



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

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My Concern

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

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





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

The Act 1: Preparation

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

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





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

Act 1: Emily's Miranda

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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





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

At the end of the Act 2 interview Miranda shared:

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

Follow Up Interviews: Miranda, Emily, David and Tom

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

The Play

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

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





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

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

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

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

Remembering Vancouver (Miranda Brown)

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





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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

The Final Word (Marsha Brown)

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

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

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





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

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

