smiling through her tears] Yeah. I guess I never... Yeah. This is the first time in my life that I've really felt that way. So yeah, definitely.





How was it possible that Sarah could experience such heightened levels of self-endearment after such a brief encounter with her portrayal? As a result of being an audience member and main character of a performance of her life, Sarah was able to achieve a certain level of 'outsideness' from the normal constraints of living 'inside' one's story. This distancing effect that IWPs make possible allows people to see and relate to themselves as if they were seeing and relating to themselves as an 'other' who is strangely but endearingly familiar.

Our client/co-researchers have been instrumental in helping us appreciate just how critical this distancing effect is in the dramatic outcomes that we have seen so far in the practice of IWPs. In a follow up interview, three months after her Act 2 interview, Miranda described two versions of herself, 'Emily's Miranda' (the counter-story produced in the Act 1) and 'Miranda's Miranda' (the Problem's Story of Miranda's life). The following represents a summary of Miranda's comments regarding the significance of the distancing effect that she experienced in the Act 2.

During the Act 2, I felt that a level of detachment occurred for me. I was looking at someone else's story. I felt differently about my own story because it didn't feel like it was me. Seeing myself this way allowed me to feel compassion for myself even though it wasn't me. It was my story, so how can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me.

For me it was like- this is your life right here in front of you but it's almost like it's so separated that I was another human being. I think it's that visual trick of the Act 2. It's like you're seeing someone else. It's so weird to think about it that way, but that's exactly how it felt. And I think that's the power behind it. It's just so mind-blowing! I wasn't looking at my adult life rather a little girl's life. And I'm not going to sit there and tell some 13-year-old that sexual abuse was her fault. The detachment was so important because I could feel for myself, the way I would for anyone else- sympathy! I allowed myself to feel things that I had not yet felt for myself because it wasn't me. I strongly believe it is never a young girls fault for being sexually abused in any way. No matter what she has done. I have always felt that way. But in my mind, I felt like I deserved to be blamed for what was done to me. The separation from myself and the story of me being told by my therapist Emily, allowed me to be compassionate to myself without it being me. During the Act 2, I allowed myself to be accepting of Emily's Miranda so how could I not be accepting of Miranda's Miranda.

Nicki, another client/co-researcher, also offers some key comments related to the significance of the distancing effect achieved in IWPs. She commented:

When Sara (the therapist) told me about the Act 2, I envisioned seeing a video of 'us' and watching it, but I hadn't envisioned Sara being so much like us. It was as if she was portraying us like an actress instead of a third person. When I watched Sara being me and being Payton, it was really strange because I thought, "That's really me" and "That's





really Payton.” At the same time, I knew that it wasn’t me and I was free from my usual self-criticism. I didn’t worry about what I looked like or whether I said things the wrong way. Because it wasn’t me, I could just soak it all in. As I was sitting there watching Sara portray us, I didn’t realize just how much I liked both of us. We thought she really captured our spirit.

Becoming More of a Character

Harking back to Hastrup who considered that her Act 2, if we can call it that, led to her having ‘more character’ we are reminded of Richard Sennett’s (2004) definition of character- “the capacity to move another.” Here, the PP moves oneself as well as the TP and the interviewer. How often have we all found one another in tears- tears of being overjoyed perhaps- at times in the Act 2? We have we all been moved by what Sennett refers to as ‘expressive exchange’:

Still I don’t believe mutual respect is merely a tool to grease the gears of society. This art has consequences for the people who practice it; exchange turns people outward- a stance which is necessary for the development of character (p. 226).

Is this an example of a ‘gift exchange’ (Mauss, 1990)? Except in the rather unusual circumstances of an Act 2, the mutuality of respect is given abundant expression by the therapist’s portrayal and in return, the portrayed person reciprocates by doing something similar for themselves?

For example, during Lisa’s Act 2 interview, she came to the conclusion that rather than being a failure in life, as she had always believed herself to be, she instead was a person who had never giving up in life. As her failures were recast in a counter-story of never giving up in the face of almost lifelong abuse, Lisa powerfully and tearfully whispered, “I never knew that I was never giving up.” I, Tom, was moved to tears by Lisa’s beautiful achievement. Ashley, during her co-research interview three months after she portrayed Lisa commented:

During our session the week following her Act 2 interview, Lisa said that there was something that she couldn’t stop thinking about all week. She can’t remember what it was that she said, but she very vividly remembers that she had said something that brought Tom to tears. I remember her saying, “There’s something in me- something about me- I have the ability to move someone to tears!” She said that is something she will never forget. She really had to ask herself, “What is it about me that can move another person to tears?” I think it was very powerful for Lisa to realize that she had the capacity and the heart to bring someone to tears. And I think it is worth noting that in this case that it was a man who happened to be a full professor with many years of experience as a therapist. She said that it was a physical representation of how far she had come.





Again, IWPs offer an exponential effect of Sennett's experience of being 'more of a character' for having moved an 'other.' Remember, Alice's experience of having come to the conclusion that she had moved her own self to tears. In that instance, she experienced what we might call being doubly moved; first by the moral character of the performed other with whom she was in "awe" and then by her realization that the performed other was in fact her own self. It is on such occasions that everyone seems to experience what Samuel refers to as being "re-storied by beauty...beautiful not only in their artistic qualities...but also in the eruption...of an inspiring and reconciling truth...a sense of wonder and awe" (Samuel, 2015).

Experience to Time Travel Due to the Suspension of Time.

When people are engaged in performance, it often has the effect of the suspension of time. When a person is both an audience and central character of that performance, the effect can be exponential. Most of our PPs have used various metaphors of time during the Act 2 such as: "time traveling," "having traveled a great distance," "I seemed to have leapt through time," "It seemed as if I was propelled forward through time," and "It was rocket-speed change. Like traveling at the speed of light". One reason this experience of traveling great distances is heightened in the Act 2 is due to the fact that the PP is afforded a view of her life from the outside and can now see and experience her life story in its entirety, as if it were happening only in the present. We are referring to this as a "simultaneous looking back and looking forwards present" (Private Correspondence, 2016). Schiff (2012) makes a similar point regarding "reading the past backward" (p. 40).

Toward the end of her Act 2, Lisa commented how such a looking back and forward present occurred for her when she said, 'When I used to look back on my life, I used to think that I was failing in life. That all of my struggles and hurts were evidence of my failure. But now, looking back, I can see that I was never giving up on life. I never knew that I was never giving up. Now, knowing that I was never giving up on life gives me an entirely new view of my life and what is possible for me. I can see things that I never imagined were possible for me.'

Similarly, Sarah at the end of her Act 2 interview commented, "Thank you. I guess my expectations of my future were nothing like this. If I were to have tried to dream a positive future for myself before coming here today, [crying] I would've let myself down."

Concluding Reminiscences

In 1973, I (David) recall attending a play in Vancouver directed by Richard Schechner whereby the traditional distinction between audience and actor was breached and the audience was inadvertently required to join the performers as there was only a 'stage' on this occasion at this theatre. I had no idea at the time how prophetic this experience would be for me. I cannot wait to send this paper to Schechner along with others by way of appreciation. Victor Turner and his performative anthropology was perhaps one of Michael's and my most significant sources. Narrative therapy is indebted to Turner and his *Anthropology of Experience (1986)*. How many times did Michael and I read and re-read it? I now wonder what would have happened if





Michael and I had read Schechner's *Between Theater and Anthropology*(1985) with a forward by Turner himself which documented and theorized the collaboration between Turner's performative anthropology and Schechner's performance studies (Schechner, 2013). It is worthwhile attempting a genealogy of some of the pertinent sources for IWPs. Barbara Myerhoff was the Ph.D. student of Victor Turner and went on to co-author *Secular Ritual* with Sally Falk Moore. Eugenio Barba called his practice anthropological theatre and was deeply influenced by both Turner and Schechner. Kirsten Hastrup has had a lifelong interest in theatre and has published a book on Shakespeare (Hastrup, K. 2004, *Action: Anthropology in the Company of Shakespeare*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press). Denzin and Conquergood translated the anthropology of Turner into performative sociology (Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (4th ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, London: Sage Publications; Conquergood, D. (2013). *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography and Praxis*, 2013, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.)

In my introduction to Michael's (2011) posthumous book entitled, "Narrative Practice: Extending the Conversation" I asked him,

Does this remind you of our fascination with performative ritual and your carefully crafted re-working of Myheroff's definitional ceremony and outsider witnessing? When we were planning to meet again, you alluded to some matters we had read in the past that we should review. Did you have van Gennep's 'liminal phase' and Turner's 'anti-structure' on your mind? I know I had Norman Denzin (2003), *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* on my list to read with you and see what relevance it might have (Epston Introduction in White, 2011).

The last papers that I emailed to Michael to prepare ourselves for our first meeting to 'start all over again,' (Epston, 2016) which sadly turned out to be scheduled for three weeks after he had died, was my complete collection of Gary Saul Morson's published papers. I am so glad to take these ideas up now with Tom but regret that Michael is not here to have participated in the invention and exploration of IWPs with us. Tom has often mentioned to me that perhaps IWPs are anything but an invention: they merely have brought us back to the beginnings of narrative therapy, something that Michael had suggested we should do on the grounds that we had by no means exhausted our sources.





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Insider Witnessing Practice: Performing Hope and Beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Three: Miranda: A Fighting Spirit's Journey to Self-Compassion

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My Concern

I was a 19-year-old university student at the time that I began meeting with Emily Corturillo, who was a student therapist at the NDSU Family Therapy Center. My reason for seeking therapy was to get a better hold on the effects of anxiety in my life. Emily was by no means the first therapist that I had met. It was no surprise to me that at our meetings the anxiety I was experiencing was easily traced back to being sexually assaulted when I was just 13 years old. The man who abused me was my best girlfriend's father. When this became known, she and all of my friends turned against me and held me responsible for causing so much trouble in my small community. To protect myself from future harm from others, I decided for my own well-being to live a life of isolation as I believed that they were people that I just couldn't trust. Because I was always on the alert for the next possible threat to my safety, I wisely committed myself to kickboxing and self-defense trainings. No matter how disciplined I was I felt at fault for all of the trouble from my disclosure and when I really thought about it, the abuse itself. I came to believe that I was tainted so badly that it could somehow be sensed by others as if it were an odor which required me to once again be on the alert in the company of others in case they might detect it. I also became convinced that I was stupid and could not possibly imagine graduating from high school. In my lowest moments, I couldn't see myself doing anything more than being a stripper. Happily, my grades and the generous encouragement of my teachers convinced me otherwise.

While kickboxing training taught me how to always be on guard, this wariness was a strategy that for several years served its purpose of keeping me from harm in my hometown. When I went to University and was in the company of fellow students, roommates, and professors, I had hoped that my life would be refreshed. One thing I did know is that I was growing tired of living on the edge all of the time and wanted to find some relief from the constant anxiety that was running me. My efforts to find any peace in my life were sabotaged by my conviction that I deserved what was inflicted on me when I was thirteen. Once again, I decided to go to a therapist, but this time I was going to make sure I would find the right person. I sampled a few possible therapists before deciding that Emily Corturillo was the right therapist for me. Although I felt that I was making good headway in our eight sessions, I still just couldn't convince myself that being abused as a thirteen-year-old wasn't all my fault. What really bothered me about this is that I had no difficulty whatsoever believing that no one, let alone a 13-year-old girl, should ever be blamed for being sexually assaulted or abused. While I held this conviction for others, I was equally convinced that my circumstances were somehow different and I was blameworthy.





Over the course of our eight meetings, I was able to gain some relief from Anxiety's demands on my life. While this was a welcome relief, I could never even begin to imagine a time when I might be anywhere near free from its demands and requirements of me. And the feelings of guilt, shame and worthlessness as a person, remained strong. To make matters worse, just a few days before my Act 2 interview, another very difficult incident occurred that caused me to feel extremely emotionally distressed. This time, however, I somehow managed to fight off accepting any blame. When Tom and Emily proposed to postpone the Act 2, I insisted that it go ahead as scheduled. I wondered if how I responded so differently to this incident meant that I was getting somewhere. I resolved to keep going with the Act 2, as I had the distinct impression that I was an inch away from living a life of misery.

The Act 1: Preparation

Emily and I (Tom) met in the physical absence of Miranda to undertake the dramatic portrayal of Miranda's life for which she had enthusiastically given her formal consent. Because we had never done this before, we thought it prudent to orient ourselves as to what the Act 1 might entail. I suggested to Emily that we carefully distinguish between how one might think about a role play and a portrayal as we understand it. Sensing that Emily was feeling burdened by the unknown and the weight of responsibility to do right by Miranda, I requested that Emily consider the following:

Emily, as you imagine yourself portraying Miranda, can you go free of any worry of 'getting Miranda right' and instead respond unencumbered and imaginatively by way of your admiration, respect, hopes for, and the promise you have come to envision for Miranda's life? Be reassured that you cannot get Miranda wrong as this is intended to be more art than psychological science and ultimately Miranda will revise the draft of your portrait as she sees fit in the Act 2 and beyond. I am going to also ask you some questions about what Miranda has been up against in life with the intention of getting an outline for a counter-story in order to counter the Problem's version of Miranda's life. My questions will unashamedly seek to be dramatic, painterly, and in the realm of speculation which very likely require you to make educated guesses rather than known facts. Given that the Act 1's primary purpose is to reveal the essence of Miranda's moral character, feel free to respond from the place of your own best hopes for Miranda's life as well as your knowing of Miranda through your relationship with her. This is about as far as you are going to get from psychological characterization and as close as you are going to get to paying your respects to Miranda. Just because I am a professor, let me summarize Bakhtin in order to lend you a hand to perform the Act 1. Role playing is duplication of the other person rather than an aesthetic image, a portrayal, of their moral character. Attempting to duplicate Miranda through attempts to 'get her right' would be unpersuasive and unconvincing as that would leave your aesthetic seeing of Miranda out of the picture. The aim, according to Bakhtin "is to offer up an aesthetic image of a loved and valued human being" (Authoring a Character).





After gathering the required material for the painting of Emily's portrait of Miranda, which usually takes about 30 minutes, I asked Emily, "Emily, under the guidance of my questions, are you ready to begin your portrayal of Miranda as a loved and valued human being? And as a final reminder, the burden of the portrayal is on me. I promise that my questions will never let you down."

Act 1: Emily's Miranda

When it happened, I was only 13, just barely a teenager. I just wanted to hang out with my friends and do my own thing. I pretty quickly knew it wasn't something that I wanted. I was asleep, you know! I think something changed when that happened. You can't experience something like that and be the same afterwards. I felt that my normal was taken from me, even though it wasn't my fault, but it was forcibly taken from me. When you asked me if I was taking the path of being taken from or did you take the path of taking back what had been taken from you, I realized I definitely am taking back some things. Last year, I ran into him, the man who abused me, at a fast food place. I know I didn't want to be in the same room as him but I realized that I was angry and unafraid. So I suppose things had changed.

Staring him down wasn't really something I expected myself to ever be able to do. It surprised me! Even though I felt angry, I didn't run away. In fact, I didn't even feel like running away. Looking back, from here I didn't expect that I would react like that but I suppose I did because I was angry about the things that had been taken from me. Funny you should ask, but I never expected my life to change like that in a fast food restaurant. What was the significance of this, of my staring him down, I think I was probably turning toward myself and what I wanted for myself. I guess I was regaining my normal again.

Being abused is such a terrible thing. You feel helpless as if you have no agency. It really messes with your mind, you know? You're constantly questioning: 'is this person wanting to hurt me?' 'Is it safe for me to go over there?' I think about my safety all the time. I would never go into a room or anywhere without asking myself: 'where are the exits?', 'who's around me?', 'who are we talking to?', 'what are we doing?', and 'how long are we going to be here?'

You asked me what I do to prove my innocence. I try to remind myself the best I can that it wasn't my fault in the first place and reminding myself of the things that I did to try to right the wrongs. Even if no one listened to me, it's still important that I did those things.

My boyfriend would probably say that he knew I could do it. He'd probably also say that I don't take enough credit for the things that I do for myself. He gets the occasional 2 o'clock in the morning phone calls, especially this past semester. What would Isaac predict about my future. He'd say that someday I'm going to be the Ultimate Miranda, the Miranda that I want to find. I suppose that I am heading in that direction, by doing active things that I enjoy, like rugby or boxing club and by being a little gentler on myself. The Ultimate Miranda would focus on living her life instead of always looking around every corner. How to live instead of survive. I still need





to look around corners when I need to. I am not saying not to do that. I'll always do that to some extent. The Ultimate Miranda would find a balance between caution and fun. I think I am on my way. When I went to my first rugby practice, because I had a lot of anxiety going by myself, I almost didn't go. But I told myself that this is something that I should learn to do.

Rugby suits me. You can tackle people and knock people over and are running constantly. Even though I've only been to one practice so far, it felt like a family. That was such a different atmosphere than the boxing club. It was really nice for me to think about having 'rugby' family after growing up in isolation.

Do I have a fighting spirit? I know I'm feisty. In rugby, I am doing a different kind of fighting, this time alongside my teammates. It's so different than one on one boxing. In a way, I am leaving my isolation behind. I still have trouble trusting people, but I think I'm getting there. When you asked me if I sought out rugby as a way to be gentle with myself I had to think twice. You don't really think of a contact sport being gentle and making you gentle, but you may have a point there. You can just joke with your teammates, "I'm gonna sweat more than the rest of you" and no one says "oh, ladies don't sweat." I can just be me and make my weird jokes and tackle people. I can be who I am, and I can play a rough sport without being told "oh, you're a girl." I don't feel like I'm an outcast when I am with them. It's the right family for me.

How long have I had a fighting spirit? I bet it's always been there. If you asked Emily what she admires about me, she would say that I'm fighting for myself and what I need and what I want; fighting for the things that I feel were taken from me; fighting for the things that I've been searching for in life. I think that she admires my fighting spirit above all else.

Act 2: Emily's Miranda meets Miranda's Miranda

Miranda, in response to watching Emily's dramatic portrayal of her encounter in the restaurant with the man who abused her and standing her ground, commented:

"I really like how Emily portrayed me in the restaurant. When I first told her about the incident, I remember feeling surprised that I responded in that way. That I stood my ground. Before that very moment, I would have assumed my first priority would have been to run away, to leave the situation. But when I was unknowingly put in that situation when we were in the same building together, somehow I didn't have this pressing urge to run away. I surprised myself! That was a really significant moment for me and somehow, even though it had happened, I hadn't realized how significant it was until I told Emily about it a few weeks ago. And thinking about it now after seeing Emily's portrayal of me actually doing it is even more significant. I don't think I will ever be as scared of him like I was before. I think if I ran into him tomorrow, I want him to know that I'm not scared anymore. If my life and what happened to me were a game, he was winning a majority of the time. Now I want to show him that I'm winning. It feels





good to hear myself say that. I have really been working towards this. As I am thinking about it now, I didn't think I'd ever be at this point in my life."

As Emily's portrayal continued along similar hopeful lines, I (Tom) decided to pause to check in with Miranda to see if perhaps Emily's Miranda was a bit too hopeful and if she might want to dial down some of Emily's hope for her life. I asked, "Are you at all worried that Emily is too hopeful for you? Would you prefer that she hold back some of her hope?" Miranda responded with a smile that seemed to consume her entire face,

"No, it's perfect! I wouldn't want it any other way. Emily's hope for me is helping me to notice things in myself that I didn't notice before."

At another point in the portrayal where Emily's Miranda was trying to make sense of how she, a 13 year old, was able to withstand the betrayal of her closest friends who denied that she was indeed abused, Emily's Miranda proposed that perhaps she was able to do so because she trusted herself. Miranda feeling a bit uncertain about the idea that she actually could have trusted herself at that point in her life asked that we pause the recording for a moment. She deliberated for a few moments before uttering the following:

"I do want to add one thing that I think Emily got wrong. When it comes to why I was able to see these people [her former friends] as bad people is because I didn't have anyone else that I could rely on. So I discussed the whole thing with myself and I decided that it was these people who did something wrong by not believing me; that they were bad and that I needed to do everything to stay away from them and their lies. I think that I learned that there is only one person who can take care of yourself and that was me! I decided right then and there that I needed to do whatever I needed to do to get myself out of that situation and provide myself with a good career so I can have a future. These people [my former friends] were the ones who were crazy, not me. Everything that they did to hurt me just amplified my insight and my knowing that what they were doing is not normal. Maybe that's where I got my trust. I still think it's my fault a little bit. Has that part of me that thinks it's my fault gotten bigger or smaller? It's definitely smaller now. You know what? I think that I agree with Emily's Miranda now. I think when I stood my ground in that restaurant and decided that my friends must have been crazy, that there must have been something inside of me that ultimately wanted to move toward believing in myself. I agree with you now."

During another part of the Act 2 interview, Emily's Miranda was invited to look back from the standing her ground present and the ways in which it has changed her relationship with fear and anxiety in her life. Emily's Miranda portrayed a version of herself that has been able to maintain more of a balance between the need to stay safe and her capacity to enjoy being with friends at public events. In response to Emily's portrayal of this emerging balance between staying safe and enjoying life, Miranda commented:





“It was really interesting for me to hear Emily’s Miranda talk about being able to do something so simple as enjoying going to a party or a game with friends. I guess I really have been starting to do this more, and I didn’t really notice it until right now. I mean, I knew that I was doing these things, but what I didn’t know until this very moment was just how big this is for me. Until very recently, I have been hyper-vigilant, always paying attention to my surroundings. I could find people who might pose a threat to me or who looked dangerous. I knew where these people were. I always felt a lot of anxiety when I was out in public. It took a lot of time and energy to constantly be on guard and analyze every situation. But watching Emily’s version of me I can honestly say that I can’t find people in the crowds like I used to be able to do. Wow! I am just not operating like that anymore. I am no longer analyzing the situation to make sure that I am okay. It’s more that I am must be telling myself that I am okay! So, I guess Emily was right. I am really am moving toward trusting myself. And I am completely shocked by that! What kind of a shock is it? A good one of course. It is very important to me.”

As the act 2 interview moved forward, Emily’s Miranda identified with a theme that seemed to be running through her life history which she referred to as a ‘fighting spirit.’ This theme was significant because Miranda had taken up kickboxing as a young person in order to stay safe and protect herself. Up to this point in her life, before the Act 2, Miranda had only considered this as a response to her abuse as if it were just something that you do when you have been harmed like she had. Emily’s Miranda offered a slightly different account of her fighting spirit; one that was informed by a sense of feeling worthy of being protected. For Emily’s Miranda, it was a fighting spirit that was on behalf of her own rights to be treated with respect and kindness. In response to this particular kind of fighting spirit that Emily’s Miranda had offered, Miranda shared the following:

“Before today, I think I would have said that Emily had gotten this part wrong. I’ve always thought of myself as a physical person. And, now I can see that this fighting spirit part of me started even before this [the abuse] happened to me. I always used to wrestle when I was a child. It used to be fun. After I was assaulted, it became more intense. I needed to know that I could hurt them. I guess that I always knew that I had the physical ability to protect myself. It’s something that I’ve always had, but I am starting to look at it a bit differently now because of this. I’ve always had a fighting spirit! I think that it is part of the reason why I am taking care of myself now. I have the faith that I can take care of myself [said with a quiet conviction]. When I stood my ground in that restaurant and said to him and myself that I’m not backing down, I am not sure if I am ready to say that I was doing it for myself like Emily’s Miranda did. I guess if I were to use my own words, I would say, ‘I refuse to lose anymore.’ I lost in that moment when whatever happened between me and that man, and I am set on never losing again. I have to win. I was doing it because I had to win. I can see where Emily was taking it. She saw it as me doing it for myself. And I guess in a way I was doing it for myself. That’s something that is a little bit tricky for me because Emily and I have talked about how I’ve felt so guilty and bad; how I’ve hated myself. So it’s just really hard for





me to see me doing it for my own well-being and for myself. That's a little more challenging. Is it okay with me to see it as an outcome of my efforts rather than a goal? Yes! I like that. There's a part of me that wants me to love myself and I can see how the part of me that wants me to love myself has really grown today. I think that part of me that wants me to continue hating myself is a little frustrated because we're messing with everything. But I'm okay with that! In fact, I'm okay with saying that I was doing it for myself all along. Because it was for myself!"

Another key point of the Act 2 interview was Emily's Miranda's introduction of her recent taking up of rugby in college as another way that she was continuing her legacy of a fighting spirit. In addition to being a very physical and aggressive sport, Emily's Miranda (through the guidance of the interviewer's queries) also noted that rugby is a team sport. And as a team sport, Emily's Miranda began to speculate about the possibility that in taking up a team sport (rather than her previous choice of solo sports like kickboxing) that she had found a way to use her fighting spirit to fight alongside others rather than on her own. Emily's Miranda then wondered something quite novel, 'was it possible that in seeking out rugby that she had found a family that was also fighting alongside her?' Miranda seemed to be in a bit of a trance as she listened to Emily's Miranda talk about rugby in this way. After gently inviting her back into the room from her reverie, Miranda commented:

"That is really interesting. I can honestly say that I have never thought about it from this point of view. I guess that I do believe that I'm moving from isolation but I haven't thought about it in the way that Emily's Miranda did. I have always felt like the others know that there is something wrong with me; that they think that I am dirty. I guess I am moving away from that a little bit. But to think about rugby as a way of finding a family to fight alongside of and with...I had never thought about that before. And even though I don't think I would have ever come up with this if you had been asking me but the more that I think about it I think that Emily got it right! Usually when people say something that I've never thought of, I almost always think that they are wrong. And at first, when I heard Emily as me say it, I thought to myself, 'What? You're wrong!' But, I don't! I don't think that she was wrong! This rugby thing is much more significant than I thought. We need to do this once a week!"

The conversation about the potential significance of taking up rugby continued. Emily's Miranda (once again with the guidance of the interviewers) wondered whether it was in any way possible that in seeking out rugby that she was not only seeking a fight alongside others but that perhaps she was finding a way to be gentle with herself. This puzzling seemed to take everyone by surprise. Once again, Miranda was entranced as she waited for Emily's version of herself to answer this speculation. After Emily's Miranda concluded that she thought that it was a distinct possibility that it was, Miranda commented:

"Now that is very surprising to me. You would think that rugby as a way of being gentle with yourself are two completely different things. At first I was thinking, 'I'm really not





sure about this.’ But as she kept going I thought, ‘But I really do like where it’s going.’ And I was very, very surprised by that. There is this little part of me that wants to be good to myself. Before today, I would have said that it’s maybe about this big [holding her fingers about a few centimeters apart]. But as I have been sitting here and hearing some of the things that Emily as me has said, I can’t help but think that there is more of that part of myself than I had ever known. I have never thought about myself in this way. And I really like it. There is this part of me that is saying ‘No’ but there is another bigger part of me that is saying ‘Yes!’ I am very shocked by that.”

At the end of the Act 2 interview Miranda shared:

“If I were to write a book about my life, I’d call it ‘My Fighting Spirit.’ It would be about the history of my fighting spirit and how it brought me to this place where I can love myself again. I think that I would end the book with these words, ‘You’re safe little voice, be free!’”

Follow Up Interviews: Miranda, Emily, David and Tom

The following represents a summary of several follow up co-research interviews/conversations with Miranda over the course of the past year. These interviews took place at three months (June 2015), six months (October 2015), and one year (April 2016) after her Act 2 interview. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. After the first interview in June 2015, David asked further queries in the text of the transcripts to help Miranda expand upon her thinking and theorizing of her experience of IWPs. Miranda then responded to David in a similar fashion. They engaged in two such rounds of inquiry. For the second interview in October 2015, Miranda, Emily, and Tom met together to read from the full set of transcripts from the June 2015 interview (including both round of commentary by David and Miranda) with the intention of deliberating further on any new ideas, phrases, or descriptions of Miranda’s experience had emerged. Finally, on April 2016, Miranda, David and Tom met together a week after she witnessed the performance of a play based on her Act 2 experience at a narrative therapy conference in Vancouver, Canada. What follows is a summary of these interviews in Miranda’s own words. Miranda’s words are in italics along with an occasional prompt question from Tom or David which is indented and in quotation marks.

I’ve given my experience of IWP a lot of thought. I am a thinker! I want to talk a little bit about ‘the magical’ because I don’t know how else to describe it other than magic.

“Miranda, we are intrigued by your comments regarding the ‘magic’ of this practice. Why do you say ‘I don’t know how else to describe it other than magic’. Before you arrived at the designation of ‘magic’, had you tried out some other forms of describing what took place?”





I like to use the word magic to describe my experiences because the process was out of my awareness but the end result was not. I could not see the work being done. I did not realize what was happening until I was processing stuff with Emily a month or two later. When I think of other words to describe it, a spiritual awakening or a change in my perception comes to mind.

“It is now three months later. Do any of these words still resonate with you?”

That spiritual awakening part – I never really thought of myself as extremely spiritual. But throughout this process, I find myself feeling more spiritual. I have a different type of compassion. I’ve never really been that compassionate towards myself. What’s different about me now is that I have a different side to me. I am now softer, calmer, and able to think well beyond what I used to be able to do. I feel so differently now. Last year I used to feel this way and think this way. This year, I feel differently. You know, if something happens, I respond differently now. I’m definitely calmer than I used to be. Here is an example: Last week, I was upset when I came to see Emily because a boy called me a bitch because I asked him to be quiet, and I didn’t think that was fair. Last year, I would’ve thought, ‘oh it’s because I am a bad and crappy person and I deserve to be called a bitch.’ Now I felt he was treating me unfairly. This was a good change. It takes a lot of weight off of me. Sure I was upset that he called me that but I was confident that was because I was a woman which made it easier for me to handle.

“How do you think you were able to come to a place where you could respond so differently?”

I think it’s my new level of compassion. I think it started with my 13-year-old self, but throughout these months, I think it’s come up to the present day Miranda. I am now feeling I do have self-worth, whereas before I didn’t feel like I had any.

“Has your newfound compassion for your 13-year-old Miranda caught up with the 20-year-old Miranda?”

It’s awesome for me to consider that I’ve come seven years in just a few month’s time! Extraordinary! It’s completely different! I used to have zero self-worth and now I have more and I’m assuming it’s just going to continue. It feels good to tell yourself that ‘you count’ as a person rather than telling yourself you don’t don’t matter and that everyone else would agree. I’ve always felt considerable anxiety, frustration and unease because inside that’s how I felt about myself. Now, I count as a person! I belong here! In fact, I think I have a chance to be 100% better! I don’t know if that’s even realistic, but I’m gaining so much and I’m healing so much that at one point everything that ever happened to me will just have been a past rather than suffering. This healing isn’t over yet. I no longer feel hatred for my 13-year-old self. I believe a lot more is to come of this. So much is happening and so quickly. It’s fast! It’s moving! After all, I didn’t have to be admitted to the hospital to get these huge results. In some ways, it doesn’t





seem that I did very much. I just went to class. I did my stuff. And then bam! All these changes are happening. That's why I call it magic because to me it [IWP] operates afterwards.

Let me explain what happened to me in a story. During the Act 2, a seed had been planted in a field that was barren and for the most part dead. Afterwards, something allowed this plant to grow. The plant continued to grow and one day, in a field that had nothing, something appeared. I realized this change had taken place in a meeting with Emily a month or so later. The plant grew and allowed me to believe that other things could grow here. The field that was once barren and dying is alive and bearing fruit. I didn't physically sense anything but rather it just appeared as if by magic. It seems so weird and yet so true!

If I were to sum up what happened to me as a result of Act 2, here goes. For a very long time, I have felt strongly that I should be treated by others and myself in a different way than I would treat others. In fact, I used to tell myself that I don't get to be treated like everyone else and instead I felt that I should hate myself as well as others should hate me. Other people could be loved and have people feel compassion for them. When bad things happened to them, it was not their fault. This was not true for me. I am the wreck, a terrible person who deserves to be treated unfairly. When I look back at what happened to me, I always felt like I did something to cause the pain, to be abused, to lose all my friends and live in misery. Even though I have been told time and time again that it was not my fault that didn't seem to change anything. All my self-hatred stemmed from the sexual abuse and believing it was my fault. My involvement in Insider Witness Practices allowed me to be free from this. I can now regard myself with same with the same compassion as I would another person who lived through what I lived through. Now I feel really sad that I felt this way for so long. This has made life a lot more sweeter!

Now that I have declared my innocence, it is as if I can look back on my past but without all of the pain. I don't have to live with the guilt anymore. I'm becoming this new person and no longer think about the abuse many times a day like I used to. I have realized that the memories of abuse are not as constant and do not have a grip on my life anymore and maybe one day these memories won't be forgotten rather they will not bring such pain with them. I don't think that I would have ever felt free from the blame that I have felt for the last seven years without this [IWP].

"Miranda, how would you explain how all of this came about?"

Okay. Emily pretended to be me, and when we watched together as a group, Tom would pause the recording and ask questions. When I watched Emily's Miranda in the Act 1, I practiced along with Emily's Miranda being compassionate and kind to myself. It was uncomfortable for me but at the same time it felt right. At first, I thought that my compassion would be reserved for 13-year-old Miranda. I had no idea that it was going to flow over to modern-day Miranda as much as it has. I am surprised that it has become so present so quickly. Self-compassion is my new norm!





I used to fight it when I had feelings of compassion for myself. Now I am fighting for 'I count.' It sounds a bit weird to hear myself say that, but that's how I feel! Before I assumed life was going to continue to suck but now I know my life is only going to get better. I no longer live in the same world. I live in a new world now!

All I want to do is yell that I'm free. That's how I feel. I feel so free from so many things. I just want to scream it! It can't hurt me anymore. I want the whole world to know! It was as if I crawled out of the darkness and now I'm finally seeing the light.

The Play

Given the dramatic transformation that Miranda (and all of us for that matter) had experienced as a result of her participation in Insider Witnessing Practices, and our continued difficulty in adequately explaining this practice to our friends and colleagues, it finally dawned on us that it might be best if we tried showing them (rather than telling them) through the performance of a play based on Miranda's life and experience. After all, presenting our work in this way would be in keeping with the performative spirit of IWPs. On account of Miranda's insistence on having her experience being known to others, we explored the possibility of turning her IWP experience into a play or documentary, we approached Chelsea Pace, a professor of theater at NDSU, to see if she might be interested in such an endeavor.

Our hopes for her enthusiasm to join us in extending the practice of IWPs were bolstered after a chance encounter with a colleague. Despite our best efforts, David and I became increasingly despairing of our inability to find the words to adequately communicate the transformative potential of IWPs to our narrative therapy colleagues. It was, after all, a practice that was borrowing from work that was far beyond anything most therapists had ever read or considered before. During a presentation on gender equity work that I (Tom) was giving to a group of faculty at another university, I learned that one of the attendees was a professor of theater who specialized in performance. I introduced myself to Gus and asked if I could have a few minutes to talk to him about a completely unrelated matter. Admittedly, I was anticipating that Gus's response to my attempt to explain IWPs would be the same as that of so many others before but this time my experience was decidedly different. After listening to me for no more than for 30 seconds, Gus's eyes began to fill up with tears. Gus politely interrupted my fumbling attempt at an explanation and commented, "What a beautiful practice! I am crying because I can just envision what it is that you are offering people. You are offering them the rarest of opportunities to be an outsider; a witness to the beauty of their own lives." I will never forget Gus' response. It was the first time anyone had immediately understood the beauty of what I had already been witness to in my experience with IWPs. While Gus admittedly knew nothing about therapy, he could immediately feel the power of this practice because of his intimate knowing of the power of performance. When I picked up the phone to call Chelsea to tell her about our project, I was hoping she would feel the same.





In September of 2015, Tom emailed to ask if I would be interested in discussing a new performance based on narrative therapy that he was developing in collaboration with David. The work immediately intrigued me and I ventured into a long process of learning about Insider Witnessing Practices through Miranda's eyes and her words. Tom had provided me with the transcripts of all of their interviews with Miranda. The words were very important, and I agreed with Tom that the most honest and useful approach to a theatricalization of Miranda's experience would be Verbatim Theatre. Verbatim Theatre, an approach resembling documentary storytelling, requires that the exact words of the subject be preserved to most authentically retell a story. It represents an ethical commitment on the part of the storyteller to honor the words and experiences of people in everyday life. Miranda's story was inspiring and the words were undoubtedly poetic and theatrical, all of which made for a smooth transition from transcript to script to performance.

As I studied the transcripts and considered the constraints of performing to an audience of therapists, I allowed the source material to shape my approach. I was inspired by the conversations that seemed to take place between Emily's Miranda and Miranda's Miranda that occurred in Act 2. The small separation of the two Miranda's allowed for what theatre practitioners would call the "space to play," or in this case, the space to resolve the portrait. Traditionally used to describe work with theatrical masks, the space to play is the physical room between a performer's face and a mask, usually created by padding. This space creates physical comfort for the performer as well as an artistic freedom to become something other than themselves. In the transcripts, I saw that space between the performance of the two Mirandas (the Miranda's Miranda and the mask of Emily's Miranda) and the possibility for resolution that this space provided.

The play came entirely from the words of Emily and Miranda's respective Mirandas. Just as Miranda had earlier witnessed Emily's Miranda through the distancing of recording and a screen, the audience witnessed a similar form reflected in performance with pre-recorded text of Emily's-Miranda and live-spoken text of Miranda's-Miranda.

The play took place within a day long pre-conference workshop presented by Miranda and Marsha Brown, Tom Stone Carlson, David Epston, Emily Corturillo, and Ana Huerta Lopez at the Therapeutic Conversations 13 Conference in April, 2016 in Vancouver, Canada.

Remembering Vancouver (Miranda Brown)

You are probably wondering why it was so important to me that my mother join me in Vancouver to watch the play at my side. I know this may sound strange but my mother was meant to be a mother and love a child to the fullest. In fact, I know now that she was meant to be my mother. Although I now feel entirely free from the guilt or blame and have declared my innocence, my mother still carried with her guilt for not protecting me from the abuse. She has played such a valuable part in my healing, I wanted her to have a similar experience of innocence. In fact, there was nothing more important to me than this.





For so long my mother and I had been unable to speak about what was done to me. In some way, I had lost some of my mother and my mother had lost some of me. I hoped Vancouver would be a good icebreaker for our relationship. Another reason I wanted her to be by my side, was no matter how hard I had tried to explain what was going on for me, I couldn't explain it to her and she couldn't understand. How could you explain something so dramatic like what happened to me to anyone? You can't just google it. I tried.

After the play, Tom accompanied my mother and me as we walked along the seawall in Stanley Park. I really can't imagine a more beautiful setting for what turned out to be the final act of the day. Tom was the only person in the audience. We had walked at a leisurely pace in to the setting sun trying our best to try to take it all in. Watching the play together, side by side, as mother and daughter, was a great experience. In fact, my mother told me that the impact on her had been '99 times' more powerful than she had anticipated.

My experience of the play was very powerful. I found myself so focused on the play, I couldn't feel other people's presence. It was just me and the play. I was engrossed. But, I kept being confused with myself because I would hear stuff that my Miranda or Emily's Miranda. I no longer could tell the difference between the two versions. I'd say to myself, 'did I say that or did Emily say that?' Had Emily's Miranda become my Miranda? It was surreal!

I remember seeing myself in the play and I had the strange feeling of being moved by myself. I had to remind myself, "Miranda, it's yourself. Calm down. It's okay to be moved by yourself." I was kind of fighting it for a little bit, but it was my story. Still there was a separation and it was as if I was watching someone else's story all over again. This time I allowed my emotions to run free because it was another person's story but believe it or not it is slowly becoming mine too.

One line hit me the hardest: "I was this close [fingers held mere inches apart] to hating myself forever." That really moved me, and I just really—everything in my body, I could feel that. Because I remember what it was like to feel that way. And to realize how far I've come? It was truly a magical experience. And then when the play was over, I realized my mom was sitting next to me sobbing. This brought me out of the play. We fell in to each other's arms and cried together. I have no idea how much time passed. But as for the duration of the play—because it felt like it went on forever I was just so... Words still fail me even when I think about it now. The play showed me how far I had come in my life and I now feel a great deal of sympathy for everything I have been through. It was just beautiful! I knew now I had gone on a journey of a lifetime! I don't think a movie could have been any better.

It was very early spring and the sun soon started setting over the harbor that nestles below the mountains. I noticed my mother's pace had slowed down and I fell alongside her. I sensed that she had something significant to tell me. She was hesitant, perhaps not knowing how I would react to what she had to say. This was something that we had never discussed before. "Miranda, when used to I looked at your scars they reminded of all of your suffering and pain.





After seeing the play, I now see them as symbols of all of your courage and strength. It is as if your scars were transformed before my eyes. To me know, they are the scars of a warrior!" My mom's words stopped me in my tracks. And we embraced one another, with joyous tears in our eyes.

Meeting Tom and David a week later in Fargo, I told them: "I had my own perception of my scars and they really don't bother me. They're my scars and are on my body. But it's surely different if your child were to harm herself. I don't have any children so I can't fathom it. I think that's something that's really bothered my parents. For her to change how she sees my scars shows the healing that she's under gone. She now really understands how far I've come. Instead of seeing them as just a horrible memory, she sees them as my warrior scars. This is hand's down the best experience of my life!

Hey, before we stop I've got to tell you about a vision I just had in my head. I am down on my knees, my arms outstretched and inviting my 13-year-old-self in to my arms so that I can hug her. We are just accepting each other; you know? We have really become one now rather than just being these two separate entities that are angry with each other for their own reasons. I said to her, "You're safe, little voice. Be free!"

The Final Word (Marsha Brown)

The day I lost my Miranda was a very sad day. For the longest time, each and every day, I could see her slipping away from me. I was scared for her and wanted to help. As her mother, it killed me to see her suffering especially not knowing why. As a small child, Miranda had always been a smiling, outgoing, and happy child. She was unstoppable! Every day when she came home from school, I would get a play-by-play account of her day. She was fearless in so many ways. I used to love watching her go through her day as if she didn't have a care in the world. And the sparkle in her eyes was just so bright. Then one day, shortly after her 13th birthday, my Miranda lost her sparkle. And my fearless, unstoppable, happy little girl was no more.

When I was dropping my son back to his dorm after a winter break, he forewarned me: "Mom, Miranda has something to tell you." I asked him what it was. "Mom, I can't tell you. Miranda has to tell you." He then looked at me and said "If she doesn't tell you in the next week, call me and I'll tell you. But she needs to tell you something!" My heart sank. You can imagine what went through my mind.

The day Miranda told me what had happened to her when she was thirteen, it was as if someone took a knife and repeatedly, repeatedly kept piercing my heart. I thought I was going to pass out, throw up, and cry all at the once, knowing she had been suffering on her own in silence for so long. How could I have let that monster near my beautiful child? I blamed myself for not protecting her and allowing that monster into our lives.





Miranda's freshman year at NDSU was hard. When she should have been out enjoying time with her new friends, exploring her new limits, she was having trouble just getting up and dealing with the day. I would pray that somehow, some way, some day she would regain that carefree spirit, 'fearless unstoppable,' and wondrous sparkle. She had suffered in silence for so long, unable to tell her story. Thank you for helping her to find her voice and the opportunity to tell her story out loud to the world. I believe that Miranda is a beautiful, wonderful, spectacular, and amazing person. She has regained her fighting spirit and her eyes are sparkling again. Not only is my daughter amazing, I know she's going to do so many amazing things in her future.

I have my Miranda back. Thank you! Thank you!





Deconstructing Denial: Stories of Narrative Therapy with People Who are Dying and Their Families ¹

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When I was 19 years old, I got a job as a nurse aide in a hospice to pay for my university fees. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) was my hero and I was broke.

One day I was handing out lunches. I walked into the room of a woman whom I hadn't met before. I had been told this woman was "in denial". She was sitting up in bed stiffly, as if uncomfortable. Her skeletally thin, pale face turned towards me as I entered the room. With some energy she immediately began to challenge me in a loud voice, "I look ugly don't I?" "Don't you think I look disgusting?" "How could anyone think I wasn't ugly?"

She spat out the words angrily.

I didn't know what to say. It seemed apparent from what she was saying that other people had argued and tried to reassure her. That seemed unhelpful somehow so I listened. In fact, I listened with all my might. That afternoon I went home and thought about her. I wondered what it would be like to be so distressed and angry, and dying.

I asked myself, "What could I do", "What could I say". I knew the staff had said she was "in denial". What did that mean I wondered, because it seemed to me she knew exactly what was happening to her and she was very, very, upset.

I went back to work the next morning resolved to try and do something for her, only to discover she had died in the night.

Wonderings of a narrative therapist

Now as a narrative therapist I might wonder how the staff came to understand the woman was "in denial" and where conversations could have gone if there had been another understanding.

¹ This paper was originally presented as a keynote address at the conference "Therapeutic Conversations Norway" in 2016. It is dedicated to Geir Lundby in acknowledgment of his commitment over many years to nourishing Narrative Therapy and in memory of a wonderful dinner time conversation. For inquiries about this paper please contact Sasha at Sasha.Pilkington@hospicenorthshore.org.nz





I might wonder what kind of assault her body had been enduring from the cancer, and treatments she may have had, and how that had been for her.

I might wonder what her understanding was of the changes to her appearance and what meaning she attributed to those changes.

I might want to ask her what was important to her in this, the last phase of her life.

In this paper I will be using stories of practice to illustrate some of the alternatives that Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) offers to labelling a person's relationship with approaching death as "in denial". The stories I am going to share are representations of therapeutic conversations I frequently have with the people I meet in my role as a counsellor working for Hospice North Shore.

Hospice North Shore provides palliative care for people living with a life ending illness and their families. Palliative care refers to specialist health care services for people with a life ending illness, and their families, that "aim to relieve and prevent suffering in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual domain" (Gaertner et al, 2015).

As I mainly meet with New Zealand Europeans, I am going to illustrate practice that addresses the influence of the dominant Western discourses that permeate many societies and impact on the work I am engaged with. However, our relationship with death is culturally constructed and I want to acknowledge that there are many cultural understandings that can shape a person's relationship with illness and death.

The stories I am going to share illustrate one way a counsellor might respond. They are not the only way to respond. However, my hope is that they will invite you to reflect on your practice and what you might do.

Deconstructing denial.

When a person's response to loss, illness and approaching death is constructed as "in denial" (Kubler-Ross, 1969), further inquiry about their actions and understandings is often shut down. Meaning is imposed and their response may be understood as "a problem to overcome" (Zimmermann, 2007). Judgements that cast a person as "in denial" foist the onus to change onto them, relinquishing those around them from the responsibility to pursue understanding their stance. The issue moves from being one between two people, to a problem one person has (Zimmermann, 2004). The values and experiences that are behind the person's stance remain obscured. At a time when a person is most needing of support they can be diminished and pathologized, robbed of dignity and disconnected from those people that are important to them. Distressed family members lose an opportunity to understand and be understood and there is a real possibility of families remaining fractured at a time when connection is what they wish for.

In the following story I am going to introduce you to Alan and Catherine. Alan had nearly died three times in the 2 months before I met him because he had refused to acknowledge life threatening symptoms of the cancer he was living with. He was also fighting for his life with





huge energy. Such seeming conflicting responses are common in this area of work. They often require a counsellor to traverse with a person, the spaces in-between (see Bird, 2000, p.23) their hopes, and what they value with tremendous care and skill. These conversations demand a commitment to look further than common explanations of a person's response, to persist in searching for what their reactions express, to hold compassion closely and respect closer still, remembering the ongoing traumatic context in which they are living.

The following is the first chapter of a story I wrote called "Travelling on the journey to death" (Pilkington, 2014). It illustrates how I might go about stepping into a conversation with someone and begin to co-evolve with them the meaning of their stance².

Travelling on the journey to death: A story illustrating narrative practice for counsellors. (Pilkington, 2014).

The rain battered the hospice roof. I could see it pelting down on the quarry that my office window overlooked. It had been a busy day for all of us in the hospice community team. I readjusted my gaze and looked down at the new referral sitting on my desk. Catherine had requested counselling because she and her husband, Alan, had been fighting for the past year. The referral described Alan as "in denial." "Whose description was that" had been my first thought. When I telephoned Catherine, she told me she was desperate for the fighting to stop so they could enjoy the last few months of Alan's life. Catherine said she wanted their three young children to have some time with their father, but all Alan did was work. "How does Alan feel about us talking about these concerns you have for the relationship?" I asked her.

Catherine told me Alan wanted to be at our initial meeting but hadn't decided if he would talk. He would just listen and then make up his mind whether he wanted to be part of the counselling or not. As Alan was extremely fatigued we agreed to meet at the family home. A few days later, I drove to Alan and Catherine's house, reflecting on the multiple intrusions families have endured in the health system before they begin to receive care from hospice. I respected Alan's caution about speaking to me. I would ask him about his concerns and address the "bystander" role as the conversation evolved.

FINDING A "WAY"

The inside of the house was in stark contrast to the luxury car parked in the driveway and the affluence of the surrounding area. It was unheated and the furnishings were oddly sparse for the size of the house. Alan sat there on the sofa, as if the weight of his concerns were pressing down on him. He looked shrunken and exhausted, at variance with the deep laughter lines running through his face. His face held no smile now. The yellow colour of his skin hinted at the cancer that had spread throughout his body. I had been warned by

² For another full story illustrating practice with someone who has been positioned as "in denial" see Pilkington, 2016.





Catherine that Alan would refuse to speak of the cancer. I wondered to myself how he had reached this conclusion and why. He would have good reasons for doing so. Catherine's welcome was tinged with apprehension as she asked me to take a seat. She sat on a chair well away from her husband and I moved to sit somewhere midway between them.

"When you were thinking about me coming today, did you have any thoughts about what might be useful for us to talk about?" I inquired, looking at Catherine.

Catherine glanced at Alan nervously. "We have been fighting all year," she explained, "ever since Alan got sick. I want to enjoy this time together but all he does is go and work in his office. He won't talk to me," she said, looking reproachfully at Alan. "I want to get on and do some fun things together with the children, but all we do is argue." Alan, whose restless movements suggested he was becoming increasingly agitated, chipped in, "We wouldn't argue if you were supportive."

Intending to sidestep any invitation to pass judgment on the dispute implicit in Alan's retort, I asked, "Would it be all right if I asked you some questions about your life before all this happened?" I waited. When they both gave a nod I began, "What was it that you enjoyed about each other before the illness came into your lives?" Smiling for a moment before answering, Catherine reminisced, "We were very happy. We've always been a close family. Alan is a great father. He has always been involved with the children. And, as a couple we have been friends, talked, you know. . . ." Catherine's voice petered out and she dolefully looked over at Alan. He remained silent and expressionless. I wondered if he had expected such a favourable description.

I proceeded on this track, uncertain as to where it might lead, "How might you like to be together as a couple, and as a family, at this time in your lives?" Catherine responded readily as if her answer carried with it some seemingly well-rehearsed thoughts: "I want to get on. I want to do things together, and talk. Be close, and share things like we used to." Alan's eyes were downcast as if he were studying the pattern on the carpet beneath his feet. "What do you think Alan's wishes for your time together might be?" I asked. Taking her time over her reply as she contemplated, Catherine, in a barely audible voice, finally said, "I don't know."

"From my experience of speaking to people, a serious illness often brings with it huge challenges that can strain even the strongest of relationships," I said. Intending to make known some of the effects the cancer might be having on their relationship, I then asked, "How would you say the illness has disrupted the way you want to be together?"

Alan, still bowed, now began to pick at the varnish that was peeling on the armrest. Catherine continued in her efforts to communicate to me some of what they had been going through. "We were devastated when Alan got his diagnosis. We were very stressed, tired. I wanted to talk about what was happening but he wouldn't. It's been endless appointments and visits to the hospital." As Catherine talked about all their efforts to rid Alan of the





cancer, Alan started to quietly chip in as if he couldn't help himself. As he started to do this more, I tentatively observed, "I notice you are sharing some of your thoughts, Alan." I broke off, before gently going on. "Would you like to join in the conversation fully, Alan? Or is it more useful to continue from the sidelines as you are?" I paused, not wanting to impose on him. "I don't want you to find yourself talking just for my benefit."

I know the people I meet are often generous to me in this regard, or perhaps feel unable to say what they want. I didn't want him to regret speaking or to come to the end of our conversation without it having been what he wanted it to be.

Alan looked me in the eye. Then, in a voice that held surprising firmness, stated, "I want to talk. Then you can hear my point of view."

Again, I was as tentative as my tone of voice would allow. "Would it be all right if I asked you about your experience of living with this illness, Alan?" I wasn't ready for the enthusiastic response I received. "Living with it!" he exclaimed. "Now that's more like it! Everyone is always. . . . The way they talk to me! But I'm going to fight. I'm going to fight this thing and never give up!"

At times taking a fighting stance can be problematic for people living with terminal illnesses (Harrington, 2012), as it leads to a binary (Bird, 2004) of "winning" or "losing." However, I respected the position Alan had taken up as it was obviously meaningful for him and may have been well thought out. Aware we still hadn't agreed on a name for what he was fighting, I asked "How do you go about this fighting of yours, Alan?"

"Well, they won't give me any more chemo." He hesitated. "I am having vitamin C infusions twice a week. My brother offered to pay for them." Pink colour spread over his face, and he started to pick at the varnish again. "I do all I can." His head dropped, as if he were surrendering something.

"Could you help me to fully understand what you are fighting for?"

In a quavering voice Alan replied, "I am doing all I can to live. I have to live." Alan's voice shook with what sounded like fear as he continued to speak. "Being sick, it has taken everything from me. You know we had to leave our house. We're renting here, though we are going to have to move. To think that I would be in a position of not being able to pay . . . the bills, they just kept coming and I kept thinking I could find a way. I used to earn a lot of money. Did you see my car in the driveway? But now. . . ." Catherine chimed in, "Alan is still doing what he can, though I keep telling him to leave it. He spends all his time in his office pouring over the accounts and doing some work for his old company. He won't let it go. It's all he ever does. He barely spends any time with me and the children. . . ." As her voice became accusatory in tone, she seemed to catch herself and quickly trailed off.

"What is important to you about the work that you return to it, Alan?" I inquired.





"I have to find a way," he said with some urgency.

"What "way" are you looking for?" I asked.

There was a long silence, which Alan finally broke. "A way for them to be okay," he whispered, releasing a long slow breath, and nodding over to where Catherine was sitting. Catherine was startled. She opened her mouth to speak, but Alan continued, fear and desperation in his lowered voice now: "I can't afford to die and leave them like this. I can't afford to die."

I listened to the yearning he had to care for his family.

"So when you retire to your office, what are your hopes for your work?" I asked quietly. "I'm working to try and find some money for them," Alan anxiously replied.

Catherine started to cry silently, the tears sliding down her face freely as if they already knew the way.

"My family are important to me." Alan looked at Catherine for the first time since the conversation began, tenderness in his eyes. Catherine, returning his gaze, rose from her seat, and moved to sit beside him.

We were interrupted by the sound of a child. Their 3-year-old son, Robbie, had woken. Catherine got up and brought him into the room. Without paying his father any attention, he looked at me with interest, before settling down to play beside Catherine. We had stretched everyone's attention and in particular Alan's energy about as far as I thought prudent.

"How has this conversation been going?" I asked them. "Have we talked about the matters you hoped we might, or is there something we have missed?"

"It's been good," Catherine answered. Alan cut in across her, "Better than I thought."

"Is this a good place to stop?" I asked "or is there something else we might speak about today?"

They both agreed there was nothing further for today. "What are your thoughts about meeting up again?" I asked them. They quickly requested another meeting for the following week.





Deconstructing Denial

You may be wondering what influenced Alan to take up such a strong fighting stance and how he came to be positioned as “in denial”.

To consider therapeutic practice with people who are dying, and their families, it is important that we understand how the notion of denial is constructed, if we are to avoid reproducing ideas that pathologize people in the counselling room (Hare-Mustin, 1994).

Western discourses of death have changed shape over time. In modern Western society, dominant discourses of death centre on our increasing faith in science and the progress of modern medicine (Powell, 2011) in its stated journey to “find a cure”. Death is positioned as something to be fought (Powell, 2011) and cancer as a problem to be solved (Willig, 2011). Discourse prescribes “fighting” (Harrington, 2012) disease, evoking a binary position (see Bird, 2004) of winning or losing which is problematic for those people living with a terminal illness. In addition, dominant discourse insists on thinking positively (Willig, 2011) closing down space for people to talk about suffering and their mortality and may have them engaging in aggressive treatment till the end of their life.

In palliative care, discourse has arisen that contradicts the wider social discourse about death. Death is accepted as part of life and is discussed openly. There is a focus on quality of life rather than cure. People receiving treatment in palliative care are engaged in conversations concerning symptom management (Zimmermann, 2007) of, for example, pain, as part of their care. They are invited to participate in advanced care planning so their wishes can be respected concerning how they want to die. From a person’s earliest contact, when a consent form is given to them, open discussion about approaching death is present and is often seen as necessary, in order for someone to have a “good death” (Saclier, 1998; Smith, 2000), though what constitutes “a good death” is being challenged (Clarke, 2002).

Once a person receives the news they are going to die the wider social discourse and the palliative care discourse collide. On the one hand people receive a message that they must take a stand to resist the illness and on the other they are quickly required to consider and discuss dying. Those people who maintain a stance where they continue to “think positively” or resist speaking about dying in the manner or at the time another person requires it, may be positioned as “in denial” (Zimmermann, 2007). In addition, denial may be applied to a person when their actions are interpreted as a hopeless attempt to prolong life, such as when a caregiver feeds someone who is seriously ill. Denial is also a description a person may apply to themselves when they have no alternative discourse available with which to describe not wanting to openly talk about death.

Narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) offers a therapeutic alternative to labelling people as “in denial”. It uses practices that privilege a person’s desired relationship with dying while honouring what is important to them in their life.





Let us now reflect back on the conversation with Alan and Catherine, and consider how my understanding of narrative therapy ideas influenced what unfolded.

When meeting with people such as Alan, their dignity is foremost in my mind. I carry with me a sense of our shared humanity, and recognition of the reciprocity in the relationship. Alan gave me a priceless gift when he bared himself and shared his experience. As I positioned myself in the conversation I wanted to honour Alan's efforts towards his life and those he loved. To do so, I was listening for virtue in his intentions. I understood the context of the conversation as a crisis where every aspect of Alan's life may have been disrupted. I was also aware that there may have been no opportunity for Alan and Catherine to talk fully about their experience. Stories such as theirs are usually untold.

When Michael White wrote about attending to trauma, he described psychological pain, "as testimony to the violation of what a person holds precious (2005, p.19)". White (2005) went on to say how day-to-day distress could be considered a tribute to a person's ability, to maintain a relationship, with what they hold precious. Such understanding, directs inquiries towards fully understanding how a person pays tribute and to exploring what is treasured in their life that the illness is threatening.

In my conversation with Alan this was reflected in me asking questions to develop a shared new understanding of how he went about the fighting, and what it represented. We were then able to research what was cherished by Alan that had been violated.

Alan's unfailing dedication to his work, in spite of being seriously ill, was shown to represent a daily tribute of love towards his family. Once this new co-evolved meaning was brought forth Alan could then weigh up the new knowledge of how he was responding to the illness, with how he wanted to show his love for his family. The new shared understandings led us to the possibility of exploring the questions:

- Do Alan's responses reflect, or contradict, what is important to him? And, are his responses the way he would most like to express what he values?

We could then follow through with exploring the implications for his life and how he lived it.

Therapeutic conversations that create space in which a person comes to understand what is behind their response and allow family members access to their good intentions can be very powerful in restoring dignity, accessing love and inviting reconnection of relationships. Let me illustrate this point further.

Restoring Dignity and Connection

The following conversation occurred in the first meeting with an extended family in a story I wrote called "Antidotes to pathologizing ideas" (Pilkington, 2016). Jane had approached me





and requested I meet with her family as they had never spoken about the cancer she had been living with, though she had been unwell for a number of years. Jane was in the last few months of her life and desperately worried about her partner Andrew, and teenage daughter Alice, whom the family understood to be “in denial”. Jane wanted to talk about her illness and dying but they refused to do so. There was enormous tension in the room with family members well aware that they were considered to be “doing it wrong”.

In contrast to beginning by talking about what Jane was worried about, I had begun with an inquiry highlighting the family’s commitment to be there to support Jane, even though most of them would have rather not come (see Epston, 2010; 2016). Having heard a little of each person’s loving intentions towards Jane, and noting their generosity in being there, we began to approach Jane’s desire for the family to talk, and belief that it would be better to do so. What follows is a brief snippet of dialogue that occurred 25 minutes into the conversation. I was still moving slowly and carefully, mindful of multiple marginalisation’s this family had been subjected to and wanting to respect each person’s position (See Pilkington, 2016, Antidotes to pathologizing ideas: A story illustrating narrative counselling practice with someone approaching death).

...Andrew, Jane’s husband remained hunched in his dark corner. He had barely moved since I had entered the room. His eyes now stared at the wall as if he was willing me to pass him by. As gently as I was able, I asked, “Andrew, do you have any thoughts you think might be helpful for us to talk about today?”

“No” was his quiet reply.

Andrew gathered himself and looked at me, “The thing is, I don’t believe in emotions”, he pronounced.

I nodded attentively. Then, with as much respect as I could put into my voice I asked, “Would it be OK to ask how you like to do it?”

Andrew uncurled his body looking a little startled.

“I think about things a bit... when I feel like it” he stuttered.

“Would you say you are a thinker?” I checked, offering a possible name for his style, but also to make it clear I wasn’t pathologizing his position.

“Yeah, I’d say that” he concluded.

I noticed his eyes were no longer directed at the wall but now followed the conversation.

As Andrew seemed finished for the moment I stored the new information away intending to return to it at a later point, and turned to Alice. Before I could say anything Alice shook her head. She was still unable to speak a word. Distress seemed to silently pour out of her bowed reddened face.

“Alice and me, we’re in denial”, Andrew explained from the corner.





I wondered if they had been criticised for their stand.

“I find people mean different things when they talk about the idea of denial. Could you help me to understand what you mean when you say you’re in denial?” I asked evenly.

He nodded, but before we could go further, Alice stood up and moved to sit on the backdoor step adjoining the room. She immediately lit a cigarette and turned her back to us. Her grandmother Violet jumped up and told her to come back, however I intervened.

I saw Alice could easily hear us, but didn’t want to talk, and not wanting to impose on her I said, “Its fine. Alice can stay there and listen or come back if she wants too. These conversations can be very tough and we all respond differently”.

“Alice and I are in denial”, Andrew confirmed again. “We put our heads in the sand.”

“Could you explain to me how you go about putting your heads in the sand?” I asked him curiously.

Andrew paused, allowing me to catch a glimpse of Alice listening intently on the step.

“I don’t think about it. I’ve still gotta work, doesn’t do any good dwelling on Jane having cancer. I wouldn’t be any use to anyone”, he answered me steadily.

“How has it helped you live with this?” I replied, intending to offer validity to the way they had responded to their experience, yet not wanting to impose a name on what “this” was.

“...Meant I could get on with things, carry on. Still gotta make myself useful. There are still bills to be paid”, Andrew answered quietly, seeming to chew the idea over.

“May I ask, what is important to you that you carry on and try to be of use?”

Before Andrew could answer Violet interrupted, “He’s had a tough life. He doesn’t talk about it”.

Ignoring this comment, Andrew began to slowly answer, “First time I’ve been happy....being with Jane...wanted to hang on to it...look after her.”

Andrew sat back in his chair, withdrawing into his dark corner. Surprise sat on every face. We all sat for a moment in silence. Jane had only eyes for Andrew. Later, I would hear how rare this verbal expression of love was.

Listening for Virtue

When people have been positioned as “in denial”, listening for and identifying “moral virtue” can reveal attributes that may directly contradict the pathologizing story. Moral virtue according to Epston (2015) refers to Aristotelian representations of goodness; courage, justice, kindness, gentleness and wisdom.





In a family where someone is dying, identifying and thickening the narrative (White, 2007) of people acting with virtue can hold immense significance in meaning making. Gathering such stories can reconnect family members and sustain people through the challenges loss and illness may present.

However, in people who have been positioned as “in denial” virtue is often rendered invisible. To make matters harder, as they defend what is important to them against the multiple intrusions that usually occur, they may become angry or react in ways they would rather not. They then have to contend with the losses in their life and the idea they are behaving badly.

An inquiry can create a new lens through which a person can understand their responses. Shame can be replaced with understanding or even pride in what they are protecting. At the same time, revealing the previously hidden purposes of anger, can allow a person to then articulate more clearly, what it is they need, and allow them to respond in ways that honour what they value. Let me illustrate what I mean.

A small hope: A story illustrating Narrative Therapy

I was on my way to a first meeting with Joe and Andrea. Joe was in the last weeks of his life and Andrea, I had been told, was refusing to speak about the possibility of his death. She instructed all health professionals that she only wanted to hear positive news about Joe’s physical condition.

As I drove to the house I reflected on how suddenly and recently Joe and Andrea had been catapulted into news that Joe’s illness couldn’t be cured. For this young couple with 6 year old twin boys it was completely unexpected.

Early in our first meeting I began “Cancer has a way of taking over people’s lives. Would it be OK if I asked you a bit about yourselves and your life before all this happened?” I turned my head towards Joe, who smiled and began to tell me about himself. Andrea had a big reaction to this question making it very clear that she liked being asked who they were aside from the cancer. This question began an inquiry which revealed their love for each other and dedication to the environment. After such a warm beginning we then went on to discuss, quite naturally, how they preferred to live with the cancer. “What do you give weight to in the day as you live with this cancer?” I asked them. Andrea confided that she was afraid that their twin boys would forget their Dad. It was the first acknowledgement of Joe’s approaching death though death was not named. This confidence provided an entryway into us discussing what was important to them that they wanted to be remembered. Together we devised a family charter of values so the boys could know what was important to them as a family being sure to name Joe’s beliefs and hopes.

During the course of the week I heard that Andrea had become angry with any assessment of Joe’s symptoms. Joe’s condition continued to deteriorate and it became evident to the hospice team he was actively dying. It would perhaps be easy for Andrea to be seen as “in denial” and as an “angry person” but inquiry provided a more useful description.





In contrast to these reports, when I arrived Andrea was bright, and told me it had been “a better week”. As Joe was too sick to talk we spoke on our own.

“When you look back on the last week do you have some ideas about what has contributed to this week being better?” I asked using her words.

“I’ve stopped looking ahead” Andrea replied.

I responded tentatively, “May I ask, where do you look when you’re not looking ahead?”

Andrea answered me initially seeming to seek reassurance.

“No one can know exactly what’s going to happen, can they? Now I only think about today and I have some hope” she added.

“Could you help me to understand a little of what this hope is to you?” I inquired. Andrea paused bowing her head.

“It is only a small hope” she said in a little voice as if confessing something. “...To be with Joe, for another day or maybe even a few days.” Andrea looked down again her eyes gleaming with tears. For a moment we sat quietly.

Moved by her humble hope I went on “May I ask what difference this small hope makes to you?”

“It means I’m not crying all the time. I sat by the window and told Joe what I saw outside. We spent some time talking quietly together once the boys were at school. I made him a little something for lunch and we sat together. He told me being together like that was perfect, and he has never said that before.”

“As you look out the window describing what you see to Joe, what does this small hope do, that has Joe finding your time together perfect?”

“I can enjoy the moment and he feels that. It helps me forget what is coming” Andrea explained.

“When you spend these moments that the small hope has given you, what has been made possible, that wasn’t there in the week before?” I asked her as I knew that the week before had been distressing for both of them.

“Close time together. Before we were only fighting we were so stressed” was her reply. Andrea and Joe had spoken about the impact of the stress and its effects with me in our first meeting. Rather than returning to it I responded, “How did you come to find closeness in sharing the view from the window and talking and bringing Joe food?”

Andrea told me with eagerness now edging into her voice “It’s what we’ve always done together, enjoyed the simple things. We like to do those things that money can’t buy”. Andrea continued telling me stories that illustrated what she had said.





“How would you describe the qualities you experience in your relationship in those enjoyable times?” I asked her.

“We are best friends. We have always done everything together” Andrea told me before enlarging on their shared parenting beliefs.

“What else do you do in the day that speaks to the closeness you share as a couple and as parents together and brings you closer to Joe?” I wondered.

“Gardening,” Andrea readily answered, “I feel close to him when I do his vegetable garden and I will keep doing it. I just couldn’t do it before. I was too shocked. Now I have some hope and it gets me through the day”.

“How important is this hope in keeping you close to Joe and getting through the day?” I asked her.

Firmness was in her voice as she stated, “Very, very important. It means I can enjoy some time with Joe and that is the most important thing to me. The time is so precious. And I don’t want to cry every minute”.

It is now easy to see why Andrea might protect the small hope that was helping her savour time with her dying husband. It is by no means a denial of approaching death but rather an embracing of what was most important to her, close time with Joe before he died.

Creating Space for Silenced Stories

As practitioners we know that therapeutic practice embraces complexity and the shades of everyday life. Clean lines and binary thinking are replaced by the “somewhat” and the “both and”. Every story a person tells us has the potential to turn any assumptions or previous understandings we hold upside down, and they often contain more beauty, than we could ever envisage ourselves. With this in mind I want to share with you a final story.

This story illustrates how I might support a couple in their preferred relationship with illness and death where they do not want to openly talk about dying. Such a preference is difficult to hold. People who are seriously ill are given regular injections of information about their health’s deterioration through symptoms, hospital appointments and in their contact with health professionals.

For people not wanting to think about dying, such overwhelming unwanted information can shut conversations down as they defend their position, leaving little room to talk about matters that may be distressing for them. Rather than label people as in denial, let me show you the space that can be created by privileging a person’s own way of talking about their experience.





A loss of faith: A story illustrating Narrative Therapy with someone approaching death.

I picked up the phone one busy afternoon. I had been asked to ring a young woman called Marie. The hospice team had requested that I speak to her urgently, as her partner Andy was very close to death.

“Sasha, I was wondering if I could see you” she said from the other end of the telephone sounding agitated. “I feel so guilty. I’m a failure as a partner. You see, I have lost the faith.”

“Could you help me to understand a little of what this faith is that you have lost?” I responded somewhat surprised by her candour.

“That he’s going to be cured. I keep trying but I just can’t be positive for Andy and keep believing” was Marie’s reply. I could hear her begin to weep with shame on the other end of the phone.

“Would it be OK to ask how you came to lose this belief that he was going to be cured?” I responded when she had quietened.

“He is so sick. He can barely get out of bed. I feel so guilty. I’m letting him down” Marie told me.

We talked a little more and then began to arrange getting together.

“Where would you like to meet?” I asked her. Normally I visit people who are seriously ill at home but I didn’t want to presume.

“It will have to be home as I can’t leave Andy anymore” she replied.

“What will Andy make of me coming?” I checked not wanting to impose on him.

Marie was clear, “He’s OK with it. He said he’d be there to support me but you mustn’t say anything about dying to him. Andy won’t talk about that. We are focused on being positive and getting him better.”

I noted Andy’s care of Marie and his willingness to risk a conversation that could be uncomfortable for him so he could support her. Andy had no way of knowing I would support his chosen stance.

With Marie and Andy

I knocked on a brightly coloured door surrounded by flowers. The door opened, and as I took a step forward, two young girls flew out dressed in fairy costumes. They were followed closely by an older woman, whom I imagined might have been their grandmother. “You must be Sasha” she immediately said, “go on upstairs, they are waiting for you”.

I walked up a light airy staircase calling out “Hellooo.....Hellooo....it’s Sasha”. Marie came out of a door at the top of the stairs to meet me. “Come on up. We’re in here. Andy is just in the bathroom”. I paused at the top of the stairs, and hesitated, not wanting to intrude. Marie





welcomed me into the room again just as Andy emerged. When he saw me standing in the hallway he immediately mumbled, “not much privacy when you’re sick, is there”.

“No indeed. I am sorry. It can be quite an invasion”. Marie beckoned me in, but I remained hesitant. “Would you like to talk here in the bedroom or is there somewhere else you’d rather go?” I asked, looking at Andy. “You’d better come in here” Andy replied curtly. Andy climbed back into bed slowly. Each of his legs moved as if attached to a heavy weight. Marie offered him an arm but he brushed it aside. Andy’s skin was a bright yellow colour that announced a liver overwhelmed with its bodily tasks. It was easy to see he had recently been a strong and fit man in muscles that had been well used, though they could barely support him now. I wondered how he managed such disability at 32 years of age.

We sat down on the bed as he indicated we should. In this intimate space we exchanged some greetings.

“Thank you for seeing me. It’s lovely to finally meet you in person Marie” I began warmly. “How kind of you to see me” I said turning to Andy, remembering Marie’s comment on the phone.

“He’s always very supportive of me” Marie immediately said.

“It’s the least I could do with all she is doing for me” Andy responded stony faced.

I began tentatively, “Would it be Ok to ask you a little bit about your lives before all this happened?” My hand in the air spoke for me as I indicated the illness because we hadn’t agreed on what “this” was.

Marie began to tell me about herself following this invitation and I heard how she was a successful personal assistant, good at organising and managing people.

Andy looked surprised by my question, “I was a welder before I got cancer”. He paused before adding, “Look I’m not any good at talking. I can’t express myself in words. Marie’s the one for that”. He lay back on his pillows shutting his eyes for a moment.

I discovered a little bit more about their jobs before asking them how they spent their spare time. When they had described the outdoor activities they enjoyed Andy began to join in the conversation a little more.

I then began to approach more personal areas of their lives. “Would it be OK to ask how you two met?”

I looked over at Marie.

“Through mutual friends...we were at a party. He came over to me towards the end of the night and just started talking to me” Marie explained.

I turned towards Andy, “may I ask what it was that drew you over to Marie? What made you think she might be worth talking too?” I smiled warmly at him.





“She’s such a beautiful kind person” he answered me somewhat gruffly. I risked another question, “Would it be OK to ask how you knew she was kind from over the other side of the room? Was it in her eyes or was there something she did that communicated her kindness...?”

Marie perked up looking at Andy with curiosity.

Andy somewhat bashfully responded, “Well err, I was actually watching her all night”... He glanced at Marie before continuing. “... And I noticed that she talked to this guy in the corner who no one wanted to hang out with and then later there was a bloke beginning to make a fool of himself and she told a joke and diverted attention. I’m pretty sure she stopped everyone thinking he was an idiot actually....and I thought “I’ve just got to meet this woman” so I went up to her....and well, she was just lovely. But I’m no good at this sort of thing. I can’t express my feelings.”

“I never knew all that!” exclaimed Marie. “Sure you did” Andy retorted.

“Was there anything in the way Andy crossed the room to talk to you, Marie, that made you think he might have seen your kindness?”

“Actually I couldn’t believe that he would talk to me. Andy is so charismatic and everyone likes him” she responded while Andy stared silently at her but remained expressionless.

“Did you see yourself differently in that moment when he picked you out to talk to?” I asked her. A small smile crept onto Marie’s lips and I caught Andy looking at her with attention. His face softened.

“He’s always made me feel special, though we are totally different. People love Andy and want to be around him whereas I’m more of an “in the background” kind of person”.

Andy interrupted gently, “She’s the organiser, the planner, the one who makes things happen and she can get close to people. I’m no good at that intimate talking stuff”.

I noticed Andy’s willingness to speak well of Marie even though he said he found talking difficult.

“We are a team. You make people happy and laugh. Everyone loves you” Marie cut in smiling at him.

“What does Andy do that has everyone loving him?” I asked her.

“He’s incredibly loyal to his friends. He looks after the people who are close to him, I mean really looks after them. My parents live with us, and, he takes care of all his family.” She looked towards Andy and for a moment I thought I saw the gleam of tears in her eyes.

“Do you mind me asking how Andy shows that care and loyalty towards you?”

As Marie hesitated Andy answered, “It’s not just me. We all rely on you to make things work.” Andy turned to look at me with expectant attention as if seeking my backing.





However, before I could reply he added, "I just wish I'd been able to tell her what I feel more".

He looked downcast for the first time as the conversation took on a new tone.

Carefully I responded, "May I ask, what you wish you could have said if you'd been able".

"I would have told her what she meant to me" he answered seeming to force the words out.

I reflected that my question may have been too broad and tried to cut it down a size or two,

"Is there a particular time when you would have told Marie what she meant to you if you could have?" I asked him.

"The way she stuck by me when my parents died. And then when it was tough at work and I was a bit of a...well you get the picture. She was on my side always. And then the way she organised our holidays. We've travelled a lot together and she made all this wonderful stuff happen. I've always been able to count on her. She means a lot" he managed to utter.

"What difference has it made to you to have Marie at your side and to know you could count on her?" I asked wanting to give him a chance to express his appreciation of Marie in her presence.

"Well it meant I could get on and do my thing and there she would be kind of organising things behind the scenes, making things work. I wouldn't have been able to support the people I love if it hadn't been for her. She is incredibly kind and generous. I was right about her from the start." Andy looked pleased with himself.

Marie chimed in, "We are a team".

"Would you be willing to tell me a bit about this team-ness? Do you have any stories of you being a team together?"

Marie took the lead and began to share some of the precious times they had spent together. Andy then told a story of his own about a travel adventure they had shared. It was rich and full in spite of Andy's assertion he wasn't able to express himself. I pursued stories of appreciation and they both spoke of their love and value for each other.

Andy finally remarked, "Not that I can travel now I've got cancer."

"Andy may I ask how you go about living with cancer?"

"I look after my health. I'm not into pills and artificial stuff. I've always been very positive. I don't believe in looking ahead. I just live moment by moment."

"What part of your life would you say you are prioritising as you live moment by moment?"

"Time with Marie and the girls I guess" he replied.





“How did you come to decide to live moment by moment rather than letting the cancer take over your life?” I then inquired.

“I still wanted to be a husband and father and live my life. I wasn’t going to give in to it. I admit it’s challenging at times” he told me.

“When this way of living is challenged, may I ask what you do to reconnect with it?” I asked.

“Marie helps me and I believe. I know I lose the plot sometimes. It’s like a bit of metal, if you bend it enough it breaks. But I’m a welder, and I know metal can be welded together again. So I just move on and put myself back together”

I was fascinated by his reply. However, as Andy spoke Marie’s eyebrows drew together and her foot started tapping on the floor. She then exclaimed, “I do believe but I also worry about how I might manage. I don’t know how I would cope with the girls and looking after my parents. I can’t help it, I keep worrying. I’m so sorry Andy... I’m worried I’m losing the faith”. Marie began to cry.

Andy looked uncomfortable and concerned for her. He tried to wriggle closer to Marie but weakness prevented that. He then attempted to cover up his inability to move in the bed so, concerned for his dignity, I offered a distraction in the form of a question.

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions about this?”

Marie nodded.

“Would it be OK with you Andy?”

Andy with a rueful smile said, “Sure”, and in that moment I gathered he knew what I had done and was perhaps grateful.

“Could you help me to understand a little of what this faith is to you both?” I asked. I steered away from asking about the nature of the faith as I didn’t want to take Andy down paths he didn’t want to travel, even though I recognised Marie had alluded to him dying indirectly.

“It keeps me going. A good attitude is essential. The diet and the special supplements I am taking are making a big difference. I believe in myself” Andy answered and turned to Marie.

“We have believed all along in him and it has got us this far” Marie told me. “I’m letting him down....losing faith”. She looked like she might cry again.

Rather than pursue further what Andy meant by a good attitude and believing in himself I decided to inquire into what was distressing Marie, “Could you help me understand this experience of losing the faith?” I asked her.

“It makes me feel so bad...a failure. I want to keep the faith but stuff that is coming up worries me and I start to think ahead” she explained.





“What is important to you that is reflected in this desire to keep the faith?”

“I want Andy to know I believe in him. Support him... So I know I’ve done everything possible” Marie and Andy looked at each other. Andy softly spoke to Marie,

“You are, love. I know you believe in me. We are just different people. And you are looking after the girls, your parents and me. Making sure we are all Ok.” I noted that he had spoken of the faith as believing in him rather than in his getting well.

Andy reached out for Marie’s hand.

“What do you believe in about Andy?” I asked turning to Marie.

“That if anyone can do it he can, he will do everything that’s possible”. We were speaking about the possibility of Andy dying and I noted he appeared calm. Marie added, “I’ll be here looking after him and the girls no matter what.”

“How do you go about looking after Andy and the girls?” I inquired.

It was Andy who answered, “She organises all my treatments, food and appointments. She’s making sure everyone is going to be OK and I appreciate that”.

Marie looked grateful for this interruption so I continued, “Andy, what does it mean for you, that Marie is taking care of everyone?”

Andy paused looking thoughtful, “Actually, it means I don’t have to worry. It means I can be in the moment. Marie is the planner. It saves me worrying about the family and day to day stuff so I can concentrate on my health.” I noticed Marie began to look a little brighter.

“Marie, may I ask, does taking care of the future and making sure everyone is Ok mean you have lost faith in Andy?”

Marie almost stood up as she exclaimed, “No! I’ve just realised. I haven’t lost the faith and given up on Andy. I am just planning and looking after everyone like I always do!” She laughed and Andy returned her smile. “See love, I told you, we were OK. Someone’s got to do it” he reassured.

I couldn’t help but grin. Marie was way ahead of me!

“If you were to hold on to this recognition that you are planning, and taking care of other people, rather than not believing in Andy, what difference might it make to the way you think about yourself when you fear for the future?” I asked still catching up.

Marie became buoyant. “All the difference! I just need to remember I’m looking after them” she exclaimed. Her relief was palpable.

“What could Andy do to support you in this remembering... so you keep this knowledge in the forefront of your mind?” I continued however Marie changed our direction.

“Andy, you could help practically. Will you speak to Dad about moving?” she replied.





“Sure” he grunted willingly.

“When will you do it?” Marie persisted.

When they agreed that it would have to be that evening or the following at the latest it became clear to me they were now acknowledging that Andy had little time left alive, though death was not openly canvassed.

I could see Andy was tiring and began to bring the conversation to a close.

Andy died 5 days later. When I met with Marie after his death she told me “When I look back I will always treasure those last weeks. We did all we could. In spite of everything, we kept believing till the very end”.

Marie and Andy had preserved the way they wanted to live by not speaking openly about dying (Frank, 1995). I chose to uphold and respect their wishes, making it possible for a conversation to unfold.

Beyond the Veil of Denial

When we cast aside prescriptions of a right way to die we create the possibility of a space to be alongside a family as they contend with some of the struggles that may accompany approaching death.

The stories in this paper illustrate some of the alternatives Narrative Therapy offers to labelling someone as “in denial”. They show how people can be supported and find new meanings in their preferred relationship with loss, illness and death.

When we focus our energy on entering another person’s world with curiosity, bending our attention persistently and compassionately towards trying to understand their experience, we cast aside the veil of denial, and enter a realm of many possibilities.

We may find there loss and suffering, but also more love and virtue than we dreamed was possible. We may find creativity, and the extraordinary in the everyday, or we may be called on to witness distress, and paradoxes that challenge us. However, when we meet people in this realm of their creation, we can join with them; to find chinks of light in dark places, give voice to silenced stories and maybe, find solace in love.





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