



Journal of Narrative Family Therapy

Ideas and Practices in the Making

Founding Editor: David Epston

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Editors: Tom Stone Carlson, Ph.D., David Epston and marcella polanco

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

Editors: David Epston and Tom Stone Carlson

Editors' Notes

About this Release

We are excited to announce the second release of the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy. Since the inaugural release of JNFT in May 2017, we have received a number of exciting and innovative papers that we have been 'stockpiling' for the purpose of making more frequent releases available to the narrative therapy community. Rather than following a traditional journal release format of quarterly issues with a large number of papers, we intend to follow a more frequent release schedule so that new ideas and practices are made more readily available to those interested in narrative practices. This second release of JNFT marks the beginning of what we hope to be a monthly release schedule.

This release includes three innovative papers that are sure to interest readers of JNFT. The first paper entitled "Notes on Socio-narratology and Narrative Therapy" written by Art Frank brings together Art's long time interest in the relationship between Socio-narratology and the ways in which narrative therapy has perhaps 'understudied' stories, especially as it relates to what it is that makes up a 'good story.' The second paper entitled, "Lessons From Lucy: Reunion Questions, Creating Time Portals, and Helping People Witness Themselves in Narrative Therapy" written by Travis Heath and his colleagues Rowan Ramsey, Luke Riley, and Fernando Ocampo-Gomez introduces readers to a new innovation in narrative therapy questioning called "Reunion questions." These questions are an extension of David Epston's internalized other questions that involve conversations with past and future versions of one's self. The third paper entitled, "Miranda Returns" written by Miranda Brown, Tom Stone Carlson, and David Epston tells the ongoing story of Miranda and the dramatic transformations that have occurred in her life as a result of her experiences with Insider Witnessing Practices. This unique paper, based on a therapy interview that Tom had with Miranda, introduces readers to a new format for presenting transcripts in a more readable and story like form.





Exciting News from JNFT

marcela polanco named Co-Editor

We are excited to announce that marcela polanco has agreed to serve as a co-editor of JNFT. marcela will oversee the development of a new Inter-cultural and Inter-language section of JNFT. The purpose of the new section will be to publish original papers by authors in their local languages and contexts in the hopes to contribute to the ongoing efforts around the world to decolonize narrative ideas and practices. Look for a future announcement for further details about the Inter-cultural and Inter-language sections of JNFT.

For more information about marcela and her interests please [click here](#).

Spirit of Adventure Conferences

One of the visions that David and I have for the journal is to find ways to acknowledge and support the efforts of agencies that have and continue to make significant contributions to the development of narrative ideas and practices. It is particularly important to us that we acknowledge agencies that are working on the front lines, working with people whose lives are on the edge and often with very few resources to do so. We came up with the idea of co-sponsoring what we might call 'Spirit of Adventure' conferences with such agencies with the express purpose of raising the visibility of the agency and the important work that they are doing for their local communities and the larger narrative therapy community. Additionally, it is our hope that through co-sponsorship with JNFT, that these conferences might also bring a financial benefit to these agencies to help them to continue to carry out the important work that they do in their communities.

We are excited to announce that the very first 'Spirit of Adventure' Conference will be held on March 15-16, 2018 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The conference will honor the important contributions that the Calgary Women's Health Collective has made to the development of narrative therapy ideas and practices in the local Calgary community and beyond. The conference will follow a unique format that embraces a spirit of partnership where members of the Calgary Women's Health Collective will present alongside David Epston and Tom Stone Carlson in an effort to highlight the ways that they are innovating narrative ideas and practices. Given that the conference is so very near the 10 year anniversary of Michael White's death, we will also offer a tribute to Michael and his influence on our lives and work.

For more details about the conference including information on how to register for this unique event please see the flyer found in this release.





Notes on Socio-narratology and Narrative Therapy

Arthur W. Frank ¹

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Revised July 20, 2017

These notes explore and develop the relevance of what I call *socio-narratology* (Frank 2010) to the narrative therapy innovated by Michael White and David Epston.¹ What follows is less an essay than part of an on-going dialogue with White's writings and with Epston's evolving practice. My interests are in what is specifically *narrative* in narrative therapy, what sort of *self* is implied by both socio-narratology and narrative therapy, and the particular nature of *story*, a word often used without specification.

I proposed the label *socio-narratology* in my 2010 book, *Letting Stories Breathe*. Socio-narratology uses concepts drawn mostly from literary narratology and from folklore studies—concepts including genre, character, point of view, plot, and type-tales—but its questions derive from social science. The core questions are about the complementary issues of individual action and group formation.

With respect to individuals, socio-narratology is interested in what provides for and can require the sense of being a self, how malleable and multiple that self can be, and especially, what action possibilities particular selves can imagine for themselves. With respect to groups, the interest is in what enables people to affiliate, understanding themselves as *members*, and what holds those affiliations together.

Letting Stories Breathe focuses on how socio-narratology grounds a form of qualitative research, which I call dialogical narrative analysis because I like the pun on DNA. Stories, on my account, are literally the DNA of selfhood and groups. This article shifts the focus from research to therapeutic practice. My questions about what sustains a sense of self and what sustains group affiliations are central issues underpinning any therapeutic work, although narrative therapy seems to be the therapeutic modality that most actively engages these questions. That may reflect White's and Epston's original training in social work, rather than psychology or psychiatry.





When I wrote *Letting Stories Breathe*, I was certainly aware of narrative therapy and the work of White and Epston. My wife, Cathie Foote, had participated in training workshops with Michael White, and he and I had exchanged papers. But any book can sustain only so many theorists, and *Letting Stories Breathe* does not discuss narrative therapy. Writing now, I see the core of the book's argument as having already been summarized by White, in a statement that the rest of this article develops.

It's to propose that it's not possible for us [humans] to interpret our experience without access to some frame of intelligibility, one that provides a context for our experience, one that makes the attribution of meaning possible. It's to propose that *stories constitute this frame of intelligibility*. It's to propose that meanings derived in this process of interpretation are not neutral in their effects on our lives, but have real effects on what we do, on the steps that we take in life. It's to propose that it is *the story of [as?] self-narrative that determines the shape of the expression of our lived experience*. It's to propose that we live by the stories that we have about our lives, that these stories actually shape our lives, constitute our lives, and that they "embrace" our lives. (White, 1995: 13-14; brackets and emphases added)

Note that White does not close by saying that our human lives embrace stories. Instead, he says that stories embrace our lives. That subtle shift is a considerable difference from how many people think of stories. These notes are commentary on this passage, the radical implications of which still seem scarcely understood. I realize that many other statements expressing these same ideas can be found throughout the corpus of writings on narrative therapy and in the wider narratology literature.

Becoming an Escape Artist

My usual way of doing socio-narratology is to tell two or three stories, put those stories into dialogue with each other, and let any analytic points emerge from that dialogue (for example, Frank 2004, 2016a). Sometimes I ask one story to carry the argument (Frank 2016b). This working method is my version of what narrative therapists practice as *de-centering* the therapist. In narrative therapy, the therapist is no longer the master interpreter of the client's life and its troubles. Instead, the therapist asks questions that reflect a sincere curiosity about the client's life, and these questions instigate the client's work of reflection on that life and especially *how that life is being narrated*. In socio-narratology, the narrative analyst sets stories





in dialogue with each other, and observes what can be learned from this new juxtaposition of stories.

This article juxtaposes not stories, but rather a couple of epigrammatic quotations. The first quotation is from the American novelist Tim O'Brien, who writes about the Viet Nam War, which is always a major reference point in my consciousness. O'Brien says that, as a writer, he asks himself two related questions: "Why do we make things up? Why don't we just report what happens in the world?" He has provided significant answers to those questions, most directly in his book *The Things They Carried* (1990), which comprises linked stories about the war, narrated by a character who may or may not be O'Brien himself. The book has a short interlude in which O'Brien asks the question that is posed implicitly in the stories themselves. The question is how do you tell a *true* story about war, or I would add, about anything that traumatizes the narrator and is not something that listeners want to hear about. Those two conditions--the traumatization of the narrator and the resistance of listeners--are also conditions in which therapy begins, in its own way.

A brief response to O'Brien's questions about why we make things up is that many and possibly most narrators cannot "just report what happens in the world". They cannot do it, first because they themselves are unable to do it. What has happened to them defies conventional articulation, and what could be spoken is intolerable to speak. Second, narrators cannot just report because their listeners do not want to hear what happened. These conditions reinforce each other, and they illustrate why, if we are speaking properly, we should always talk about *relations of storytelling* rather than just storytelling.

Anyone's possibility of being able to tell a story is always already a response to the imagined future response of listeners. Taking that seriously, the primal task of any therapist is to convince the client that the therapist is prepared to be a new and different sort of listener. For the client, being in relation to that new and different listener enables becoming a new and different narrator of his or her life. To repeat: The initial problem of therapy is whether and how the therapist can convince the client that he or she is in the presence of a new species of listener, and that relationship enables the client to become a new narrator.

Narrative therapists emphasize having *re-authoring* conversations. That usage is entrenched and I am not proposing giving it up, but *multiple-narrating conversations* might be more accurate. There is a subtle difference between authoring and narrating, and that difference goes back to why post-structuralists including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault proclaimed





the death of the author. Authorship, in the post-structuralist account, is tied to authority; it's an assumption of narrational authority that is singular or monological. The intended awkwardness of my preferred *multiple-narrating* instigates reflection on the presence both of multiple narrators in any storytelling scene, and of multiple narrating voices within each person. The narrator is never the singular locus of authority of the narration. The sense that there is or can be a single locus of authority is an effect of a narrative style, and both narrative therapy and socio-narratology understand such a style as a tactic of power relations. Thus, instead of re-authoring with its implication that one author can replace another, the possibility of singular narration is replaced by an awareness of multiple narrational possibilities. How to tell a true war story—or any true story—begins with deconstructing the idea of truth as singular.

Another answer to Tim O'Brien's question is expressed by my second epigrammatic quotation, from Bruce Springsteen speaking in an interview (Hiatt 2016) about his recently published autobiography. The interviewer asks Springsteen what I think a narrative therapist would *not* ask, at least phrased this way: "Does the book get us closer to really knowing you?" That question presupposes a really-knowable-you that is the object of others' progressive knowing. Narrative therapy refuses that presupposition. Springsteen does not resist the question—he is, after all, trying to sell books—but he deflects it: "You know, I would say so," he answers. Then comes the deflection: "But once again," he adds, "it's a creation. It's a story that I drew from my story. It's one of the stories I drew from my story." When the interviewer then asks how Springsteen's own autobiography compares to biographies that have been written about him, his answer continues this deflection: "They're all good, if you're interested in different sides of me and different parts of my story."

I hear Springsteen responding to O'Brien's question about why make things up. His autobiography does not make things up, but "it's a creation", because there is no single, straightforward reporting of just what happens in a life, even or maybe especially one's own life. We are always telling only "one of the stories" that is drawn from a set of narrative possibilities that might be imagined as an anterior story, true and complete, but *no such story itself could ever be told*. All that can be told are different parts of that hypothetical story. Springsteen thus expresses the self-understanding that seems to be a goal of narrative therapy: the self is constantly creating itself by choosing which stories to tell about itself. That overly broad statement requires two qualifications. First, Springsteen, like any storyteller, is limited in his choices; limitations include what did or did not actually happen, and what narrative resources are available for telling.ⁱⁱ Second, Springsteen knows he cannot control which stories others tell. Rather than resist that as an imposition, he generously offers space for others to





narrate his life in ways he would not choose. He can co-exist with alternative narrations. That co-existence is a considerable accomplishment. Most people need narrative therapy to get to that possibility of co-existence.

I want to quote a later part of the same Springsteen interview that seems to express another fundamental issue for narrative therapy. He is asked about changes in the styles of his songwriting, and he replies: “You’re always in a box, and you’re an escape artist if you do what I do—or if you’re a creative person, period. You build your box and then you escape from it. You build another one and you escape from it. That’s ongoing.” To understand this in relation to narrative therapy, I recall David Epston saying, in a workshop, that narrative therapy is a *critique*. Epston did not specify, at the time, what it is a critique of. The narrative therapist Christoffer Haugaard (2016) builds a careful case that narrative therapy is a two-fold critique.ⁱⁱⁱ It critiques other psychotherapeutic practices and how these are implicated in power relations. And narrative therapy critiques society generally, especially how relations of power normalize selves, stigmatizing those selves that do not fit this normalization.

When Springsteen says “You’re always in a box”, I hear that in terms of Foucault’s argument that the subject is *always* within relations of power; there is no outside to these power relations. To escape is, as Springsteen says, to build another box to put yourself in. Narrative therapy helps people escape from a box that is sometimes called the *dominant narrative*. That is, culturally pervasive narrative lines that imply parameters for how persons of a certain character type—that type implied in phrases including ‘somebody like me’—can expect to live his or her life; what actions are possible for such a person, and what the effects of particular actions will be.^{iv} Both therapist and client, collaboratively, work out how to escape--both of them--into a new box. This new box is still a box, but it is different from the old box. The best way I can articulate that difference is to use a trope from folktales. The old box was encased in spells binding the person within it to an inevitable future; *this is who you are and this is your rightful life*, the spells say. The new box is encased in spells reminding the person that escaping and building new boxes is the ongoing work of being human. The object of narrative therapy is to create conditions that enable someone who is trapped in a box to become an escape artist.

But again, there is always a box; or in Foucault’s terms, there are always power relations. Narrative therapy teases out stories of the client’s previous escapes so that she or he feels empowered to make future escapes. I find it useful to think of narrative therapy as being training in the art of becoming an escape artist, including escaping aspects of narrative therapy itself. Critique eventually has to be reflexive and understand itself as open to critique. Many





forms of therapy profess something like that, but the question is how well they *practice* it. Do these forms of therapy enable clients to become escape artists, or do they aspire to put clients into boxes that have labels like functional, rational, and productive? Is the point to stay in the box that therapy constructs? The box labeled *authentic* can be the most confining box of all, which is one aspect of Foucault's (1997, pp. 283-84) rejection of the idea of *liberation*. Liberation pretends to discover a space outside the box, but it itself is another box that people are supposed to stay in, and too many liberation movements have spells to bind people into their box.

Stories and Experience

I now become more specific about stories and selves. Three arguments from socio-narratology seem pertinent to narrative therapy's interest in how selves change.

First, *stories precede experiences*. Michael White implies this in the long quotation earlier, but he stops short of saying it explicitly.^v Saying it explicitly makes a difference. Putting stories before what can be known as experience reverses the common-sense sequencing in which people first "have" experiences and then, later, tell stories about these prior experiences. In settings exemplified by law courts and medical history-taking, the value of the story depends on its representational accuracy in depicting what took place at some previous time and place. Crucially, representation must be singular; only one story can be true and correct. Beginning with Freud, most forms of therapy have in various ways rejected that representational view, but both narrative therapy and socio-narratology radicalize that rejection.

The idea of stories preceding experience depends on realizing that the inherently unordered and incoherent world we live in is endowed with order and coherence by narratives and stories. A human who does not know stories would be unable to perceive how to act and have agency in the world. One core citation here is to the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, writing in his 1984 book *After Virtue*: "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted; anxious stutterers in their actions and words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories that constitute its initial dramatic resources" (216). A therapist wants to add that the scripts and dramatic resources provided by some stories can cause people trouble and suffering. Yet, MacIntyre reminds us that even the most dysfunctional stories still allow a person to have any sense of self at all, and that gives those stories their sticking power. Narrative therapy never underestimates the





sticking power of stories that support problems in people's lives, or the capacity of these stories to convince people their lives are defined by that story.

What people are able to see in the world depends crucially on what MacIntyre calls their dramatic resources, which in turn depend on which stories they know. A person is able to perceive as possible and potentially effective only actions that are possible for a person *such as I believe myself to be*. The significance of this point deserves an illustrative example. The music critic Greil Marcus, reviewing the autobiography of the famed guitarist Robby Robertson, writes that when Robertson was a teen-ager, "his father had no patience for his son's rock-and-roll fantasies: 'Look at your relatives on the reserve. Look at the people in our neighborhood. That doesn't happen *to folks like us*. So don't set yourself up for disappointments'" (Marcus 2017, 45, emphases added). Robertson's father does not exactly tell a story. Rather, he sets out a narrative line that emplots his son's future within its parameters. Young Robby's future story is expected to follow this narrative of what happens to "folks like us". Most children are given stories to grow up on (Frank 2010, 7), and much time in therapy is spent identifying and contesting these stories.

We humans know ourselves as persons who operate within set parameters of possible action. Those parameters are learned in the stories that are a person's dramatic resources. These stories—including fictions, memories, and anecdotes of past events—circulate within membership groups; these groups are defined by the stories that members share and expect each other to know. Thus, when talking to seriously ill people, I want to start the conversation by hearing what family stories they heard as children that first taught them how adults respond to illness. These stories are their dramatic resources that set their sense of limits of what they think they can do and be.

Second, the longer I work with stories, the spookier they become to me in their ontology; that is, what a story is as a *form of being*. The common-sense notion is that stories exist only insofar as people tell them; consciousness is understood to be the genesis and repository of any story's possibility. Contrary to this, I believe that stories endow consciousness with its distinctive perceptual possibilities. Stories actually have a provisional independence from consciousness; they float around out there in the ether, and that's what is spooky about them. A core problem of academic folklore studies is how stories that are recognizably the same turn up in geographically disparate cultures. The characters wear different costumes, but the plots and character types are similar. For me, stories are like seeds, or spores, or viruses; they blow around, they find hosts, they germinate, and they pass on.





Narrative therapists trade in such spooky quasi-beings. To externalize a problem requires a way of thinking that understands stories as ontologically external to consciousness, and only taking up temporary, contingent residence in consciousness. I describe the relation between humans and stories as *symbiotic*: stories need humans in order to be told, and humans need stories in order to perceive the world, to gain a sense of agency in that world, and to bond with others in relationships and groups. The reason why therapists have to do the work of having externalizing conversations is that once a sense of self and its affiliations are up and running, people think of stories as emanating from their selves, reflecting some essence of those selves. They understand stories as representations of experience, rather than as resources that made it possible to have experiences. People have to be reminded that their sense of self comes from the stories they know, instead of these stories coming from a self that was originally there as a primal reality. This reminding must proceed slowly and with marked respect. People are deeply attached to stories as *their own*.

The third idea that my study of stories made inescapable for me is the idea of *companion stories*. I draw on the feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway (2003) for her description of domestic animals as what she calls *companion species*. What counts most in Haraway's analyses of human relationships with pets and working animals is how human and animal species *shape each other*, physically. Borrowing her description, I think of stories as companions in the sense that stories shape humans to be what they are, and humans are perpetually reshaping stories.

Each of us has a collection of companion stories that travel with us—that idea goes back to MacIntyre writing of children needing stories and their dramatic resources. Some companion stories come to consciousness with regularity; others form a pre-conscious background against which new foreground stories either attract or repel us. Most important, companion stories *endow emerging narrative lines* with a sense either of possibility and rightness or of impossible-for-me and not-right-for-me. The sense of impossibility or not-right takes us back to Robbie Robertson's father telling his son that his musical ambitions do not fit the family narrative. By *rightness* I mean a continuum from mundane rightness that includes what clothes feel right to wear and what food feels right to eat to reflective rightness that includes a sense of ethical imperative or prohibition (Frank 2017). This sense of rightness is the core of my sociological social psychology. A sense of rightness is what allows humans to be functional in a world of constant choices. Both the proscription impossible-for-me and the prescription right-for-me





impose limits on lines of future action. People need limits, but limits have costs, and therapy often begins when those costs are unsupportable.

Companion stories are thus both the guides that make possible our ability to navigate the world, and they can be the dangerous inhibitors of how we navigate. As a brief personal example, my father, in his nineties, has made at least one financial investment decision that I disagree with. When I press him on why he acted as he did, he tells me a story that someone whom he knew only slightly once told him about what happened to their family decades ago, during the German hyper-inflation following World War I. What's interesting is that a story to which he has such an apparently fragile connection could give such consequential decisions a sufficient sense of rightness. Which stories stick with us and have what effects on us is both crucial and mysterious.

Whether my father was well or poorly guided by his memory of a story, we confront a core human problem: *Which companion stories do I allow to guide me in this situation?* One difficulty of responding to that question is, again, there is no outside of stories. We make guidance decisions about one story by referencing other stories that we take as guides. At best we humans learn to recognize what companion stories are guiding us, and we learn how to mediate between stories that pull in different directions. That seems to me what narrative therapy invites its participants to do: become co-investigators of stories that are external, affecting a life that in this instance happens to be that person's own.

Vulnerable Selves, Good Stories, and Moral Life

My three ideas about stories and selves still lack dramatic animation, and therapy is a drama. This section positions the self in a drama of vulnerability. In this drama, conditions of vulnerability turn out to be possibilities of moral life. I list five suppositions that mix what can be called *philosophical anthropology*--stances on the nature of being human and being social--with *ethics*, by which I mean taking a committed stance on issues of rightness. *Rightness*, to expand on the earlier discussion of that idea, designates what an individual self believes it owes both to itself and to other selves. These five points seem fundamental, but the list is by no means complete or fixed.

First, the nature of selfhood in the historical period of modernity is to be *holding one's own*. By holding-one's-own, I mean a version of what the mid-century sociologist Erving Goffman wrote about as avoidance of embarrassment and management of the constant threat of stigma





(1967). I follow Goffman's observation that the modern self exists in a constant condition of vulnerability to information that would discredit claims made for that self. Since Goffman wrote, vulnerability has been intensified by the advent of social media and permanent digitalization of personal files that can be searched from anywhere. *Selfhood*, in this purposefully reductive sociological sense, comprises claims to how a person is entitled to be treated by others. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the self is formed in relations that express deference and demeanor, which are complementary. Deference involves expressions of respect to another self, affirming the value of that self. Demeanor is caring for one's self in ways that present it as worthy of others' deference. *Holding one's own* is the work of sustaining the reciprocity between deference and demeanor.

Discrediting information renders demeanor a false front, which precipitates other people withholding their deference. On Goffman's account of stigma, to appear in public is to render ourselves vulnerable to accusations that we're not all we claim to be. *Holding one's own* is the work of avoiding or neutralizing these discrediting accusations. When narrative therapists begin by asking parents what is wonderful about their child (Marsten, Epston, and Markham 2016), they stave off the discrediting effects of the "problem-saturated story" with which therapy typically begins. By opening with wonderfulness instead of eliciting a history that further stigmatizes the child, the therapist preemptively helps the child hold his or her own. Inviting parents to present the most creditable version of their child's self also manages their stigma of responsibility for the child's problems.

I believe Goffman was fully aware but chose not to write about discrediting accusations that come not only from other people but from ourselves. We accuse ourselves; here I'm accepting an aspect of Freud's super-ego (*über-Ich*). We internalize others' accusations, often in anticipation of those others actually accusing us. Again, narrative therapy is crucially about *externalizing* accusations as being culturally available stories that get applied to types of people, not as statements of who someone is, in essence. External accusations can be understood as just another narration of one's life that either can be non-defensively accepted as Bruce Springsteen accepts others' versions of his life, or it can be resisted as demeaning. Such an accusation is, crucially for narrative therapy, a *social* issue, not a psychological one. Narrative therapy is a practice of understanding the personal to be political.

Second, stories are both a resource for people as they work to hold their own, and stories are often what people must hold their own *against*; they cut both ways. Too often, "telling one's story" is presented as an unqualified good. Socio-narratology takes seriously stories' dark side;





anything that powerful has to have a dark side. Stories give and they take away. They succour and they confound. Stories are both indispensably useful for people, and they do not always intend the best for people on whom they do their work.

As suggested earlier, stories exert their power by creating a phenomenological sense that they emanate from a psyche of which they are authentic and distinctive expressions. But individuals at most only fabricate stories, in the sense of stitching together culturally available resources. I can quote Haugaard stating what is the core of my argument in *Letting Stories Breathe*: “What is thereby formed [in what he calls the “self-shaping practices” of narrative therapy] ... can only be fashioned out of the material supplied by our culture” (7). The philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) makes the most definitive case that the horizon of any person’s sense of authenticity is mediated by that person’s location in a culture; again, the availability of what MacIntyre calls dramatic resources.

Once stories are fabricated, they conceal their fundamental externality. A primary work done by both socio-narratology and narrative therapy is to *reveal this externality*. Stories are best thought of not as *mine*--and certainly not as *me*--but rather as out there, floating around, much the way Springsteen talks about the other biographies that tell versions of his story. Springsteen neither embraces those stories as making who he is really knowable--to paraphrase his interviewer’s version of the self--nor does he resist them as misrepresenting who he is. His enlightenment is to allow himself to have different sides, about which different stories can be told. He is not neutral about which of those sides he is happier about being, but he is willing to accept his different sides, because each had its apparent necessity, at that time. That includes the story he himself tells in his autobiography; it’s *another* story, subject to future revision.

The complementary source of stories’ power is that humans need stories to *configure* the world around them and to develop a sense of what actions are possible in that world. Here I return to my initial, long quotation from Michael White, but also draw on a fundamental idea of sociology. The constant human task is to define the situations in which we find ourselves and to determine how we might act, with what foreseeable consequences of that action. To do that, we draw upon a stock of stories about past situations, out of which we fabricate a narrative that we *commit to believing* represents the present situation. What happens depends on which stories a person draws upon, because most people’s stock of stories contains both demeaning, limiting stories as well as stories that open possibilities. Narrative therapists seek out clients’ half-forgotten stories of their past successes dealing with problems and of their most





supportive relationships. These dramatic resources then present the client as a character that has enhanced capacities, living a story that is engaging in its new possibilities.

To say that stories configure worlds is to recognize that any story both reflects and creates an implicit *narrative logic*. According to a narrative logic, certain kinds of things can happen, certain actions are predictably antecedent to consequential results, and different types of characters have different scopes of effective action. Robbie Robertson's father, in the story quoted earlier, presents a narrative logic of aspiration leading to failure. Robertson Sr.'s narrative is not inaccurate as he depicts their family and neighbourhood, but his story creates a world that is utterly negative in its limitations. The narrative logic thus imposed on his son's future story is especially dangerous because it addresses a need that becomes acute during young adulthood. At any stage of human life, but especially during youth, a person has to know what world she or he is in, and what the narrative logic of that world is. Out of our observations of life around us, our own memories, and stories we have heard in all sorts of settings and media, we fabricate a narrative logic of the world we believe we live in. Such narrative logics generally remain tacit, unspoken. Robertson's story of his father's admonition depicts a moment when that narrative logic was made explicit and given immediate applicability in an injunction of "do not". Other stories are equally positive in their implied injunction.

Narrative therapy often begins with a client whose fabricated, problem-saturated story is at least demeaning to themselves. At worst, the story may be close to killing them (Maisel, Epston, and Borden 2004). The therapy is for clients to realize *that* story is not who they are; rather, it's external, and also out there are many possible stories from which to fabricate a livable present story. A crucial question that I've heard David Epston ask is *what kind of life a particular story plans, intends, or wants for the person who believes that story is their own*. Here we see clearly that narrative multiplicity is not narrative relativism; not every story's plans are equally good.

Third, and briefly, the issue is less often *what* is a good story, as if good stories had some set of inherent qualities. More often we should ask *when* is a particular story good, for whom, in the immediacy of what situation. To paraphrase Heraclitus, you can never walk into the same story twice, because the story is always interacting with a different you, who interacts with a changing world around you. The relevant morality is situational, but not relativist. For example, stories everywhere value resistance to cruelties. What counts as cruel has local variation, but a core of brutality seems universally recognizable. That core may be a restricted category--it includes murder, theft, torture, rape, enslavement, and denying necessities of life, and maybe not much else--but the concept of human rights requires that such a core be recognized. And





hearing many stories from multiple cultures, one can hear this non-local core of what is inhuman.

Fourth, people attend to some stories, and other stories go by as background noise. That selective attention is inevitable to being human, and our attempts to gain some reflective control over which stories we attend to is fundamental to what can be called *moral life*. Again, narrative therapy works hard to seek out stories that have drifted into the background and to bring these into the foreground, especially stories in which the person engaged in therapy has exhibited some particular capacity or strength. Narrative therapy also understands certain stories are needing to be dislodged from the prominence they have in a person's life and either repudiated entirely or given a carefully qualified continuing place in that life.

To give this point the briefest elaboration, stories are either worth attending to or worth disattending to, according to what they imply their protagonist *has a stake in* or refuses/declines to have a stake in. The immense question of morality is this: *In what should one have a stake?* That question is relational. Consider the type-tale of the three brothers who successively undertake a quest. The first two fail because they each refuses a helper who offers assistance in exchange for some token gift, often food. That refusal is an expression of not having a stake in the welfare of the apparently lowly other. The third and eventually successful brother offers the assistance and gains the helper's aid. In folk-tale morality, having-a-stake-in is a reciprocal process; to express having a stake in the other's life is to invite that other having a stake in your life.

Narrative therapy might be called a socio-therapy rather than a psychotherapy, because its implicit ethical stance is that the client's sense of a stake in his or her own life depends on membership in a community of others who are significant because they express having a stake in the client's life. Narrative therapy is *community work* insofar as anyone having a stake in his or her own life depends on a community of people who express having a stake in each other's life. This, I believe, is what is meant by *re-membering* conversations.

Fifth, finally and perhaps encompassing of all other issues, both stories and people are *unfinalizable*, to use the memorable word of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984; see Frank 2010). No one, no author or authority, can ever have the last word on anyone else, even on oneself. Any representation or account is always open to other versions; any story is open to retellings. Narrative therapy may differ most substantially from other psychotherapies in the self-consciousness of its commitment not to finalize persons. The refusal of diagnostic categories is





one expression of this commitment, and beginning a course of therapy not with the problem but rather with what is “wonderful” about a person also affirms unfinalizability.

The unfinalizability of lives is what makes even people who have done pretty awful things still worthy of respect.^{vi} They did something awful not because an external story compelled them do it—that account would deny all moral responsibility. But, these people did have the bad luck to be thrown into bad narrative company. What is worthy of respect is the yet unfinalized person who still may be. The singular capacity of the narrative therapist is to see *that* person, then to present that vision as possible and eventually compelling, but *not to specify* the person-to-be. Specifying possible futures risks imposing another finalization. Therapy offers the client an imagination of him or herself as unfinalized.

The unfinalized self is Springsteen’s escape artist. We humans are always held in a web of stories, but we are not bugs caught in some spider’s web. We ourselves weave the web that supports us. And being human, we weave webs that are held in place by others’ webs, including webs from the past; that’s what it is to be social and exist in history. But the possibilities are still endless.





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ⁱ I have not included citations to ideas and practices that are discussed at length in multiple writings on narrative therapy; some familiarity is presupposed. My most significant sources include White 2007, 2011 and Marsten, Epston, and Markham 2016. I also want to acknowledge the generosity of David Epston in our personal communications. Misinterpretations are of course my own.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps the significant study of the limitation of choice in telling one's story is Greenblatt 1980, although the issue is raised in different ways by most scholars of narrative.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also the explicit critique in Marsten, Epston, and Markham 2016, especially chapter 7 on psychiatric practices.

^{iv} An discussion especially relevant to narrative is Lindemann Nelson 2001. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu spent his career exploring the tension between people's loyalty to their social location, with its particular stories, tastes, and sense of possibility, and the limitations that this social location imposes on people's mobility; see Bourdieu 1990.

^v Perhaps the most explicit statement is in White's introductory chapter to *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, quoting the anthropologist Edward Bruner. Writing of ethnographic practice, Bruner argues: "the narrative structures we [anthropologists] construct are not secondary narratives about data but primary narratives that establish what counts as data" (White and Epston, 1990: 11). White's interest then turns to how "experience" excludes "those events that do not fit with the dominant evolving stories we and others have about us" (11). In my own writing published at the same time as White's interview (Frank 1995/2013), I now read myself as knowing that stories precede experience, but I also could not have said that explicitly.

^{vi} Michael White's work with abusive men is a good example; White, 2011, chapter 7.





Lessons From Lucy: Reunion Questions, Creating Time Portals, and Helping People Witness Themselves in Narrative Therapy

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“... the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.” ~ T.S. Eliot in ‘Tradition and Individual Talent,’ *The Egoist*, 1919

I (Travis) remember the first video I saw of David Epston using what I later came to understand as Internalized Other Questions (IOQs). I was taken aback by the direction the questions went. I recall David interviewing a person as if she were her grandmother. Most astonishingly, David didn’t even “set-up” the line of questioning. He just more or less started asking the woman questions as though she were her grandmother. I remember feeling a jolt of energy tingling down my spine followed by a breakout of goose bumps across my body. I must admit, though, I was just as confused by what I was watching as I was energized.

A couple years removed from this now I sometimes wonder if David sent some of these interviews to me purposefully knowing that they would tickle my mind in a way I could not ignore. These questions were like none I had ever witnessed before even in narrative practice. For whatever reason, I am almost magnetically attracted to lines of inquiry that are different. Perhaps it’s because I have found such lines of inquiry to be mandatory in helping those who come to see me who have been “therapized,” a term a former client of mine gifted me for persons who have seen many therapists previously. It has been my experience that those who have been therapized are keen to the ways of psychology and the practices of mental health. They can almost smell the script and what is to come next and become bored and frustrated with it rather quickly. As such, I’m always looking for ways to shake up the experience of the therapized, and Internalized Other Questions have helped me do exactly that.

Of course, it’s one thing to want to ask a new genre of questions. It’s something entirely different to do so with any semblance of success. It took me at least six months of practicing IOQs with people who consulted me before I felt like they were going much of anywhere. Initially, I found myself riddled with doubt and I spent way too much time “setting them up.” It was if the people I was having conversations with could sense my discomfiture, and as such, were even more discomfited than I was. As you can imagine, such conversations were halting





and I often aborted them soon after we had begun. When I called on enough gumption to just jump into the questions, I found that people responded in turn.

As IOQs can be a bit challenging to understand in the abstract, here is an example of a series of IOQs I asked a person we will call “Shawn.” Shawn’s father had died over a year prior to this conversation. Just a few months after his father’s death in 2015, pain made Shawn believe that he had no other choice than to drink large amounts of alcohol. One evening he was pulled over for driving while intoxicated. As a result, a judge mandated that he be on probation for at least 18 months. His probation officer sent him to see me a short time later. In one of our conversations I learned about the importance of Shawn’s best friend Rachel. He said that she knew him better than anyone else. In this particular meeting something was starting to percolate in Shawn’s life. His spirits were quite a bit higher and he had recently cut his trademark long hair, something he hadn’t done since before his father’s death. What follows is an example of me interviewing Shawn’s ‘internalized other’ version of his best friend Rachel. Remember, Rachel isn’t actually in the room. Instead, this is Shawn embodying Rachel and speaking as though he were her.

Travis: Rachel, Shawn has told me that the two of you are quite close and that no one knows him better than you do. Given that you haven’t seen him in person since December being away at school, what do you notice about him now that is a bit different than in April?

Shawn as Rachel: He cut his hair. I know that anytime he cuts his hair something is going on.

T: Yes! He hadn’t cut his hair in almost 2 years. He hadn’t cut his beard, either! Rachel, what has history taught you about what a haircut and shaving of the beard mean for Shawn?

S as R: It means he’s growing.

T: I find this really interesting, Rachel! Is it okay if I ask you more about this?

S as R: Sure.

T: Rachel, are you saying that when Shawn’s hair gets shorter his spirit is expanding?

S as R: Yeah, I have always known him to be doing a lot of painting during these times. He loves painting. That’s when he’s back to the real Shawn.

T: Rachel, Shawn has described the final few months of 2015 after his father died as a “brutal winter.” Have you noticed anything else lately that has let you know the real Shawn is blooming for spring?

S as R: He’s back on his bike again. Shawn always used to ride bikes with his dad for hours at a time, but there was a time last year where he didn’t ride much at all.





T: Rachel, given that Shawn has weathered the most difficult of blizzards this last winter, what do you think this will mean for the other blizzards that mother nature inevitably will send his way throughout the seasons still to come in his life?

S as R: I think he will weather them better. I mean, there will still be times where it's windy and cold, but... what do they call it... like the weather people on TV use the term to describe when it's hard to see outside?

T: Is it visibility?

S as R: Yeah! There will still be moments of decreased visibility, but he will be able to find his way better during this time.

T: IS IT Almost like this last blizzard has equipped him with a winter sonar system that will help him find his way even when his vision is obstructed?

S as R: Exactly.

About a year into using IOQs as a staple of my interviewing practices, I started asking questions that I had taken for granted as being simply IOQs. However, when David read an excerpt of a transcript from one of my interviews, he noticed something different that I had failed to recognize. Via email he asked: "Travis, what are these???" Initially I feared that he might be admonishing me for a poor job of adapting IOQs to my work. He continued: "I have never seen these before!!!" I wrote back: "I guess they are kind of an Internalized Other Question where the internalized other is a past version of one's self." David said that we must come up with a name for these in order to distinguish them from IOQs. Nothing immediately came to mind, but David emailed me back within 24 hours to propose the name 'Reunion Questions'. I was instantaneously attracted to the name, and this is the working title we have given such questions.

I originally started asking Reunion Questions to virtually every person I was working with who had been referred to me by local probation offices in my area. As our work was drawing to a close, something in me wanted to be able to have a conversation with the person who originally came to see me some months prior and the person who was sitting in front of me now. It simply wasn't enough to take a quick trip down memory lane. It wasn't visceral enough. I had the sense that we actually needed to bring that person from some months ago back into the room somehow. This was the genesis of Reunion Questions, and they are now a part of my interviews with (almost) everyone I have conversations with at some point in our journey together.





The results have, quite frankly, been stunning. When people are invited into a reunion with prior versions of themselves they often see things or say things about their current selves that they otherwise wouldn't have. It is as if a mechanism for time travel has been established.

In my work as a supervisor I have heard any number of supervisees say when introduced to Reunion Questions, "Oh yeah, I do these kind of questions." Without exception, though, I have found that they stop one step short. They ask a person what a prior version of themselves might think or say, but they do it by having the current iteration of the person give the answer. The magic in this line of inquiry, as I strongly suspect is also the case with IOQs, is when it becomes not simply a cognitive exercise, but an exercise of time travel where the person actually responds from the embodied presence of an earlier version of themselves. I might equate this to seeing a picture of Machu Picchu in Peru. Without question, the picture is beautiful, maybe even stunningly so. However, when one is actually hiking the magnificent Inca fortress once occupied by emperor Pachacuti, the magic becomes experience near and the person can feel it in their body in ways they can't when simply seeing a picture or thinking about it afterwards. For a reunion question to have maximum impact, we would do well to invite the person to hike the incredible terrain again rather than to simply show them a picture and reminisce about what it was like when they once hiked it. When people can assume the position of their former selves and give voice and body to them in the present, only then can the full value of the reunion be realized. I use the word "body" intentionally, as it is not uncommon for people to hold their bodies differently when responding to IOQs or Reunion Questions than the ways they might hold their bodies when being the current iteration of themselves.

Take for example the story of a person we will call 'Arnold'. Arnold was 33 years of age when he came to see me and had felt under the control of depression for going on two years. As he sat on the couch in our first meeting his body slumped over almost as if it was soaking wet and thus too heavy to assume a regular sitting position. As I came to learn more about Arnold I discovered that he was once infused with an adventurous spirit the likes of which I had seen very few times before. He told me stories of hiking some of the world's largest mountains, sailing across the Pacific Ocean by himself, and canvassing glaciers that had seen only very minimal human interaction. The content of the stories was mesmerizing. However, 33-year-old Arnold told them while under the influence of depression, and thus, the tenor of the stories was similar to someone telling you what they ate for breakfast when they've eaten the same thing every day for the last decade. The pitch of his voice never changed. His eyebrows stayed stationary. His body remained slumped over in despair. It was as if he was reading the stories off a cue card. This is when I decided to invite 25-year-old Arnold into the room. I chose this time because it was fresh off a trip across the Pacific Ocean on a sailboat he manned completely on his own. It took a couple of minutes for 25-year-old Arnold to begin to become





embodied in the room, but once he did, it was like speaking to a different person. I saw Arnold hold his back up straight for the first time since I had met him. He leaned forward in his chair, and there was a distinct twinkle in his eye that I had never witnessed before. He spoke quicker and with more purpose. He made motions with his arms as if to show a neophyte sailor like myself how I might begin to navigate the open ocean. It was (as if) I could see the life being breathed back into him. To my astonishment, I learned in our next meeting that Arnold had hiked a 14er (a mountain over 14,000 feet in elevation) for the first time in over a year after having been reintroduced to 25-year-old Arnold. It started to become clear that perhaps the best elixir for depression was a visit from an old friend, a friend who just so happened to be an earlier version of himself.

In the spirit of practice transparency and showing the work in action, what follows is a 'reunion interview' with a woman who we will call 'Lucy'. Lucy was 26 years old at the time of the interview. This story is shared with her permission and was co-authored.

Per Lucy's words, she had seen "countless therapists" over the years. She had originally come to see me with complaints of "anxiety." After our first meeting when Lucy began to get the sense that she might invest in our work together she made two requests of me:

(1) "Don't worry about me. I hate when people worry about me." (2) "Don't tell me I'm strong."

In the spring of 2016 Lucy began to really confront her anxiety. She called it 'The Bully'. The Bully requested that Lucy not attend school or work a job on the grounds that if she did, she would fail and look like a fool in front of everybody. The Bully also convinced her that if anything went wrong, it was exclusively her fault. After three or four months of regular meetings Lucy started to get an upper-hand on the Bully. She began working a job again and was enjoying as much success in college as she could remember. Near the end of this chapter of our work she did make reference to the fact that she still had a relationship with alcohol that she didn't like, but nevertheless, she believed that she had gotten what she wanted out of our meetings and was ready to go it alone.

In the winter of 2016, Lucy returned. The Bully began making a bit of a comeback. Moreover, Lucy resolved that she never arrived at the relationship with alcohol that she desired, and thus she wanted to focus a bit more on developing that in this new chapter of our work together. After a few months, The Bully had again lost the hold it had on Lucy. Still, curiously, alcohol played a larger role in Lucy's life than she would have preferred. We began looking at ways that she might rebel against The Bully's mandate that she must drink alcohol to be a person that other people would like to be friends with. This reunion conversation took place on the heels of Lucy going out to a rather large event in the city where she resides where pretty much everyone drinks to the point of intoxication or beyond. Lucy, however, did not do that on this occasion. While she was able to acknowledge that this was a step in the direction she wished to





travel, she didn't seem to truly grasp the magnitude of the change until she had a conversation with a previous version of herself. As a point of context, we chose Lucy from July of 2016 as the version to reunite with because that was the very month when our previous work had concluded prior to Lucy (deciding to focus) on changing her relationship with alcohol.

1. Travis: Lucy from July 2016, when you look at Lucy of April 2017, what do you most admire about her?

Lucy: I admire her confidence and that she is able to be independent from the group. She feels okay with who she is.

2. T: Lucy from July 2016, are you in any way surprised by some of the stories you've heard from Lucy of today during our conversation this afternoon?

L: Yes! I would have thought it would take her two or three years to get where she is.

3. T: Lucy from July of 2016, what do you think it says about Lucy of today that she was able to do in one year with her relationship with alcohol what it might reasonably take people two, even three years or longer to accomplish?

L: She used to think of herself as small and fragile. Now she can stand up for herself because she knows herself better. She is better at knowing The Bully and not being consumed by it. She will punch back now. She doesn't give The Bully too much time or energy like she used to.

4. T: Lucy from July of 2016, what are the parts that most invigorate you when listening to Lucy of today?

L: That she likes herself more. She's more open to things and more comfortable being who she is with the knowledge that not everyone is going to like her and that's okay. I mean, I would want to be her friend. I would say, "Who is that?" I want to be like that. I want to be that confident and open without the protection of being drunk.

5. T: Lucy from July of 2016, imagine that you were friends with Lucy of today. Do you have any ideas about what the relationship might teach you?

L: Be more present. Be in that second... like that very second. I think she would help me be more social and not doubt myself so much, you know, just the way that she is.

6. T: Lucy from July of 2016, if you could ask one question of Lucy of today what question would you most like to ask?

L: Where did this self-esteem come from and when did she finally accept herself?

7. T: Lucy from July of 2016, what about Lucy of today's way of being lets you know she accepts herself?





L: Look at her shoulders. She holds them high and her head is not staring at the floor. It's like she is open to the world.

8. T: Hey, Lucy of 2016, would it be okay if we posed the question you wanted to pose to Lucy of today?

L: Yeah, sure. (smiling)

9. T: Lucy of today, where did this self-esteem come from and when did you finally accept yourself?

L: That's a big question!

10. T: I know. I have to be honest, a wise friend of mine from the past spoon-fed me that question.

L: (Laughs) It's important not to hide parts of yourself, even the weird parts. If you just let those parts out and own them, people will just begin to let you be who you are and not try and spend so much time changing you into someone you're not.

11. T: Lucy of 2016, does this wisdom ring true in any way to you?

L: Yes. It's the wisdom I always needed to hear.

12. T: Lucy of today, would it be okay if we went back and read the account of how Lucy of 2016 experienced you today?

L: Sure.

TRAVIS READS EACH ANSWER BACK TO LUCY IN ORDER

13. T: I'm just guessing here, Lucy, so I know I could be wrong, but do you feel even a little in awe of yourself after hearing that?

L: Yeah (tears begin rolling down her cheeks). It's just because it seemed so hard.

14. T: May I ask Lucy of 2016 one more question?

L: Of course.

15. T: Lucy of 2016, what do you think it says about Lucy of today that she was able to do something so hard?

L: She's strong.

(Pause with no talking for about thirty seconds).





16. T: Lucy of today, I know what kind of relationship you've had with that word strong before. Would it be fair to say that it's a word that has been very hard for you to hear directed towards you in the past?

L: Yes. Very much so.

17. T: Lucy of today, what's it like to hear Lucy of 2016 use that word to describe you?

L: I can't even believe it. It's like I just called myself strong. I never would have guessed in a million years I would say that about me.

18 T: Lucy of today, given the impact her words have had, would you like to invite Lucy of 2016 to stay around as a consultant in our future conversations? Do you think she might help us understand aspects of you that even the two of us might otherwise miss?

L: I mean, of course. I'm just speechless.

19. T: I just want to extend my sincere thanks to Lucy of 2016. This work would not have been possible without you.

A: (nods as if to say thank you).

20. T: Might I also take a moment to thank you, Lucy, for being so kind as to hear out Lucy of 2016 even though I know some of what she was saying might have surprised you in ways neither of us could have imagined just a few minutes ago.

L: Thank you. Thank you for doing this.

Something I try and avoid when having a reunion conversation is the potential pitfall of speaking to a previous iteration of the person as though she is in some way inferior to the current one. My hope in this case was that I could treat Lucy from July of 2016 as an important and active contributor to Lucy's recent achievements in her identity. One so important, in fact, that we literally could not have arrived at the current iteration of Lucy without her.

In addition, I've found reading the questions and responses back to the person to be of profound importance. The deft work of David and Tom Carlson and their Insider Witnessing practices (http://www.journalnft.com/uploads/9/4/4/5/94454805/jnft_2017_full_release.pdf)

has demonstrated that it is very hard, if not impossible, for someone to be themselves and witness themselves at the very same time. As such, David and Tom were hoping to find a way to help people experience themselves as both an 'insider and outsider' to their stories and





experiences. Reunion conversations hope to do something similar and pull people out of themselves so that they can witness themselves in a way that they simply can't when they are *being* themselves.

Reading back the responses to the person helps to deepen this experience of pulling a person outside of themselves. Lucy noted in a conversation we had after this interview that it would have been very unlikely she would have used the word "strong" to describe herself, especially given her particular aversion to the word, had I simply asked her questions about herself. Moreover, had I not re-read her responses back to her so she could experience them outside of herself, she suggested that she would have been far less likely to ever use such a word. In that sense, this reunion conversation led to a remarkable outcome. It was as though Lucy was calling herself strong due to the fact that she was able to observe herself as she actually was and not how someone else has told her she was or should be. In fact, she noted that people told her she was strong quite frequently and that only intensified her feelings of disdain for the word and for people "worrying" about her. I might humbly suggest that while IOQs provided the framework that helped give birth to Reunion Questions, these questions might rightfully reside in the same spirit or genre as Insider Witnessing practices, which David and Tom argue might very well be cutting to the heart of narrative therapy.

The reunion conversation with Lucy happened two and a half weeks before the Therapeutic Conversations 14 conference in Vancouver, Canada in late April of 2017. Lucy was gracious enough to insist that we use the transcript as part of the presentation given her belief in the insight it might offer therapists who are working with what she refers to as therapized persons. Two days before the conference, I had a conversation with Lucy about the reunion conversation from our last meeting. In a wild turn of serendipity, it hit me that I would love to talk to a version of Lucy from the future. I had never tried anything quite like this before, so this was my very first go at it. The end result, not as though I had planned it this way in advance when the idea struck me, was that we ended up with three different versions of Lucy in the room all at once. I've taken to calling these "Futures of the Present" questions. The word futures instead of future signals an important distinction, as the goal is not to describe a single, linear future, but rather, any number of futures the person might experience in their future.

1. Travis: Lucy, I know in our last meeting we spoke with Lucy from July of 2016. Might I ask you how you reflect on that conversation eleven days later?





Lucy: It was like the weirdest conversation I've ever had. You know, a lot of people have told me I'm strong or whatever, but when it comes from other people it's easy to brush aside. It's easy to say, "Oh, they're just trying to be nice."

2. T: Did you experience it a bit differently coming from Lucy of 2016 instead of from some other person?

L: Being from myself, it has more validity to it. I don't think I could just brush it off even if I wanted to. It's weird and I can't even believe I'm saying this, but I still believe what I said about me last time. I believe that it's true. I know it. I can feel it in my bones. The whole thing has been like a weight off my shoulders. After talking about me then and me now, I'm a person that I like way more.

3. T: Do you have any sense of how our conversation last time has impacted The Bully?

L: The Bully sees me as tougher competition, that's for sure.

4. T: Hey Lucy, I just had a wild idea. As always, please tell if you don't think this idea is worth pursuing and I will not be in the least bit offended if you don't think it is. What if we talked to Lucy from the future?

L: (Big smile)

5. T: If that smile could speak, what would it say?

L: It would say, yes!

6. T: What future version of Lucy should we interview? I mean, we could do two days, two weeks, twenty years and on and on. What do you think might prove most helpful, Lucy?

L: Well, we did one year into the past, so why don't we do one year into the future?

7. T: That sounds like a tremendous idea! Would it be alright if we began?

L: (nods her assent with a curiously excited facial expression)

8. T: Lucy of 2018, would you be so kind as to bring us up to speed on how life looks for you right now given that this is the first time we've ever spoken with you?

L: There is more independence. I see it more in work and personally. I'm financially independent. I don't have to lean on others to be happy or live my life.

9. T: Lucy of 2018, are there any events that have transpired that might surprise those of us who still reside in the year 2017?





L: I have a job that's full-time and demanding... (pauses as if waiting to deliver an unexpected plot twist) and I still *love* it.

10. T: Wow! Lucy of 2018, I don't know if you recall, but there was a time when Lucy of 2016 didn't believe that she would ever be able to work a full-time job. This is just beyond words exciting, wouldn't you agree, Lucy of today?!?

L: It is like odd, but it definitely makes me happy. I guess I never really entertained it before because I didn't think it would ever be possible.

11. T: Hey, Lucy of 2018, do you mind if I inquire about what the job is?

L: I'm working for the state and doing research, but I know that I'll be going back to grad school in the future and I'm excited about it instead of scared.

12. T: Isn't that something?!? Can you believe that, Lucy of today?

L: (tears begin slowly coming down her face) I've never been able to imagine that until now.

13. T: Lucy of today, how does it look when you imagine it?

L: (tears still flowing) It looks... beautiful. Like the one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

14. T: (tears begin) Beautiful, indeed.

(Lucy and Travis crying together in silence for 60 seconds or so).

15. T: Lucy of today, I'm just speculating here and I know I could be wrong, but is it possible that Lucy of 2018 has just taught both of us a lesson today about doing the undoable?

L: I think so.

16. T: Lucy of 2018, given that you are an expert at making the impossible possible, is there any particular wisdom or advice you might offer Lucy and I of today as our work together is scheduled to come to an end at the conclusion of our meeting in just a few minutes?

L: You're capable of anything you want to do. At least give it a shot and try it. It will pay off.

17. T: Lucy of today, if you were to take to heart the wisdom that was just so graciously lent to us by Lucy of 2018, what do you think it would mean for your life?

L: It would mean I could be everything I want to be... actually, more than I want to be or thought I could be.

18. T: Lucy of today, what might happen if you were to carry forward Lucy of the past and Lucy of the future as consultants in your endeavors outside of the work you and I have been





doing? I know this might sound weird, but could you have conversations with them when you needed to?

L: I mean, I guess they've always been in there, right? To be honest, I don't know why I didn't have conversations with them sooner.

19. T: Lucy of today, if you had both of them onboard as consultants, do you think 'impossible' might continue to make its way to 'possible' in your life?

L: Yes, I mean, I have no doubt that would be true.

20. T: Lucy, I just want to tell you the immense amount of pride I feel in the work we've done together. It has been my distinct honor to ride shotgun on this journey with you. Thank you for allowing me to accompany you. It has most assuredly changed me – not just me as a “therapist” (air quotes) but also me as a human. Thank you.

L: Thank *you*. I don't have the right words. Just... thank you so much! I just wish everyone could come do this. It saved my life.

While there is quite a bit from this last exchange that we might discuss, I am drawn immediately to one line. After the second question Lucy replied that she could feel the wisdom imparted by Lucy of 2016 “in her bones” because it was an embodied response. Would this have been possible, to extend the previous metaphor, if we just showed her a picture of Machu Picchu and she didn't once again feel the sweat on her brow as she hiked the extraordinary terrain? Lucy's response was a resounding no.

There is much talk about the present moment in the mindfulness movement and in other areas of psychology and the broader helping fields. The ability to stay in the present moment no matter how one might be feeling is often thought of as an ideal that we must be striving to embrace. However, the current moment can be as stifling as it can be exhilarating. When it becomes stifling, we can be imprisoned by it, even feeling paralyzed. Knowing intellectually that this moment won't last forever, as we all inevitably realize at some level, I have found is of little consolation to most. Could it be that becoming a time-traveler and leaving the current moment could somewhat paradoxically help people see themselves in the current moment in ways they can't while they are 'being' in that moment? Instead of focusing so hard on being in the moment, what if we all carried with us as consultants our past and future selves? Perhaps as Lucy noted, we already do. The more interesting question then might be: what if we choose to consult and perhaps even embody these selves when the current moment begins to feel insoluble? Might it offer us a kind of wisdom, that as Lucy noted, we “couldn't brush off even if (we) wanted to?”





As a child growing up I lived in a house that was quite literally (as any of my childhood friends will attest to) lined with books from floor to ceiling in virtually every room save the kitchen and bathroom. My late father's favorite genre was science fiction. As an adolescent I much preferred reading non-fiction, mostly autobiographies. I remember once asking my father why he liked science fiction so much since the storylines were based on something that "wasn't true." The example I brought up specifically was the idea of time travel, almost mocking the possibility that this could ever be realized. He replied with his trademark brevity: "Well, son, most everything was once thought to be untrue until someone conceived that it wasn't." I'm sure somewhere my father is smiling, in the way wise fathers do, now that I have discovered the merits of time travel in my own life.

My co-collaborators, Rowan Ramsey, Luke Riley, and Fernando Ocampo-Gomez spent many, many hours during the first four months of 2017 living with and scrutinizing my attempts at Reunion Questions. Other than Lucy, I can't think of three people better positioned to talk about their experiences with these questions. What follows are short reflections on the relationships they have formed with reunion questions and time travel.

Reflections from Rowan Ramsey

Having a conversation with one's past self is like getting the advice you always hope your friends will have for you. Lucy says it perfectly, "It's the wisdom I always needed to hear." It's deeply comforting and affirming, and it's really rather amusing and strange, which is part of the magic. As I have been having conversations with myself, I always find a smile growing on my face throughout. It feels like "of course! This was here all along, how could I forget? And how fortunate I am to be reminded of it now!" When I was in the last few weeks of the semester, Rowan from January – the Rowan who was so pumped full of energy and joy for the semester – was a welcome friend. She knew *exactly* what I needed to hear in my darkest moments of doubt, frustration, and self-criticism. She helped me chunk tasks into manageable pieces, she reminded me it's okay for me to not be perfect; she gave me permission to be upset without the upset taking over; she gave me energy and hope. As I reunite with myself more, I find my past selves branching out towards me, asking for a chance to share their tales and be heard. Rowan of January had that unmistakable Infinite Excitement for School Wisdom; I wonder what wisdom Rowan of a year ago has? What about Rowan who welcomed her sister into the world 5five years ago? And Rowan who traveled alone for a month after graduating high school? We have a well of experiences stored in our bodies! Our past selves can help us navigate new and difficult situations; they can comfort us; they can remind us of things we have long forgotten; they can serve as council. And what about the wisdom Rowans of the Future hold? I'm due for a conversation with Rowan who has forgiven her mom. I'm certain she will have some important





insights for me. And I would love to have a chat with Graduate School Rowan! We can invite these practices into our everyday lives by starting a conversation, “Hey, it’s me. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Let me fill you in...”

Reflections from Luke Riley

Whatever happened to that gentle smile, framing the innocent eyes that were warmly sparked with the glint of its bashful youth? It’s been almost a year now since I have revisited my baby and childhood photos, but I can still remember the powerful inquiries stirred about as I curiously unshelved the picture books from my closet. This magnetism as I turned through the pages afforded a type of stillness, quieting the time around me. I was no longer in my room, but rather existing as that child, and as others observing that child. What was it that I lost so long ago? A forgotten beauty sheathed from the spite of embracing too personally the undeniable torments of this world. Has this world finally accomplished its mission of darkening this ripe kindled light? No, I live as the embodiment of its revolt whispered to me that day. A personal shining endearment towards resonating with that one thing in childhood I never thought I could lose. Something without a name, personally formulated and explored when childlike wonderment was at its prime.

When I came upon Lucy’s reunion questions I had that same feeling again of immortalizing a bond previously unspoken. More than that, these reunions are an attempt at immortalizing a theory of self that can be called upon anytime with the right inquires and mindset of course. We can forever be changed by those that we carry with us on the inside, and who better to carry with you than yourself? Lucy now carries just exactly that inside of her. She is no longer Lucy of ‘now’. She is Lucy from a year ago plus Lucy of now. Just like I am no longer Luke of now, I am Luke of a ripe childlike wonderment plus Luke of today. Although I am a fan of mathematics, I cannot say what these different perspectives added together equate to. Perhaps that is a benefit of reunion questions; there is a potential greater than the sum of its parts, and should not be limited by formulaic designs in explaining its exploration. A spiraling staircase of self-generative beauty appearing to organize the entropy of subjective life by personal laws known only through this reunion experience. The present is my vehicle for time travel; asking advice mediates my passage in time. Traveling back I can remember; traveling forward I am allowed to forget. In forgetting all the hardships of searching for lost time, the future is met at its dimly lit horizon with just enough light to encourage the yearning ventures of life yet begotten.

Reflections from Fernando Ocampo-Gomez

I remember the first time I was presented with reunion questions, I thought the nerdiest thing: *this is straight out of Doctor Who!*





For those who aren't familiar with the show, it's about the adventures of a humanoid, time-traveling alien; whenever he has been fatally injured, he goes through a spectacular transformation, changing everything about himself including appearance. Not only that, but there are several episodes where he literally encounters his former versions of himself. I always loved these episodes because it's magic to see how the same person, the same consciousness, could be so different in different points in time; these version also learn so much from their interactions with each other, even if it is *the same consciousness* meeting itself.

So imagine how exciting it was to be introduced to a form of narrative therapy that encapsulated this very idea! That all of us could have a conversation with ourselves from the past and recognize that they can still provide valuable insight; Lucy of a year ago, or Fernando of 2013, still have much to offer. Perhaps the biggest lesson I learned, and perhaps Lucy did as well, was understanding that my past self is in awe of the accomplishments I have made. It drives hope into us because then we think: what will our current selves think when we become 'the past self?' What will Fernando of 2017 say when he is no longer the present one, and what things will he be in awe of when he observes Fernando of the future? It makes me hopeful for what lies ahead, making me that much more excited for the prospects of my future self.

I (Travis) would like to kindly invite you to view Reunion Questions and Futures of the Present Questions not as inventions, but rather as practices that are still being invented. This is how I have started to imagine these questions. If the inspiration strikes you, please take them up in your own work. See where they take the conversation. Grab the brush and render your own strokes. Perhaps you'll be as surprised by what emerges on the canvas as I was.





Miranda Returns

Miranda Brown, Tom Stone Carlson, and David Epston

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Readers of the first release of JNFT will recall “Miranda: A Fighting Spirit’s Journey to Self-Compassion” whereby Miranda transformed her life as a result of her experience with Insider Witnessing Practices. At the time of the publication of the first three papers on Insider Witnessing practices, two years had passed since Miranda’s Act Two interview (Jan. 25, 2015) where she watched the portrayal of her life by her therapist Emily Corturillo. During those two years, David and I met regularly with Miranda to catch up with her on the consequential unfolding of her life and to learn more about the possibilities of this practice from her unique position as the first person to have experienced an Insider Witnessing interview. While we scheduled co-research interviews with Miranda every three to six months during that period of time, Miranda would often excitedly reach out to us requesting a meeting to tell us about surprising new developments in her life. The third paper on Insider Witnessing Practices that appeared in the last release of JNFT represents an account of the interviews and experiences that transpired during those two years. One matter that Miranda would inform of us time and time again was that after her experience in the Act 2 interview, changes in her life seemingly started happening spontaneously. During one meeting, Miranda told us how puzzled she was by changes that took place without her having done anything she was aware of to bring the about. As we explored with Miranda how this could be possible, she concluded that it was as if she was changed so dramatically in the Act 2 interview that it took time for her to catch up to all of the ways that she had *already* changed. Or as Miranda often quipped: “My IWP experience is like a gift that just keeps on giving.”

The following represents another telling of another dramatic transformation in Miranda’s life that took place almost three years after her first experience with Insider Witnessing Practices. Miranda contacted me (Tom) after doing a final edit of her paper that we had written together for first release of JNFT. While reading the paper, Miranda had the odd experience of not recognizing herself in the story anymore. It no longer represented the Miranda she had become. She recognized her current self quite well but she no longer recognized the Miranda of the past. It was as if her life had changed so dramatically that she could not ‘read’ herself

After learning of this, I asked Miranda if perhaps she might need a new story of her past that was worthy of the story of her present. She immediately agreed that this was the case and said that it was as if “a light of compassion is pouring into my past. I am seeing things about me that





I never knew existed before.” At that very moment, we agreed that we would embark on a project to find her a new story worthy of her which we dubbed, ‘the light of compassion’ project. What follows is the first and last interview of this project. As you will discover in reading the interview, a dramatic retelling of Miranda’s life takes place in such a way that no further interviews were required.

Rather than simply presenting an unedited transcript of the interview, we have decided to prepare what we are calling a *rendered* version of these interviews. Given that spoken word is so different than written text and can often only be understood in the context of the conversation itself, we have recently taken to rendering transcripts so that they are more accessible as a written text. Spoken word within conversation is filled with stops and starts and partially finished sentences. In the midst of the conversation itself, these stops and starts are hardly noticeable to those involved. When put into text, these stops and starts that appear normal within conversation itself become terribly distracting to the reader who expect a particular level of flow in the written word. In an effort to address the readability of transcripts, we have recently begun to take up the practice of rendering them into a format that more closely resembles what you might expect from a written text at the same time as preserving the ‘feel’ of the conversation itself. In order to do so we carefully edit the transcripts to improve the flow by deleting the stops and starts, partially completed sentences, and any redundancies that might be present in the original spoken version of the transcript.

Throughout this process, we are guided by two principles. Firstly, we are committed to staying as close as possible to the original wording and intent of the speaker. Secondly, we are committed to presenting speakers’ words in a way that is respectful of their intelligence. We consider that if they had known that their words were going to end up in text, they would have paid far more attention to the precision and flow of their words. The result of this process is a text that is not only much easier to follow but it also enhances the reader’s Apprehension of the significance of the conversation that took place between the therapist and her or his conversational partners. In addition, this was returned to Miranda for editing. She had no qualms about assuming such a role in regard to the rendered transcript. As an aside, the literal meaning of ‘to render’ is ‘to reproduce or re-present something in an artistic form.’ For our purposes, we see the rendering of transcripts as the art of transforming the spoken word into story form.

Rendered Transcript of Miranda Returns

Tom, I want to tell you something important that happened to me over the summer. I was shopping for groceries in my home town in August. It happened to be the same store where I first confronted the man who abused me. Do you remember that? I was 18 years old then and you’ll remember I managed to stand my ground. I didn’t run away. Whenever I’ve shopped





there since, I would always be looking over my shoulder and trying to plan an escape route just in case he showed up. Well, this time, I was just minding my own business. I was just shopping. I wasn't even thinking about where the exits were or what my escape route might be. I wasn't even thinking about him at all.

As I was standing in line to pay for my groceries, all of a sudden I heard a familiar voice. A feeling of panic came over me as I looked up to find him standing right in front of me. I quickly looked to see if I might escape to the next available line but then, for a reason I still can't explain, a wave of calmness came over me. I told myself, "You're not going anywhere" and placed my groceries on the conveyor belt. I still can't believe it even as I am telling you now but once again, I stood my ground.

Somehow realizing I was right behind him, he turned and addressed me, "How are you doing Ms. Brown?" I couldn't believe his audacity. Who did he think he was to believe that he had the right to even utter my name? With all of the courage that I could muster, I declared, "I AM FINE THANK YOU!" The strength and power of my words surprised me. But they surprised him even more. The jovial and confident man who had been charming everyone around him in the store fell completely silent. As he turned away from me his head hung down as if ashamed and walked slowly out of the store.

While I was still in awe that this had really happened, the woman at the register commented, "Isn't he just the kindest and funniest man?" Her comment shocked the awe right out of me. Before I could even decide whether I should respond, these words jumped out of my mouth, "Well, he wasn't kind to me when I was 13!" Immediately afterwards, the sense of awe quickly returned. Had this really happened? Not only had I stood my ground and declared I was now free from the grasp of his abuse, I actually had spoken out against him in public. No wonder I was in awe of myself. It was like I had awoken from a dream that had finally come true.

Later that evening as I was reflecting on the events of the day, a fleeting feeling of worry came over me. As the worry settled in, I wondered how long the anxiety of running into him again would continue to trouble me. In the past, whenever I would see him, even if from a distance, the feelings of fear, worry and self-blame would stay with me for weeks. It was like each encounter would ruin me all over again. Somehow these thoughts of worry faded as the evening passed and before I knew it I had opened my eyes to a new day. As I took my first breath that morning, I realized that I had awoken to find that this was just another normal day. There were no feelings of fear, worry, or self-blame. It was just a normal day. The first normal day of the rest of my life. The thoughts in my mind fell silent contemplating this prospect.

It truly feels like you could never understand this unless you had gone through it. It's this feeling I cannot put into words. I just remember breathing in the first time and nothing was





holding me back that day. In response to your question, “If there aren’t words for it which I can completely understand, then might there be an image for this feeling?”

Well, I remember opening my eyes and just inhaling. I can’t put it into words but my body can still feel it. It was a breath that I had never taken before. Sometime later in the day it hit me, “Wow, this didn’t carry over to the next day.” You asked me “if it was a breath that took my breath away”. I guess my smile confirmed it.

For this one moment in time, I don’t think my breathing had ever mattered to me so much ever before.

When you asked, “Are you saying your lungs filled with life when you had your first breath the next day?” I replied: “It was crazy because before that I never knew how I used to breath. But now that I have had this experience, I can understand how my breathing wasn’t normal. So after this cool experience the next day, I knew that nothing could hold me back. It made me think about all the times it had been holding me back. Before when I would see him, it literally felt like the fear would hold on to me for days and days. It would be a really, really, really tight grip. Even in my sleep it was still always there. This process has shown me how different I am. Hey Tom, this stuff is really weird to try put into words.

Let me try. I’ll trace the timeline on your table. Here’s the day I woke up and had my first breathe and everything was okay, nothing had carried over and from this point on all of this over here is just... I am running out of words again. When you asked me, “Are you saying that as you look back into the past you can’t find yourself there?” I marveled that it really can’t and that’s really weird because for years this is how I lived.

“Is it an okay thing that it’s not your life anymore?”

It’s an amazing thing because that’s why I feel free. This is just another example of how free I feel because I never knew I wasn’t free. I never knew what life was until this whole IWP thing.

I am remembering that you told me not so long ago, that the light of compassion was pouring in to your past. Have I got that right? I’ll take your enthusiastic nod for confirmation. And how this has taken you into a new life which promised a very different future. Do you think you might need a new story of the past that is worthy of how your present has been illuminated? As you shine this light of compassion in to your past, what can you now see that you couldn’t see before when you were in the darkness of those years?

Well, I definitely look back at my experience during middle and high school as more of a victory than I previously had. But let me go back to the grocery store first and how it didn’t carry over the next day. It’s still blowing my mind.





How can I explain this? It felt as if I had an incredible insight about- let's just call it abuse –how much the abuse had affected me in ways I hadn't understood before.

Let me explain it to you Tom. After having the experience at the grocery store and how I felt the next morning, I felt like a normal person. Not only that, I now believed that I could go through my life as a normal person rather than constantly being held back by this dark force that was always there. I never realized how powerful it had been nor thought it would ever leave me. Until that day when I exhaled all the darkness, I couldn't possibly have known anything different. After all, for the last seven years, I had never lived life without it. Now I have the privilege of being free from the past as if it were a merely a memory; I wake to find that every day is literally a brand new day and there is nothing from my past holding me back.

Miranda, is it possible that your new past is holding you up instead of holding you back?

Tom, you ask the wildest questions. Where do you possibly get them from?

Well, how about this one... Did you come away from this experience a bit in awe of yourself like you did before?

I'm finally free. I'm finally free! It's mind blowing. But I want you to know that it definitely feels like a different level of freedom. What I keep learning from this experience is that I keep becoming more free and I don't know how that is possible. You think there is an absolute to it but I keep learning that there isn't. But I'm fine with that!

Are you becoming open to the idea or the possibility that there may be more surprises ahead?

Yeah. I can't think of what could possibly be as life altering as the things I've already experienced. I didn't expect anything to happen last summer and something did that was very, very meaningful to me. I keep asking myself, 'what will life bring next'? And I think it's something I have to allow to happen at its own pace. I suppose these new ways of being free will happen whenever they are going to happen. But I'm not going to question its methods because it's working. And it's funny that I can now laugh about it. Look, I am as free as I've ever been.

Are you open to the possibility of being even more free than the freedom you know now?

Yeah! It will be really crazy to see what will happen next. It will be mind blowing but at the same time I have how many years left in my life? I mean I am only 21 years old. I've got a lifetime ahead of me.

When I think about it, up until now Emily and I have been your companions on your travels but over the summer when you were back home you were on your own...





Yeah. Yeah. I think it really speaks to how much this abuse doesn't have a hold on me. And how I can truly wake up the next morning and just go on with my life rather than being destroyed because that's how I used to feel. It's like I went through this thing, I felt feelings about what was happening and I was sad afterwards but now I no longer feel shame when I think about what happened to me. I no longer need to hide from myself what happened to me. I can now just allow my life to happen. I don't think I've ever let myself feel this way or deal with my emotions for what they were. Actually I think I did an incredible job! Way to go Miranda!

In an earlier interview you were talking how you were able to see yourself as another person and have compassion for yourself, would you say in that moment when you woke up that morning and breathed in the first breath of the rest of your life [or was it after you confronted him in the store? Miranda, which one of the two is the reference for this question], that you somehow allowed yourself to be there for yourself?

Yeah because it was as if I'm sending compassion to myself by allowing myself to be sad about it for a little bit. Cry about it if I need to but then after that emotional expression I was okay; then the next day I was fine and ready to move on. And it was really interesting because I keep learning about how I used to live. It almost feels like an outside point of view. I get to look at my life as a "normal person" would. Wow! It's just really interesting to see the difference when I think about it.

Given everything that you have suffered and lived through, would you consider your ability to now live your life as a normal person an ordinary achievement, extra-ordinary achievement, or somewhere in between?

Extra-ordinary! That's just crazy because I always felt like I had to be separate from everyone because I wasn't normal. There was something wrong with me and I was worried that they would find out. But now I'm not constantly feeling like I'm a bad person all of the time. So this kind of fell off and so did this feeling of having to be separate from everybody else.

Is it possible that there's nothing ordinary about your 'normal' Miranda?

I think that I've gotten to this place of normalness in a way that's extraordinary.

Off all the achievements that someone could accomplish in their life, where does this rank in your life?

One of the biggest! And I know about people who have gone through something similar to me and spent their whole lives just self-destructing and in fact, more or less stopped living even if they are still alive. And I could very well have been someone like that. To be free of something that could have held on to me for the rest of my life is one of my greatest achievements.





Given that you consider this one of your greatest achievements, does this suggest to you as it does to me that there is something about your enduring moral character that built the momentum necessary for these extraordinary events to take place? When you look back on your life as a younger person, does anything come to mind about your character that you are now seeing a little bit differently than you did before?

Yes. I definitely think that fighting spirit is even more true than it was when it was revealed to me in the Act 2 interview. Again that seems crazy.

When you think about it now, does this fighting spirit go back in to your past a longer way than you had previously thought?

I can't believe I am about to say this but 'yes.' I did a lot back then to try to deal with the abuse and I realized that I did a better job dealing with my situation than I have given myself credit for. There were so many times I thought to myself that I was crazy for feeling the way I did. I was embarrassed by what had happened and how I was feeling about it, but now I think I did a pretty darn good job with what I had to go through.

And you know, Miranda, you did it on your own didn't you?

Yeah, my 13 year old self did quite a good job dealing with this negative event that happened back then and also dealing with all other aspects of being a young teenager. There has to be something good about who I am as a person to have gotten me past all of that suffering.

Even though you felt at times sad, defeated, and perhaps without much hope for your future, did you somehow or other manage to keep pushing along, keep fighting along?

Your question reminds me of when Emily's Miranda talked about that little voice. You know I think that even when I felt there was really no hope for me when I was a teenager, there must have been this little voice that just kept saying "keep moving, keep going" because if I didn't have one shred of hope for myself then why would I have even tried so hard. Tom, I am so happy to be thinking about this. That voice was always there and that is so crazy to think about!

How 'little' do you think your little voice really was if you managed to make it where you are today?

I think it had to be a big voice. How I deceived myself was making my situation into the whole game idea. I needed to beat these people rather than thinking to myself, 'You're a person that can accomplish something.' After all, this whole incident made me feel like I was nothing. 'You need to do something to show them that they didn't break you.' Rather I should have just believed in myself. Perhaps it was my way of believing in myself but not in a way that was really good for me.





As you were playing this game, is it possible that at the same time you were also nurturing a belief in your own worth? Your smile tells me to ask another question. So here it goes. Are you ready? Given all of the weight and pressure that you have to suffer through, how 'big' do you think that this voice must have been in order to make it through it all?

It must have been an everyday reminder because if on any given day the voice wasn't there I would have just given up. Any hope I had would have crumbled into dust.

As you are looking back now with this light of compassion, how 'big' do you guess that voice was before this all happened to you when you were 13 years old?

So like when I was really, really young? I would have to say normal level. Before this all happened, I had a belief that I could accomplish anything and make all of my dreams come true. So I think that I had a normal self-esteem before all of this happened. Wait a second Tom. When I think about it right here and now, the voice was much louder and bigger than I ever imagined.

Given how hard it is to come back from something like the abuse and the suffering that you endured, what might you have already been armed with in order to make it through all that darkness?

Self-confidence, it was always there. I have no doubt about it now.

In order to make it through, was the voice of your confidence and your worth ordinary, extraordinary, or somewhere in the middle?

Extraordinary! I never thought I would ever hear myself say that out loud. That feels really good.

Do you remember in your mom's letter to us she said that 'my Miranda was full of life... She was a fighter...She was someone who believed that anything was possible.' Do you remember your mother's Miranda? If your mom was here with us right now and we were to ask her just how 'big' this voice might have been, what do you think she might say?

She would say that it was very, very loud. It is so interesting. It's like I am a different person... I'm evolving in to a new person. I am reconnecting with the youth that I once was, Miranda at her core.

Miranda, do you think it's possible that the Miranda that was here at age 13 through age 19 was just as 'big', just as full of life but you just didn't know it because it took so much energy for you just to survive? How full of life and a fighting spirit would you have





needed to have in order to come through all of this and not to just survive but to actually go free?

More than the average person.

Have you been full of life and alive all along Miranda?

Oh my gosh... I mean...

Miranda, is that possible?

It is possible! And I would have to think that is true. Which would be crazy because you said that we are rewriting my history. And we really are! Because three years ago, I would never have looked at my life in this way. I think that I'm learning that it's okay to not look at the abuse and its effect in a negative way as I had for the last six years. I really did. I was holding on to all of the sadness. I thought the sadness would never leave me.

Miranda, in this new version of your past that is now filled with the light of compassion, what might you have been holding on to all along even if you didn't know it at the time?

THE LIGHT! YES!!! What would have guided me through the darkness if it wasn't for that light?

Miranda, had the abuse unfairly convinced you that it had stolen six years of your life from you when in fact that was not the case?

At this point when Tom asked me this question, I was overcome by emotion and collapsed into my own arms sobbing in ways that I never have before. I have no idea how long this lasted but it seemed to me forever. I have never cried in front of anyone like this, even my adorable mother.

I am sorry I never cry. It really did feel like that. It really did.

Miranda, as you are looking back now was that fair at all?

No!! It was my life to live! It felt like he took it from me.

When I asked the question about abuse trying to convince you that it had stolen six years of your life when it actually hadn't, can you give any words to the tears and the physical response of your body as you folded yourself into your arms?

Whew! Let me catch my breath. Tom, what did you just ask me?

The question that seemed to bring up these tears was that we were talking about the fact that there was what we thought was a little voice that must have been as big as the world to survive all of this darkness. And this voice was so loud and so clear that you could hear it all along even in the darkest tunnel. Because of that, we came to the





conclusion that perhaps you had been full of life all along even during those dark six years because otherwise how could you have made it to where you are now? In response to this, I asked this question, 'Miranda, had the abuse unfairly convinced you that it had stolen six years of your life from you when in fact that was not the case?'

Wow! That was one of the most truthful statements that I think I have ever heard. When you said that it just hit me. It hit me right here in my heart.

Miranda, were the tears witnesses to the truth?

Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

Miranda, is it now time for you to reclaim those six years of your life back from the lost and found?

Yes! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Hang on Tom. I need to catch my breath.

Miranda, without wishing in any way to diminish how hard and dark those years were for you, how else could you have survived unless you were so full of life in the first place?

It's such an incredible way to look at it and it's very powerful. It really is me taking back my life. Just by simply seeing it differently, I am really taking it back and freeing myself from it. It's so crazy because it truly felt like he had taken that away from me, and with that came all the frustration and anger that I think always held me back.

It certainly wouldn't be fair to say that he didn't do something horrible to you. Did the abuse also somehow or other blind you to both your courage and your fighting spirit that you were well known for from your earliest years?

Wow! Yeah!

Miranda do you think it is time to pay you respects to your fighting spirit that somehow lived on during those six years of darkness?

Yeah! It really is Tom.

How should we go about honoring it?

I don't know but I think that we were honoring it with the play in Vancouver and the plans to take my story even further with a play for my family. I want Chelsea to add this interview to the play because if something made me cry like I just did—I told you I never cry in front of people- I think it's something that other people would be able to understand and also value along with everything else that's already in the play. As much as I have felt that I have had a hard time explaining what's happened in my life as a result of my IWP experience to my family and friends, people aren't having a hard time understanding the play. [On May 3rd a private





performance of the play was held at NDSU Walsh Theater for Miranda's family and partner at her request]

There is something I want to ask you about the tears. Do you mind? You told me that the tears that came to you so forcibly were like witnesses to the truthfulness of your life never really having been stolen from you. So far we have been calling this your 'fighting spirit', can you think of another word or description of the character of that 'big' voice that you kept alive and well all those years? Or are you satisfied with Emily's Miranda's 'fighting spirit'?

Yes but I feel like there's more. The ability to get through it. My core. The person who I am deep down. Wow. Tom, that's a big question. I don't have anything that immediately comes to me but I definitely agree there is something more to my character. I just don't know how to define it yet.

Miranda, would it be okay if we consulted your mom here? She referred to her Miranda as someone who was "an unstoppable and fearless young girl". In the conversation we had in the Act 2, you had dated the start of this 'fighting spirit' back to when you were 19 when you confronted your abuser. Given your mother's Miranda and everything else that we have discovered so far today, would you say that there is a much longer history to this 'fighting spirit' than you have ever considered?

Absolutely! It goes all the way back. Because now I know it's always been there. It just had to take a different form.

If it had to take the form of fighting supported by training yourself in mixed martial arts in order to survive, what form did it have when you were 'an unstoppable, fearless and carefree little girl'?

Wow! I guess I was just living. I was just living my life.

Miranda, was it possible that the spirit that was with you as a little girl was a 'full of life spirit'?

Yeah. Yup. Absolutely! Wow!

The purpose of our conversation today has been to find a new story for your past that is worthy of your present. Would you say that this description of yourself as always having a 'full of life spirit' is up to the task?

Full of life spirit. Because that's where I'm at in my life.

Miranda, would you like to be reacquainted with your 'full of life spirit' that you now realize has always been with you?





Yeah. It feels like I already have.

Did you have to transform your 'full of life spirit' into a 'fighting spirit' to get through those years of suffering?

It's crazy how much I just adapted to get through it. I keep thinking how easy it would have been just to give up. But I never did. There was something about me that just wanted to keep living and just wanted to show them they were wrong. That I'm not broken. The 'full of life spirit' just had to disguise itself but it was definitely there.

Would you say that the abuse was hoping that it could keep you from remembering just how full of life you were?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Let me just breathe this all in. It did everything in its power to do that.

Even after you have virtually turned your life right side up over the last two years, had it managed to hide just enough to keep it in the realm of a 'fighting spirit' rather than a 'full of life spirit'?

Holy shit Tom! It's still just so crazy to think about this! It's such an empowering thing to say. And I think that I was holding on to everything because I believed... I somehow believed that I would come through all this. And that is crazy to think about too!

Miranda, do you think that we should press pause now and you can just relish the idea of reclaiming these six years of your life and 'full of life' spirit and see where it takes you until we meet again? How does that sound to you?

Yeah. This is more than enough to think about. I think there's more to come.

