



## Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

**Founding Editor: David Epston**

ISSN 2767-3766

**May 2023**

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

[www.JournalCNT.com](http://www.JournalCNT.com)

Sponsored in part by



---

### Content

- P. 1 [Editors' Note](#)
  
- P. 2 [Narrative Orthodoxy and Hegemonic Power: An Evolutionary Perspective by Jeff Zimmerman](#)
  
- P. 20 [Katja-writing: Being author and audience to fictionalized stories of trauma by Christoffer Haugaard](#)
  
- P. 68 [Painting the bigger picture... Putting the quality in qualitative research by Helen Böhme](#)





## Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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

---

### Editors' Note

Welcome to the April 2023 Release of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy! We are excited to highlight three original papers in this month's release.

The first paper, "Narrative Orthodoxy and Hegemonic Power: An Evolutionary Perspective" was written by Jeff Zimmerman. In this paper, Jeff addresses the dangers of, what he sees as, a growing orthodoxy or hegemony in narrative practice that has led to the "policing" of narrative therapy and to a "stifling" of creativity and expansion of narrative work in our contemporary times.

The second paper, "Katja-writing: Being author and audience to fictionalized stories of trauma" was written by Christoffer Haugaard. In this paper, Christoffer introduces readers to an innovative practice of using fictional stories written in collaboration with clients that seeks to position themselves simultaneously as authors and audience members to the stories of their lives.

The third paper, "Painting the bigger picture: Putting the quality in qualitative research" was written by Helen Böhme. In this paper, Helen shares the story of her journey to narrative therapy through a unique autoethnographic telling of her relationship with qualitative research and narrative therapy ideas.





## Narrative Orthodoxy and Hegemonic Power: An Evolutionary Perspective

Jeff Zimmerman

---

It was the heyday of narrative therapy, and Michael White and David Epston were quite busy. David had finished collaborating on a book that summarized his work on Anorexia, *Biting the hand that starves you*, published in 2004. Michael was busy working on a seminal book called *Maps of narrative practice*, which would be published in 2007. They eventually saw some light in their busy schedules and planned a meeting to re-imagine narrative therapy, a meeting that would occur after Michael's book launched. Three weeks before the meeting was going to happen Michael died...

Michael had been posing the rhetorical question, "What are we doing wrong? Why aren't the next generations coming up with novel ideas/practices?" According to David, it was their intention to find ways to insert more innovation and creativity into the everyday practice of narrative therapy.

In his 2016 JST article entitled, *Re-imagining narrative therapy: A history for the future*, David stated:

"I believe Michael would never have asserted that there need be any 'official mode of geographical representation' and that his mapping in *Maps* should assume such hegemony. Why do I suggest this? Michael aspired to live by the Foucaultian notion of 'movement of thought.' Rabinow and Rose (2003) described this methodology of Foucault as 'an antimethodology' or what they called a 'practice of criticism': 'Thus the practice of criticism which we learn from Foucault would not be a methodology. It would be a movement of thought that invents, makes use of, and modifies conceptual tools as they are set in relation with specific practices and problems that they themselves form in new ways. When they have done this work, without regret, they can be recycled or even discarded.'"

David went on to suggest that, "This is in sharp contrast to other notions of methodology, for example, how to do things as primarily to be ruled and regulated by canons..." (p.84)





In his 2018 San Diego address, *Re-imagining narrative therapy: An ecology of magic and mystery for the maverick in the age of branding*, David asks, “What kind of rules and what kind of freedoms will decide whether narrative therapy teaches scales only as a regulatory regime like so many contemporary psychological practices and limits our freedoms and our imaginations” (p.5). David (p.6) then quotes the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul, “Imagination protects us from the temptations of premature conclusions: the temptation of certainty and the fantasy of fixed truth,” and then he goes on to encourage us to, “take heed of Saul’s warning:” “as I said, enforced loyalty to declared truth is the way to marginalize the imagination.”

What stands in the way of this re-imagination is something that I have been thinking about as “Narrative Orthodoxy.” This Problem has encouraged deliberate attempts to undermine, sabotage, and discard ideas, practices, and even individuals whose work represents a departure from the original but relatively ancient discourses of our work. Some of these attacks were heinous in nature. David himself tells a story about a paper of his that was rejected from a narrative therapy journal because it wasn’t narrative enough... I could share many other specific examples of policing that I am aware of, but in the end, I don’t see these specifics as the overall point. Instead, in this paper, I will try to make a case for the importance of evolving the narrative lens to include ideas and practices that I believe are critical to narrative therapy moving forward and becoming more relevant to our current context of living. This context is greatly changed from the 1980s when narrative therapy was born; that’s 40 years ago! I will also try to address some of what stands in the way of this critical development and will do so in a variety of ways that include words from our founders, academic presentation, metaphorically-situated questions, an old exercise, deconstructed clinical material and, of course, some interpersonal neurobiology...(it’s me!). I must admit to having a great deal of passion for this conversation about orthodoxy, as narrative therapy has been an important part of my life and is quite dear to me. Lack of evolution results in sure death...

There has been a great deal written in the US recently about the Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe V. Wade*, including the idea of “originalism,” in this case meaning a strict interpretation of our constitution as was “originally” written. Proponents of this idea now dominate our Supreme Court and used this justification to overturn 50 years of precedent of abortion rights. It was as if they think the US constitution was written without a realization that much would





change in the years to come. Here are some quotes from a recent (2022) Washington Post article by Ruth Marcus that seem relevant to this discussion:

“Even beyond that, originalism suffers from multiple flaws. It offers the mere mirage of objectivity and therefore of constraint. It is self-refuting: The Constitution itself was deliberately written with grand, magisterial phrases — what Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes in 1934 called ‘the great clauses of the Constitution’ — meant to be interpreted by future generations. It is incapable of being strictly enforced without producing repugnant results...”

“Did the framers of the Constitution or its amendments intend for its meaning to be fixed at that point in time, as they understood it? They certainly didn’t say so.”

“A faithful originalist approach would not fixate on the words’ meaning at a particular point in time. The Founders were anything but originalists. Originalism generates its own demise.”

“The liberal justices took a stab at it in the Dobbs dissent. ‘The Constitution does not freeze for all time the original view of what those rights guarantee, or how they apply,’ they wrote. ‘That does not mean anything goes.’ Rather, they said, ‘applications of liberty and equality can evolve while remaining grounded in constitutional principles, constitutional history, and constitutional precedents.’

I’m certainly in agreement with the latter point as far as narrative therapy goes, that the overarching principles of narrative therapy that we hold so dear need to be preserved, even while we shed some previous resistances to certain ideas that made sense to hold in the 1980s but not necessarily now. For example, I suggested (Zimmerman, 2018), that, while the construct of “emotion” may not have made sense to us in the 1980s as we strove to depart from the traditional psychodynamic/psychoanalytical models of the day, it may now need to become an important dimension of narrative therapy work given today’s cultural context.

Before I go any further, allow me to provide some definitions... Ok, definitions can be boring, but these particular ones are being reviewed here because they contribute to the overall points being made in the article. First up is the term orthodoxy. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines orthodoxy as: “An orthodox





religious belief or interpretation is one handed down by a church's founders or leaders". Compare this to the one from vocabulary.com: "A widely accepted belief or theory is an orthodoxy. You could call the scientific theory of gravity an orthodoxy, since it's generally considered to be an established fact. The word orthodoxy comes from the Greek root words orthos, which means right, true or straight, and doxa, opinion. So orthodoxy describes the one true opinion."

As well, I would like to introduce the notion of hegemony. I am quoting here from vocabulary.com: "Hegemony is political or cultural dominance or authority over others..." Britannica adds "...by legitimating norms and ideas. The term hegemony is today often used as shorthand to describe the relatively dominant position of a particular set of ideas and their associated tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas" (Rosamond).

From a poststructural perspective, one can see the influence of both Capitalism and Patriarchy on the development of institutional hegemonies. Capitalism, in the way it encourages competition for the dissemination and subsequent sale of resources, which might include the teaching of skills and knowledges. Patriarchy, for the way it encourages notions of superiority, and competition for power.

And lastly the term evolution from the Oxford Dictionary: "The gradual development of something, especially from a simple to a more complex form..." Webster defines it as "the descent with modification from preexisting species : cumulative inherited change in a population of organisms through time leading to the appearance of new forms : the process by which new species or populations of living things develop from preexisting forms through successive generations."

I also want to introduce the term contemporary narrative therapy, coined by Ann Epston, to refer to recent developments in our work that support the evolution of narrative therapy practice. David Epston (2020), commenting on the change of name of this journal from the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy to the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, stated that, "we are committed to discover and highlight examples of practice that cannot be explained by the existing narrative therapy literature." From my point of view, a contemporary narrative therapy is one that is inclusive of new ideas and new practitioners and what they bring to the work, and is consonant with the demands of the current cultural context. Let's now turn to some questions that relate to this evolution.



## What's the problem? Some questions for the iron throne

Do you think it was a coincidence that poststructural models took hold in the mid-80s or was it a reflection of the (then) current culture and the experiences of those gravitating to these ideas? Do you think it is a coincidence now that mindfulness and affectively oriented models are taking hold, or is it a reflection of the current culture and the experiences of those gravitating to these ideas?

1. Do you remember that, in the 80s, we critiqued the then current models as being outdated and not relevant to current times?
2. Power relations do not operate only through repression or hindrance; they are also productive. As you continue to create good soldiers who tout the party line and spout only Narrative Orthodoxy, have you considered how this will affect narrative therapies' ability to evolve and meet the current demands of the culture? Or should we resist (power relations always leave open the possibility for resistance) being complicit in shaping our bodies along the lines of older narrative discourses?
3. Have you considered the real effects on younger people around the world who are experimenting with new ideas, of banishing any practices and ideas that, don't fit the Narrative Orthodoxy mold, despite the popularity and helpfulness and good effects of these new ideas?
4. Oppression involves a lack of tolerance for new possibilities in any form. We all feel passionate about standing up to oppressive ideas that have real effects on us, and also passionate about questioning all points of view. Back in the day, we were rebelling against the dominant models as they were restrictive and proscriptive; how is the promotion of Narrative Orthodoxy different? In either case, new ideas are shunned and those who hold them are made to feel unwelcome in the club, made to feel that their ideas have no place in the hegemony of Narrative Orthodoxy... Is that what you want?
5. Deconstructing the wielding of power and the establishment of power relations has been a hallmark of narrative therapy thinking from day one... Are you aware of the real effects over the last 20 years of Narrative Orthodoxy? How many people (e.g., both founders) have felt that they need to move away because their ideas no longer fit the mold?
6. There is a difference between theoretical understandings and experiential ones... Should the ultimate accountability of new ideas lie with the real







effects of these ideas on the day to day, week to week practice of therapy, and thus be best spoken about by those who regularly engage in that process?

This might be a good time to bring up a virtual institution that I suspect most of us are aware of, something that has been referred to as the “narrative police.” Now I must admit (as I have in other writings) that I was once a card-carrying member of that organization. Caught up in the passions and excitement of these (at the time) new ideas, I believed they deserved a rigid following. Looking back at that time it now seems silly, as Michael himself was always adding to the work with new ideas from all sorts of places. I apologize to those I taught for whom I may have promoted the kind of “gaze” that we were all so desperately trying to usurp. How ironic is it that we spoke of the way our culture invited us to police ourselves, only then to replicate that process in our own teaching and presentation...

I’m not saying that there aren’t more and less helpful ways of doing things, I’m just saying that having a rigid stance on what was helpful wasn’t helpful at all. I am glad to have handed in my resignation from that hurtful organization, as it raised questions for those it had affected (even experienced practitioners) about whether what they were doing was even narrative therapy at all. When I first started giving workshops on Neurobiology, attendees would come up to me, often in a voice no louder than a whisper, and wonder if it was really ok to work with ideas from both perspectives, and would thank me for giving them “permission” to experiment with the new ideas they had been reading about and learning. I’m certain we could all contribute examples to what would be an extensive list of other no-nos that the gaze of the police tried to enforce, many that were accepted as truths without any measure of their real effects...

### **Practices and real effects on hegemonic power**

Situating oneself in a hegemonic discourse inevitably leads to engaging in practices of power in order to maintain one’s authoritative position. Felluga (2011) suggests that some of the ways dominant cultures maintain their dominant positions are to create institutions to formalize their power, to create bureaucratic structures to make their power seem abstract and not just attached to one individual, and to use education, advertising, and publication to induct individuals into the ideals of their group. Scholte (2020) notes that with discursive practices, hegemony secures legitimated dominance in world politics through the use of language and meaning. Willing subordination is achieved with semantic







signifiers (e.g., 'community', 'democracy', and 'justice') that construct the supreme force to be good. Similarly, narratives (e.g., of 'transparency', 'development', and 'security') spin positive storylines to legitimize a structure of domination, as do hegemonic accounts of history. In short, hegemonic discourses construct consciousness ('regimes of truth') in which the dominated genuinely believe that their domination is a good thing. He also points out that modern science affirms its hegemony with conference routines, academic prizes, and graduation rites.

In the U.S., teachers are currently being rooted out for deviations from locally prescribed orthodoxy (see Florida or Texas). And not just teachers, but any staff, parent, or individual who fails to construct themselves around dominant prescriptions can find themselves marginalized or even ostracized for holding beliefs counter to local hegemonic ideals. Indeed, one's personhood can be at stake when they are made to feel uncomfortable about their, to use a metaphor, race, if they are discovered giving voice to contemporary ideas or saying things that in any way betrays the hegemonic perspective. In a Washington Post article, *Opinion: Behind the latest GOP restrictions on race teaching: A hidden, toxic goal*, it was stated that Martin Luther King said he hoped America could live up to its stated ideals, but nevertheless, he wrestled with whether that was possible... Can narrative therapy live up to its ideals?

I wonder if one effect of hegemonic abuses of power would be to cancel the value of ultimate accountability ONLY to the real effects of any contemporary possibility, and not just to idiosyncratic and ill-informed theoretical speculation, possibly motivated by a desire to maintain one's position of power. For a relevant example, as suggested earlier, in order to have some experience-near opinion of what might be useful to an actual therapist, one would have to have spent many hours sitting in a therapist's chair in order to evaluate the real effects of any therapeutic possibility. Otherwise, any opinion could be seen as blanket entitlement to the "truth," and the holder subject to the temptation to engage in a common tool in the authoritarian playbook, (used currently and across history) to attack other positions and points of view, holding the belief that strength lies in attack and not in defense.

I'm not suggesting that all hegemonies are bad, or that all of us involved in trainings/training institutions don't engage in some of these practices. But in the end, as we all know, all ideas, practices, and institutional structures have to be





accountable to their REAL effects.

**And now some questions for narrative orthodoxy:**

(I decided to have a bit of fun here and resurrect an old training exercise we used a lot back in the day.)

Question: What is it that you want for narrative therapy?

Answer: I'm big on slow death... Without evolution, most ideas and practices fade away and die.

Q: Can you think of an exception to that rule?

A: Meditation has been around since 5000 BCE. But it was generated from indigenous knowledges, across ethnic and religious groups.

Q: What is your biggest enemy?

A: Context. You gave a great example of this in your discussion about the US Supreme Court. The conservative majority eliminated abortion protection rights for women because this protection isn't strictly the purview of the constitution as it was originally conceived. However, in the world TODAY, this protection is critical... I'm not a big fan of TODAY...

Q: Who are your best friends?

A: People who judge possibilities but have no actual personal knowledge or experience of what they speak about (despite being under the influence of an idea that they do).

Q: What is your favorite strategy for squashing resistance?

A: Create misleading misinformation... I believe that if you make the lie big, make it simple, and keep saying it, eventually, they will believe it... After all, the victor will never be asked if he or she told the truth...

Q: Don't you think resistance is inevitable?

A: Yes.

Q: Is resistance futile?



A: No comment.

Michel Foucault here: I have a comment. "WHERE THERE IS POWER THERE IS RESISTANCE."

Princess Leia Organa: "The more you tighten your grip...the more star systems will slip through your fingers."

### Contemporary narrative therapy (CNT)

Is resistance futile? Whether it is or is not, there is plenty of it going on in narrative therapy land these days... Here are a few examples of individuals whose work has evolved. Most of them have spent many hours over many years seeing clients, and understand the changing developments in our ideas and in our lives:

1. Insider Witness Practices- (Tom Carlson, David Epston, & Sanni Paljakka) attempts to address trauma in novel and interesting ways. From my point of view, these are ways to bring forth, separate from, and then move on from the unhelpful affect that is getting in the way of allowing a client's life to finally move forward.
2. This group, also including Travis Heath, Kay Ingamells, & Sasha Pilkington, engages in what they refer to as "literary means to pedagogical ends."
3. Relational Interviewing- (Stephen Madigan & others) interviews the "relationship" in order to be helpful to couples caught in extreme conflict (in my mind, this "relationship" is formed from right-brain communications between members of the couple). Rosa Arteaga (also from the Vancouver School of narrative therapy) interviews the body to help women deal with trauma. And from this school, the philosopher Todd May has been suggesting that Maurice Merleau-Ponty and not Derrida might have been a place Michael could have gone especially to address the body in narrative therapy work (apparently, orthodox narrative therapists have heads only).
4. Acknowledging the "affective turn"- Gerald Monk & Navid Zamani, as well as David Pare & Ian Percy, have written about the importance of bringing affect into narrative therapy work. Lynn Rosen has given workshops on Embodying conversations.
5. Revising psychoanalytic/dynamic practices for narrative therapy use- For





example, I read a very interesting and well thought out article on using a sand tray in a narrative therapy process. And one about working with dreams. Interestingly, even a group of psychoanalysts have evolved, referring to themselves as neuroanalysts. They have moved away from a one-directional conception of the therapeutic process, instead acknowledging the dyadic nature of the therapeutic relationship.

6. Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB)- I dove into the interpersonal neurobiology literature to get inspiration for enlarging the narrative therapy lens to include a more affective focus, as well as to introduce practices such as meditation and imagery-based work into the narrative therapy tool bag. My former colleagues Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin and Ron Estes picked up the baton and did so as well.

What's common to all of these initiatives is that they maintain a narrative therapy meta-structure, constructed by previously mentioned overarching narrative therapy values. These initiatives also reflect the importance of developing new ways to address current issues. If you read the above and find it hard to imagine how these ideas get along with narrative therapy ones, you might consider doing due diligence and reading about the work that is actually being done in the room with clients. Michael White said that there were 2 kinds of Problems. One occurred when a person was resisting dominant discourse and was made to suffer accordingly. The other was when a person was (unhappily) cooperating with dominant discourse and was suffering accordingly. My personal response has usually been the former. And yours? What have been your (silent?) ways of resisting orthodox dominant narrative therapy discourse?

### **An IPNB interlude**

One of Dan Siegel's more recent concepts is something he calls the plane of possibility. The plane is part of his metaphor for how the mind works (See "Mind" or "Aware"). In many ways, the idea is similar to Bateson's concept of restraints... What does this have to do with CNT you ask? Let's see.

According to Siegel, energy flow is the mechanism of mind. Your mind is able to send and direct the flow of energy; subjective experience may simply be sensing the feeling of that flow, whether it is coming from inside or outside the body. And so an embodied mind is beyond the brain (as it was for Bateson) and is made up of patterns of embodied energy flow. In the plane, the experience of spaciousness





occurs when the energy probability position is immersed in the plane of possibility, a probability position of near zero... In other words, if your mind is resting on the plane, all sorts of possibilities may arise.

Yet it would be difficult to get things done in general, let alone efficiently, if the mind were in an entirely open state all of the time. In this metaphor, above the plain lies plateaus, a more limited set of potential activations from which a more constrained pattern of peaks can arise. For example, a plateau formed by the meta-principles of narrative therapy carries with it certain intentions and usually leads to certain practices (peaks). A high and narrow plateau would indicate a narrow state of mind; only giving rise to a limited number of peaks. A lower broader plateau would indicate a more open state of mind. Peaks, however, especially narrow/rigid ones, are even more constraining and so are difficult to escape from (such as the effects of a Problem).

These filters operate from the “top-down” and may enable only certain elements to enter awareness, and in that way, plateaus serve as filters for what does or does not become a part of the peaks of actualization in awareness. This is in sharp contrast to information entering from the “bottom up,” which means that the flow of energy and information is as fresh and new and unconstrained as possible. Needless to say, as therapists and teachers, it’s helpful to be operating much of the time from the bottom up, opened up and on the plane, before rising to a preferred plateau, and from there to a peak with a question...

Perhaps the big picture for us is the importance of dipping below these plateaus and into the plane to open space for new possibilities in order for us to evolve and become something other than we are now...to allow new information and the effects of changing contexts to have more influence, thus opening the door for new plateaus to form to allow us to operate more helpfully in the current context. Tom Carlson suggested to me that one of Michael White’s stated purposes of narrative therapy was “to encourage people to take an observer position in relation to the events of their lives,” and that Tom had referred to this in a paper he wrote as a theory of oversight in narrative therapy (Carlson, 2020, p. 12). Dan Siegel’s concept of mindsight (2009) is similar to this as well. All require the skill of being “in the plane” enough to separate from our preconceptions and our usual habits of responding, therefore leaving us open to what might be seen that wouldn’t be noticed when caught in a plateau or peak.





Accordingly, as far as opening space for a more contemporary narrative therapy goes, we must first face Orthodoxy, the rigid peak which prevents new information from being relevant (like with any sort of Problem).

What does this discussion suggest about what is required for a more contemporary narrative therapy?... From my point of view, it is a stance of openness to new possibilities that allow for new organizational states to form. It is not a defined set of practices, except for the meta-practice of openness and curiosity, which have long been narrative therapy meta-practices. In the 2018 San Diego address, David discusses some of the spirit of narrative therapy and shares a story about Michael's hope that that spirit continues (p.1)... One such spirit was appreciating, "the magic of the other" (p.2)... Another was the "imagination in discovery"(p.2) ... Yet another was "irreverence and improvisation" (p.4)...

David notes that one of the central aspects of the work Michael did was the "spirit of adventure." (p.7) Quoting from the introduction to his and Michael's book, *Experience, contradiction, narrative and imagination*, "We have been steadfast in our refusal to name our work in any consistent manner. We do not identify with any particular 'school' of family therapy, and are strongly opposed to the idea of our own contribution being named as a school. We believe that such a naming would only subtract from our freedom to explore various ideas and practices.....we regard (this work) to be an 'open book'.....however, we are drawing attention to the fact that one of the aspects of this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure. We aim to preserve this spirit, and know that if we accomplish this, our work will continue to evolve in ways that are enriching to our lives, and to the lives of those persons who seek our help". David notes that, "If there were anything approximating a manifesto for narrative therapy, you could find it briefly stated in the introduction."

Quoting from his introduction of Michael's 2011 posthumous book, he notes that the 'freedoms' required for our imaginations to re-imagine narrative therapy have now become very precious... and we may have to secure them appealing to a greater fidelity to this spirits..." (p.9). Discussing Thomas Kuhn's (1967) work, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, David noted his commentary about "how 'revolutionary sciences' overtime become 'normal sciences' which are left to mop up before being replaced by another 'revolutionary science.' If I were to predict when that will take place in any contemporary therapy, I would say around 25 years from the date of its discovery. It is a rather predictable path to its





obsolescence. If 1985 was the year of the origination of narrative therapy, then its 'use by' date was looming around 2010. Michael and I had wisely proposed to preempt that, to 'start all over again' in 2008" (p.14). David then goes, "...to Chick Corea's definition of improvisation and the balance between the rules and the freedoms and how over time there is a shift in favor of the rules. Shouldn't we resist such regulatory regimes, from both without and within?"

### A CNT moment

I've had many experiences where widening the narrative therapy lens has resulted in new and useful possibilities... I imagine all of us practicing therapists have had MOMENTS where something pops into our heads, or we make a comment that seems to come out of nowhere and may even be in a form not sanctioned by our preferred model. Some therapists seem to operate in more intuitive and less Maps-y ways in general. What if some of that was teachable, which would require having understandings that we can teach? David Epston always seemed to operate intuitively to me, and while Michael White seemed to follow more of a defined map, he seemed to me to be unusually sensitive to where the affective flow of those he was interviewing was going. This was without ever discussing the process whereby certain directions and questions were seized upon and not others.

One hot topic in the neurobiology literature is "synchronicity," the roots of which lie in the reciprocal right brain to right brain flow of energy that is the nonverbal undercurrent in communications between all of us. It appears that as we interact, an increasing amount of this synchronicity begins to evolve. We are constantly receiving implicit, non-verbal information from others without necessarily acknowledging or consciously processing this information. What if we paid more attention to this and we became able to make more direct use of this information?

I received a call from the wife (V) of a client (B) whom I have been seeing on and off for some time. I had seen them as a couple previously, but the sessions were difficult as B could barely tolerate hearing any negative feedback. He had experienced a very psychologically abusive relationship with his father when he was growing up and had an identity of "Bad B," which was extremely easily triggered, so easily that he often had to run to the bathroom during the sessions, experiencing cramps and diarrhea. I hadn't seen V for about six months.







Working with V was also difficult, as you might expect, but in very different ways. She was forthcoming about her distress in the marriage, and presented an array of congruent emotional responses, looking sad when she was sad, angry when she was angry, and hurt when she was hurt. We were able to identify an easily triggered experience of “Lack of Respect,” and had long ago mapped out its’ effects and worked with them in traditional narrative therapy ways. Despite all of that, I always felt that something was missing, but was never sure how to get a hold of what that was in the sessions. I imagined that she had her own version of “Bad V,” but unlike with B, it was not easily invited out. I also imagined that there was a lot of potent affect having its way with her. Likely I was thinking too much and working too hard.

When she arrived at the session (he was happy for me to see her alone), I could clearly see that Depression had taken over her face and body. It turned out that after a number of new incidents where B treated her and the kids in a very critical manner and had once again left her embarrassed in front of her friends and family, Hopelessness had taken over. She told me that she really didn't want to get divorced but didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do either. I suggested a plan to involve B’s mother, who had continued to inadvertently support the behavior that was having such deleterious effects; she had always been protective of him in an effort to make up for the treatment he had received at his father’s hands. I had always wanted to involve her, but for reasons that go beyond the scope of this example, I had never contacted her. I could see that at least the idea of perhaps involving her in supporting B to set a new direction to become what we all knew was his preferred self, picked V up a bit. But this was just a band-aid for the moment.

The next morning, when I opened my phone, I had received the following text from her (she knew I was seeing him later that day): “Another bad night... I can’t do it anymore... I can’t go on like this... being in this situation is horrible.”

I felt Hopelessness trying to overtake me as well. So I sat down and remembered “breathe... just breathe”... and I pictured V's face, easy as it was etched in my subconscious. Unlike in the sessions, where I often (too often) used more of my left brain to ask a question or to even say something supportive, I instead breathed and let myself feel the feelings that were coming into my body as I read her text. I responded back with the following message, this one now coming from my right brain instead: “The Hopelessness is overwhelming to me too... and you





hurt so, so bad... it must be horrible indeed to see yourself as someone who would be in a situation like this... sometimes I just don't seem to know how to help you..."

Not rocket science, not externalized (my experience is that sometimes you have to internalize affect so it's felt enough to be acted upon), but something that emerged in the MOMENT between us (synchronicity) in a way that we both felt... My close colleague Bill Lax, who is well versed in EFT, mindfulness practices, and narrative therapy, suggested to me, after reading what I had written, "that drawing from EFT and many other models, my response was one of empathy, feeling her pain, validation of her experience, and compassion for her experience, similar to that of many others (including perhaps all of us at one time or another) in the world who may be in situations like hers," and agreed with me that, "this was not left brain, but (well-trained) right brain activity that we often ignore when under stress." It is so interesting that this kind of response has not been privileged in narrative therapy writing other than to encourage therapists to "follow" the experience of the client...

Later that day, when B entered my office, something was different. V had communicated her distress to him in a "loud enough" way that he could hear it, and he was suddenly more open to doing the work he needed to do to become his preferred self. He acknowledged, for the first time, that, "I am abusive to her." This statement became a new starting point for us. He also agreed to let me contact his mother. V and I had a phone conversation the next day, in which she shared that she realized that the intensity of her feelings was previously unknown to her and had to do with "a lot of things" that she wanted to explore in her own therapy.

### **Finally: The end or the beginning?**

My hope in writing this article was that it would not only invite you to come up with the "novel ideas/practices," that Michael White hoped to see from the "next generations" (see the opening paragraph), but also to help free you from turning the gaze of the narrative police on yourselves. From the beginning, narrative therapists took initiatives to stand up to impoverishing dominant specifications that had limiting effects on the enactment of one's own preferred values and practices. Indeed, it is a time-honored tradition for narrative therapists to question, comment on, and yes, even rebel against the operations of power that





support these dominant specifications...

So please “fight the power,” stand strong with your own ideas, and find support for them among like-minded others.

It is important to remember that Michael White would go on reading binges of ideas that came from outside the world of narrative therapy. Tom Carlson reiterated to me that if there was a tradition in narrative therapy, it would be this practice of reading and letting the ideas that emerged from this process influence the next set of ideas in the work. It is my hope that all of us, all of you, will do the same.

In the 2016 JST article, David suggested that, “should you travel beyond where the “maps” go, you have some responsibility when you return to report back on where you went and what you found so others can travel the same direction... and sooner or later (hopefully sooner), a mapper will map such a territory, allowing so many more to travel there and enlarge the terra cognita of narrative therapy practice” (p.84).

### References

- Carlson, T. (2020). Who is the outsider in insider and outsider witnessing practices: Toward a theory of oversight in narrative therapy. *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, IWP Special Release, pp. 5-15.
- Epston, D. & White, M. (1992). *Experience, contradiction, narrative and imagination*. Australia South: Dulwich Centre Publications. P. 9
- Epston, D. (2016). Re-imagining narrative therapy: A history for the future. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 35(1), 79-87.
- Epston, D. (2018). Re-imagining narrative therapy: An ecology of magic and mystery for the maverick in the age of branding. San Diego, CA
- Epston, D. (2020) On the necessity of adventure: Toward a contemporary narrative therapy, *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2, p. 4-7
- Felluga, Dino. (2011). "Terms used by Marxism." Introductory guide to critical theory. Purdue University.
- Kuhn, T (1967). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.





- Lax, B. (2022) Personal communication.
- Maisel, R., Epston, D., & Borden A. (2004). *Biting the hand that starves you: Inspiring resistance to anorexia/bulimia*. Norton.
- Marcus, R (2022, December 1, 9:21 EST) Originalism is bunk. Liberal lawyers shouldn't fall for it, Washington Post.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Evolution. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evolution>.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Orthodoxy. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/orthodoxy>.
- Oxford University Press (n.d.). Evolution. In Oxford Dictionary. [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/evolution](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/evolution).
- Rabinow, P., and Rose, N. (Eds.). (2003). Foucault today. In the essential Foucault: Selections from the essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984 (pp. 47–64). New Press. P. 27
- Rosamond, B. (n.d.). Hegemony. In Britannica Encyclopedia. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>.
- Saul, J.R. (2001). *On Equilibrium*, Penguin Books. Pp. 116-121.
- Scholte, J. A. (2020). *Hegemony and world order: Reimagining power in global politics*. Routledge.
- Sargent, G. (2022, January 24) Behind the latest GOP restrictions on race teaching: A hidden, toxic goal, Washington Post.
- Siegel, D. (2009) *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*. Norton.
- Siegel, D. (2016) *Mind: A journey to the heart of being human*. Norton.
- Siegel, D (2018) *Aware: The science and practice of presence*. Tarcher Perigee.
- Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). Orthodoxy. In vocabulary.com dictionary. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/orthodoxy>.





Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). Hegemony. In vocabulary.com dictionary.  
<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/hegemony>.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.

White, M. (2011). *Narrative practice: Continuing the conversations*. Norton, Pp. 10-16.

Zimmerman (2018) *Neuro-Narrative therapy: New possibilities for emotion-filled conversations*. Norton Pp. 1-12.



## Katja-writing: Being author and audience to fictionalized stories of trauma

Christoffer Haugaard, Irene & David Epston

---

### **"Love of the written word"**

Poem by Irene.

*I feel like singing, dancing, - yes, even weeping,*

*I feel like playing music, loudly rejoicing, - yes, even singing psalms,*

*I feel like exploring, re-experiencing, - yes, even dreaming,*

***Each time I look to the written word.***

*I feel special, chosen, - yes, even honored*

*I feel pure, poetic, - yes, even pretty,*

*I feel happy, joyful, - yes, even worthy,*

***Each time I look to the written word.***

*I enjoy paper, pencils, - yes, even glue,*

*I enjoy stanzas, verses, - and rhyming too,*

*I enjoy letters, notation, - yes, even grammar,*

***Each time I look to the written word.***

*I fill with harmony, trust, - yes, even wisdom,*

*I fill with loss, sorrow, - yes, even wrath*





*I fill with zeal, loyalty, - yes, even love,*

***Each time I look to the written word.***

This paper describes a writing-based, storytelling approach to engaging with the consequences of extreme violence and sexual assault in childhood. This approach emerged spontaneously during a therapeutic collaboration between myself, psychologist Christoffer Haugaard (Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital, North Jutland Region, Denmark), and Irene. We wish to provide an insight into how this approach arose, how we practice it and what effects it appears to have. In doing so, we hope that others may derive some benefit from these experiences towards finding ways to live a life beyond trauma that maintains and empowers one's dignity and humanity.

Irene is in her early thirties. Throughout her childhood, her parents had subjected her to a multitude of forms of violence, including rape and physical, as well as psychological, violence. Shortly after reaching adulthood, she started seeking help in order to deal with the traumatization caused by her parents. This eventually led her to contact with psychiatric services. Prior to this, Irene had some experience with self-harm practices, but this was inconsequential. This changed dramatically upon becoming a psychiatric patient, after which extreme and even life-threatening self-harm was a persistent hazard<sup>1</sup>. She was diagnosed with a personality disorder.

I met Irene after she was referred to psychotherapy for the second time within the hospital. This was in early 2012 when Irene was in her twenties. By then, she had frequently been hospitalized on account of dramatic self-harm and suicide attempts over the previous seven years. We have had weekly meetings since then and up until the present. Finding a way to engage with Irene's story proved to be a significant challenge in itself. The fact that I am a man made it no easier for Irene. Therefore, our collaboration has also very much consisted of a search for, and a testing of, ways of talking about matters of concern. We would like to begin by describing some of the history of how the approach to therapeutic conversations that we discovered emerged:

Christoffer: We were attempting to talk about your life, Irene. I was focused on understanding how the things you were subjected to through so

---

<sup>1</sup> This is no longer the case. Irene has not performed self-harm since 2015.





much of your life had been a shaping force on your way of being and how you had resisted that power and the violence. I think that sometimes led to rather divergent characterizations of your person. Whether your past self should be regarded as wrong, selfish, dirty, and guilty, or alternatively be regarded as caring, intelligent, and strong-willed. At that time, I began to write abbreviated stories about you to convey what it was that I saw in you. I remember you telling me that when you read those stories, you were seized by a strong urge to refute the veracity of my claims as if the text was subjected to an intense criticism because I dared to propose a different perspective on your character to the dominant version. At some point, you named this urge to criticize The Shadow Side. It readily reacted against attempts to challenge the heavy and dark interpretation of your story and your moral character. I recall you forcefully bringing The Shadow Side's refutation to my attention at one point regarding the significance of me referring to you by the pronoun 'you'.

Irene: I could hardly read the texts when you referred to me as 'you'. The Shadow Side, the judging side of me, got angry and became automatically defensive. It wanted to tear the paper apart and shout at you, but it knew nothing was to be gained that way. Instead, it scolded me for being so stupid as to talk to you or read anything from you. We talked about how it was nearly impossible for me to read anything that portrayed me in first or second-person grammar, so you changed your text into the third person. It was still a tough read, but it was acceptable because The Shadow Side perceived a small victory in this.

Christoffer: The first time I wrote to you addressing you in the third person was in 2013. You made me aware of The Shadow Side, and we described it and tried to deal with it through 2014. Would you mind describing The Shadow Side as it was at that time to provide an impression for our readers?

Irene: The Shadow Side destroyed my possibilities by repeatedly telling me that I was too ugly for anyone to like me, too fat to have friends, too dirty to receive a hug, too stupid to give my opinion, too wrong to



breathe and more insults like these. It constantly brought my attention to similarities with my parents whenever I said or thought anything that could remind me of their cruelties. If I got angry, The Shadow Side immediately made me think that I was evil and therefore capable of becoming violent or otherwise mean-spirited. Even though I never became violent, it had me believe that I was. The Shadow Side convinced me that I had anger like my parents and therefore I was identical to them and their atrocities.

The Shadow Side was a merciless judge or a desperate prosecutor. It devised well-thought-out and devious methods of making me portray myself as stupid and unworthy. Every time the cautious Defence managed to argue well, the desperate Prosecutor convinced everyone in the court with ten strong arguments to the contrary. Some were a little far-fetched and had no truth to them, but when you listen to something long enough it is likely that you will come to believe it.

The Shadow Side was always hard, indifferent to anything anyone else said and always awake and alert. It never took a break. The Shadow Side made me become hard and live my life in a self-destructive bubble. It made me harm myself so that I could cope with everyday life, keep others out so that I would not be let down, live a façade so that I did not fully realize the horrors, ignore possibilities for getting help so that I could be strong and so on. The Shadow Side made me believe that I was insignificant, as if I wasn't even alive. It always told me how wrong and useless I was. The Shadow Side was my thoughts, beliefs and actions. It took over everything and swallowed my identity.

Christoffer: We arrived at me attempting to write about a fictional person instead. Someone not you, but similar to you and having endured similar trauma. In 2013, I started writing such stories about a fictional version of you in the third person that I called Kate. These stories were surprisingly not attacked by The Shadow Side. They were allowed, and you were able to read them, and we could talk about them without The Shadow Side attacking the veracity of the facts in the story or Kate's moral character. It also made it easier for me to



write stories, because now that it was fiction, I had creative license and consequently didn't have to worry so much about getting all the facts right. Instead, I could focus more on the moral of the story. You have told me that when you read these stories about Kate, you were able to have an opinion and feelings concerning the subject matter. It became possible for you to feel compassion for Kate in the story.

Irene: That is correct. Kate came alive through third-person stories.

Christoffer: In 2015, we were focusing on circumstances, events and actions that have contributed to your survival and to the moral character that you have today.<sup>2</sup> There were many things, but two things are of particular relevance in this context:

### Having an audience

As a child, Irene was the one amongst her siblings who took care of most of the practical tasks on a daily basis, while her parents did nothing. At a young age, her parents charged her with the responsibility for cleaning the house, tidying up, cooking, doing the dishes, looking after her younger siblings, including comforting them, protecting them from violence and rape, helping with their schoolwork, washing clothes, tucking in her siblings at night, getting them up in the morning, getting them to school and so on. She was also held responsible for unjust chores, such as chores given to other siblings that they had neglected or avoided, in addition of course to the basic unfairness of being forced to do all the work parents normally do. She was often given additional tasks on top of this, or their demands were increased with the intent of punishing or humiliating Irene. She was forced to live such a slave-like existence by means of threats of violence, humiliation as well as acts of brutal violence leading to physical injuries.

How does a ten-year-old child survive such circumstances? Irene did so by imagining she was the main character in a fairytale-like Cinderella. She would make-believe that all these exhausting, humiliating and unfair chores were like Cinderella's, and that she herself was a kind of Cinderella in a movie and had an audience that witnessed everything. This audience understood Irene to be the

---

<sup>2</sup> We looked through examples from Irene's childhood with a focus on her ways of taking care of herself and her dignity, as well as her survival strategies. In this, Christoffer took inspiration from the response-based approach to trauma that has been described by Wade (1997; 2007), White (2004) and Yen (2009).



main character of the story and felt sympathy for her. They could see all the injustice that was otherwise hidden from everyone's view and never spoken of as anything unjust within the family. The audience saw what happened, understood the injustice and reacted to it. This type of fantasy contributed to Irene maintaining a sense of dignity and justice throughout her childhood.

### Writing stories

Irene only revealed to me that she had previously invented a similar writing practice for herself after we had already developed our method of writing fictionalized versions of her life in the third person. She had begun writing stories about a fictional alter ego when she was around 10 or 11 years old and had even made an illustrated story prior to having the skills to author a written narrative. Her fictional alter ego was called Katja, and Irene continued to update Katja as the years passed. The latest additions were written when Irene was in her early twenties. I was quite amazed when Irene told me this. Had we reinvented a new version of a practice that Irene had in fact invented for herself many years before? Unlike Irene, Katja of the story fled her home and had adventures and faced dangers in the wide world, finally becoming a physician and married with children. However, this alter ego was more to Irene than a character of this unfolding narrative. She was also a sort of invisible friend and companion to her. Here is Irene's poem about her, written in July 2018:

#### WHO IS KATJA?

*Katja was once a little girl who fled from her home.  
She is the girl who held my hand when mom yelled at me.  
She played with me when no one else was around.*

*Katja was moved to a foreign land.  
She is the girl who held me when I fell.  
She helped me when life was hard.  
Katja was subjected to horrible things by her own parents.*

*She is the girl that hid with me when dad beat me.  
She whispered words of comfort into my ear when dad left my bed.*

*Katja hurt herself.*



*She is the girl who carried the pain when I cut my body.  
She managed fear so that I could breathe.*

*Katja experienced many betrayals.*

*She is the girl who suffered with me when dad kicked me.  
She gave me sustenance when mom starved me.*

*Katja was assaulted many times.*

*She is the girl who never complained when we were tortured.  
She sang for me so that I could fall asleep.*

*Katja never grew up.*

*She is the girl who shielded me from evil.  
She followed me my whole life as a side of myself.*

*Katja's life is my life.*

Looking back and wondering what may have inspired the character of Katja, Irene points to fictional characters that were significant to her in her childhood: Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking and Katarina Taikon's tales about the Roma girl Katitzi that she had seen on television.<sup>3</sup>

We did not consciously create a therapeutic method out of these elements, but we discovered in hindsight that these survival strategies seem to foreshadow the approach that we arrived at. For that reason, we have chosen to name our approach after, and in honor of, Katja. The step from me sometimes writing to Irene about a fictitious version of her that I called Kate,<sup>4</sup> and to the approach containing precisely those two elements described above didn't happen until 2017.

---

<sup>3</sup> Our use of the name Astrid in the stories about Kate is in tribute to Astrid Lindgren.

<sup>4</sup> I cannot resist pointing out the peculiarity of Kate and Katja having the same meaning, even though I did not know about Irene's Katja when I decided to call my version of her Kate. Both names are short for Katarina, a name that means "The Pure." What a fitting name!



## Good night stories

Irene had been haunted by several nightmares her entire life. They are connected to her childhood but are not simply horrifying memories on repeat. Some of them do indeed take place in her childhood, but they contain twists and events that belong in other periods of her life and even contain events that have never happened in her waking life. An example is a nightmare about her school years in which she self-harms in a way that was not part of her life until later. It may also happen that someone discovers her parents' violence in a dream and that someone tries to help her, even though that did not happen in waking life. Anticipating such nightmares prevented her from getting any proper sleep. She would wake up in shock every morning due to the extreme content, feeling as if the events of the dream had really just taken place. It took half a day to get out of this state of shock and it was difficult for her to relate to other people due to the nightmares. She would have this surreal sense of something catastrophic having just happened; by contrast, all the while the whole world acted as if nothing had happened.

This chronic lack of sleep resulted in periodically occurring depressive states that involved an increase in the risk of self-harm and suicide attempts. This pattern had led to frequent hospitalizations for years, often involving physical restraint. Irene and I had been working since 2012 on escaping the emotional numbness she had experienced for many years so that she could feel and react to these bouts of depression at an early point and reduce the intensity of these cycles. We hoped that this would lead to less dramatic hospitalizations and a reduction of the risk to Irene's health and life. This part of our collaboration was quite successful.

In June of 2017, we were focused on finding ways of alleviating these nightmares. I had the idea that perhaps Irene could influence her dreams by bringing moods with her from the waking to the dreaming state and thus create a less devastating course of dreaming. Irene had said that she was sometimes able to become lucid towards the end of her dreams and then be able to influence the events to some extent. Could this be expanded so that Irene could act within the dreams or shape them? I suggested writing a kind of good night story to investigate if elements of such stories could be brought into the dream if Irene read it just before retiring. The nightmares felt indescribably horrible to Irene, and therefore she had not described them to me in great detail. Based on what impressions I had, I wrote a



short fiction about the girl Kate and let the story take a turn in which Kate fled her parents and sought refuge at the house of a kind woman living next door. This woman realized that Kate was a victim of violence and called the police. Irene took this story home to read before bedtime.

It did not work.

Irene had become annoyed and frustrated with my story. It did not succeed at all in describing the reality of an 11-year-old girl who is a victim of rape and violence from her own parents. Irene was shocked at how ignorant I was and realized that she had assumed that I understood a lot more than I actually did. I could do nothing but admit to this and say that my own life experiences had not equipped me to know what it is like to grow up amidst such violence. It became very apparent to us both that we were on opposite sides of a deep gulf in understanding and experience. We came from very different life experiences that amounted to inhabiting different realities, each lacking insight into that of the other. She felt compelled to write a story of her own and wrote an account of the fictional Kate, based on one of her many recollections of being brutally beaten by her parents. Like me, she allowed the story to end with Kate running away with her younger sister. She then gave me this story to help me gain some insight into the reality that she knew only too well.

I admit it was horrible to read. It confronted me even more directly with what I already knew I did not comprehend: How can parents do that to their own child – or any child for that matter! It was painful to read and to know that it was based directly on Irene’s reality as a child. The story also taught me something about what it is like to be a child under such circumstances that I obviously had great difficulty imagining, dependent on my own imagination and disparate life experiences. For example, the sympathy she felt for her father as he kicked her again and again. Or how guilty she felt for every blow she received, as if she deserved it. And how most of her attention was directed at her little sister who was hiding nearby, and how Kate was preoccupied with keeping her parents’ attention fixed on her so that her sister was not discovered. It was so painful and heartrending to read that I felt I could not refrain from some kind of response. But how? This was a fictional version of something that happened many years ago. I had the spontaneous inspiration to write a reaction to the events, much like a witness that sees all these things unfolding, but who cannot be seen or heard by any of the people involved until many years later. I read the story again, but this





time I marked every place in the text that made me think, evoked an emotion, whether it was anger, despair, compassion or hope, or that provoked my sense of justice and morality, and made comments that were sincere, immediate and spontaneous responses to everything I had marked out. I gave this, unedited, to Irene to read and then we talked through it at our next meeting.

Without knowing it, we thereby created a method that we would continue to use with a number of Irene's nightmares and memories from several periods of her life, a method that uncannily seemed to contain those two prominent survival strategies from Irene's childhood: Writing fictional versions of her life about an alter ego in the third person, and having a sympathetic and responsive audience, advocating for the protagonist of the story.

In August 2017, Irene decided to convert one of her recurring nightmares into such a story about the alter ego Kate, who had now become our shared version of Katja. We agreed to follow the same procedure as before: I would write down my immediate, unfiltered responses while reading the story and send this back to Irene.

### **An example of Katja-writing**

Irene and I would like to share with you an example of this work as we believe demonstration is the best possible explanation of it. We also hope that the contents of the example may contain knowledge about the effects, and the responses of a survivor of severe childhood trauma, sexual assault, parental violence and horrification. We hope such knowledge may be of some assistance to others seeking to address such problems. This specific example is the second story of this kind that Irene wrote to me in August 2017, based on a recurrent nightmare. It makes reference to sexual assault and parental violence but does not contain explicit descriptions of such actions. It does, however, contain an explicit description of self-harm, which might affect some readers, therefore reader discretion is advised. We refer you to the Appendix to read this material.

### **How we do it**

Irene writes a fictional story about an alter ego going through something very much like real events from her life or an actual dream. I receive this story and respond to it in writing as I read it. The concept of responding that guides me is



this: I read the story as if I were a fly on the wall, an invisible presence in the story as if it were reality, or like an audience watching a live documentary in the cinema. I take Kate to be real, but someone I can only reach with considerable delay. I respond as a human being and not a therapist delivering psychological interventions to some determined effect. I am a representative of humanity and a moral universe that is against violence and oppression and holds the person to be of fundamental worth and life to be sacred.

When I have received such a story, I find the time to privately commit myself to it without having to hurry or be interrupted. I return the text to Irene with my comments and when she has read it on her own, we have a conversation where we go through it comment by comment and discuss the significance and meaning of it. Conversations emerge that are by no means limited by the story but go beyond it. Sometimes Irene writes a response to my responses. And sometimes I also write a response to her responses to my responses, creating a written record of effects and reflections emanating from the story. Such material has been an invaluable source of learning for me.

### Effects of Katja-writing

The following is Irene's account of the effects of working in this way for about a year:

Irene: Having this heap of accounts is evidence. Evidence for reality and existence. It is hard evidence of a history and a life. It is there – no matter what anyone else thinks. It makes it possible for me to be a person, and not to just have to fit in, in the eyes of others. These accounts give me a place to stand. It makes it possible for me to live and exist and find peace with myself and not have to “pretend” so much to other people, in place of the feeling that I always have to please others by approaching them, being polite and similar things. The heap of tales make up my life and give me the right to be – in my own way. This is a great change. Being able to feel that way just some of the time is unbelievable!

Living with these stories about Kate and the responses to them is a whole other way of living your life. It makes a very big difference. Everyday life itself becomes different. For example, it matters in daily



life that I can say to myself that “I am allowed and have the right to go and buy groceries.” This gives me a place to stand in life that makes it possible to be. My history still takes up space and haunts me, of course, but suddenly without being heavy and depressing. I can breathe.

All those things I have been called so many times, I have always just had to take it. These words tear one’s personality apart – one’s whole identity that you try to build up – and divide body and soul. It is ripped to pieces so that it is in rags and tatters, but the stories about Kate make it possible to sometimes accept myself.

Working with Katja-writing means that I don’t have to be the main character and carry all the burdens. Instead, it is ‘someone else,’ even if it is about me. It is not remote, but there is more distance. It is almost like becoming part of the audience, and there it doesn’t hurt the same way. There is space to have an opinion about the story. When it is not ‘yourself’ then maybe you don’t need to keep your guards up to defend and explain yourself so much.

Reading the stories about an alter ego makes it possible to think about the content. It makes it possible to feel something, to see clearly, and to have compassion for the person in the stories. It sort of takes all the ‘noise’ away so that you are able to look at something ugly, but at the same time relate to it. When it is written about someone else, then you can feel something without it being ‘wrong.’ If it is written about me, then it is dangerous and forbidden.

The stories and the responses are enticing. They give me a desire to read them again and again, both inside my head as well as reading it aloud to myself. It is fascinating that it is your own story that you suddenly gain access to.

### **Katja-writing and The Shadow Side**

In October 2017, Irene explained to me something of the conduct of The Shadow Side when she read my responses to her stories. It had basically given us permission to do this writing practice and seemed to have an interest in it. Irene



told me that she got the impression that The Shadow Side is like a frightened child acting in a violent and repellent way to keep everyone away. It doesn't trust anyone. It had helped and protected Irene and she feels she has an obligation to it. Hearing Irene's impressions of it, I began to feel sorry for The Shadow Side and desired to recruit it 'on our team' rather than seeing it as something 'evil.' Irene explained to me that it can take on many guises and speak with different voices, but she could tell that at its core, it is basically a frightened, rejected child.

Irene has kept a continuous diary of every conversation she has ever had with me. In May 2021, she decided to share an entry with me as part of a letter from her, concerning our work on the story Freedom:

Around the summer of 2017 I suddenly felt a stomachache – in a good way. I started to look forward to reading Christoffer's responses to my Katja-stories about Kate. I think it was when I read the responses to the story Freedom that I quietly smiled to myself. It was responses like: "Dear Kate. You protected your sister in this ugly night. That is what you did. Your love is so great that I struggle to fathom it. And the injustice is so great". Did he just praise Kate? And if it was praise for Kate, then was it not also praise for me who survived that ugly night?

In the same text, Christoffer responded: "You are giving something good to your sister's life, Kate..." Did Christoffer think that Kate did a good thing when she looked after Little Sister? In that case, would that also be what he would think of me, if he had been around at the time?

I smiled and got all warm inside – someone thinks I am doing well. That I did well when everything was at its most chaotic and I didn't know what to do.

For some reason I was not attacked by The Shadow Side when I read these responses to Kate. That was probably why – because they were for Kate. But I was Kate! The responses had to apply to me too?! Apparently, that was alright with The Shadow Side who began to empathize with me instead of acting like a harsh judge.

In a diary dated August 18<sup>th</sup> 2017, I wrote about a conversation with Christoffer:



“We started talking about those responses he has written for the first part of the dream. I asked him if he wrote these responses for ME or Kate?! He replied that it was probably for Kate, but that he was also aware that there was a certain connection between me and Kate. He told me that he didn’t try to analyze what was me and what was Kate but responded very directly to what the story said. I was happy with this. I made a point that I was not Kate and at the same time not not-Kate.<sup>5</sup> So he chose to respond in the same way. I felt gratitude that he could be so liberated and honest, without hidden motives about achieving something definite. That he was willing to share his immediate thoughts with me without reservation. I explained to him that by doing this, I actually felt that Kate was finally getting a response! *Yes, and maybe I am getting it too through Kate, but that is really good, because when I reflect on all that has happened, then it feels so real and at the same time so unreal. Almost like Kate – or Katja.* I said that this in a way made the past easier to deal with. And that someone could react to it. I added that at home, I had imagined that I had to remove everything that didn’t fit into the story. Make it chronological and detailed – and as such write a completely truthful account of that time. I would not have been able to do that. It would not have been nearly as free – and it would have been way too hard. But this way became more right, in a way, because it was me and yet not me. That is also what it is like to think back on that time.”

I thought it was interesting that Kate and I were not the same, and still were. His responses were not for me, but still they were. It may be a little confusing to put it like that, but perhaps this confusion was precisely what was needed to confuse The Shadow Side so it would tolerate such talk!

In the past, The Shadow Side often caused me to have many trains of thought going in my head – mean, accusing and demeaning “voices” that commanded and commented on everything I said or did. I could rarely achieve peace in my head during a normal conversation with Christoffer – especially if he said anything positive about the person I once was. The Shadow Side would be there immediately to remind me of my mother’s mean-spirited reproaches: “You can never do anything right” and “You are always in the way”. It became hard to think straight, for who did this mean I was? The one who was always in the way and doing everything wrong? Or

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare with Insider Witnessing Practices (Carlson and Epston, 2017).



could I be Kate? Was I the same as Kate? Kate, who had endured so many terrible things, but still had an understanding and empathic audience?! I smiled. If I was Kate, it wasn't so bad. Then the future was not so bad as the past, because then I wasn't alone anymore.

It may still happen that I get excited about something and have many trains of thought in my head, but then it is usually because I have been captured by something that interests me. Then it is a positive thing. Yes, the many trains do come when I feel bad, but they are not nearly as vicious or pronounced any longer. They do not stand alone like their own "voices" and no longer have a life of their own. Today I am the one who is more and more in control. They are no longer there every day.

Now that The Shadow Side no longer attacks me in the same way, this has affected a change in how I write and think. It is really liberating.

This work led to changes for The Shadow Side – that entity that, in a way, was the occasion for our first steps towards this way of working. This became apparent in October and November 2017:

Irene: When we wrote about Kate in third person, The Shadow Side wasn't busy demeaning and opposing. The Shadow Side finally got the space to be the child it had needed to be for a long time. It got the first break of its life. Naturally, it couldn't take a break in the form of complete disappearance, but it sat down in your office and started drawing. It felt as if The Shadow Side had taken possession of the office with its crayons, while just listening in. Sometimes it positively disappeared into the drawings. At other times it just listened.<sup>6</sup>

Christoffer: I recall the day we talked about this and you said that The Shadow Side was sort of sitting up at my desk and drawing while we talked. I find it immensely warming to consider and it makes The Shadow Side lovable to me. Someone I want to look after and be kind to.

---

<sup>6</sup> Irene added the following in September 2022: "I don't think The Shadow Side is a little girl anymore. I think she has gotten older – a teenager perhaps. She is no longer making drawings at the desk, but is now lying in a garden chair with her legs crossed, sun glasses on, reading a magazine and blowing bubbles with her chewing gum. She is still paying attention but sometimes it seems she is intrigued by something in her magazine and forgets to listen. She feels reasonably safe."



### A conversation about Katja-writing in May 2018

Irene and Christoffer shared an example of Katja-writing with David in 2018. This led to the following correspondence:

David: Would you be willing to tell me in some detail how you consider Christoffer is different from other therapists you have known?

Irene: Yes, there are many differences, but probably the biggest is that I can keep pace without there being an expectation that I should achieve something within a set timeframe, that I do not have to feel pressure to talk about unpleasant details to feel worthy for treatment, that I do not have to cry or cut myself to convince the therapist that I am a human being, that I do not have to feel bad in order to be able to talk to him, and that I am allowed to be me. In contrast to other clinicians, Christoffer does not attempt to “cure” me to be me. I decide for myself, who I want to be. If I want to be me, then that is completely fine. I do not feel ill or wrong or different from the rest of the world. Maybe I AM different because of what I have been through, but that does not make me a non-human. And it really is not that relevant whether I am like others or not. Many therapists have made a plan, without first consulting me, for where I should preferably be within a set time. For example, “After 2 years it is embarrassing to self-harm, because then she is too ill for treatment,” or, “Now she is ready to talk about the assaults.” I feel no pressure – and that is all-important for trust. When I started seeing Christoffer, I knew I would never tell him about the details of the assaults – and in order to prevent coming to like him and “fall in” anyway, I distanced myself from him. I still do not want to, but now it is not because it is HIM. Now it is not so relevant for me if I choose to talk about it or not, because we already HAVE something to talk about. I do not have to perform, as I have felt I had to with other therapists. It is also pleasant that I may say something crazy or poorly phrased without immediately being analysed or put in a box.

I also like that I am allowed to be an active part of my own recovery in the sense that I am also the therapist myself. With other therapists, I have experienced just having to sit in a chair and talk,







while the therapist does the hard work of analysing and drawing up conclusions, but with Christoffer, I feel rather that I am getting HELP to save myself. I become an important element in my own treatment, rather than just being a thing that talks and walks out after an hour.

Occasionally, Christoffer has also taken extra time when there has been a need to talk for longer than the given 60 min. Or has called me on the phone when that has been required. Those things contribute to me feeling like a human being getting help, rather than a thing that needs changing because it is broken.

Christoffer may at times say “forbidden” things about psychiatry, such as criticism. That is a big contrast to other psychologists; and that gives me an enormous freedom to also say what I feel – even if it is “forbidden”.

That Christoffer takes time to read and write to me is also very different from other therapists who preferably spend only the designated 60 min – because their time is more important. I feel grateful, but not in a humiliated or demeaned way. Christoffer’s approach gives me an overview that I have not had before. It gives me energy and allows me to have an opinion about it. It is a relief. It is in fact also essential to my decision to keep seeing and speaking with Christoffer.

David: Irene, do you consider this approach more effective? If so, why? Can you tell me about that in some detail?

Irene: It is easier to speak when you can breathe. When you are drowning, you can only focus on getting out of the water. When you are on the bank and looking at the water, you can talk about the water – even about other things. You may be afraid of the water when you look at it, but on the bank, you are not at the same time in a panic or struggling for your life. It is more effective because it opens more possibilities – both in one’s thinking and in one’s relation to the one you are speaking with. Who would like to be close to drowning once a week if they can avoid it? Do you ever get used to drowning? I do



not think so. Who can speak about deep matters when they are drowning?<sup>7</sup>

Christoffer: Something we also talked about with this practice, is that it requires some work ahead of introducing it. You have to have some knowledge of each other. I also speculate that it is very important to be able to get a sense of my personal ethics and moral values. This work involves me putting my personal ethics on the line and relating them directly without filter to her stories.

David: Irene, what would you say? And how would you say it? I know people have told me that they had to 'trust' me but when I think about it, I left it there. Perhaps I should have asked why they trusted me? How I have proved myself trustworthy? After all, if your trust had been betrayed by those you should have been able to trust like your parents, then it would make good sense to be very judicious about who you should trust and how you might evaluate the trustworthiness of another? In fact, many have told me they could 'see into another's heart' as they had to spend a great deal of time 'heart-watching' I guess you might call it...to form very careful assessments of another's trustworthiness.

Irene: I agree with Christoffer. Without having an idea of what he stands for and his opinions, it would be very difficult for me to entrust him with my work. I do not think, however, that trust is critical for, well, how can you have trust when you have been let down all your life? I do not think it is only about trust but also about will and maybe stubbornness or persistence. It is my WILL to get better, and it is my WILL to work on myself even if it is hard. But do I dare? That depends on the therapist. I AM prepared to trust someone, but are they prepared to contain what I have to tell? And what is the alternative? If you talk to someone and risk that someone is not good at listening

---

<sup>7</sup> In this paragraph, Irene is referring to a metaphor for approaches to trauma described in chapter 3 of White & Morgan (2006). This metaphor likens the effects of trauma to struggling to keep yourself above water in a raging river, and therapy to getting up on the banks of the river where you are no longer struggling to keep yourself alive, and are able to see the river before you. Christoffer shared this metaphor with Irene during our conversations at this time.



or seems indifferent, then MAYBE you lose, but if you do not talk to anyone then you definitely lose.

When you have been let down by the people who should have taken care of you, I think you will always be missing something. No one can replace a mother and a father. That is a giant betrayal. But the therapist isn't supposed to have the place of a mother or a father, really, so I do believe you can actually try as you go and slowly open to a psychologist. But yes, it requires trust. But don't all relations require that?

Yes, I think you become very good at seeing through people and consequently only open to the ones who can contain it. Actually, it is not because we do not open up; perhaps we are just more sensitive to little things that may signal that the other person cannot deal with it. It may be words said, but also moods or events.

David: Do you know what Christoffer is referring to as 'without filter'? I am not so sure I do. Can you explain to me what you think Christoffer is talking about here if you do?

Irene: Yes, I believe I know what Christoffer means by that. A filter may be the fact that you are a professional and distance yourself. Perhaps even having hidden agendas or ideas about wanting to move the patient to a specific place with what you are saying or writing. When Christoffer's comments are without filter, it means they come from the heart, without a specific agenda.

Christoffer: This requires a lot of trust and confidence that I am, well, 'good' in the moral sense. This reminds me of one of Michael Guilfoyle's (2016) papers that I have been reading. He wrote about making the therapist's ethical landscape available to the other. To me, this seems to support an understanding of therapeutic practices as more about being ethical than being technical.

David: I agree entirely with you here Christoffer. How about you Irene? Or do you see this differently? And if so, I would be glad to hear about it.



Irene: Yes, I also agree. With machines, you can be technical, but with people you should be ethical. And you should remember that both parties are human beings – the therapist as well as the patient.

## Dreams

In late 2019, we had been using Katja-writing for a number of situations and accounts from Irene's life. Some were longer stories; others were short descriptions of specific events from Irene's childhood. Apart from accounts of childhood events, Irene also wrote stories about her experiences as a psychiatric patient. Around late 2019, however, our attention returned to those nightmares that originally inspired us to write fictions based on Irene's life, hoping that they might slip into her dreams and affect the nightmares. We did not immediately observe such an effect but discovered that it had other effects in her waking life that consequently preoccupied our attentions.

We considered the possibility that these dreams might be more than simply repetitions of traumatic memories, but perhaps also be communicative. Might the dreams be trying to tell Irene something? I had come across people who are able to hear voices with whom I have discovered that voices may be trying to communicate something and have some intention behind the things they say, although it may require some effort to understand it (see for example Haugaard & Max, 2019 and Haugaard & Trish, 2021). Might nightmares also have intentions of communicating something to Irene? I wrote a letter to her nightmares in the style of how I sometimes write to voices, hoping to appeal to any benevolent intentions the nightmares might have, and informing them that Irene could better realize her potential and her good character if they were easier on her. This did seem to have an effect on her dreams, as not long after, Irene had a dream that was completely unlike the nightmares that otherwise occupied all of her dreaming. It was a dream in which she was compensated for her suffering and the crimes against her, and in which she used the money she got to give presents to her loved ones. The amount of money she got in compensation in this dream was huge! This was nothing like the nightmares and we really wondered if it had some connection to our attempt to appeal to her dreams.

Discussing this, I mentioned our earlier hopes of influencing the nightmares through the stories about Kate, and how this had not seemed to work. Irene's comment to me about this almost had me fall off my chair, and I certainly had to



pick up my jaw from the floor: Now that I mentioned it, Irene searched her memory and noticed that in fact, that nightmare that we wrote about had not occurred in quite a long time. In fact, it ceased to haunt her in the time after we wrote about it. This was the nightmare that we have included in this paper (see Appendix). Irene recalled that it began to fade after we worked on the story and then it disappeared and has not re-occurred. Somehow, she didn't even notice at the time. I was amazed to hear this and could hardly contain my enthusiasm and the idea that was forming in my head. I said to her: "You know what we have to do Irene!? We have to put this to the test. You have to write the story of the king of your nightmares. The big one that you never dared to talk about in detail. The one that traumatizes you more than anything every night. Write that up as a fiction for me to respond to!" In early 2020, Irene did so. In a matter of weeks, this most powerful, most haunting of her nightmares did in fact fade and fall apart and ceased to haunt her for a whole year. This, however, takes us beyond the confines of the present paper. It does seem to indicate, however, that this way of working may have some potential to affect dreams and even dissolve trauma-related nightmares. Irene's sleep improved significantly over the following months. Her dreams were not dominated by trauma-related nightmares, but instead concerned many different themes more related to her present circumstances, and she no longer suffered from shock every morning.

### **Irene's evaluation of Katja-writing in November 2020**

Irene: Again and again have I seen various accounts from people who are victims of sexual assault that tell of their grim consultations with psychiatric professionals. They describe how bad they feel after consultations with psychologists – that they are breaking up and don't have the strength to live anymore. People saying that exposure therapy retraumatizes them and destroys them slowly. That made me think of how I do therapy.

With my psychologist, it is not like this at all. There are times when I feel spent or sad after a conversation, but I am not ruined or ready for hospitalization like the people I hear from. Why this difference? I think their treatment is wrong! Not the people – not the patient nor the therapist. They are not wrong people, but the treatment of the people is. It is not the right treatment for people who have been subjected to this kind of trauma that is sexual assault.



It is important that the professional has an external perspective. There must be a gulf between the two. A gulf that means that the professional's sense of morality is shocked by the accounts of trauma. The gulf is a good thing – it leads to greater understanding and places a focus on how we people who have survived these things survived the nightmares we were in. The sense of morality of the professional must be under attack to such an extent that he or she will say something like: “That is horrible! What ever did you *do*?” Meaning: “It is so amazing that you *did* something and that you are alive today!” To survive something like this is heroic! The professional must dare to engage themselves and their own sense of morality in the treatment of traumatized people.

We write stories about real life as a kind of fictional third-person account that reduce the factual details but promote the emotional. An example could be the story of Kate self-harming in school. I did not cut myself when I was at that age, but the thinking and the events around the self-harm is consistent with my experiences at the time. Thereby, I get to say something about a particularly difficult time in my life without the factual details getting all the attention. I can distance myself from the events and be creative because I don't have to force out memories to get the right age, right location and so on, but instead focus on what it *did* to me to self-harm. This means that we can have a good talk about it afterward. It also makes it easier for me to mention difficult subjects like assault for example. In a way, it provides more distance – and yet it gets closer to it so that you can work with it.

Katja-writing helps you to feel sympathy for yourself. You can suddenly see yourself in a different light. It is like *watching* a documentary about your life instead of living it. Contrary to exposure therapy where you are retraumatized. Katja-writing makes it a lot easier to relate to your life and evaluate it and generally have an opinion about it. Fiction allows the brain to play along, and you can go into more detail because you kind of trick your brain. It is a light way to deal with something difficult and heavy.





A fiction in third-person is a small linguistic change that makes a huge difference. You become more visible to yourself – your own sense of morality and values show up more. You stop being an exception to your own values. An example may be that you are able to feel sympathy and have understanding for others, but when it is about yourself, you are hard and unfair. Katja-writing helps you see that. It helps you to see yourself from outside. To see the poor neglected child. See how unjust the violence was. Understand that you actually survived torture!

Many psychologists or professionals are frustrated and lost when it comes to us people with these problems. They see us as a big mouthful. Like someone who is very demanding for attention and cannot get enough care and love, and who is in some cases not receptive to proper psychological help. But who says exposure therapy is the only right thing? Who says we have to sink deeper into a hole in order to stand up again? We already DID get out of one hole! Why force us into another one?! I do not believe it has to be THAT hard to be in therapy. Hard, yes, but not SO hard that you are almost breaking apart. It IS hard to realize what you have been through, and it IS hard to talk about it, but it doesn't have to be THAT hard. Christoffer believes therapeutic conversations ought to be revitalizing – I think so too!

### **Christoffer's reflections**

This collaboration with Irene has had quite a significant impact on my view of my work as a psychologist. It has shown me that there are different ways to do things and that it is possible for a psychologist and a person seeking help to use therapeutic conversations as a form of exploration of the different realities that people may inhabit and take a not-knowing approach to difficult and overwhelming problems. It has also given me the impression that ethics can be an essential aspect of psychotherapy. By that I mean that my work as a psychologist may not necessarily consist of the administration of a technique or a method but may rather involve making my humanity and my moral reality available for another person and equally receiving the same from them. It doesn't feel like using a technique on a patient. It feels more like having become an apprentice to Irene. She has taught me about the reality of her origins and how one survives in





such a place. This is a knowledge that we have put into practice as a way for us to collaborate. To the extent that there is a technique involved here, it consists of writing fictions about yourself and having an audience to your life. These are 'techniques' that I have not learned in university or in any book. Irene taught me. I can see that this also affects how I collaborate with other people who consult me. Both explicitly in that I have introduced Katja-writing to others, but also in my way of being in other conversations. A way of being that I can best describe as responsivity. That is a readiness to respond as a human, emotionally and morally, to the stories that people tell me like I do in the written responses to Irene's stories. I see this in contrast to engaging in an intellectual or analytical manner. Perhaps it is not always the sharp analysis that heals, but the plain and authentic response of another human being. Katja-writing does have a technical element, but it is one that depends on something ethical. It cannot be practiced dispassionately.

## Appendix

*Irene wrote this story in August 2017, based on a recurring nightmare. Bracketed comments in Italics are Christoffer's responses.*

### Freedom – A Dream story by Irene.

Kate got up early that morning. She could not sleep. This night had been particularly ugly, and Kate had not dared to fall asleep after dad had gone.

*(I am at a loss for words to connect to this. Even though it calls for something to be said. Somehow these words are powerful, even though it is short and describes so little)*

Kate lay there for a long time, observing sister's alarm clock that she had forgotten to set yesterday evening. It did not matter that much, for Kate would make sure that sister got up on time. Although the sound of sister snoring was calming, Kate also had a particular unrest and tension in her body. She lay scolding herself in her head: "*Kate, get up now! Sister is safe now. You can go back to your own bed!*"

*(Dearest Kate. You protected your sister in this ugly night. That is what you were doing. Your*



*love is so great that I have difficulty imagining it. And the injustice is so great).*

Although she could hardly stand to leave her sister, Kate forced herself out of the bed. She knew the danger was past and that they should be getting to school soon.

*(It seems to have two meanings, this word<sup>8</sup>)*

Kate picked sister up from the floor and tucked her in bed.

*(This is beautiful. It glows in the darkness)*

Then she set the alarm clock to ring in half an hour.

*(No sleep for Kate. She must be exhausted)*

Kate walked through the dark attic and down the big staircase. She took out oatmeal and two plates. Just as she had just about set the table for sister and herself, dad came in the door.

*(Stay away!)*

Dad smiled with a look in his eye and said:

-“Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

*(Are you insane! What the \*\*\*\* kind of question is that?! Are you absolutely insane!)*

Although Kate had not slept, she said that she had indeed. It was a good morning, for Kate knew that sister had slept all through the night.

*(Your heart always belongs to your sister. I wish someone’s heart was yours in the same way. You too should be safe so that you could sleep all through the night in safety.)*

---

<sup>8</sup> Note to reader: In Danish, the words ‘the danger’ and ‘the father’ are spelled exactly the same.



That was good. Dad asked if she wanted a “super-sandwich” or “sloppy-sandwich”?

*(Does he not get anything? It is like he does not have any awareness that he has given his daughter “a particularly ugly night” which I am sure is the world’s biggest understatement!)*

Kate wanted a super-sandwich. She knew that the sandwich only consisted of a slice of rye bread and a slice of white bread put together with liver pâté between them. Dad believed that if the rye bread was on top when you ate it, it was a super-sandwich, while white bread on top was a sloppy-sandwich, while in the eyes of the children it was reversed. Dad and Kate used to laugh about it in the morning, but on this morning, she did not think it was very funny. The sandwich had no superpowers, no matter how she turned it. She did not feel very strong.

*(Kate, you must be absolutely exhausted. And violated and degraded.)*

Sister came bumping down the stairs. Kate had taught her to sit on her bum and take one step at a time.

*(I bet you have taught her a thousand good things, Kate.)*

Sister smiled and had slept well.

*(Because Kate protects her and makes her safe. Is there a better gift to give to a child than that?)*

Dad teased her by putting half a “super-sandwich” (rye bread on top) on her plate. Sister made a sound of joy and seemed as surprised about it as she did every single morning.

*(This tells me that Kate succeeds in protecting her sister. Because sister seems like she feels safe.)*



Sister's happy laugh always got Kate in a better mood. They ate their bread with some oatmeal that they knew was not mouldy like the bread often was.

*(I never feed my children mouldy food. Why do they have to eat mouldy food? Does Kate's mom and dad not care? Do they eat mouldy food themselves too?)*

Kate took sister along to the school bus. It was Wednesday so Kate did not have to look after her sister so much during the ride. The big kids were not riding along on Wednesdays. While sister was being silly with the boy from next door, who got on just down the road, Kate sat looking out the window. She liked to look at how the road, the trees, houses and people disappeared.

*(Is that because it feels like escaping?)*

That made her calm. The further away from home that they got, the worse Kate felt. She knew it was not because she would rather stay at home, but it was like her body began to wake up.

*(Does this say something about what Kate does to survive? Does it reveal how she prevents her body from being awake so that she does not feel what it is subjected to? Is that necessary to survive? Her body ought to be honoured as the way in which she is present here in the world. That body is sacred and should be protected and caressed. True caressing that stems from caring and loving from people you love and with whom you feel safe and are safe.)*

It began to hum and hurt, and she felt nauseous. Sister and the boy were playing energetically with their bags, and one bag hit Kate on the face by accident. Kate scolded and told them to sit and be nice. When Kate turned to the window again, she felt how the pain increased on her cheek. It was nice. Her cheek went all warm, and everything else disappeared.





*(Is this also a way to escape? A way to slip away? A way in which Kate protects and upholds herself?)*

It was as if Kate's brain no longer focused on the nausea, but only on Kate's cheek. It was a nice feeling, because strangely it somehow made her clean. It was as if it sucked up (like a vacuum cleaner) all the bad so that it only existed on the cheek.

*(I think I understand what it says here, but I am not sure I properly understand what this is and why it works this way.)*

Kate knew what she had to do!

The bus arrived, and Kate hurried sister along. Sister did not understand why they were in such a rush this morning.

*(It is because you have something you need to do, is it not, Kate?)*

The bus always arrived 10 minutes before the call to attend class. Sister was being difficult and did not want to come along, and so Kate spoke to her in an excited tone of voice:

-“Look!” Kate pointed into the empty air in the direction of sister's classroom and said:

-“Do you see the giant ice palace?! It's made of ice cream!!” Sister looked around with big eyes, but did not see anything.

*(You are amazing at this, Kate. I think you really understand a lot about how your sister thinks and what is fun for her. And I think it is a significant accomplishment to be so imaginative and convincing while there is at the same time a seriousness in this situation. I bet there is a history of how Kate and her sister found this imaginativeness together. Kate, I*





*know this is something you do to lure your sister along and get her to do what you need her to do. One might say that you manipulate her a bit. I know that. But I do not think it is evil. I am impressed at your skill in making life a little easier for your little sister, and that is loving.)*

That did not matter, though, because Kate's voice assured her that if you imagined something strongly enough, there was a real possibility that it could become real. And who would want to miss an ice cream palace?!

-“I’ll get there first!” Kate yelled, picking up sister’s backpack and started running.

-“Wait for me!” sister yelled and dashed after her. When they arrived, Kate took out some paper from her backpack, folded it and gave it to sister.

-“You mustn’t eat it all at once. It’ll give you tummy ache.” Sister skipped over to the boy from next door in excitement and showed him the “ice cream.” They immediately started playing with it, while Kate put sister’s backpack in its place.

*(Sister is having fun. You are giving something good to your sister’s life, Kate. That is true, even though I know that it also has a different purpose. But that does not make what you give to your sister any less real)*

After Kate had said goodbye to sister, she ran to the restrooms in the building for the middle age group. It was right next to Kate’s classroom, so she had time if she was quick. Kate locked herself in the toilet and put down her backpack and pulled out a small razor. She had stolen it from dad’s toiletries once. Kate knew stealing was wrong, but she was going to give it back – someday.

*(He he. I bet that when Kate grows up you will still be able to recognize her by things like this here. This particular way of phrasing it. I like it. There is life and self-determination in it)*





Kate got everything ready like she had done so many times before – rolled up her sleeves, unrolled most of a roll of toilet paper to form a little blanket that she placed in her lap and got ready with the razor. It was important that no blood got on her clothes, because then the grownups would get angry at her – or the other children would see confirmation that she was weird. Kate stretched out her arm, pressed the razor into the skin and pulled. What a relief. She was liberated!

*(Does that not hurt? In biology class we once had to cut ourselves in the finger to measure our own blood sugar. I couldn't do it. The thought of it made me nauseous and I refused. Not because I can't stand the sight of blood. I am fine with that. But cutting myself deliberately. I can't. Here is something that is different from what I am familiar with. What is this? Kate, you call it liberation? When you cut yourself, is it like cutting a rope that had you tied? Or is it because it is like something being able to come out of the body?)*

The first cut opened her and let out her ugly thoughts and feelings.

*(So it lets something out. Something that was trapped inside?)*

The next cut wiped away her personality.

*(Is it a particular version of you that is wiped away, Kate? Something you precisely do not want to be?)*

The third cut gave her a feeling of strength and courage.

*(Does something else step in when ugly thoughts are let out and personality wiped away? I wonder where that strength and courage comes from?)*

And the last many cuts made her invincible.





*(Wow! This is powerful stuff. Is this a big contrast for you, Kate? Compared to what you are otherwise made into by humiliation and violation?)*

She always tried to cut around the bruises on her skin, but that was not possible this time. Kate had been very bad all summer, so dad had had to punish her.

*(Did your father himself teach you that this is something he has to, Kate? He does not “have to” anything. It is a choice. And what must a little girl do, I wonder, to deserve so much “punishment” that she is covered in bruises? I cannot think of anything to justify it. And by the way, it is illegal. And Kate’s dad, will you stop making your daughter believe that you have to beat her up because she has been bad? Would you like to know who I think is bad? Kate’s dad: Keep your hands off your daughter. She is a most beautiful human being and you do not even grasp it. You treat her as if she were a thing that exists only for you)*

The bruises covered almost all her body. But it didn’t really matter. She could not feel the bruises at all when she cut in herself. Kate always did it quick, so it did not hurt. The pain began to make itself felt after a little while. It warmed, removed the nausea, cleansed the filthy body and made her alive.

*(It cleanses? And makes alive? How does this transformation work? And perhaps more importantly: Where does it take you, Kate? I am fascinated with this Kate that appears when the body has been cleansed and a personality has been wiped away. This strong, courageous, invincible, alive person. Do you know where that comes from? What are you capable of when you have become that*





*person? Would you like to always be that person?)*

For a moment, she rested her head against the wall. Her arm fell into her lap. She went all limp. It was as if all bad that had ever happened to her disappeared. Like a wet sponge erasing all traces of chalk on a dirty blackboard. Kate had become clean. She made a new cut every time the blood coagulated. It was beautiful to behold how the blood first streamed down over her arm and coagulated in big lumps. Observing how the blood coagulated, she knew that she was normal. Her blood coagulated as it should. No one could prevent it from coagulating. She knew that in this, she did not differ from other people.

*(Does the blood make you part of humanity? I am sorry that your skin must be cut and that you must bleed to know that. But I am also glad that it is possible for you to know that, even as I wish you had a different road to that knowledge.)*

It told her that she was more than a kind of object only to be taken out for the pleasure of others.

*(I think we see the same in how your parents treat you, Kate: They treat you as a thing that exists for their sake. You are truly more than that. You are a living human being. I believe that when you treat a human being as a thing, then you are practicing a form of evil.)*

She was a human whose blood coagulated as it should. Kate also knew that NO ONE had touched her blood and thereby spoiled it. It was all clean and now it covered her filthy body.

*(Kate, does this tell you that some of you is out of reach of others? That there is something in you that is clean regardless of all the filth they throw on you? I am sorry that it takes blood to know that, but I am so happy that it is possible*



*for you to know. I imagine that the knowledge that there is something that nobody has touched and that is clean and proof that you are a real human being – I imagine that that knowledge is quite significant for you! Has that knowledge contributed to Kate's survival?)*

While Kate sat there on the floor, her eyes closed and enjoying being in a sort of parallel reality that protected her from the evil world she otherwise inhabited, it suddenly called in for class. Kate returned to reality. Now she was busy.

She panicked while she wrapped her arm with the remaining toilet paper. Kate only now realized she had cut herself much deeper than she usually did. The blood under her arm had not yet coagulated, as it should! Kate wrapped more paper around it, but it kept seeping through. If she put more paper around the arm, the thickness of it would give her away. That must not happen! Kate had to think fast while she pulled her sleeves in place. She concluded that luckily it was only the lower arm and therefore easier to hide it, as long as she took care to turn it away from others. She flushed the bloody paper in the toilet and made sure there was no blood on the floor or anywhere else.

When Kate tried to get on her legs, it was as if she should faint. She had not felt that way before.

*(Has she bled much? Is it so serious that she has suffered significant blood loss?)*

Kate thought it was probably because she had been running with her sister and hoped that sister was okay.

*(It is always your sister that you have in mind, Kate. I wish someone had you in mind as much as that.)*

Kate struggled to her legs and supported herself into class. The others were running around and were too engaged in their own activities to notice that Kate was not feeling well. She sat down on the chair, even though she knew the teacher had not given permission for that yet. Kate probably got on her feet as



she ought to when the teacher came in, but she was too unwell to remember if she had.

*(Kate is usually quite sharp, even in extreme conditions. And it is not usually like this? So it is not because she is still in a rapture or in another world?)*

It was not until she saw the teacher explaining a lot of things to the class up by the blackboard that Kate registered that class had begun. Kate could feel the vessels in her arm pumping blood into her body. It was almost as if she could see the arm rising every time her heart made a beat. Kate could not focus on what the teacher was saying at all. It was as if the teacher's mouth was just moving without any words coming out. The teacher moved from side to side, and Kate felt almost car sick from watching her.

*(This sounds bad, Kate, are you alright? You don't sound at all alright!)*

Kate saw how the other children opened their math books and started solving problems. She tried to do the same but got so dizzy when she bowed her head that she was close to falling off her chair.

*(!)*

Kate tried to focus on the math problems, but her eyes kept wanting to close, and the fingers could not manage to lift the heavy pencil. The teacher came over to her table, while she supported her head with her arm. Astrid, that was her name, sat down and asked her in a friendly voice:

-“Do you need help?” When Kate did not answer, Astrid asked:

-“Let me see. Which problem are you at?” Kate would usually turn the numbers the wrong way, hoping to be sent over to the special education teacher. It was nice to get away from class and get help from the special education teacher.

*(Does that feel more like caring than most other things that happen to you, Kate?)*

Kate liked Astrid, but Astrid always paid so much attention to her.



*(This is a form of caring from Astrid.)*

She did not like that. It was hard to hide anything from Astrid.

*(A dangerous care? Is it because this attention could unravel the masks and the acting? And then what? Would the consequences be overwhelming for Kate, even though she would like someone to be nice to her? It must be a terrible dilemma; Having to participate in maintaining one's own prison and cover for one's own executioner while a kind person is standing right there and wants something good for you. How do you survive that? Because you know nothing else?)*

Kate always succeeded to do so, but it was difficult. Perhaps because secretly, Kate wanted to tell Astrid everything, but she could not do that. The special education teacher was very pedagogical and would end up doing the problems for you if you pretended to be really bad at it. That was nice, because then you did not have to think. It was not like that on this day, though. Kate had not written anything wrong, so she could not be sent to the special education teacher. She had not written anything right either.

*(She has not written anything because she can barely stay conscious. There is something really wrong, Kate!)*

Astrid moved closer to Kate and put her hand on Kate's arm. Kate was startled and pulled in her arm in a sudden movement. She did not really intend to respond like that. It was not like it hurt or anything, but Kate was just startled that someone was suddenly nice to her.

*(I suspect your body is used to responding to violence. That is its first response. Is that right?)*

People around Kate usually never touched her. Perhaps they thought that it was best for Kate when you did not show her kindness or attention.





*(Oh no. What may that give Kate reason to conclude? Does that not fit in all too well with the idea of being filthy and wrong and not a real human being?)*

At least then she would not tell any crazy stories. Maybe they were right?! Kate sort of woke up a little when she caught sight of Astrid's hand. Astrid had gotten blood on her fingers but did not seem to have noticed it yet.

-“You look pale. Are you alright, Kate?” asked Astrid, now in a worried voice. Kate replied that she was just a little tired, but then it happened! Astrid discovered that there was a fresh drop of blood on Kate's sleeve. It was just a little blood off of Astrid's finger. Fortunately, she had not seen how much Kate had bled through her jumper.

*(!!)*

Astrid again put her hand on Kate's arm and asked if she was okay? While Astrid repeated the question in different versions, the shame grew within Kate; “Why are you so STUPID to bleed through?! You do not deserve Astrid being this nice to you at all!”

*(Dear Kate. I want to tell you that you are never stupid. And you are not at all in control of what your body is doing here. Your body has suffered injury and it cannot close the injury. Someone being nice to you is exactly what you deserve. That is precisely what you deserve, for you are a beautiful and good human being, doing all that you can to solve all problems under completely awful, hellish conditions.)*

Astrid pulled up a chair next to Kate. This time she must have noticed the blood, because she twisted Kate's arm around forcefully so that she could see the lower arm. Kate knew that the forbidden thing happened and that she should resist, but she just did not have the energy.

*(!!! She does not have the energy. This is bad.)*





Astrid lifted Kate's sleeve a bit and looked positively shocked when she saw the blood soaked paper that had tried to hold back the blood in vain. Kate came quickly to her own defence:

-"I won't do it again! It was just one time!" Kate knew that was not true, but she was willing to say anything to get rid of Astrid.

*(Is this the dilemma again? Being forced to cover over your own imprisonment just when a kind person wants to help and has seen something right. Is it not terribly destructive for a person's perception of oneself to be put in that situation?)*

In a firm and serious tone of voice, she asked Kate to accompany her out of the room. Kate, ashamed and fearing that her classmates would see how weak she was, tried to get up, but her legs would not carry her. Kate sent Astrid a look that told Astrid that the legs refused to lift Kate off the chair. Astrid told Kate to wait there and bolted out of the classroom. Kate was ashamed and knew that it was all wrong with her.

*(No, you do need help, Kate. You are allowed to. It is right.)*

It was not nice of her to make Astrid so worried.

*(Astrid's worry is not your creation, Kate. It is not a pain that you have inflicted on her. Astrid's worry (and I think that word is an understatement) is a result of Astrid's moral character and her responsibilities and duties to other people in general and to children and pupils in particular. In fact, she must feel that way as a moral being and a responsible schoolteacher. That is not something you have created, Kate. You are entitled to Astrid's worry, Kate. You are entitled in being the*







*occasion for the activation of Astrid's moral character and duties to other people.)*

Kate found it more difficult to stay awake and again supported her head on her arm.

Kate suddenly awoke at someone pulling at her. It was Astrid and some other teachers. Kate could not quite figure out what had happened – or where she was.

*(It makes me silent inside to read this, Kate. Because I think you lost consciousness just now. I think you are in very serious danger, Kate. Will you please let the adults do what it takes to help you? These people wish you no harm. I know that is probably difficult for you to believe, but will you try please?)*

She was not in the classroom any longer but was lying on the floor in another room. A bunch of teachers stood around her. They looked uneasy and talked amongst each other in serious voices. Astrid had put Kate's head in her lap, while someone else was in the process of cutting open Kate's sleeve.

*(I value the care that Astrid shows by doing like this. That is caring in a fundamental human way with no professional distance. I am drawn to the fact that the dream allows Astrid to do this)*

-“You mustn't!” Kate burst out. Kate panicked and tried to free herself. One of the teachers yelled:

-“She's trying to grab the scissors!”

*(Do they think Kate can be a danger to herself?)*

But that was all wrong. Kate just wanted to get free and look after her jumper.

*(Dear Kate. You always look after everything so well, and also other people. But right now, you*





*are more important than the jumper. You yourself are precious. The jumper is just a thing. You are a human being.)*

Astrid stroked Kate on the forehead and assured her that nothing would happen to her, that she was in safe hands and that they just wanted to put a band-aid on it.

*(Thank you, Astrid. I think that is the right thing to do. And thank you to the dream for letting Astrid do this.)*

Thinking a band-aid would be nice enough, Kate calmed down.

*(Good.)*

When they lifted up her sleeve entirely, they could clearly see the many bruises and the blood seeping from the toilet paper. They exchanged serious looks along with some sign that Kate did not understand.

*(I think they realize something of what Kate is subjected to. I think that they think it is horrible that a child has been treated in such a way. And I think they may understand something about why Kate has done as she has. That she suffers and tries desperately to do something about the pain and the fear and the humiliations she is subject to.)*

The school nurse removed the paper. When the paper was all gone, the blood flowed onto the floor. Panic shone in their eyes and they got busy.

*(It is really serious. I hope Kate makes it.)*

Kate felt that she was all wrong because the blood had not coagulated by itself.

*(That is for the blood to decide. You cannot decide that Kate. It is not about whether you are wrong. If I were to point out who was wrong in all this, you would not even make the*





*list. You would make the top of the opposite list.)*

A teacher passed some more towels to the school nurse and they put them on her arm and pressed hard. The school nurse looked at one of the teachers and asked:

-“Will you make the call?” The teacher confirmed the order and ran. She tied the towel tightly and pointed further up.

“Look!” They began to evaluate Kate’s bruises, but Kate was too tired to fight against it and could not keep her eyes open. While they shook her, she only managed to feel how the blood in her veins pounded against the tight bandage. Everything was hazy and confusing, but it was quite nice to be unable to think.

*(This sounds so desperate. So utterly desperate. That the reality in which you live is so horrible that you just want to not think, and that to be able to escape thinking, you have to not be able to.)*

When Kate woke up again, they were taking off her jumper. Kate resisted and Astrid asked them to stop. They did.

*(I think they understand something here. I think they become aware of Kate’s dignity and the inviolability of her body – especially in light of how others have transgressed against that inviolability.)*

-“Have you only cut your arm?” a teacher inquired. Kate only noticed the word “only”.

*(Is something using these words against Kate?)*

She was ashamed that she could not even manage to cut herself right.

*(Is that which tells Kate that she is wrong so powerful that it can turn even this unhappy situation against her. It seems so low for this idea that it even uses this against Kate. What is*



*the origin of this idea and accusation? I would like to tell this idea something about what the adults are saying to Kate: The questions the adults are asking are born from care. They want to know if there are more cuts than the one they are aware of. They want to know this in order to do something about it in order to save Kate's life. It has nothing to do with Kate's character as a human being, which, by the way, is excellent!)*

As Astrid lifted her arm, Kate noticed that Astrid had goose bumps. "Oh, I have hurt her!"

*(Dear Kate, you have not hurt Astrid. It is true that what is happening here is painful for Astrid. But it is not an evil you have inflicted on her. Astrid's pain is a consequence of her morality and humanity and her care for others – including you, Kate. Astrid's pain is testament to her moral character and human qualities. It is not your fault, Kate. You deserve Astrid's worry. You desperately need people who are intensely worried for you, or else I think you may die. And it would not be best to die. That would be a loss for the world and for those who care about you, and a loss of what your life might turn into. Your fate is not sealed. Your life is so young. You are still all new. Life is not only this.)*

Kate felt bad and felt tears coming. "1-2-3-4-5-6-7....." That helped Kate regain control.

When Kate woke up again, more footsteps could be heard, and a panicky voice shouting:



-“It’s in here!” More people came in. Four of them were paramedics. “I don’t like men,” Kate thought and was reminded of her dad.

*(That is understandable.)*

“He will get SO angry when he finds out I have caused so much attention... and they haven’t even seen the bruises.”

*(HE will be angry about what YOU have done? That pathetic excuse for a man who with such vile and cowardice blames his daughter for the consequences of his own actions. He should be ashamed! What kind of thing is this to do against another human being, and even a child this loyal?! May you choke on it, Kate’s “dad.”)*

One of the paramedics pushed hard on Kate’s collarbone, so she opened her eyes again.

*(Then they are worried. This is done to see if a person has cardiac arrest.)*

-“Am I sleeping?” asked Kate. “Why am I sleeping?” she mumbled. Said Astrid calmly:

-“You must be tired.” Kate smiled inside – they knew nothing!

*(Oh Kate. You are far away. But I am glad that you don’t feel fear. That way you suffer less right now.)*

One of the ambulance people said something to Kate about staying awake and staying with them. Kate did not understand, because she was right there?! Another asked where she got the bruises. Kate knew they wanted her to say something bad about mom and dad, and that would give them an excuse to send her to the orphanage,

*(Have your parents made threats about this to you, Kate? Have they frightened you with such tales to silence you and not reveal the horrors*



*that they inflict on you? Remorseless cowards!  
To think to scare a child into being one's own  
prison keeper.)*

but Kate didn't want to leave her sister.

*(Yes. Your sister and you, you two need each  
other. But you are slipping away from her,  
Kate. Stay!)*

She tried to get away from the teachers, but this time they did not have to hold on to her. She did not have the strength to move. Astrid smiled at her and said in a friendly way:

-“Did you fall?”

Kate nodded.

-“Did you fall at home?”

Kate nodded again.

-“Do you often fall at home?”

*(Astrid has guessed how things are, but she is  
saying it with such care and consideration. She  
is doing well.)*

Kate nodded in confusion.

-“Do you fall with your mom and dad?” Kate did not understand why she would ask so stupid?! “Mom and dad don't fall. They are grown up!” Kate thought.

*(They have fallen. They are fallen. Grownups do  
fall. But children need to believe that grownups  
do not fall. And grownups must strive to live up  
to it. That makes children feel safe and  
confident.)*

-“Hold her arm!” an ambulance man ordered. The school nurse took the unharmed arm. They pulled up the sleeve and all went still for a moment when



they saw how many scars and bruises there were on her little arm. Astrid got tears in her eyes and looked down at Kate.

*(Astrid understands and it gives her pain that such an injustice has happened to Kate. She feels it. It is not only something she thinks. Her body shows it.)*

Kate was sorry she had been so evil that it made Astrid sad.

*(You are as far from evil as you can get, Kate. What you are witnessing in Astrid's tears is her humanity, her compassion, care and moral character. It is right that tears should be shed for you, Kate.)*

Kate wished she had never gone to school without a proper bandage that could have stopped the bleeding, so no one had seen it. When Astrid helped move the bandaged arm, she got some blood on her clothes.

*(That blood is your humanity, Kate. You got it right when you understood about blood when you were sitting in the restroom. That blood on Astrid's clothes calls Astrid to help you. I only hope that it is not too late now.)*

It wasn't much, but Kate was ashamed and felt really filthy.

*(Your blood is pure.)*

Now she had contaminated Astrid. Astrid would hate her.

*(You have not contaminated anyone, Kate. Astrid will not hate you. I see clear signs of love. Like Astrid's tears just before, and how she strokes you, and how calming and considerately she speaks to you, and how she lay your head in her lap, and when she got*





*goose bumps. I see the marks of love in many places)*

It is not easy at all to get blood off clothes. They held Kate's arm and added drop on her hand along with another towel on the bloody towels on the arm. It hurt Kate to get the drop added. "Why are they stinging me?! Don't they know that hurts?!" thought Kate, but she was too tired to resist.

Kate was lifted onto a stretcher and pushed out into the schoolyard where an ambulance was waiting for them. A teacher ran up to Astrid and gave her a bag:

*(This is thoughtful and caring. I think these qualities are common among these people. I hope Kate may get to know such qualities.)*

-"Here's your bag. I have put your jacket in there too." Astrid said thanks and got in the ambulance into which Kate was also pushed.

*(Again, Astrid demonstrates love. She goes along with Kate and does not leave her alone with strangers.)*

The ambulance had lights and sirens on when they started rolling. It had all happened so fast, and Kate couldn't believe she was really in an actual ambulance.

*(Dear little Kate, you are far away in your head, are you not? You do not understand. But rather than if you were frightened. Yes, ambulances are exciting. I only wish you got to ride one just for fun.)*

-"I must pick up sister after school!" whispered Kate to Astrid. Astrid answered:

*(She is always first in your mind. You have a beautiful heart, Kate. Let it do you good also. I am convinced that it contains enough love for both you and your sister, without any of you being in need.)*





-“It will be seen to. Don’t you worry about it at all. Just you try and keep yourself awake until we get to the hospital... I’ll stay right here with you.”

*(Thank you, Astrid.)*

For the first time, Kate felt really safe and closed her eyes.

*(You deserve that. Is this not a great moment for you? That Kate should feel really safe for the first time. I wish that this would only be the beginning of a new and magnificent chapter in the life of Kate and her sister.)*

The ambulance people got busy and kept telling Kate to stay here with them, but Kate needed to rest.

*(Later, Kate. Not just now.)*

The machines made noises and the men again pushed on her collarbone, but this time it did not bother her.

*(Oh no, that is not good.)*

Kate smiled to herself and thought:

“Now I will be free” ...

*Dear Irene. Now that I have written my responses to this story, it is the second time I am reading it. First time I just read it from beginning to end. I do not know how to explain what I feel or think after having read it. Both the first and the second time. After having read it the first time, I put on my ‘occupied’ sign, closed and locked my door, rolled the curtains and took my print of this story in my hand and sat down on the floor in the corner of my office. I feel the same way now. I don’t know how to write that I cried. So, it will have to be that sentence. It seems so vulgar or crude to me to try to write something. As if the letters are a vulgar parody of something strong and beautiful and terrible. I must be honest that to me Kate is a hero who must not die. Even though I am still cheering for her, I do sense where the story is going. I think that Kate’s (possible) death as freedom*



*here, says something about what evil, injustice and torture does to a person's view of life's value and understanding of what freedom is. That torture can bring a person to long for death because death is the only freedom that the torture allows the person to see as any real possibility. And this effect of torture seems to me to be torture's grotesque mockery of what it means to be human. In this story it may be sweetened by Kate's innocent ignorance of what is happening to her. But everywhere in the shadows around Kate's shining smile and Astrid's radiant tears, I see torture's grotesque, mocking, degrading being. The filth belongs with that monster.*

*Thank you for this invitation into a world I do not know myself, and for this hospitality. For me, it is like being given access to a sacred building that people are not otherwise allowed access to. It is my hope that I may succeed to behave and speak in a way that gives something back for this gift. And I hope there are other versions of Kate's life that do not end much too soon. Versions that take Kate on journeys she could never have imagined, or perhaps only imagined in her wildest imagination.*

*Christoffer.*

### **Acknowledgements**

Irene would like to thank Christoffer and David for their dedication – not least their conviction that people with trauma can recover and that we too are human beings. Thank you!

### **Consent**

The name 'Irene' is a pseudonym. The person behind the pseudonym has been fully informed about my interest in publishing her story and has given her consent for me to write it and expressed her desire for her story to be made available to others to inspire them to find ways to address childhood trauma. Irene has contributed directly to this paper by means of written correspondence, comments, corrections and she is also explicitly quoted in the text. Prior to submission and publication, Irene has read this paper and accepted it, and she has given her written consent for it to be submitted to a journal for publication.



## References

- Carlson, T. S. & Epston, D. (2018): Insider Witnessing Practice: Performing hope and beauty in Narrative Therapy: Part Two. In *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2017, Release 1, pp. 19-38. [www.journalcnt.com](http://www.journalcnt.com)
- Guilfoyle, M. (2016): Storying unstoried experience in therapeutic practice. In *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 0(0), 1-16, 2017. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Haugaard, C. & Max (2019): Respectful letters for aggressive voices: Max's story. In *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, 2019, Release 3, pp. 19-36. [www.journalcnt.com](http://www.journalcnt.com)
- Haugaard, C. & Trish (2021): Trish and a Frustrated Voice. In *Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy*, 2021, Release 3, p. 69-85. [www.journalcnt.com](http://www.journalcnt.com)
- Wade, A. (1997): Small acts of living: Everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression. In *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 19(1), March 1997. Human Sciences Press, Inc.
- Wade, A. (2007). Despair, resistance, hope: Response-based therapy with victims of violence. In C. Flaskas, I. McCarthy, & J. Sheehan (Eds.), *Hope and despair in narrative and family therapy: Adversity, forgiveness and reconciliation* (pp. 63–74). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- White, M. (2004): Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma: A narrative perspective. In *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 2004, No. 1. Dulwich Centre. Adelaide, Australia.
- White, M. & Morgan, A. (2006): *Narrative Therapy With Children and Their Families*. Dulwich Centre Publications. Adelaide, Australia.
- Yen, A. (2009): Less pain, more gain: Explorations of *responses versus effects* when working with the consequences of trauma. In *Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice*, 2009, Number 1, 6-16. Dulwich Centre Foundations. [www.dulwichcentre.com.au/e-journal.html](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/e-journal.html)



## Painting the bigger picture... Putting the quality in qualitative research

Helen Böhme<sup>1</sup>

---

### Abstract

With many years of experience as a couple and family therapist I became a researcher and embarked upon a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. I had wanted to illustrate the art, craft and aesthetics of therapy and show therapist expertise as creating the space for and architecting a reflexive conversation. Traditional research methods were too limiting for this project, so I created my own bespoke methodology. I tell stories from my lived experience that give life to and elucidate the theory. I set them in a bed of reflection and in their cultural and historical context. I describe how we make meaning, sculpt our identities through storytelling in conversation. This opens up the possibility to change the nature of our relationship with our own history. This 'ecological' approach to living systems transforms autobiography into evocative autoethnography.

**Keywords:** *storytelling, narrative research, evocative autoethnography, ethical practice, conversational artistry.*

“No story can flourish without access to ears who, by way of hearing, nourish it.”  
-‘*Desertification*’ Ben Dorey, 2022

### The gravitational pull of history

My mother was somewhat alarmed when I left my job as a senior manager to train as a psychotherapist and I remembered her saying “what’s this job you’re going to do... *chat* to people?” I very inadequately tried to explain. This story was summoned in an early conversation with my doctorate supervisor. In some dark

---

<sup>1</sup> Helen Böhme, DProf, has spent a career helping people create the family they envision. She managed and developed an Adoption and family placement service in a local authority. As a therapist with children and adults she has worked in a number of contexts including over 20 years as a counsellor in a licensed fertility clinic. She lives the “personal as political,” actively challenging inequality, oppression, and social injustice in her day-to-day, moment-by-moment conversational practice.

E-mail: helenbohme@gmail.com



recess of my mind lurked the idea that what I do and what I know are no big deal because all I do is *chat* to people. In that moment in that conversation, we had incarnated an idea. I began to understand why I do not always value the knowledge and experience that I have... and why I needed to explicate in the form of research the how, what and why I perform as a therapist and indeed what therapy is and can be. I was also reminded that “Scholarship is not purely an intellectual act but is situated, embodied and intimately woven with who we are. Who we are is about *we* not *I*, our sense of self and scholarship are shaped in relational, poetic and political moments and this means implicitly that we have responsibility to others” (Cunliffe, 2008, p.2).

In contemplating the direction of my research, I remembered an old family story: As my grandmother lay dying, she called out for her mother. This would not sound significant until you know that her mother had abandoned her in an orphanage when she was very young. Indeed, as both my parents had an orphaned parent, the idea of childhood loss and abandonment has been a thread that has weaved itself through generations of my family and the tapestry of my life. My reflections led me to consider how this story provides a context, history and the engine that has driven my doctoral research endeavour.

I have come to realise that this gravitational pull of history has held me in one particular orbit that has shaped and formed both meaning and language in my personal and professional life. It has inculcated a passionate desire to find families for dislocated children; make a career in social work and then as a family therapist... And to marry a man who lost his father as a baby and his homeland by the age of seven.

### Putting myself in the picture

So, with many years of experience, initially as a social worker with children and families and then as a couple and family therapist, I became a researcher and embarked upon a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. I wanted to acknowledge and validate many years of experience *and* illuminate the art, the craft and the aesthetics of conversational practice. Through experience I had embraced the idea that cast the practitioner as a conversational artist whose expertise is collaboratively architecting a dialogical space where each participant becomes a co-researcher. An ethical and philosophical position frames my life and enables me to reflect on and consider the interconnecting personal and



professional contexts that I am writing out of and into. In writing my doctorate I had wanted to re-politicise what has been de-politicised and de-mystify therapeutic knowledge (White, 1995). I had wanted to illuminate how the liberal and radical politics of action make the personal political (Holman Jones, 2005). Additionally, I had taken into this research journey the idea of exploring *how* a therapist uses the reflections on their own lives in the service of a collaborative conversation with their clients. It takes courage for the client and therapist to engage in this mutually affecting, two-way process. We can never know what people will bring and we can never know how this will resonate with our own experience, we only know that it will...

As I work with people I have needed to develop as a conversational artist and achieve a relational, reflexive and in the moment practice. This requires me to travel inwards, to know the inner stories I tell myself as I listen to the stories of the people that I work with (Rennie, 1998). Conversational practice is multi-layered, with each layer having multiple influences, so that I move in and out—and I have come to experience—many levels of awareness as I listen. I take into the room layers of experience with its contextually and culturally shaped meaning so that the words that I hear are likely to sift through the narratives of my own life. I have to reflect moment-by-moment to be aware how my own experiences and contexts might be impacting on the listening and responding. It is only in the depth reflection and the storying of my life as a researcher that I have come to fully acknowledge the part that the therapist's own life plays in this dialogical process. As a researcher of lived experience I realised that it was not simply a question of finding the right theoretical perspective and using an already established method. I needed to find another way to illustrate reflexive conversational, collaborative and *ethical* practice; that foregrounds context, culture and the construction of meaning; that recognises power relationships; illuminates a sense of identity; and how this *process* can alter the relationship with one's own history.

In taking this 'relational turn' research becomes processual with a focus on context, connections, events and relations (Desmond, 2014), rather than a content approach of collecting and analysing data as static and disconnected things (Simon, 2014). It has empowered me to put into words what I have come to know and how I have come to know it, and in so doing, I have created a language of networks and relationships by illuminating them as dynamic,





interconnected phenomena. In other words, its *ecology* (Bateson, 2016). In order to understand the larger landscape of lived experience, I realised that I must paint a bigger picture and find a way of exploring a single narrative or story *and* their contextual relationship with many other stories.

### Storying my life as research

Storying my life as research began with the Masters' Degree in Couple Therapy. In the first session of the course, we were asked the question, "*What is a couple?*" Over the following years of study, I came to understand why this question had taken my husband and I into couple therapy as clients and had drawn me towards training as a couple/family therapist. I did not have a clear sense of what a couple-in-partnership looked like. I had been born into a family where three generations lived together- a matriarchal tribe with tenacious women who distanced themselves from, and generally derided their menfolk. I also recognised that my style was to seek an academic and theoretical route—in other words, to do research—in order to understand those things that challenged me in relation to meaning and purpose in my life. Interestingly, the research question emerged as, '*An Exploration of How a Couple in a Long-Term Relationship Balances Individuality and Coupledness.*' And of course, it was intimately connected to my sense of self and my identity, particularly in relation to another—an intimate partner.

While studying for a Masters' Degree in Couple Therapy, I encountered Michael White and David Epston's Narrative Therapy, which for me felt like *coming home*. They said that it is only through the practice of reflecting on our experience with a conversational partner that we make meaning of it. Then in the telling and retelling of these stories, they can take on enough substance to change our lives (White, 1995). I have always held a healthy irreverence to 'simple totalisations' that capture and restrict our thinking. Narrative therapy then takes the form of a dialogical conversation, framed in the context of researching one's life. This enables a reflexive re-engagement with, rather than simply a re-experience of our lived experiences. In the telling and re-telling, our "stories provide the frames that make it possible for us to interpret our experience, and these acts of interpretation are achievements that we take an active part in" (White, 1995 p.15).

Throughout the previous 10 years working as a couple therapist, I had dutifully



learnt the language, read the books, and practiced the techniques, all the while feeling that I was wearing someone else's clothes. I started to understand why my practice as a couple-therapist with an individualistic, analytic, interpretive and diagnostic perspective made me sociologically queasy and never sat comfortably with my social work background. With over forty years of professional experience as a social worker and family therapist I have come to believe that we are created in relationship and weave our personal lives from skeins of imagination, memories and stories which have been [in]formed within cultural, temporal, and historical contexts. For example, I was an undergraduate sociology student in the late 1960's. Our teaching and learning about power and power relationships had a Marxist/feminist bias. We actively expressed our frustration with political ideologies that upheld inequality, oppression and taken-for-granted privileges. Until I had written my doctoral thesis, I had not appreciated how much I have been influenced by this social context and how much these ideas have shaped knowledge acquisition, meaning and performance throughout my life.

### **Sifting through the narratives of my own life**

In the 1990's a serious illness and a brief acquaintance with the idea of my dying connected me to a sense of a spiritual self and a deeper understanding of my own life and values. It also enabled me to make my hobby (a volunteer counsellor) my profession by leaving social work and train as a family therapist. I had become a conversational or dialogical practitioner when none of these words were used at the time. My experience had shaped me into a *facilitator of dialogical conversations* in whatever context or role, be it manager, supervisor, therapist, partner or friend. I have come to see this as more than a theory or technique; rather it is philosophical approach, based on a value system and borne out of a lifetime of reflexive practice.

These experiences paved the way and instigated six years in a Bereavement Service, working therapeutically with children and young people. Dealing with issues of death and loss with children helped me to develop a spontaneous practice that matched and engaged the unique nature of each child. In turn this led to Art Therapy training so that I could work with people using a range of media, symbolically to add to, or instead of, words. Over the following years I worked simultaneously in a number of contexts. This included over twenty years in a licensed fertility clinic working with people who use donated gametes (sperm, eggs, embryos) and/or surrogacy to create a family.



I had arrived at the same place as Harlene Anderson (2014), who sees therapy where client and therapist are human beings involved in human interaction and where the therapist seeks to minimise social and power inequalities. She suggests that seeing therapy from a collaborative perspective places importance on everyday understandings that are embedded in history, culture, and linguistic practices. This means that therapists are more interested in the client's understandings than in professional ones. Anderson describes how we translate relational or dialogical ethics into action by the therapist taking *a philosophical stance*. She prefers to consider a 'way of being' in relationship and conversation; a way of thinking *with*, experiencing *with*, relating *with*, and responding *with* people we meet in therapy. However, this does not mean that therapy is about chitchatting, for therapy conversations and relationships occur within a particular context and with a particular agenda. Like Anderson I see this as an approach, a philosophy of life in action, rather than a theory or model of therapy. In support of this philosophical stance Shotter (2011) suggests that the focus of theory is retrospective: it provides a map that instructs practice and justifies or legitimates a proposed course of action that is not necessarily collaboratively determined. Philosophy, on the other hand, focuses on questions about ordinary everyday human life such as self, identity, relationships, mind and knowledge. It involves on-going analysis, inquiry and reflection with self and others. It challenges institutional traditions such as boundaries and self-disclosure. It challenges the idea of a client wanting help with "problems," as this word carries inherited baggage, seeing a problem as dysfunction or deficit to be fixed or solved (Anderson, 2014).

### **An emerging research methodology**

I had wanted to demonstrate but had no way of articulating, "those living moments in which certain not-yet-related events come into a...dialogically structured, responsive relation with each other... Such moments are *poetic* in that they are to do with processes of first-time creation...once occurrent events of Being" (Shotter, & Katz 1998 p. 81). I was given permission to approach patients in the licensed clinic in which I worked, but after much effort, I was unable to find research participants to interview. This presented an enormous challenge: without other people's stories, how was I going to capture collaborative conversational practice as an interactive process of people in relation to each other and their environments? How was I going to demonstrate nurturing and



respectful relationships, and show the unique and spontaneous co-creation of ideas through reflexive engagement? How was I going to illustrate where co-creation of knowledge can transform inquiry into practical, reflective, pragmatic action? How was I going to elucidate the link between a single story and many other stories? How was I going to explain how meaning and thinking is shaped by and through the many contexts that we live out of and into? And how was I going to embrace this as an ethical practice?

### **How autobiography becomes autoethnography**

I had to create—or to be more precise—allow the emergence of my own bespoke methodology... This thesis then became an entirely ‘fledgling’ process, I wrote about my own life as both therapist and client. I crafted an autobiographical tapestry of conversations from the material of a lifetime’s reflection on my lived experience. And, in order to sustain an academic rigour, my stories were framed within a systemic discourse in the sense that every thought, idea and word was mediated through a consideration of its ecology. As storyteller I became aware of both inner and outer voices and thus positioned myself as both participant and observer. Although my stories were based on memories of real people and real events, I was not simply reporting and describing episodes. I was creating them in a literary format and setting them in a new bed of reflection to illustrate meaning and the relationship to the performance of my life. Individually they sat up and spoke to the richness of lived experience not otherwise shown or heard. Together they not only offered the reader the experience of knowing from within and alongside, but also over time and across context. My personal narratives were based on facts but not completely determined by them being more involved with ‘narrative truth’ and less concerned with ‘historical truth.’

I did not describe the past *as it was*, but rather, I am giving voice to the significance and meaning of my experiences (Ellis, 2004). However, meaning is not permanent and for each new telling the story is modified. The past is not frozen in the moment of experience; rather it is actively reconstructed in our memory. In this autobiographical tapestry, the personal and professional are woven together with a provocative mix of story and theory. The content, process, meaning and spirit of the collaboratively co-created conversations in this thesis represent the heart of this research, and to a large extent, its data.

...And in so doing, *autobiography becomes autoethnography...*



The stories are written from within my personal experience and a reflection on their meaning to me. They are not simply narratives of ‘what happened next.’ They are carefully written to demonstrate reflexivity, to illustrate how each comment and response has been sifted through a number of perspectives, how one story is contextually related to many other stories and how meaning develops through this relationship. The stories also show how we can develop and privilege certain ideas. I had also wanted to show that, in order to research living systems, I had to establish what counts as knowledge and what knowledge counts as (Shotter, 2011) when it comes to researching lived experience. And that there is no model or diagram that can effectively illustrate the learning within the context (Bateson, 2016). Additionally, I wanted to illuminate the “paths through our culture that have been worn in so completely that it is nearly impossible to see past the prescribed, pre-scripted versions of how to navigate them” (Bateson, 2019). So that each of my narratives was carefully considered from this position, nothing was written about people who were not related to me that were not already publicly known. All the “characters” in my stories were treated with dignity and respect. The feedback that I have received from a number of readers is that the processual nature—the way they were written and the way the conversations evolved—encouraged the reader to reflect on their *own* lives and experiences, which, in a sense, was one of the purposes of the enterprise.

The context of my own family provided a unique set of circumstances that allowed the comfortable re-telling of well-known family stories. My husband and I had a long relationship; we have two adult daughters and five grandchildren. I have worked with families in a number of settings for over forty years. The concept of ‘systemic complexity’ pervades all the conversations in our household. We have all grown/are growing (even my grandchildren) into being reflexive thinkers. I read the stories to my husband and children as I wrote them and would have not used them if they were not comfortable. My husband and I have had couple therapy and in the 1990’s we both participated and gave permission for us to be a “case study” in a book that our therapist had written about her practice. We both had had the unusual experience of reading what a therapist had written about our relationship. The stories that I tell have been re-told on many occasions and are embroidered into our family’s history.

My thesis provides a conceptual framework, and defines a conceptual field known as conversational practice. It fully acknowledges the part that the therapist’s own



life plays in this dialogical process. In the performance [of researching and writing], the process has become the product, demonstrating that conversational practice requires:

- A co-created and reflexive conversation that is ethically underpinned, and that foregrounds the construction of meaning and sense of identity.
- An illumination of shifting discourses within narratives that are collaboratively invoked in conversation.
- An awareness of power in relationship and relationships of power.
- An exploration of single narratives or stories, *and* their contextual relationship with many other stories in order to understand lived experience within the bigger picture of context, culture and history.
- That we re-engage with the emotional context in a managed and reflexive way, rather than a raw re-experiencing of the feelings.
- A process that enables our thinking about our lived experience to become more fluid, expand our narrative resources, and make it possible to alter our own relationship with our own history.
- If we do this, we can create a landscape of possibilities and space for transformation.

### Contextualising experience... Meaning making in re-telling a family story

Amelia: “Mum, I never really understood why you joined the Quakers... You and Dad never went to church and you didn’t get Anna and I Christened. In fact, I don’t remember going inside a church when I was a child, apart from going to your cousin’s wedding with Nanny and Grandad... Oh, and Old Omi’s funeral.”

Helen: “Oh yes... Old Omi’s funeral... We did wonder, Amelia, as you were only six at the time, whether we should take you. Would you have taken Gabrielle, Rebecca or William to a funeral at six? It’s funny that you mention Old Omi’s funeral, because the thing I remember most about that was you looking up at me and trying not to laugh... Come to think of it, when I joined the Quakers you said to me, *hey Mum, what’s this sect you’re joining... Quako?* You were probably alluding to the Waco cult in America. You always had an irreverent sense of humour. Do you get that from your dad, or me? Anyway, one way or





the other, I blame the parents!”

Amelia: “Oh gosh, yes, I do remember wanting to burst out laughing... I wonder what I could have found so funny at Old Omi’s funeral?”

Helen: “Perhaps you were picking up on all those odd family dynamics... Or the strangeness of the situation... Do you know, Amelia, somewhere we’ve got photographs of that funeral... Tante Magda took them.”

Amelia: “What an odd thing to do... But, then again, she was a very odd lady!”

Helen: “I suppose it’s not very ‘British’ to take photos at a funeral... Dad and I have wondered about her...and Omi, over the years. Magda certainly had the strangest relationship with her son Dieter...and he with her... But of course, Omi and Magda grew up in strange times; throughout their childhood, adolescence, and until the end of the war, they lived under a totalitarian regime. They must have been inculcated with some alien ideas about themselves and about the world. Somewhere, Dad has got his mother’s certificate that Adolf Hitler gave women who breastfed their children for at least a year... for the ‘Fatherland’... Doesn’t it remind you of Margaret Atwood’s book, ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’... and it’s interesting that women are referring to this today, in Trump’s America...”

We don’t know what happened to women when the Russians marched into Berlin in 1945 towards the end of World War Two. And there was a story that Old Omi attempted suicide at the end of the war and that Frank saved her. We know that the surviving population of Berlin were made to view the Olympic Stadium full of dead bodies, and Dad lived just up the road... he took me there on a sort of pilgrimage in 1967 and again, in 2015. There is a photo of me holding onto the dish that held the Olympic flame... And I got to stand on a parapet looking over the Berlin Wall with people on parapets in the East looking over at us on the West... Sad, silent, eerie even... A defining moment in my life... It was a very emotional moment for Dad seeing the Wall come down in 1989, and Dieter sent us a piece of it... I wonder if we have still got it... Did Dad ever tell you the story of how he was airlifted out of Berlin in the Russian blockade in 1947?







Although Dad was only a small boy, a lot of that must have been absorbed into his psyche.”

Amelia: “I’m not sure he has told me that story, certainly I’ve never heard about the breast-feeding certificate... I see what you mean... ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ ... And I’m getting a sense how survivors’ guilt, or the idea of personal responsibility for catastrophe, can thread through generations. So maybe, Mum, I had already inherited the need to take responsibility for you two in the womb!”

Helen: “Yes... And do you know, Amelia, it’s only just dawning on me as we are talking... Something that has caused Dad and I a lot of grief in our relationship over the years... And something you’ll be aware of, too... Dad’s anxiety around time, his needing to give a timed deadline for everything. Even Saturday morning shopping... The night before, he’ll say to me, “*Let’s go at 9:15 am,*” and my heart rate rises, and I start feeling aggravated... And I say nothing, of course... And we leave the house at 9:15 am!”

Amelia: “Mind you, Mum, you have driven everybody crazy over the years... Well, Dad, me, and Anna, anyway... How you’re never ready until the last minute. How many times were the three of us sitting in the car waiting while you were finishing your makeup!”

Helen: “Shall I intertwine two stories about time, and show you how they get spun into a couple’s relationship?”

Amelia: “You and your stories, Mother... Leave out the flowery details and cut to the quick.”

Helen: “I’ll try... But the detail does add texture... The difference between a line drawing and an oil painting.”

Amelia: “I can see how frustrating you’ve been for Dad over the years. He’s a pure scientist after all; like me, he deals in *hard facts*, not aesthetics. The line drawing will do just fine.”

Helen: “Well, I’ll leave out the detail about how Omi met and married Frank, just to say that Frank, being in the British occupying forces, arranged



for Dad to leave Berlin. Dad tells how he was unaccompanied, sitting on a wooden bench in a Dakota aircraft where he says he could see the sky through the fuselage; he didn't speak English of course, and he was sick on the soldier sitting next to him."

Amelia: "God, I can't imagine sending William, at five, away from everything he knows. And poor Dad, leaving his Omi and Opa, who had effectively been his parents, to go who knows where, with whom... Why...?"

Helen: "Just a small detail in the horror of war... You can see why Dad is so affected by the reports of Syrian child refugees. Dad has a vague memory of Berlin being virtually raised to ground, and people not having enough to eat."

Amelia: "I could imagine why someone would want to hold on to some shred of security by at least knowing the time... it might keep you in the real world rather than some horrible nightmare... Or... There's an embodied sense of anxiety around every departure, who knows. Of course, this is just how I'm thinking about it; it might be something wholly different... I guess Dad would have to unpick that for himself."

Helen: "That's true, we can never say how it is for other people... We can only surmise, but we can get a sense about how much *time matters* for Dad."

Amelia: "Actually Mum... For me, too. I do not like to be late; I'm always chivvyng the children to be on time... It's important in our family, and Anna's too."

Helen: "Well... Put that together with my story, where time is a whole other different matter... In some ways, you could describe Nanny as a woman who liked to be in control... Along with controlling my dad (in the nicest possible way), she thought she could control time... She would always have the kitchen clock set for seven-and-a-half minutes fast!"

Amelia: "Not five or ten... Seven-and-a-half?"



Helen: “Yes, God only knows... Seven-and-a-half! She reckoned that it gave her more time, not sure how... Yet it meant she did everything at the last minute. She was even putting mince pies in the oven when the hearse carrying your great-grandfather’s coffin drew up outside our house in order to proceed to the funeral. Can you see how it messed with my head? For many years I never actually saw real time when I looked at a clock, not sure I do now, and the time on my watch is always only approximate! And do you know, a really funny thing I’ve only recently noticed... I’m often seven-and-a-half minutes late getting to my Quaker Meeting! So, as far as time goes, can you imagine the scenario, a man who seriously worries about being on time... Being married to a woman where time is an arbitrary and moveable feast... Need I say more?”

Amelia: “Where did all that come from Mum... Let’s get back to the funeral?”

Helen: “You know, Old Omi’s coming from Germany to live with Frank and Omi was the final nail in the coffin of their marriage; with Dad getting married and Old Omi dying, I guess it was difficult for Omi and Frank to live alone as a couple. And what’s interesting is that was an issue with my grandparents, my parents and... Thinking about it now... Probably Dad and I. So, you can see why we might have needed to bring you into the world rather quickly after getting married! Safety in numbers, perhaps?

Back to the funeral... Omi and her sister Magda loathed each other, and had started to wrangle over any inheritance; Onkel Kurt had always been treated as stupid by his sisters, and was rather neglected by the mother that they were burying... Oh, happy families... Probably the only person who was deeply grieving was Dad... It was Old Omi and Old Opa who brought Dad up for the first five years of his life. I’m wondering now if you have inherited Dad’s acute sensitivity to feeling and atmosphere?”

Amelia: “Going back to your question whether I would take my children to a funeral at six, I don’t think I can give you a definitive answer, maybe Pete and I would talk with our child about what would feel right for them...”



- Helen: “You know Amelia; I never fail to be impressed by how well you parent your children. I can never quite reconcile how inept Dad and I were as parents with you.”
- Amelia: “Well... You were young and you hadn’t planned to have me.”
- Helen: “That didn’t mean we loved you any less.”
- Amelia: “I know that now... But I guess my being in the world did make life more difficult. Dad was a student; we lived in a second-story, two-roomed flat; you had to go to work and leave me with Verity; both your families lived down south; you had little money, and a paraffin heater I fell against and burned my face! Certainly, BAD mother of Cheadle Hulme.”
- Helen: “Oh gosh, yes... I actually started my career as BAD mother of Chorlton. We didn’t move to Cheadle Hulme until you were eleven... You’re bringing it all back... Dad wasn’t around as usual, he spent day and night at the university huddled over scientific experiments. Looking back, I think he was avoiding my ‘just-about coping sadness’... and that continued for about ten years! I rushed you to the hospital with your burned face and it became very clear that they wondered if it was a case of neglect, or if I had perpetrated something untoward... I think I was too embarrassed to tell them I was a social worker... with children! They were a lot less rigorous in the 1970s; they didn’t call it ‘safeguarding’ then.”
- Amelia: “You know Mum, by the age of three or four, I think I had clocked your ineptitude and decided that you needed ‘training up’ as parents.”
- Helen: “Is that what you called *giving us a hard time*?”
- Amelia: “If I did inherit Dad’s sensitivity or let’s call it a sixth sense, I think that I was very little when I started to feel rather too responsible for you and Dad... in the sense that I felt, for a long time, whatever happened to us as a family was my fault?”
- Helen: “I know, and it still makes me very sad what Dad and I burdened you



with.”

Amelia: “I don’t know about burdened... It’s really interesting... You’ve just shown where I sit, and my children sit, in generations of family history. Maybe it’s one of the reasons why I became a couple therapist. I’ve known odd details, but this conversation has helped me join them up and make sense of them.”

Helen: “You mean putting them in *context*, Amelia?”

Amelia: “Precisely...”

### A Reflection

“A good novelist writes like an ethnographer and a good ethnographer writes like a novelist.”  
- Bochner, 2002: 331

The conversation ‘Contextualising Experience’ illustrates the multi-contextual nature, spheres of influence, and the *learning between contexts* that Bateson (2016) describes. This single conversation incorporates two different cultures; relationships within, and between, four generations of more than one family; and spans a period of eighty years, within which life-defining experiences are enacted. It tells how layers of context influence personal relationship(s). It illustrates the relationship between personal performance, contemporaneous events, and concomitant discourse within wider social contexts. On an individual and personal level, it shows how a ‘marital problem’ is constructed when one aspect of each partner’s story [of *time* in this narrative] gets spun into that couple’s relationship. It demonstrates the relationship between personal performances, history, context, experience and the meanings constructed from them.

The above story (along with others in the thesis) indicates how the context of one’s conception and birth story impact our identity. My own conception was planned, considered, welcomed; it was a symbol of hope for a mature couple within a loving relationship. I could shape my identity in a supportive family and community with shared values. My husband was conceived within a brief wartime relationship, and born when his father was fighting in Montecasino. A culture of fear, destruction, starvation, death or survival pervaded his world. Our daughter Amelia’s conception, on the other hand, was unplanned, to a newly married couple, recently students and without an established home, career or income. As



we lived several hundred miles away from family support, we were also very much on our own as a threesome.

This contextual history about family relationship can illuminate how each of us has created meaning; and how we might perceive the issues that emanate from the experience. They might also lend weight to how we have constructed our sense of self, and therefore our identity. For me, it has given solidity, positivity and confidence to step into the unknown, or to take on a project in the belief that it will succeed. For my husband, it has given the feeling of never really 'belonging', being unsure that he has the 'right' to be wherever he is, and a sense that every departure is tinged with anxiety. My daughter, on the other hand, tells of her inappropriate sense of responsibility for her own parents, and for the things that happened in the family.

The retelling of my stories become the threads I have embroidered into the tapestry of my life. I take these stories and many, many more into every [therapeutic] conversation in which I am a participant. They are part of the air breathed in the conversational space that is created. They do not enter the space in terms of the detail, because the details are unique to me: no one else could have lived a life with the experiences I have had. They enter the space in the form of a trope contained in my imagination. My reflections on the unique experiences in my life, and how I have created meaning from them reframes the events into the form of a process. Understanding comes out of conceptualising all experience as fluid, flexible, and forever in motion, rather than as static forms that can be described, interpreted or analysed.

Vedeler (2011) suggests that any dialogue may be defined as an ontological research process, in that it is created in relationship and in continuous movement between voices in action. Therapy becomes, for both therapist and client, ever more like researcher/participant into the story of one's life, so that narrative/systemic inquiry allows the research to set in train a process of mutual shaping, in which researchers and co-researchers are changed by each other, in that there is always some kind of developmental continuity (Simon, 2012). Thus, I have come to believe that practitioners *are* researchers by consistently using reflexive, analytical processes in daily practice, moment by moment.

## References



- Anderson, H. (2014). Collaborative-Dialogue Based Research as Everyday Practice: Questioning our Myths. In *Systemic Inquiry -Innovations in Reflexive Practice Research*. In G. Simon, and A. Chard, (Eds.) Everything is Connected Press.
- Anderson, H. & Goolishian, H. A. (1987). Language systems and therapy: An evolving idea. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 24(3S) 529-538.
- Bateson, N. (2014). Framing the Symmetry. In. In McCarthy, I. & Simon, G. Eds (2016) *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Everything is Connected Press.
- Bateson, N. (2016). *Small Arcs of Larger Circles*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.
- Bateson, N. (2019) Lecture to PDSP students June 2019 Brathay Hall, Cumbria, UK.
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria Against Ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2): 266-272.
- Bochner, A.P. (2002) *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, literature and aesthetics*. AltaMira Press.
- Cunliffe, A. (2008). Inaugural Lecture: *Alterity, Ricoeur, and the Poetics and Politics of Self and Scholarship*.
- Desmond, M. (2014). Relational ethnography. *Theory Society*, 43:547-579 Harvard University. Published online: 27 August 2014.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. (2009). *REVISION: autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Holman Jones, S. (2005). 'Autoethnography': Making the Personal Political. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N.K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 763-791). Sage.
- Rennie, D. (1998). *Person Centered Counselling: An Experiential Approach*. Sage.





- Simon, G. (2014). Systemic Inquiry as a form of Qualitative Inquiry. In Simon, G. and Chard, A. (2014) (Eds.). *Systemic Inquiry*. Everything is Connected Press.
- Simon, G. & McCarthy, I. (2016). Preface p: xiv. In McCarthy, I. & Simon, G. Eds (2016) *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Everything is Connected Press.
- Shotter, J. (2011). *Getting It Withness Thinking and the Dialogical... in Practice*. Hampton Press Inc.
- Shotter, J and Katz, A.M. (1998). 'Living moments' in dialogical exchanges. *Human, Systems, 9*, 81-93.
- Vedeler, A. H. (2011). Diving into Poetic Movement. Exploring 'supervision and therapy'. A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice: University of Bedfordshire.
- White, M. (1995). *Re-Authoring Lives: interviews and essays*. Dulwich Centre Publications.