## Kay Ingamells on the Wonderfulness Interview in Narrative Practice

An Interview with Kay Ingamells by Lawrence Rubin

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### Editor's Introduction

The following interview with Kay Ingamells offers readers an accessible and richly storied introduction to one of the foundational yet often underdeveloped territories of narrative practice: the *Wonderfulness Inquiry*. While Narrative Therapy is frequently associated with externalizing conversations, Kay makes a compelling case that inquiries into what is "wonderful" about a person—their moral character, commitments, virtues, and hard-won ways of living—are equally foundational to contemporary narrative work.

For readers new to this practice, it may be helpful to listen for several threads woven throughout the interview. First, Kay invites us to think of "wonderfulness" not as praise, positivity, or strength language in a conventional sense, but as a careful inquiry into how people have enacted preferred ways of being in the midst of hardship. Second, she demonstrates how these inquiries become resources for standing against problems—not by ignoring suffering, but by approaching difficulty through what people already know, value, and have carried forward in their lives. Finally, readers may notice how these conversations widen beyond the individual, drawing in histories of family, ancestry, resistance, culture, and communities of belonging.

The interview also highlights an important distinction that may orient readers unfamiliar with narrative practice: Kay prefers the term *inquiry* over *interview*, emphasizing a collaborative and improvisational process of meaning-making rather than a structured extraction of information. Readers will see this stance reflected in her stories of practice with children, families, and young people facing anxiety, fear, oppression, and suicidality.

We are deeply grateful to Psychotherapy.net and interviewer Lawrence Rubin for generously granting permission to republish this interview in the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy. We appreciate their support in helping make these important conversations more widely available to practitioners, students, and communities of care.

## The Wonderfulness Inquiry

**Lawrence Rubin (LR): I'm here today with Kay Ingamells, a therapist, educator, and author who lives in New Zealand. We'll be chatting today about the Wonderfulness Inquiry, a fascinating and foundational intervention embedded in narrative practice. Hi, Kay!**

**KAY:** Hi, Lawrence! Thanks for having me today. So, I'd like to begin by saying where it comes from. As most people reading this may realize, David Epston, one of the founders of Narrative Therapy, originated the Wonderfulness Interview. It came about through necessity as he found himself in live interviews with children and families where he knew that what he had to bring was not going to be sufficient, and he needed to invent something pretty much on the spot. That evolved over time into a very clearly formulated, distinct practice, which, to my mind, is as important as a Narrative Therapy practice as externalizing is.

It's absolutely foundational to my practice, and I say inquiry, not interview, because it is an inquiry into what is remarkable about somebody. It's an inquiry into what David Epston would call their moral character, or what Sasha Pilkington would call their virtues. So traditionally, for the last however many decades, the way that people have come to know people through therapy has been through a particular lens, which David has called the crisis of representation. Here, people are represented, to you, by you, to themselves in therapy interviews through a lens of pathology, stigma, or a diagnosis.

A wonderfulness inquiry turns that tradition of focusing on the crisis or symptoms on its head. And so, what I'm doing at the beginning of an interview, whether it's with a child or young person or a family or an adult, starts from the other direction. I might begin with a question like, "Before we talk about the problem

today, and I know that the problem is something that you've come here to talk about, would it be okay if I was to get to know you in another way altogether? (I'll relate this to working with a child with a family present) Could I ask you what's wonderful about Billy? What is it that I would come to know that is wonderful about him if I was to get to know him as well as you do? The reason I'm asking this is because people don't come to therapy without having had life experience. As parents, you will have worked through all sorts of things in your lives, individually and as a family, and you will have wisdom and qualities and abilities to bring to what we're dealing with today. And if I know what those are, we can put our heads together and think about how we might use Billy's wonderful abilities and your family's wonderful abilities together to deal with this problem." That's one of the ways I might begin it. And hopefully that gives you a sense of what it is.

**LR: It does indeed. A little bit earlier on, you drew a distinction between an inquiry and an interview, and while some may use those terms interchangeably, my sense is that they are very different processes for you.**

**KAY:** In several ways. The first is that this is something I'm doing with somebody. I'm not interviewing somebody. I'm inquiring with people. We're inquiring together. I'm not bringing in the expectations of where I think we will end up specifically. I don't have a list of questions in front of me. It's an inquiry. It's an inventive, imaginative inquiry that really stems from narrative values about being decentered as a practitioner, valuing people's knowledges and wisdom. It's about connecting to and bringing out their insider knowledge. When I say inquiry, it occurs inside of a larger narrative inquiry, which is about the development of a counterstory. And the counterstory is an attempt to co-create a narrative with the client, with the parents of the client, that counters one of pathology and problems.

Wonderfulness inquiries or virtue inquiries are so helpful in interviewing people because the conversation is directed at what's wonderful about them, what you appreciate and respect about them. With older people, you're discovering who that person is as a character, a moral character. You are characterizing them as a

protagonist in their own story; champions in their lives, who they are as a resource, who they are—someone they can be proud of in their lives. Then you're taking that character and using it as part of the larger counter storying endeavor or process.

**LR: When I think of moral, and I may mistakenly be conflating it with morality, my sense is that when you say moral character, it's far deeper than right vs. wrong.**

**KAY:** Yes, that's a really interesting point. I don't mean moral in that moral sense of right and wrong. Instead, it draws on Aristotle's ideas of virtue. When I say moral, what I really mean is how people wish to be known. It's about the values and virtues we take pride in; those that we're living our lives by, and that might be something like courage, honesty, integrity, kindness. Most people live their lives or attempt to live their lives in these ways.

## Preferred Identities and Counterstorying

**LR: Is this what the narrative clinician would refer to as a preferred identity?**

**KAY:** Yes, I think those two could probably be conflated. Someone's moral character or preferred identity is based on how people have enacted it. It's not just how somebody would wish to be, it's how they have actually evidenced virtues in their lives. Part of a narrative wonderfulness inquiry is to actually bring forth how people practice those things. It's about looking for stories which really bring to life how somebody is enacting those virtues in their lives.

**LR: Some of our readers may be familiar with the notion of re-membering conversations, so I'm wondering how these may be related to wonderfulness inquiries.**

**KAY:** I think that's a very interesting question. Whilst distinct practices, you can absolutely bring re-membering inquiries or conversations into a wonderfulness inquiry. You can also use internalized-other questioning. Quite often, clients do not bring people with them to interviews, and you need an audience to have

these conversations. So, it's helpful to interview people about what other people would admire or respect about them or believe what is wonderful about them. You can use a re-membering conversation for that. I don't do that exactly in a wonderfulness interview, but I am asking the young person to look back at how other people have seen her.

**LR: Although our client might not bring physical people into the therapy space with them, they do bring internalized-others with them. So you might inquire into who first recognized some of the client's virtues in elementary school? Or who wouldn't be surprised that you have accomplished what you have at work? Who would not be surprised that you've become the young person that you are?**

**KAY:** Absolutely! It's a key thing to do at the beginning of the session with a child or young person or family as part of the counter storying endeavor. For instance, you could just ask somebody what their strengths or virtues are. That would become a very flat interview. You could say a bit more about it. Again, that could be quite flat, and you could end up with a thin interview, as narrative therapists call it.

You have to bring narrative counterstorying skills to it and be really persistent in the questions you ask people, because these are not things people ordinarily talk about. People's virtues sometimes are only ever talked about at their funeral. So you have to give people lots of prompts and lots of follow-up questions; be really persistent and ask imaginative questions.

**LR: I would imagine that the more a client is entrenched in what the narrative therapist calls the thin, problem-saturated story, the harder you have to work to draw them into these conversations. If I was the client and you were asking me to identify the qualities of my moral character or my virtues, and I was in a particularly depressed space, I might say to you, okay, I'm just not in a place where I can even think about something positive about myself. How persistent must you be?**

**KAY:** It's very important if you're going to set this up for success, to give a really strong preference. I will start by ideally phoning somebody before the first conversation and asking them what they think about that; then when it comes to how; there's a time and place for everything. I would err on the side of persistence because, as I said, people aren't used to these inquiries and don't know how remarkable they can be. It does take something to really get people engaged in this kind of conversation.

With the example you gave, and I'll call you Frank, "Frank, you know, I realize that you're feeling so depressed. I appreciate that. We'll have plenty of time to talk about that shortly. Would it be okay for you if we just took a little bit of time for me to begin to understand what it is that you've brought to bear against this depression? For however long you've been experiencing it, I know that you will have knowledge and practices, and you will have wisdom that we can really use together to help in the rest of this conversation and in our other conversations."

I'm always seeking consent and judging whether or not somebody is willing and ready to engage in this different kind of conversation. I take my cues carefully.

## The Legacy of Wonderfulness Inquiries

**LR: What is it about Kay that has attracted you to this particular intervention?**

**KAY:** That's a question I wasn't expecting. There are so many ways I could answer that question, but what I would say in short, and it is part of a bigger question about what attracted me to Narrative Therapy, is that I've always disliked the way people are always talked about because I've always believed in the beauty of

people. One of the things I've discovered since really ingraining wonderfulness inquiries into my practice is that I am meeting people who are so much more wonderful than I was meeting before. I meet people who are so much more remarkable than I was meeting before, and that brings me great joy.

I would also say that I really value connection. There was an article that David and I wrote many years ago about bringing together strength-based practice with narrative practice and talking about how we might story people's strengths. That has a bearing on this interview because David asked me similar questions, and I found myself reflecting back to my grandfather, who I never met. He was a residential canon in the Church of England, and he set up the first youth work programs in the UK and youth camps after the Second World War. My sense of him from stories I've heard is what he loved was connecting people and connecting people to spirituality and to God. That's not for me since I'm not religious, but I'd like to think that I follow in his footsteps in some sense.

**LR: Well, I wish we could spend some time talking about your grandfather, but my guess is that many of the qualities that helped him to be effective in what he did are the ones that you've inherited.**

**KAY:** Well, thank you. I'd like to think so. I only have my mother's memories to go on, but this actually brings us to something else that's really important about wonderfulness inquiries. When I've heard really evocative stories about someone's wonderfulness in action, I'll ask about the legacy of those wonderfulnesses. I might ask, "Has someone passed this down to you or taught you how to be brave, for example, or how to be kind, or how to keep going in the face of fear?" And then all sorts of stories emerge, and it can be very moving with the family present, because, again, these are things people have very rarely talked about, not in this way. They might have been mentioned in passing or you might have been told that your grandmother was X and did X, but not in relationship to the rest of the family or the young person. I could give you a couple of examples if you like.

**LR: Absolutely!**

**KAY:** I remember many years ago—and this will appeal to American audiences—working with a young woman and her mother. I was conducting a wonderfulness inquiry during the first session, our first conversation, with an American family—the young woman had been born in New Zealand, was about 15, and had a commitment to social justice and social causes. I asked the mum if she had any idea where her daughter's commitment to social justice comes from?

She started telling me about herself and her own history as she'd done lots of volunteering work and particularly around the area of domestic violence. Then I said, "Who handed it down to you?" She paused and thought, because it didn't come readily to mind and said, "Of course, my father was a factory owner during the McCarthy era in the United States, and he was told in no uncertain terms that he needed to sack his workers who were presumed to be communists. He refused to do that."

This young woman was hearing for the first time in a storied way how her commitment to social justice had been nested in her grandfather's experiences, his whole legacy. As a young person, especially in the individualistic culture we live in, you can imagine the difference it makes to have that sense of connection and belonging to a group and to a tradition.

**LR: As you talk about tapping into the legacy that contributed to this client's sense of self, I think we can also consider how a client, maybe not a child or a teenager, can influence other people in their lives. In other words, asking an adult how they would like their children or grandchildren to experience their own qualities. It's almost like embedding a time machine into the wonderfulness inquiry.**

**KAY:** A time machine is a beautiful way to talk about it! And that's exactly right—a reverse legacy. You can then say to a parent, "Has Alex inspired bravery in you?" There are also times when I've gotten young people to take on a problem by demonstrating their wonderfulness to their parents. For example, I asked the five-year-old, who'd been really brave at the dentist, and whose father was not feeling

brave about going to the dentist, to take his father and hold his hand and give thanks.

## Playing Into the Wonderfulness Inquiry

**LR: How has your style of wonderfulness inquiry evolved as you've grown as a therapist?**

**KAY:** Oh, that is a very interesting question. I think, in the beginning, I was experimenting with the basic question. "If I were to get to know X as well as you do, what would I come to appreciate and respect about them? What's wonderful about them?" There are so many creative ways to weave wonderfulness inquiries into narrative interviews, and it's not like they are separated and divided into discrete little boxes. They are overlapping practices that get woven together in improvisational and imaginative ways.

I've become more fluid and fluent in bringing forth wonderfulness in many different ways depending on what the situation best calls for. For instance, I remember doing an internalized-other interview with a woman in her early 40s who had experienced horrendous abuse—sexual abuse and neglect—in her family. This one character, her grandmother, was a person who really saved her and saved her sense of who she was. I interviewed her as if she was her grandmother, and it was in that internalized-other interview that her own abilities, her own wonderfulness, really became alive for her. From there, the therapy was a downhill journey. She had her grandmother alongside her.

You need to learn specific practices like externalizing, wonderfulness inquiries, internalized-other interviews, how to search for sparkling moments or unique outcomes, how to counterstory, and of course, how to formulate really good imaginative narrative questions. Those are all practices. It's like learning a musical instrument; if you want to get to the stage where you're an artist, you have to learn and then practice the basics and become comfortable improvising. You learn your scales, you learn your set pieces, but at some point, to really be performing it, you have to be able to integrate that in an improvisational fluid way.

For me, there's no limit to how you could use wonderfulness inquiries. If you think about it, it's about believing that people are not their problems. The problem is the problem. It's a whole way of thinking about people, of operating inside of that stance, which is quite different. It's like a doorway into another country than traditional psychotherapy interviews. I'm not meaning to give traditional psychotherapy a bad name at all—it's just that it's a very different orientation.

I don't have a playroom at present, but I can see so many options for kids for that. What's important to remember is the audience. What's important is that the child is hearing this or the young person is hearing this from others; the importance is that it's brought to life. I'd be doing that with parents or other people in the room co-creating that story with a sandtray or puppets. I'm very, very playful in my practice, which is the key to narrative therapy with children. The foundational book in narrative therapy for working with children is called *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems*.

I was talking on the phone this morning with the mother and her five-year-old little boy, who I will call Eli. I met with them about six months ago, and he was dealing with enormous fear about being on his own in the house and at school, and it came upon him from seemingly nowhere. What we did was to bring a lot of playfulness into how we engaged with the problem, because the important thing to remember about wonderfulness inquiries is that they're just the beginning. You're bringing forth stories of someone's wonderfulnesses so you can then engage those in standing up to the problem. Otherwise, to quote Tom Carlson, you just end up with a cute interview.

But where does it go in terms of engaging with the problem? With this little boy we came up with all sorts of imaginative ways of engaging with the problem, and one of them was that he and his father were going to make tiger masks and go out in the garden to scare the fears away because he had identified that the fears came from the garden, and he actually told me in the first interview that an alien had come down and taken one of the worries out of the tree in the garden.

I was using what he said, the environment of the garden, his bravery, and turning him into a tiger with his father as his supporter and bravery-giver as well. They would go out every night after his dad came home from work and put on the tiger masks, which they made together, which was very important. They tore around the garden, screaming and grumbling and chasing away the worries. Mum told me this morning that he had found these masks in a drawer the other week, and he pulled them out and hung them on his bedroom door. This was six months later, which is quite a long time in a five-year-old's life.

**LR: In the case of this brave little boy, what were his moral qualities; his virtues that you were able to tap into?**

**KAY:** I had interviewed them extensively about his wonderfulnesses, and there were so many. When I have a child in the room, I will sit on the floor with them and I will draw pictures of what the parents are talking about to bring it to life. This child was a great listener and, of course, very brave, which was the key thing. They gave me some wonderful examples, like he was very good at trying new things and had no limitations in what he was willing to give a go to. It was the bravery that I zoned in on and knowing that he would probably give this a go because he always gave things a go, especially his love of tearing around and being outside in the garden.

**LR: From what you're saying, the more you know about a person, the more useful the wonderfulness interview becomes because it's a reservoir of resources that you can help the client tap into to stand up against the problem.**

**KAY:** Absolutely. I take very detailed notes in my sessions, so I have that clearly written down to refer back to at any point in time. You can always dip back into the first interview for both of these if we need them.

**LR: I always go back to something that David Nylund said in this regard, which is something like, "who gets to decide what the evidence of effective treatment is?" In this instance with Eli, the evidence of the outcome was hanging the masks on the door of his room. I wonder if this would have been as effective had the clinician not been grounded in narrative practice.**

**KAY:** That's a very kind and interesting question. And I say this boldly, but if the clinician is not practising inside of a narrative stance, they're not doing a wonderfulness interview. It's something else, and I'm not saying that's bad. I'm not saying it's not helpful. It's just not a narrative inquiry. There's a fantastic article by Victoria Dickerson called *Positioning Oneself Within an Epistemology: Refining our Thinking about Integrative Approaches*. It's an argument against eclecticism.

To be practising on a particular side, a particular framework, you have to be sitting inside of the values, principles, and philosophies of that way of practising. That's not saying you cannot take other practices from other modalities and kind of graft them into your practice, but if I'm a CBT therapist doing the wonderfulness inquiry, then I'm not doing narrative therapy. Using a wonderfulness inquiry without any anchoring in narrative therapy might yield an interesting conversation. But where would the conversation go?

## A History of Standing Against Oppression

**LR: Can you share the last time you used the wonderfulness inquiry with an entire family present where it was clear that the client wasn't the only one in the family who was struggling?**

**KAY:** Yes, I could give an example, but I won't give too much detail. It was a typical teenage problem of a young person vanishing out the bedroom window in the middle of the night and hanging out with people that the parents would rather they didn't. And of course, when you come to wonderfulness inquiries, it would be silly not to draw on the wonderfulnesses that the whole family has to bring against a problem that the whole family is concerned about or involved in.

What was really lovely about this family was when we looked at the genealogy of this young person's wonderfulness, she was so appreciative of what her parents had contributed to her—the wonderfulness of the entire family. The family had really worked together as a team, which had come from doing amateur dramatics together and playing a lot together. Her father used this wonderful term—"we're really good at walking problems down." So, I took that term as a headline to the counterstory that this family had what it took to walk problems down. We then talked about other problems that they had walked down. I then interviewed the children about stories from their lives, about where they had used this ability that their parents had handed down to them.

In this case, you've got the children really speaking to their appreciation of their parents and how they've taken these abilities and used them in their lives. My sense was that this young person felt so privileged in the interview that I really think it enhanced what we call in New Zealand, in Māori, her *mana*, her sense of being respected by others. Then I wrote them a narrative letter following the interview, which really brought forth all of this. And then that was it. Problem over!

**LR: A traditional, or modernly-trained clinician might look at the genetic precursors to a family problem, but you're talking about the genetic predisposition to wonderfulness which is entirely different and far more hopeful.**

**KAY:** There are wonderful things, what I call counterstory threads and counterstory headlines, that you can pull out which the whole of the work can then hinge on. I remember interviewing a young woman, I think she was about 17, about *anxiety*, and her mother was present. We brought her grandmother in for the next session.

What emerged was that there was this history of women in the family having strong backbones. So, I interviewed them all about this history and then how they'd use their strong backbones, because it turned out that anxiety was something they all encountered and had used their backbones to stand up

against. Now you're really working with how a family history of engaging with the problem can be used to support a young person engaging with a similar problem. It never ceases to amaze me that these stories, and this history, are rarely ever known prior to these interviews. They might have had glimmers or snatches, but not in a way that is a resource like this.

**LR: I can see this being so helpful in working with families whose ancestors suffered from and stood against systems of oppression.**

**KAY:** Absolutely, because as a narrative therapist, I do see problems inside of a social, political, cultural context, but not inside the individual. A problem has its beginnings, as you say, sometimes generations back, and it's located in history. To be able to locate it there can be so liberating for people and then, as you say, engage the whole history of how a community, a family may have engaged with a problem over time.

That is particularly true for Māori families, where there is such a strong connection to ancestors and the people who walk with you and ancestral warriors and people who've engaged with colonisation and practices of colonisation. People can often trace back their ancestry to a particular ancestor who perhaps was involved in signing the founding document of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi.

I'm thinking again of that young woman, Fatu, who came from a very poor Māori community. Many of the young people around her were in dire straits. One of them had recently killed himself. We located the problem at one stage inside of racism. She told me the story in a subsequent session about how she went to a party where it was mostly White kids there, and she was feeling really comfortable. She was with her friends, and then somebody said something really racist. We were able to talk about what happened at that party in terms of racism, not in terms of anxiety or how she could be more confident in situations like that. I think that meant the world for her to talk in terms of race like that, and allowed her then to engage her voice of opposition, of outrage, of agency against that problem and to talk about it, because how many young people would have

the confidence to talk about a problem like racism, unless a therapist brings that up and locates it there?

**LR: As you're talking, I had the image of a tree and how a wonderfulness inquiry can help a person sprout branches of hope while remaining anchored at the roots, their ancestors.**

**KAY:** That's just lovely. And, you know, you think about the liberal, individualistic world that we live in, and this has never been more needed. Think about how young people's measurement for what it is to be successful in the world mostly comes from social media. Today, it's all about perfection and success for measuring up to these standards, which are never unique. They are packaged versions of who people are. One of the things about wonderfulness inquiries is if you really story in depth, what comes forth is a picture of that young person which is unique to them. They can aspire to be themselves or be inspired to be like their family or their ancestors, not like the influencers on social media.

## Standing Up Against Suicidality

**LR: Are there any clinical situations where you would NOT use a wonderfulness inquiry?**

**KAY:** In an emergency, such as a young person who is actively suicidal. That's not to say I wouldn't do a wonderfulness inquiry, but I almost certainly wouldn't begin there. As I said, a wonderfulness inquiry is part of a whole way of seeing the person, so I would be weaving those questions all the way through the interview to bring forth their wisdom, strengths, and abilities. Where else is it more important to do that than when somebody feels that life is not worth living? But it would be a different inquiry, and that would go into, no doubt, reasons for living. So, it would simply have a very different flavor to it.

If there were other people in the room, I would be only using them in that emergency as much as possible to bring forward a young person's resources, abilities, and strength in the face of what they've been dealing with in life that's led them to feel that they might wish to take their own lives.

**LR: In such a situation, how would you respond to a critic who might say, "it sounds like you're just trying to talk someone out of their symptoms—their wish to die?"**

**KAY:** Symptom isn't a word I would use. However, it's absolutely not about ignoring the problem. It's how you come up on the problem through a different lens, one about what somebody has to bring to put against it. You're just more resourced against the problem and understand that they may have resources to use against it, and then you fiercely engage with and on behalf of the person with the problem. It's not as direct. I'd like to think it's a more secure or more clever way to go about it, and I don't mean that in an arrogant way—maybe it's a more nuanced way.

## Paying Forward

**LR: As we wind down, Kay, what advice would you give to new therapists who may not fashion themselves as creative or spontaneous, and who would see something like a wonderfulness interview or narrative practice, for that matter, as too different or too uncomfortable?**

**KAY:** Just like most things, it requires application and practice. If you want to do something in a way that is really interesting, like play an instrument or play tennis to a high standard, therapy is no different. And why should it be? I think what I'd say is there's a distinction in therapy between a paint-by-numbers kind of therapy where you have a method and a craft where you've developed skill to a reasonably high level, and then there's art or artistry.

David Epston, Tom Carlson, and I teach a worldwide Zoom program called *The Apprenticeship and the Artistry of Narrative Practice*, where we teach people how to go from craft or even paint-by-numbers to artistry. I would also suggest his book, along with David Marsten and Laurie Markham, *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland.*

When I first met David 23 years ago, I asked him what his secret was because I was just so mesmerized by his practice. He sagely said to me, and I remember his tone even now, “practice, practice, practice.”

**LR: On that wonderful note, Kay, I will say thanks so much for sharing yourself with our readers.**

**KAY:** It’s been an absolute pleasure to talk with you today. I have so enjoyed your questions and the conversation. Thank you for inviting me.

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