Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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

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Editors' Note

We are pleased to announce the May 2026 release of the *Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy*. This issue brings together the work of practitioners whose writing emerges directly from practice shaped through careful attention to language, ethical responses, and reflection of narrative ideas in lived therapeutic encounters grounded in close listening and collaborative inquiry.

In **"It's Taken Care Of: A Collaborative Effort by a Student and a Teacher to Keep Trouble Out of the Classroom,"** *Virginia Maxfield* offers a compelling account of narrative practice within a school setting. Through a brief yet impactful exchange with a young student, Maxfield traces how an externalizing conversation creates space for a story of strength, leadership, and courage that extends beyond the classroom.

In the final installment of her series **"Breaking the Frame: Aesthetic Encounters with Narrative Practices – Part 3,"** *Lucy Merrill Cotter* continues her exploration of the relationship between art and narrative practices. Drawing on works from Yayoi Kusama, Pipilotti Rist, and Ana Mendieta, Cotter invites our readers to reconsider assumptions of identity and space, and widen the conceptual and imaginative territories available in therapy.

Lastly, in **"Animative Descriptions and Vivifying Discovery: Inviting Clients into the Marvel of Their Understory,"** Brian Wainwright explores the generative force of language in the narrative therapeutic practice. Attending carefully to the animating effects of description, Wainwright examines how narrative dialogue can invite persons into renewed contact with subtle, and often overlooked, aspects of lived experience.

The articles in this issue reflect commitments that continue to animate contemporary narrative therapy: careful attention to language, ethical responsiveness to lived experience, and openness to forms of inquiry that make available new territories of meaning, authorship, and participation.

Sincerely,

Tom Carlson, Ph.D.

Editor, Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

Trainings and Workshops

3rd Annual Contemporary Narrative Therapy Conference, November 5th – 7th, 2026, San Diego, CA

What is a good question – and what does it do?

Narrative therapy has always taken questions seriously—not as techniques, but as acts with consequences. CNTC 2026 opens once again with a keynote by **David Epston** (presenting from New Zealand over zoom), an honor that reflects a continuing conversation at the heart of narrative practice. Together with **Michael White**, David has long argued that narrative therapy relies more than any other therapy on the art of asking questions—questions of literary and ethical merit that invite people into what they do not yet know but may come to know. This year's theme draws on Michel Foucault's enduring provocation: "*We know what we do, but do we know what our doing does*?" and brings into focus the shaping effects of our questions—how they organize meaning, invite moral positioning, and participate in the making of lives.

We are excited to announce that **Cheryl Mattingly**, will be one of our keynote speakers at the conference. Cheryl Mattingly is a renowned medical anthropologist whose groundbreaking work on narrative, morality, and lived experience has profoundly shaped how story is understood far beyond psychotherapy. Her book *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots* has been deeply influential in **David Epston's** thinking—and in his call to return good storywork to the heart of narrative therapy—making her presence as a keynote speaker a rare and significant honor.

Across three days, conference presenters will labor this question in practice. Through transcripts, therapeutic documents, and close reflections on their own work, speakers will share the actual questions they ask—and trace what those questions *do* in the lives of the people who respond to them. Opening the conference, David Epston's keynote will return us to the ethical heart of

narrative therapy: a careful attentiveness to how our questions act in the world. CNTC 2026 is an invitation to slow down, study our words, and refine our responsibility as practitioners whose asking shapes what becomes possible for others.

Confirmed Speakers for this event include: David Epston, Cheryl Mattingly, Travis Heath, Iman Dadras, Sanni Paljakka, and Tom Carlson.

For more information, please visit: https://www.socalnarrativetherapy.com/event-details-registration/contemporary-narrative-therapy-conference-2026

Apprenticeship in the Artistry of Narrative Practice with David Epston, Kay Ingamells, and Tom Carlson

Immerse yourself in this unique year-long apprenticeship with David Epston's narrative therapy practice. This is the only place in the world where you can learn directly from the co-originator of narrative practice together with his closest colleagues. We use a unique pedagogy developed over decades for teaching advanced narrative therapy practice. Nowhere else can you experience such intensive training that takes place within a very detailed story of your own therapy sessions and that of others.

This is a boutique learning experience, with between 6-10 apprentices in each cadre. The next group will begin in September 2026 for our Level II cohort. The course will take place in an online learning community made up of like- minded, skilled narrative practitioners from all over the world. For more information see the ad in this release or go to: https://narrativeapprentice.com/.

Learn Narrative Therapy From it's Co-inventor

The Apprenticeship in the Artistry of Narrative Therapy.
A year-long Program

Join Our Introduction

July 8th
12 -1:15 pm PDT

To register, email
narrativetherapytraining@gmail.com
For more information visit:
www.narrativeapprentice.com

Program begins November 2026

- Learn through a unique immersive pedagogy
- Bring the artistry of David's practice into your own
- Be part of an international narrative therapy community

Foundations in Contemporary Narrative Therapy: Advanced Clinical Application

Calgary Narrative Collective | Sunalta Community Centre, November 26 – 28, 2026

Due to high demand and a sold-out Part One in February, capacity for this training has been expanded. Early registration is encouraged.

While described as an advanced applications training, this is not a move into technique, nor a departure from foundations. Rather, it is an extension of them.

This two-and-a-half–day training opens with a keynote address by David Epston (joining from New Zealand via Zoom) and serves as Part Two of the Certificate Program in Contemporary Narrative Therapy.

While it follows *Foundations in Contemporary Narrative Therapy: Theoretical Foundations*, it has been intentionally designed to stand on its own as a meaningful and rigorous experience.

Those continuing from Part One will deepen the conceptual and ethical ground established there. Those joining for the first time will be welcomed through structured teaching that situates clinical practice within contemporary narrative therapy.

Participants may complete the certificate by attending both trainings in any order.

This training is intended for therapists at all levels who are seeking a more thoughtful, ethically grounded, and practice-oriented engagement with narrative therapy.

Contemporary narrative therapy does not begin with technique—it begins with a particular understanding of the person, relationship, and ethical responsibility.

In Part One, we asked: **Who is the person in narrative therapy?**

In Part Two, we ask: **What becomes possible in practice when we take this question seriously?**

This training is devoted to the clinical life of narrative therapy.

Rather than focusing on methods, it examines how therapeutic conversations are shaped by the therapist's orientation to the person, to story, and to the effects of their actions.

Clinical work will be engaged through transcripts, live interviews, and therapeutic documents, including letters and poems that extend conversations beyond the session.

A Map of Client Authorship

This training does not offer a map of what the therapist should do.

Many approaches organize practice around therapist action or technique. These contributions are significant. At times, however, they leave less clearly articulated how authorship becomes available to the person themselves.

Here, we begin elsewhere.

We offer a map of client authorship—one that integrates practice and moral inquiry while focusing on how people participate in shaping their lives.

This map traces a movement:

- from global descriptions where authorship is suspended
- to experience-near accounts of what a person is up against
- to the emergence of their own actions and responses
- to an explicit engagement with values and moral positioning
- to deliberate, ethical authorship taken up on purpose

The task of therapy, then, is not to move through steps, but to participate in conversations that make authorship visible, ethically grounded, and available to be taken up on purpose.

In this training, participants will be invited to:

- Examine how their understanding of the person shapes clinical decisions
- Engage deeply with clinical material, including transcripts and live demonstrations

- Develop practices of listening that attend to complexity and unfolding storylines
- Work with therapeutic documents (letters and poems) to extend conversations
- Engage moral inquiry as it emerges within lived responses to life
- Reflect on their participation in shaping the stories people come to live by

Whether continuing from Part One or joining for the first time, this training offers a rigorous engagement with contemporary narrative practice—grounded in its ethical foundations while opening new clinical possibilities.

Presenters

Sanni Paljakka & Tom Carlson

Fees

Professional – $600

Provisional – $450

Student – $300

Event Times

Thursday, November 26 – 4:00–7:00pm

Friday & Saturday, November 27–28 – 10:00am–5:00pm

Certificate Pathway

Participants may complete the Certificate Program by attending Part One and Part Two in any order.

Register here: https://www.showpass.com/foundations-of-contemporary-narrative-therapy-part-two/

"It's Taken Care Of": A Collaborative Effort by a Student and a Teacher to Keep *Trouble* out of the Classroom

Virginia Maxfield, LCSW[1]

The morning was cool and fresh, just after the winter break, as I climbed the steps to the elementary school. I was loaded down with my milk crate bins of supplies, looking forward to introducing a new lesson to my fourth-grade art students.

I was in my fifth year of teaching and felt like the luckiest person on earth. Why? my friends would ask: you have no classroom of your own, you have to cart around all your supplies from room to room, you teach over 400 students in three schools – what's so great about that? My response was always: The kids! The art! This is a job where I get to bring those two together and witness the surprises that come forth when kids are let loose with art materials. They're hilariously funny and quick with ideas, they'll trust me with any crazy lessons – they jump right in. We collaborate, invent, try things, fail, try something else, borrow ideas, use silly voices, wear costumes– all the best of who these young people come forth in an art classroom – it's just so fun!

This particular morning, I met first with a fourth-grade class, where I was familiar with most of the kids. I found a cart in the storage room and loaded up my supplies for the new project. When it was time, I rolled into the room and said hello to the teacher. Then I noticed one boy sitting next to the teacher's desk and facing the wall, away from the other students. The teacher came over to let me know the new student's name was Darnell, and he was "a troublemaker," who was rumored to have been involved in fights and destructive behavior, so he had to be kept away from the other students.

I flinched at the label. While I really loved working with my students as they created art, I often felt dismayed by the regular use of labels for children, and I

[1] Virginia Maxfield, LCSW can be reached at maxfieldtherapy@gmail.com or through her work website at www.narrativeinstitute.com

often wondered about how school systems could feel okay about them. The descriptions were so limiting.

We were about to work on a new group project on African art, where kids could share ideas and help each other with supplies. So, I asked the teacher's permission for Darnell to join the class. With raised eyebrows, she shrugged and said it was up to me.

I told the students they could sit where they wanted, with four students to a table. I motioned for Darnell to join in. He jumped up, and all the students quickly moved about the room until they were settled in groups. I noticed that Darnell was drawn to sit with two other boys. One boy, Tim, did not have a team and was resigned to sitting with Darnell and his two friends.

I asked the students what they thought of dividing up responsibilities so that each person had a role. They could give their own titles to the roles, but someone would need to act as speaker for the group, someone in charge of supplies, another student would write down their ideas, and someone could be a time-keeper. I had found that kids love to form tribes and have roles, so they were quick to organize themselves and came up with titles for their group members. Most groups also gave their team a name.

As I roamed the room, helping each group with challenges, I came to Darnell and Tim's group. The boys were in a big argument, and Tim was sobbing softly. I asked what they could tell me about the situation. Tim claimed that the boys, especially Darnell, were telling him to "shut up" and would not let him speak. I asked the group if there was a problem here that needed to be solved, and Darnell jumped in to say that they didn't like Tim because he was weird.

While my first inclination was to provide a lecture to these boys about inclusion, I decided that would likely go nowhere. What was needed was for me to somehow create an opportunity for Darnell to decide for himself that excluding Tim was not a kind thing to do. But how? I was in a bit of a panic, wondering what I could say that might encourage him to show some kindness to another boy.

In those seconds that passed, I remembered a conversation I had had a few weeks earlier with a new friend, Paul Gallant. He was a therapist who shared his work with me, and one evening, he told me a wonderful story about using the metaphor of strength to encourage a young person to take on Trouble when it shows up. Paul had a simple, but quite clever, approach. But what if Darnell found the idea silly and walked away? I was afraid I might make things worse. I decided to jump in and give it a try.

I asked Darnell if he would step over to the door, as I needed his help with something. His face fell, and he looked very unhappy, but with arms crossed, he walked slowly over to the door. I wondered if he was used to being reprimanded and may have suspected that I would be one more adult who would shame him. I told myself to keep going. I explained that I had not heard nor seen what had happened and I wanted him to know I was not blaming him for anything, but that I could really use his help.

A boy realizes his strength

Virginia: Can I ask, Darnell, how old are you now?

Darnell: Ten. *(Arms still crossed, turned away from me).*

Virginia: And do you feel pretty strong for a ten-year-old?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Hmmm. Would you be willing to show me how strong you are?

Darnell: I don't know. *(Mumbled, barely audible).*

Virginia: Well, I was wondering if you would be willing to test your strength by squeezing my hand as hard as you can.

Darnell: Okay. *(Cautious grin).*

Virginia: Before you do, take a deep breath and put your feet apart. Now look straight at me, and when I count to three, squeeze my hand as hard as you can. Don't be afraid of hurting me.

He squeezed my hand so hard, I had to shake it out.

Virginia: Yow. You're pretty strong. Did you say you're ten years old?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: I don't know, Darnell, I think I felt some 11 and maybe even 11½ year-old strength.

He grinned.

Virginia: But, if you agree to it, I'd like to test you again to be sure. You okay with that?

We repeated the test and, again, I had to take a minute to recover.

Virginia: Yup. No question. You've got some 11½ year old strength.

In that moment, I could see Darnell was excited; his 11 ½ year old strength had been confirmed! Sensing that, I felt encouraged and decided to go on.

Virginia: I've noticed that there's some Trouble in the classroom today, and I'm wondering if you could help me to keep it out in the hallway. Just for today. Do you think you could help?

Darnell: Okay. What do I do?

Virginia: I'm not sure what would work. Do you have any ideas?

Without any direction from me, Darnell grabbed the doorknob, opened the door, stepped out into the hallway, and yelled:

Darnell: Stay out of here!!!

"Oh, no," I thought. Yelling in the halls was prohibited, and I worried that someone might show up to find the source of the infraction. Darnell and I could both be in big trouble.

Virginia: That sounded pretty forceful and strong. You think Trouble will listen to you?

Darnell: Oh, yeah.

Trouble tries to find a way in, but fails

Virginia: Wow, that would be great, wouldn't it? I'm wondering if you could use your 11½ year old strength to help with one more thing. It looks like Trouble might have been hanging around your table and stirring things up for all of you, making people say things to make Tim cry. Do

you think Trouble will stay away now?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Have you noticed if Tim has a friend?

Darnell: No, we don't like him – he's weird.

Virginia: So, Trouble is talking you into thinking Tim is weird, huh? I wonder how that feels to Tim – what do you think?

Darnell: I don't know – maybe lonely.

Virginia: Hm, lonely – you could be right. Do you think you could help today with that?

Darnell: Yeah.

Darnell rejoined his group, and overheard him say to Tim: Wanna be recorder?

The rest of the class time (50 minutes) went smoothly. The above exchange I had with Darnell took a total of about three minutes. For the remainder of the class, he was kind, helpful, and cooperative. He seemed to actually enjoy working on the lesson. I saw him in the hallway at the end of the school day, talking with two other boys, about 20 feet away from me. I called to him.

Virginia: Hey, Darnell – thank you.

He looked up and grinned.

Virginia: Do you know what I mean?

Another grin.

Darnell: Yeah. *He turned back to his buddies.*

I left school at the end of the day, still puzzling at what felt like an astonishing change in this young boy. It felt unreal, and I was convinced that it was a fluke, not something that would endure. That evening, I called Paul to let him know I had used his suggestion. I was excited but unsure that the change in Darnell would stick; I wasn't even sure what had happened. He talked me through the process step by step and helped me understand how it unfolded and why I might just try holding onto the belief that I was onto something.

I decided to pay close attention to what transpired in the following class sessions and take notes after each class. Here is what happened.

Sharing the story

Darnell once again worked well in his group. Although the noise level was high in the room, the groups were busy and focused. At the end of the class, I asked Darnell if I could speak to him. I told him how impressed I was that he was able to use his Strength to keep Trouble out of the room for a second time. I told him what it meant to me and the effect it had on the class. I also told Darnell that I believed other people should know about his ability to help the class and keep Trouble away. I asked him if he would be willing to meet me in the principal's office one day soon so I could let the principal know what a good job he was doing. Darnell said that would be okay. I told him I would arrange for a meeting and would let him know when we might meet to see if he was still interested.

After the class, I checked with the principal and set a date for two weeks out.

Change continues; skills are put to good use

The teacher had allowed Darnell to join the rest of the students at the worktables.

But I discovered the student art projects were missing from the drying rack, and no one seemed to know what had happened to them. After a search, we had to assume they had been thrown out. The class was extremely disappointed. I was concerned that some students might not want to start over. To my surprise, Darnell was one of the children who, after expressing disappointment, made the choice to start the project again. But one member of Darnell's group was quite upset and declared that he was not going to continue. I asked for Darnell's help, and he agreed to use his Strength to console the group member and ask for his cooperation. Darnell put his arm around the boy's shoulders, talked to him, then came over and reported to me, "It's taken care of." The boys in his group all chatted and continued to work on their art.

Widening the circle: the ripple effect

Later, I asked Darnell who would not be surprised to hear about his Strength Against Trouble, and he quickly said, "My grandmother." I asked if he would like his grandmother to know about his achievements or keep them to himself. He wanted her to know. So, I asked if he would like to share it all with her or if he'd like me to tell her. He wanted me to let her know what had happened, but said he would add anything I might have forgotten. At the end of the day, I noticed Darnell's grandmother in the hallway, coming by to walk him home, as was their custom. I told her about Darnell's achievements in our art class, especially the way he had helped me by using his Strength. Darnell added a few details. His grandmother told Darnell she was very proud of him. Darnell left school smiling.

The weeks went by, and I arranged a meeting with Darnell, his grandmother, the principal, the social worker, and Darnell's teacher. Darnell related the story of his ability to keep Trouble out of the classroom. The group asked several questions, and he responded with more details about his ability to keep Trouble away. I was surprised at his ability to recount his accomplishments, and it appeared that he was feeling a sense of pride in being recognized. The principal complimented him on his achievement and thanked him.

The child teacher the teacher

Darnell agreed to be interviewed about his expertise in keeping Trouble away, not just in art class, but in other situations, like homeroom. Once we sat down, I

asked him if he would be willing to help other children out in their efforts to keep Trouble out of their classrooms and their lives. I explained that I sometimes meet other children who have the same kind of challenge, and I knew he was now an expert in this. He said, "Sure."

Virginia: What exactly did you do, Darnell, to keep Trouble away?

Darnell: Well, I just got ready and put my things away when I was supposed to.

Virginia: How did you keep Trouble away so you could do that?

Darnell: I said, “Trouble, you’re bad!”

Virginia: Trouble, you’re bad. So you spoke directly to Trouble and told it that it’s bad?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: What did Trouble do when you told it that it’s bad?

Darnell: It went away.

Virginia: And does Trouble ever come back?

Darnell: Yeah. But I think – You can do that thing to get in trouble, or you can do something else and get to go out and play.

Virginia: Do you mean that even when Trouble tries to show up and give you a hard time, you’re able to keep it away and get to go out and play?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Wow, Darnell, I’m so impressed with your Strength. I wonder if you would be okay if we used your ideas to help other children when Trouble shows up in their lives and tries to take over. Would that be okay with you?

Darnell: Okay.

Trouble still shows up, but strength wins out

The school nurse stopped me in the hall several months later to ask if I had a student named Darnell. She then related the following story to me. I asked her to put the story in writing as I was so delighted that others were witnessing Darnell's growth and conquering of Trouble. Here is her account:

> On April 21st, I was at the clinic window, and I noticed a group of boys on the playground. They were playing four squares in the parking area near the dumpsters. One child became visibly upset over the game and lashed out physically at others. He was yelling and swinging his arms. There were no teachers witnessing the incident, and the children could not hear or see me at the window. One student, whom I believed to be Darnell, immediately put his arm around the angry child and tried to walk him away from the area. He went back and put his arm around the other child. I could see that he was talking to him. I wasn't sure of the names of the children involved, so I called the secretary to the window. She verified for me that the peacemaker was Darnell. I wrote his name on my student log, followed by a two-word description of what I had witnessed: Darnell – the hero.

Solidifying the story

During our last art class of the year, students created heavy board portfolios for their work from the year. With markers, they drew and colored designs on the outside of their portfolios that reflected their personalities. I noticed that Darnell was drawing a large face of a young, strong man on his portfolio, and then saw that this man was lifting a barbell with weights.

Virginia: Darnell, that's quite a drawing there – is that you lifting weights?

Darnell wrote "174 lbs." next to the barbells.

Darnell: Yeah, you know – Strength.

Virginia: Of course. I understand.

The other boys at the table asked what we were talking about – what about strength? They wanted to know.

Darnell said, "It's between us". He went back to drawing.

Checking in to celebrate success

Although I married (Paul Gallant!) and moved to another state, I contacted Darnell and his grandmother two months later and sent him a certificate honoring his Strength Over Trouble:

Presented to Darnell

Official Certificate of Strength Over Trouble

in honor of your amazing skill in keeping Trouble out of the classroom and out of your life.

It has become clear to me, to your teacher Ms. Davis, to the school nurse, Ms. Henson, to the principal Dr. Leeds, to the other students, and to your grandmother that you are a boy with determination to keep Trouble away.

Your eleven and a half-year-old strength, and your ideas and methods, will be an inspiration to other students who want to take on the challenge of Keeping Trouble in Its Place.

Congratulations, Darnell, on your extraordinary accomplishment!

Good luck to you in the fifth grade; feel free to share this certificate with your new teacher so she is aware of your Strength Against Trouble.

Signed by Ms. Maxfield, Ms. Henson, and Dr. Leeds

Follow-up at two years

I phoned Darnell's grandmother and asked about her, the family, and Darnell. She reported that he was doing well in sixth grade with no problems at school or home. She commented that he still had the certificate on his wall and enjoyed talking about his Strength Over Trouble. I spoke with Darnell, who said he still had the Certificate of Strength. He told me he had some good friends and was involved in school activities. His grandmother told me he continued to be the protector and advisor to his two younger cousins. Darnell and his mother gave me permission to write up and share his story with others.

Follow-up at five years

A phone call at five years confirmed the transformation in Darnell. His grandmother also told me she was going back to school to get her GED. She had found a tutor in the school system and, since I knew the teachers and staff, she asked if I could guess with whom she was working on her lessons. I named a few teachers who had done GED coaching before, but she said, "No. It's Darnell." It was Darnell who was tutoring his grandmother. He was happy and doing well in school, with his friends, and with his family.

How these interactions with Darnell affected me

Because of the success of this collaboration with Darnell, I was interested in learning more about using a Narrative Therapy approach with children. I studied with Walter Bera at the Kenwood Center and enrolled in a Master's program in clinical social work. Post-graduation, I worked as the children's therapist in a local clinic, then joined Paul in private practice.

My young clients and I collaborated in building an Anti-Worry Machine, a Brain House, and a laboratory for concocting secret ingredients for dispatching Troubles. We used photography, painting, sewing, clay, to build models of the Troubles that tried their best to sneak up on kids. When the kids found ways to

take control, they recorded their ideas in a book titled Advice for Kids and Teens by other Kids and Teens. What an absolute joy to experience the delight and pride that children feel when they realize their courage, creativity, and wonderfulness.

Discussion

What stood out for me.

I found this approach with Darnell to be a little different from what I had learned in classroom management trainings. Getting to know your students, tracking behavior, correcting in private, and praising in public– all these, and more, were part of what we practiced.

But what stood out for me in this interaction with Darnell was that he and his expertise were given center stage. He had power (his strength) that I didn't have. He was willing to show me evidence of that strength by doing the test. I wondered: had he ever before considered that he had such strength? What might have gone through his mind about how he could use this mighty strength?

I mentioned that there seemed to be Trouble in the classroom, and Darnell didn't ask what I meant. So likely we both recognized that something was amiss and, by talking about the problem – Trouble – in this way, we were both able to see it as something separate from either of us. He was not accused of anything or shamed. We were in this together.

He then responded to my request for help in keeping Trouble out of the room by jumping in and collaborating with me! I was amazed. He immediately opened the door and commanded it to stay away. He was loud and firm with Trouble. I had not offered any prompt. I didn't try to trade his assistance for a reward. He wanted to help.

So, when it came to asking him to use his 11 ½ year old strength against Trouble that was hanging around his table, he already knew what he wanted to do. He took charge and made it right. Quickly.

It felt like we were two humans working together on a solution to a problem, and he was the one who took the lead. That felt humbling yet very exciting to me. It

made me so much more curious about young people and their skills.

It seemed important to Darnell's preferred story that his Strength Against Trouble was told and retold, remembered and celebrated over the years. Not only did this alternative story about Darnell grow and thrive in primary school, but it also carried over into other areas of his life. He became a focused high school student, a mentor to his cousins, and a tutor for his grandmother. His journey is an example of how alternative stories can recruit new audiences and new contexts over time.

If I knew then what I know now.

I have learned that there are many different directions therapy conversations can take. In my initial naïve approach with Darnell, I chose one and explored that. But upon reflection over the years, I've come to realize that we could have taken other forks in the road. I think about what we might have talked about. Directions that still have me feeling curious about the expanding story of Darnell and his Strength Against Trouble. Here are a few examples:

I would have liked to explore further the importance Darnell put on Strength. I approached him to access something meaningful to him (his physical strength) and asked him to use Strength in a helpful way. He claimed his Strength and saw value in using it for good. I would want to explore the history of this Strength and other ways he may have used it to help. I wish I had asked him:

"When did you first begin to see yourself as a strong young man?"

"Who else might have noticed this strength of yours?"

"What do you think they noticed that told them you have strength?"

"What ways did you build on your strength?"

"How do you think your strength has helped you to become the young man you are today?"

I would have wanted to connect with his interest in being a Leader. What was important to Darnell was to be seen as a strong man with leadership skills. I would be curious about the history of this Leadership skill. I would ask Darnell:

“Was there someone you knew, or learned about, who you chose to model your life after?”

“What was it you noticed about that person that interested you?”

“What kinds of challenges come up for a person in a leadership position?”

“What skills do you already have that have helped you to develop even more as a leader?”

“Can you think of an opportunity you’ve had that has offered you the chance to show your leadership skills?”

I would have encouraged further conversations with Darnell about other skills he might have that are not hidden but may have been ignored or missed in others’ ways of seeing him.

“When problems have come up and hogged all the attention, what abilities and skills of yours have been there in the shadows?”

“Would you be interested in bringing those skills into the light?”

“If so, how might you do that?”

“If I wanted to learn more about these skills of yours, who else might be able to tell me about them?”

I would have liked to have asked him to share some stories or memories of these qualities and skills with me, which would have brought forth even more questions, more opportunities for exploration. And I would like to have had a chance to interview Darnell and his grandmother further about his lifetime

experiences as a young man of strength, leadership, and courage.

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Breaking the Frame: Aesthetic Encounters with Narrative Practice – Part Three

Lucy Merrill Cotter, MFT

As an artist and narrative therapist, aesthetics energize my narrative practices. "The Breaking the Frame" series discusses a brief selection of artworks that highlight alternative ways to engage with life. Each artist's vision offers novel perspectives for clients' stories, psychology, and world-making. In this globally challenging time, many people experience stories as fighting for dominance and for reality itself. Art invites us to perceive differently, reminding us that reality has multiple dimensions for thinking, seeing, and imagining. I question the effects of psychology's implicit categories, divisions, and prevailing beliefs. Aesthetics can help free client stories from the confines of the known and the familiar.

The philosopher Deleuze has said, "There is no work of art that does not indicate an opening for life" (as cited in *Times Flow Stemmed*, 2023, para. 4). This vitality is embodied in my favorite narrative therapy quote, which has inspired my work with clients for over twenty years. Reflecting on Foucault, White and Epston (1990) write that when space is provided for "alternative knowledges" that resist techniques of power, "'Docile bodies' become 'enlivened spirits'" (p. 31). Through art and story, we can break through mediating frames that inhibit clients' energy and agency. Deleuze (1966/1991) drew on Henri Bergson's idea of "Èlan Vital" to view life as multiple creative expressions of becoming (p. 107). Avoiding fixed identities or finalized conclusions allows life to unfold through experimentation and play. As an artist practicing narrative therapy, my primary goal is to collaboratively transform the constraints of preconceived notions, inherited concepts, identity conclusions, and client stories into 'enlivened spirits,' alive through dialogue, process, and re-visioning.

An aesthetic retelling of narrative therapy fosters interchange between different 'media of thought.' Words and the story metaphor may constrain imaginal options, whereas art often challenges common-sense conventions, problematizing naturalistic accounts of space, time, identity, language, and fixity.

In both art and storytelling, we animate the media of creation, and these vital acts reveal hidden values in how we position and organize knowledge. Michael White and David Epston emphasize the need to "…identify the context of ideas in which our practices are situated and explore the history of these ideas" (1990, p. 29). Narrative therapists encourage an ethics of collaboration that investigates what is central to therapeutic conversations. We question our complicity in reinforcing outdated systems rather than conceiving novel ecologies for clients' lives.

Earlier in the series, I discussed the potential that emerges when "we look to practices and the genesis of performance, rather than representation, as our basis for knowledge" (Cotter, 2025, p. 23). Art interrupts our "habits of meaning making" to expose preconceptions about logic, ordering, and coherence that affect how we see our place in the world (Cotter, 2023, p. 39).

As William Blake (1906) wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite" (p. 26). The artistic act reveals the contingency that shapes perception and experience. In articles one and two of "Breaking the Frame," I discuss how art can expand the narrative metaphor and resist the seduction of resemblance, encouraging handmade meanings, abstraction, fluidity, and contextual migration. The second article in the series examines the movement of thought and assemblages of ideas that arise through aesthetic and interdisciplinary approaches, and I learn from the dynamic ways Andy Goldsworthy's artwork interacts with the environment. Similar to Goldsworthy's ice sculptures, leaves, and river eddies, the subject is transformed through relational processes. We are in flux, and experience, like art, is a conversation between the world and ourselves, a call-and-response and a reminder of intertextual exchange, layering events with ongoing reauthoring throughout all of life.

A narrative nondual therapy

In this final article of the series, art helps me examine various forms of dualism, such as mind-body, self-world, subject-object, and spirit-matter, that shape story construction. I turn to aesthetics to imagine nondual options for narrative

therapy. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that psychology became a scientific discipline, separated from the vital and the spiritual through a logical positivist emphasis on what is measurable, generalizable, and evidence-based. This framing of psychology is less relevant in light of current views, such as quantum research and new materialism. Alan Lightman (2023) broadens my understanding of science by aligning it more closely with art, nature, and wonder. Every atom of the universe mixes and scatters the past, present, and future, reenergizing a sense of awe and belonging that extends far beyond psychology's reductive accounts of the human and more-than-human world (Lightman, 2023). Across cultures and time, science, art, and narrative converge in the storytelling of the earth and the cosmos. Art connects me to the miraculous in ways that psychology often denies.

Aesthetics remind me that narrative therapy can evoke virtual energies and encounters that confront the operations of modern power. Our artistic expressions and therapeutic conversations can spark creative resistance to the domestication of daily life. David Epston and Michael White celebrate Bourdieu's exoticizing of the familiar, which highlights the extraordinary in the ordinary (Cotter, 2023). Whereas psychology can support forms of rationalism that regulate conduct, art and narrative can contest the tyrannies of spirit that separate us from untamed innovation. White and Epston write that narrative therapy aims to challenge "… the techniques that subjugate persons to a dominant ideology" (1990, p. 29). Art offers multi-perspectival alternatives that free us from fixed mindsets and overturn dominant truth claims. Incorporating a variety of visual, spatial, and temporal languages into narrative therapy can disrupt systemic ideas that reduce mental health to a single story of isolated individual traits and behaviors.

I am becoming more aware of the connections between my clients' inner and outer experiences, beyond psychology's socially constructed divisions. One client, Jenny, is considering her next steps and says, "We're all participating in this life thing. It's not about me. We're all woven into the fabric as a collective." Concerned about the world, my client Christopher says, "… fear overwhelms everything, and it becomes a power struggle that dims everyone's light."

Aesthetic ideas can decenter and reposition humanity within our narrative practices, fostering alternatives to collective disenfranchisement.

The terrapsychologist Craig Chalquist (2021) asks a crucial question: "What emerges when we … put the presence of the world at the center of psychology?" (para. 4). Reflecting on Chalquist's challenge to a narrative approach, I revisit the evolution of Western art discussed in "Breaking the Frame–Part One," where passive spectators of a fixed, objectified world picture become active participants in immersive environments (Cotter, 2023). We see life and art merge in interactive processes, and media engage us with both nature and technology. Traditional notions of a central protagonist, inner and outer, foreground and background, dissolve into new options for making meaning. Deleuze (1968/1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) challenged our reliance on first-person human perspectives, and Foucault (1966/1970) rejected giving "… absolute priority to the observing subject …" (p. xiv). By breaking the frame of realism and the illusion of separateness between subject and object, our clients' narratives unfold in co-creation with life's forces in ways that are inseparable, continuous, and boundless. I am reminded of Deleuze's (2006) concept of the fold, which draws on Baroque art and Spinoza's philosophy and, instead of centering the individual, shifts our understanding of inner and outer forms. Aesthetics can help us create a more-than-human, vital, and fluid ecology among our clients, ourselves, and the larger world.

New forms of life

Art and narrative bring new ideas to life, creating encounters and differences that assemble collaborative dialogue between abstract thought and material form. As narrative therapists, we engage in political and philosophical conversations not as intellectual theories but as awakenings to a heart-led life aligned with our values and hopes. I find inspiration in many philosophers and writers whose work supports my artistic interests. Deleuze reminds us of the vitality that arises when our imaginations venture beyond established categories, interpretations, and plots to actively participate in shared acts of becoming. The Colombian scholar Arturo Escobar (2018) describes the pluriverse, a concept that encompasses

multiple visions of politics and culture that promote community, sustainability, and diverse ways of knowing, while challenging the dominance of Eurocentric structures. I am struck by how the philosopher Guattari (1992/1995) wrote of creative acts that demonstrate transversality by crossing boundaries between systems, and by how the feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) encourages interconnections between humans, animals, nature, and technology. She wrote, "I admit I am drawn most by the collaborations that entangle people, critters, and apparatuses" (p. 129). In addition, the post-humanist authors Eduardo Kohn, Cary Wolf, and Jane Bennett help me see vibrancy in more-than-human ethnologies and in every encounter as expressions of something new. These examples invite narrative therapy to include transpersonal, relational, multistoried accounts that are alchemical, transforming the world rather than just ourselves.

For Deleuze, the life force manifests in endless variety through all potential acts of creation. Foucault (1970) emphasizes the importance of understanding knowledge as interactive contingencies rather than as a study of static representations. Our Western approaches, which rely on identity and form, can be transmuted into art, liberated from the materialism of objecthood. Our clients can engage in a creative process, freed from essentialist selves constrained by reductive stories of causality and determinism. In a state of constant change, time can be non-linear and simultaneous, surpassing the conventions of mechanical utility, fixed outcomes, or client histories. The feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2007) writes about Deleuze, "Life can be understood as the becoming-artistic of the material world; and art can be understood as the mode of making matter live…" (p. 300). I think of the artist Wassily Kandinsky (1911/2008), who describes the spiritual vitality in art that goes beyond the material. He writes, "Cezanne made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive" (p. 50). Art brings unseen stories to life as part of the animate world.

With these goals in mind, I want to share a few artists' works that help me reimagine narrative therapy's approach to space, time, vitality, and identity. I begin with Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room.*

Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away

Yayoi Kusama, 2013

Installation

Yayoi Kusama (1929-) is a Japanese artist well-known for her sculptures, paintings, installations, videos, and performances. Although her work is often playful, it stems from memories of trauma and hallucinations. Her ubiquitous motifs of polka dots, flowers, pumpkins, stuffed furniture, and phalluses burst with the energy of Pop Art. *The Infinity Mirrored Room* helps me envision the dialogical space of narrative therapy, with the client as a decentered, small part of the world. Kusama (2002/2015) contributes to this vision of narrative therapy in her description of her art practices. She writes, "My desire was to … measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it ... I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions" (p. 23).

Standing in *The Infinity Mirrored Room*, I imagine a multidirectional narrative conversation. Its lights evoke a Jorge Luis Borges (1962) quote describing "… one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars" (p. 23). Kusama's points of light hover as simultaneous moments in time, virtual potentials for new storylines. A teaching tool in narrative therapy uses dots on a page to illustrate clients' lived experiences. As we re-author clients' stories, we release these dots from dominant narratives, allowing them to be reconfigured into new constellations of meaning. Like Borges' labyrinth of stars, our conversations are rhizomatic, with an

infinite number of routes. I think of Carl Sagan (1980), who states, “We’re made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself,” and consider how aesthetics might inspire conversations between our clients and a sense of this larger belonging (6:17).

Michael White and David Epston have extensively used spatial concepts in narrative therapy, including metaphors of landscapes and archipelagos. They draw on practices such as mapping, externalizing, scaffolding, and identifying subordinate storylines. Reflecting teams and Outsider and Insider Witnessing Practices enrich clients’ stories from multiple perspectives. De Certeau (1984) writes, “Stories… traverse and organize places…” and “Every story is … a spatial practice” (p. 115). Beyond linear emplotment, narrative dimensions can keep dialogue animated and untethered from constraining structures. In my notes from art school in 1990, I wrote about the multiplicity of meaning that becomes possible when our interpretation remains open-ended and intertextual, describing the “endless play of differences” that art enables through a “… non-linear temporality that has no hierarchy,” and noting that our “… interpretations can grow out in all directions.” Similarly, in Kusama’s work, our conversations can illuminate a postmodern, spatial framework. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992) states, “A postmodern narrative submits to the sequential nature of language grudgingly and at every juncture keeps alive for readers an awareness of multiple pathways and constantly crossing themes” (p. 53). Memories are never fixed at their moments of origin but are alive with every retelling. I listen to clients’ recollections as they shapeshift within new relational contexts. *Infinity Mirrored Room* inspires us to venture beyond the limitations of linear histories and actively participate in multimedia performances.

Trapped in the mirror

Kusama’s engagement with representation, mirrors, and mimesis is evident in the photograph of *Infinity Mirrored Room*, where the photographer cannot take an objective photo without including themselves. Kusama’s work requires our participation, challenging the idea of humans as spectators or of fixed objects unaffected by our perceptions. We see how Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrored Room*

offers a spatial strategy in which the viewer becomes both the viewer and the viewed, blurring the distinctions between inside and outside. As a narrative therapist, I consider the benefits of clients focusing on their individual, subjective experiences while communicating with the environment as part of the whole.

Artists provide many examples of the interplay between the inner and the outer, as in the sculptures of Anish Kapoor and Ruth Asawa. Kapoor's work incorporates the viewer into its surface reflections. Asawa creates wire sculptures, stating, "What I was excited by was I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time" (as cited in Higa, 2014). A related idea appears in literature, where the reader is seen as part of the text's meaning. Similarly, narrative therapists are decentered collaborators who challenge the notion of the therapist as an external, objective observer. Whether we are an audience for Kusama's artwork, a reader, or a therapist, we find ourselves part of the work. Kusama (n.d.) reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of 'interbeing.' He writes, "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper" because the paper cannot exist without the cloud and the rain (1992, p. 95). Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room* presents a counter-narrative of interconnection, with multiple subjectivities, locations, and moments in time.

While the traditional focus on a protagonist as the driver of a story's action may impose a conventional structure, our aesthetic conversations can deconstruct this ordering. Kenneth Gergen (2021) writes about relational ways of being that support this shift in perspective. He critiques the "presumption of separation" underlying our mental states and social systems, including "... families, schools, organizations, and nations" being seen as individual, "independent units" (pp. 2-4). Similar to Craig Chalquist's inquiry, Gergen asks, "What if we reverse the order of significance, and begin with *relational process…*?" (2021, p. 10). Our representational systems are embedded in the inextricable links between knowledge and power. Aesthetics can reveal implicit assumptions within story geography and "the organization of persons in space" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 30). In narrative therapy, we focus on clients' subjective experiences and first-person accounts. In contrast, art invites relational and cultural perspectives that go beyond the boundaries of internal and external, subject and object, and move

us beyond traditional power structures of surveillance and hierarchy. Are we at the margins, at the center of the universe, within a panopticon, or a small part of the larger whole? Art clearly shows the importance of the human subject's location in shaping our stories, depicting multifaceted views of space and time that differ from Western divisions of subject and object. I consider how therapeutic conversations might shift clients from passive observers to interactive participants while also challenging anthropocentric assumptions.

Foucault plays a crucial role in my understanding of the political implications of spatial and organizational strategies. He compares Bentham's panopticon prison model with society's invisible, subjugating gaze and describes the regulatory effects of space, stating, "... space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (1984, pp. 247-252). For White and Epston, narrative therapy offers "counter-practices" to the self-policing and conformity produced by panoptic structures. At Otis College of Art LA, my mentor, Simeon Wade, agreed with White and Epston and challenged his students to imagine "non-panoptic space," asking us, "How does an artist design space to produce the opposite effect of the panopticon?" and "What are spaces that invite participation?" A panoptic space relates to the term 'anthropocene,' the human dominance of Earth, as both refer to arrangements of space that objectify people and the planet through separation and power. Alternatively, the art critic O'Sullivan (2001) writes, "Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of" (p. 128). Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room* helps me imagine a post-humanistic environment beyond the inert silence of traditional Western materialism.

The world speaks

In the 1960s, a shift in the social sciences known as the "spatial turn" recognized that space plays a role in our stories. Rather than a neutral background for the protagonist's main action, space participates in meaning-making through aesthetics, place, culture, and geography. In a solely material world, language is a form of spatial conquest occupying discursive spaces and colonizing geolocations. Narrative therapists demonstrate how "naming" can empower clients to reauthor their relationships to problems as externalized objects. Yet language can objectify

meaning, and naming can lead to commodification and dominance, taming the vitality that imagery brings back to the wild. Words can falsely legitimize, say too much, close spaces of possibility, and lead us in one direction at the expense of another. As in artmaking, our encounters with the living world open space for different modes of representation and thought. The ineffable can also thrive in silence, and the mystery beyond human speech can inspire radical change beyond the constraints of worded designations.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write of relational, territorial expressions in nature, that "… many birds are not only virtuosos but artists…" and that "… art is not the privilege of human beings" (pp. 316-17). The ecologist and writer David Abram (2010) explains that when we speak directly to the world, it responds directly to us. He writes about the more-than-human world and the multiplicity of languages, from trees to hives to thunder. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) coined the term polyphony to describe the coexistence of multiple voices that sustain a multivocal, unfinalizable dialogue, each with its own point of view. The writer Ed Yong (2022) explains the variety of perspectives in the living world:

> To us, it feels all-encompassing. It is all that we know, and so we easily mistake it for all there is to know. This is an illusion … We cannot sense the faint electric fields that sharks and platypuses can. (p. 6)

To reach beyond the myopic confines of the known and revitalize our flagging spirits, we must participate in nonhuman dialogues as far-reaching as those of technology, as well as those of mice, rocks, and rain.

These dialogues with the world are a recurring theme within the history of art. We can see this in the dynamic processes of earthworks, such as Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, and in Andy Goldsworthy's work, as discussed in the second article of the series. In addition, the light and space movement, at its height in the 1970s, relies on the intersections of art and science, inner and outer engagement, and the viewer's active participation and perception. Artists such as James Turrell and Larry Bell present time, space, elements, the body, and

perception as interconnected languages, alive and in motion. These aesthetic conversations continuously shift as we negotiate our perception of reality and the responsive reciprocity of sensory experience. The Icelandic–Danish artist Olafur Eliasson provides another example of interactive media and the viewer's perception, using large-scale installations and elements such as light, rainbows, ice, and weather to address our engagements with changing environments. I am influenced by the art of the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime, where time is simultaneous, landscapes and their ancestors speak life's storylines.

Narrative vitality

For many clients, enlivening their spirits means finding freedom from constrained territories and speaking to the inner and outer worlds, the material and immaterial, as one. Although quite different from my approach to art and narrative, I recently encountered Georgi Y. Johnson's (2017) writing on Nondual Therapy and agree with her idea that dualism contracts the energy of time and space (p. 2, pp. 77-78). This aligns with Deleuze's immanent vitalism and Michael White's work on trauma, both of which emphasize the need for lines of flight and the expansion of our energies in time and space beyond rigid representations and diminished narratives. In articles one and two, I describe the imperative of difference, the movement of thought, and the breaking of frames that free us from restricted territories (Cotter, 2023; 2025). Johnson writes, "… there is a sense of contraction or freeze… restraints in the flow of vitality through the body, psyche, and mind …Where there was freedom, now there is contraction…" (2017, p. 36). In Michael White's discussion of narrative in the aftermath of trauma, he writes, "This is a recounting of life that lacks vitality and animation - it is flat, dead" (2004, p. 70). He (2004) continues, "We can think of identity as a territory of life … there is a very significant shrinking of this territory of identity … " (p. 46). Honoring a client's responses, however small, we reinvigorate their sense of self and connection through "… aesthetics of living and, at times, … specific spiritual notions" (pp. 46-47). We can employ double listening, witnessing, and questions to broaden access to alternative territories. White describes this expansion of the "territories of life" as "islands upon which safety and sustenance can be found, and then archipelagos, and eventually continents of security that open other

worlds of life …" (pp. 59-60). This repositioning is crucial to the reauthoring of all of our clients' accounts by animating narratives with renewed liveliness (Johnson, 2017).

In the following conversation, my client, Daniel, has worked hard to overcome childhood trauma that restricted his access to his energy, feelings, preferences, and sense of connection to the larger world. It's just after Thanksgiving, and we discuss joy and whether it's an inside job, an outside job, or both. Daniel begins to notice what might spark a sense of agency, vitality, excitement, and expansion.

Daniel: When you said a flock of birds taking off, I thought of a color series of cars. Blues, beiges, greens. It's a style of color.

Lucy: I love color.

Daniel: This isn't glossy, it's muted… it doesn't have the metallic part. It reflects less light.

Lucy: And the colors create a sense of appreciation or joy?

Daniel: It evokes an emotion, a feeling of joy. That group of colors.

Lucy: So expanding those emotions, hearing the two-year-old say 'I love you,' the paint colors that stir the spirit… You're starting to notice more and more: that song on the radio, that recipe, a look from Stacy, things the pets do. Before you know it, the world is becoming more enchanted.

Daniel: Right, right. It's really helpful. Sometimes, a sentence in a book or a story. I have to read it to Stacy. Almost, you don't need the context.

Lucy: Sometimes, you don't even need the content.

Daniel: There have been some sentences like that. Your bird thing reminded me of a hill on the horizon, it looks like smoke, but it's a flock of

starlings, and when they're head on, they disappear, but when they turn, then there's a black smudge in the sky.

Lucy: How would you name that, the entity or fascination, the triggering of joy that it really captures? What are you aligning with when things like that happen?

Daniel: The nature one? The universe. The world, the color? Beauty. A strange place to find it, a mass-produced car—not a museum—grabbing me.

Lucy: Do they make you feel alive?

Daniel: Yeah, alive, connected, not just alive in myself, but part of something.

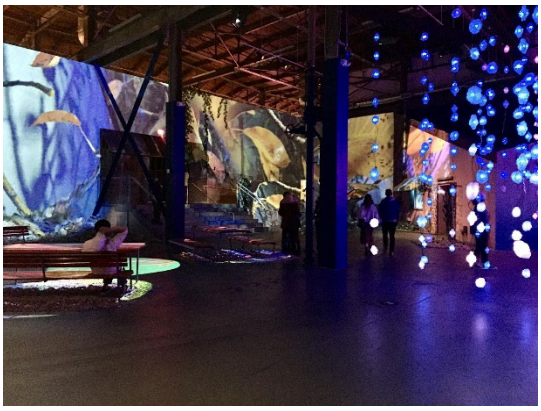
Lucy: In these moments, what were you shifting away from and what were you shifting towards?

Daniel: I was shifting away from somnambulance, being zombie-like. Plodding through the world.

Lucy: What is the shift towards?

Daniel: Joy, awakening. Some diffusion of the boundary between me and other things. More of a part of the world. It brought another meaning to Thanksgiving.

Reflecting on Daniel's story, perhaps a key purpose of psychology is to co-creatively reimagine the self and the world beyond the margins of convention. Our conversation helps me see Foucault's "docile bodies" become "enlivened spirits" as a small part of the world, or, as Kusama states, "one polka dot: a single particle among billions" (2002/2015, p. 23). By exploring Pipilotti Rist's installations, we can see an additional decentered approach to being in the world.



Big Heartedness, Be My Neighbor

Pipilotti Rist, 2021

Installation, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA

Pipilotti Rist (1962 -) is a Swiss multimedia installation artist who invites visitors to engage in interactive experiences. Similar to Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room,* the viewer becomes part of a unique, aesthetic universe. Here, through Rist's use of diverse spaces, projections on every surface, radiant colors, and sound, we are transformed into nomadic travelers. I was fortunate to visit Pipilotti Rist's MOCA exhibit in 2021. Rist challenges our conventional views of boundaries, including the distinction between being awake and dreaming. Rather than passive spectators, we become part of an immersive environment that blurs the lines between inside and outside, self and other.

We are not alone as spectators of Rist's work, but wander through shared communal spaces. Rist states, "My goal is welcoming guests with their whole physical presence … they are in a way the actors when they come into the rooms and we are only preparing a stage. I try to melt in and work with … video, light, sound and make it a full journey" (2016, para. 6). Rist's themes of water, light, liberation, and the body help convey our sense of embodying multilayered, fluid surroundings. In Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room,* we stand on a platform inside a mirrored enclosure. In Rist's installation, we voyage without a plan, moving through disparate spaces and encounters as we participate in the decentered organization of Rist's various assemblages.

Aesthetic story maps

Rist deepens my understanding of how story geographies can share alliances that flow across multiple sites of identity. Her decentered spaces remind me of Michael White's discussion of archipelagos and trauma, and our ability to traverse varied locations of meaning. Whereas trauma often reduces access to what clients hold dear, a spatially diffuse conception of identity provides expansive places to stand (White, 2004). Combs and Freedman (2016) use a decentered spatial organization to describe narratives of identity as "*relational, distributed, performed, and fluid*" (p. 3). How "our moment-by-moment sense of 'self' is located in different places—in other people's memories, in hospital records, in anecdotes that get told and retold over family dinners..." (p. 3). Art invites novel spatial and organizational strategies that affect identity within a story's geography.

Pipilotti Rist's environments demonstrate mapping as a nomadic act. The transdisciplinary author Peta Mitchell (2013) writes about postmodern cartography, "The map is no longer a metaphor for representation, signification, and being but for affect, intensity, and becoming" (p. 88). This also describes the uncharted events in the narrative conversations I celebrate.

A map and a picture frame share much in common. Both create a world picture through artificial boundaries. Both evoke a Cartesian dualism as a truth claim, producing a panoptic ownership of space as a demarcated object, with the viewer as master of knowledge. Mitchell writes that, in the Enlightenment, maps began to be about the 'claiming of territory' as real. The whole world became mapped and like a 'closed space' (2013, p. 54). Maps can colonize, defining what belongs within seemingly naturalized organizational systems and eliminating external variables such as culture, difference, and change. Similarly, all stories colonize, reducing our thoughts to simplified versions of vast experiences and linking multidimensional moments into cohesive structures that often subjugate the marginalized, the ephemeral, the contradictory, or the partial. Our "knowing" can imprison our understanding. Whether a map or a story, representations displace alternative accounts (Mitchell, 2013, p. 54). Avoiding the generalities of a

representational history, narrative therapists use exceptions, multistoried perspectives, and reauthoring to liberate story geographies from the subjugation of problem stories, pathologizing labels, and identity conclusions.

Many significant artists use imagery and text to recover captured spaces and identities. For example, South Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *Fallen Star* depicts a house precariously perched on the edge of a library, speaking to identity, displacement, and immigration. Christo describes his and Jeanne-Claude's blue umbrellas occupying a bright green landscape, saying, "What I want to create is a poetical colonization of the space" (as cited in Weisman, 1990, p. 13). The Native American artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds uses aluminum signs to recover territories through language, reminding us of the geopolitical potential of narrative. Mark Bradford's monumental artworks depict a physical reordering of the personal and the historical. In 2022, I visited *Bradford's Pickett's Charge* at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Its richly stratified surfaces suggest a palimpsest that, through erasure and layering, offers an alternative to emplotment, with a simultaneous dialogue between the past, present, and future. The sheer heft of abrasion and repurposing in Bradford's paintings turns conflict, excavation, and identity into powerful declarations of who and what has the power to be seen and documented.

As we attend to clients' stories, we hope to uncover the story elements hidden beneath the pretenses of historical truth. Gary Saul Morson (1994) writes that "... the danger of narrative models is that they transform the process of activity into a finished product" (p. 20). Whereas client problems reduce space and totalize meaning, our narrative questions open space and reclaim territorial rights over the telling of our stories.

A conversation with my client, Jackie, illustrates her process of claiming new spaces. We discuss how anxiety and trauma keep her from owning and inhabiting her intuition and wisdom, which she needs to feel safe and present. Our talk touched on her relationships with her mother and daughter. We have done somatic work, and Jackie continues striving to "live with less fear in this world."

Jackie is shifting toward responses that better align with her values. Tearfully, she paraphrases Raf Simons, a Belgian fashion designer.

Jackie: He said something like, “Not a day goes by without considering art.” The way he said it, it was like a necessity. I get it. It’s a way to break through this default of living what’s given. Breaking out of fear is a big part of engaging in these things. I’m tearful talking about my mom… I don’t know if she ever had this, though she must have, because she enjoyed flowers so much. She enjoyed every petal. She marveled at flowers.

Jackie wants to set an example for her child. I ask how she would distill the message of our conversation, and Jackie hopes her child will hear their own voice and intuition over society’s fear.

Jackie: There’s going to be a lot of noise from the outside world, but I hope she will keep listening to her body.

Lucy: And spirit?

Jackie: Her body and spirit. That’s it!

Lucy: And can you give yourself the same message?

Jackie: Yeah, absolutely. That’s the thing about life. There’s always this constant tugging between listening to my body and spirit and getting distracted by what others are saying. There’s a lot of noise.

Lucy: Is it just a lot of conversation?

Jackie: That’s a different way of looking at it.

Lucy: Like art materials or music to make meaning from?

Jackie: That's actually a really wonderful way of looking at it. So much of this is being able to hear my own voice instead of my parents' voice in my head.

Lucy: What's the biggest difference between those voices?

Jackie: They might talk about everything being us versus them, black and white, good or bad. But it could be a conversation. When I hear this capitalist machine of nonstop advertising or noise trying to get us to buy something, it's not helpful, but it is, in and of itself, interesting art material.

Lucy: If you choose to engage with it and turn it into new ways of seeing or being. Create with it in dialogue?

Jackie agrees and uses California Governor Gavin Newsom's trolling of President Trump as an example.

Jackie: He's taking the brainwashing technique of using all caps and using it to illustrate the absurdity of what people are buying into.

Lucy: I think that's what the Existentialists were trying to do with the Theater of the Absurd. They change the timing and rhythm of the language. It's like wake up! Wake up! See the construct!

Jackie: Yes, that's it. You wake up and see the construct… It is breaking the thing that is crippling me.

In the first two series articles, I discuss Deleuze's Lines of Flight as counterplots to "outdated representational frames" (Cotter, 2023, p. 30; Cotter, 2025, p. 16). Jackie's story invites alternative meanings that were excluded or unrecognized in the old frame. Deleuze writes, "One's always writing to bring something to life, to free life from where it's trapped…" (1995, p. 141). Ronald Bogue describes lines of flight as a "… drama of imprisonment and escape…" to "… a new terrain" (2004, p. 15).

Rist's environments help me see Deleuze's concepts of lines of flight and deterritorialization, and how our nomadic traversals liberate us from the singular dictates of prescribed thought and behavior. I consider how clients inadvertently maintain the codes of the very territories they're trying to escape. Ana Mendieta's performances offer another means of shifting identity within a story's geography.

Imágen de Yágul

Ana Mendieta, 1973/2018.

Color photograph. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Ana Mendieta (1948 - 1985) was a Cuban-American artist known for performances, photographs, and videos that merge culture, the body, and the land. She transforms the invisible into the tangible through an alchemy of art, psychology, and the organic. Although Mendieta uses molding, burning, and carving of her silhouette and body, her personal identity often seems to dissolve.

Mendieta states, “Using my body as reference in the creation of these works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature” (1988, p. 70). We see complex themes of exile, pain, ancestry, and the maternal feminine in Mendieta’s imagery.

Mendieta’s art helps me understand postmodernism’s dissolution of the subject. As we question the art object, we also interrogate the fixity of identity. Mendieta’s clay-baked bodies and etched silhouettes challenge ideas of a rarified self. In art, identity is intertextual, with a plurality of meanings in flux. Multiple contributors to Western philosophy have us question individualistic, bounded definitions of the human subject as an object (Mitchell, 2013, p. 80). Bakhtin (1984) describes the unfinalizable self. Foucault discusses the subject as “constructed by ... various discursive forces” and operations of power (Mitchell, 2013, p. 85). Michael White deconstructs the idea of the self as personal property (Dulwich Centre Foundation, 2018, 3:22). Deleuze and Guattari (1994) describe art as producing sensations of affect and precepts that are separate from a subject's observations and responses.

The art critic Simon O’Sullivan (2001) explains how affect operates beyond representations and the division between subject and object (pp. 125-134). Although affect is often associated with the somatic embodiment of felt experience, in this context, “affect” refers to the potentials of the virtual. For Deleuze, intensities are emergent encounters that enable creativity to actualize in novel expressions beyond known identities and forms. Art helps me see this life force of difference and becoming, as evident in this Deleuze quote: “What we are interested in, you see, are modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons or subjects: the individuation, say, of a time of day, of a region, a climate, a river or a wind, of an event.” (1995, p. 26)

David Epston speaks of identity, saying, “I was not represented, I was performed” (personal communication, April 30, 2015). Performances of meaning are integral to narrative therapy. They appear in the rich practices of definitional ceremonies and Insider Witnessing Practices, which counteract the effects of pervasive individualism that separate people from one another and from the environment.

We see how performance art challenges our notion of the traditional art object as we shift toward an activated amalgam of artist, audience, space, and time. Freedman and Combs write about narrative therapy, "When we say that our sense of self is *performed* (Combs & Freedman, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1986) … Each of us is always performer and audience at the same time" (2016, p. 3). In Mendieta's work, we see a blurring of forms as the viewer-artist relationship becomes the work of art. In therapy, these interactions allow the therapist and client to perform collaborative stories of becoming.

I share with most narrative therapists the need to be part of the world's story and for the world to be part of ours. Our identities manifest relationally, in process, and in public. Maggie Carrie and Shona Russell (2003) write, "Narrative practice is founded on the idea that the stories that we tell about ourselves are not private and individual but are a social achievement" (p. 3).

In *The Process That Is the World,* Joe Panzner (2015) explores the relationship between John Cage's music and Deleuze's philosophy. He writes,

> For Cage and Deleuze, creativity is a property of the world itself, not a property of individuals. Artists do not exert absolute authorial control – they harness and abstract a kind of dynamism, a multiplicity that opens onto divergent realizations exceeding any kind of prefiguration. (p. 13)

This echoes Mendieta's (1988) desire to conjure the "... one universal energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy" (p. 72). My client, Jen, provides an example of this kind of dynamism and transformation:

Jen: I have to be affecting big change, otherwise I'll implode. It definitely feels like a volcano."

Lucy: What allows you to harness energy creatively in the face of that explosive fund? How do you think you are learning to do that?

Jen: I can say that my past habit was to bottle everything up using blame and guilt, being a certain kind of person, not being just happy to settle down with the guy. Crushing myself into this depression. A star super-nova contracts and contracts into a black hole, exploding in a way so violent, ridding people around me, pushing people away, with fiery turmoil, contracting again really quickly. The whole self-policing thing we've been talking about versus creative expansiveness. Now, it's more deliberate and controlled, I'm feeling at peace, it's more gradual… It feels like the black hole has turned into light.

Art, by engaging the vitality and contingencies of life, brings us closer to experiences of the world's energies. As Mendieta herself writes, "My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe" (1988, p. 71).

Conclusion

Art is a bid for conversations with the world, and like Kusama's room full of stars or Rist's adventure in color, sound, and light, our narrative approaches can conjure unimaginable visions. There is growing awareness of the power of art, science, and relational belonging. Deleuze and Guattari teach me about "becoming-artistic," reaching beyond clients' subjective experience to embrace all forms of life (Grosz, 2007, p. 300). Art documents our potential in ways beyond text and logic. By bringing together the vitality of art, creation, and all processes of becoming, we can reimagine the world and ourselves. There are possibilities beyond our perceptions, stories, and beliefs when we step out of conventional systems of representation, sense-making, and the 'self.' Through art and narrative, we can interact with a sentient Earth and situate ourselves within the living geographies of our land and cityscapes, cultures, technologies, imaginations, and relationships.

Throughout the series, art has highlighted the strength of in-process, handmade, and less recognizable ideas. Using aesthetic strategies, narrative therapy can challenge known terrain as our starting points. Clients' stories are filled with vitality when we enlarge our ways of ordering experience and radicalize what we see as possible. In this way, art far exceeds the role of artmaking by exemplifying unseen choices in our lives, worldviews, and narrative practices.

Of course, there are decades of examples and hundreds of artists who could have been included in this project. The definitions of "art" and "aesthetics" continue to expand, and technology is increasingly part of artistic conversations, including digital work. Our therapy offices become their own contingent geographies, hovering on the margins of the commonplace as sites of witnessing and transport. Our Zoom rooms are neither inside nor outside, blurring spatial boundaries.

Art inspires participatory actions and fosters immersive dialogues beyond the human-centric. Our stories can fight back against complicity as we awaken to vital aesthetic performances and animate new options in our daily lives.

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Animative Descriptions and Vivifying Discovery: Inviting Clients Into The Marvel Of Their Understory

Brian Wainwright

"Now Bjorn, you remember yesterday, the 31st day of October… it could be a really important day in your life, couldn't it?...because on that day, for some reason or other… I don't know yet, but we'll find out…you /YOU did something really, really important. You won over your habit. Before you couldn't hold on to your peepee, but yesterday you got some strength, some bear-like strength inside of you to do this. And I asked you because I think it's very interesting how it was that you were able to be so strong all day yesterday. Your strength, how long did it last?"[1]

Listening for unique outcomes in the stories clients tell about the problems they face lies at the heart of doing narrative therapy. When discovered, they provide entry into alternative landscapes of meaning-making opportunity. But listening for unique outcomes as entry points into rich story development, and calling attention to them in ways that compel persons to take up the invitation to investigate further, are two very different things. Effective narrative questions activate a person's fascination with their own lived experience and invite them to author - make sense of - the history of their experience in new and empowering ways.

An unusual story about the discovery of a unique outcome

James Tweed, while camping in the south of Brisbane, Australia, made an uncanny discovery that would have far-reaching consequences in the world of entomology. While on his way to the camp restroom, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Initially, he thought it was a bird dropping, but his scientific curiosity had him take a second glance.

Upon further investigation, James realized he was looking at a beetle. But it was strange. Its little beetle body was red and black and had large, but not unusual,

[1] David Epston interviewing 7-year-old Bjorn about his "bear-like strength" to win over the habit of frequent ablutions, a leftover symptom after a successful treatment of kidney infection. (Epston, 1991)

"longhorn" antenna looping from its head. What made it curious, though, was the long, spindly white hair shrouding its body. It looked like it was covered in some kind of hairy fungus. The kind that is known to infect insects, turning them into zombie bugs, mindlessly wandering the forest floor like cursed shadows of their former insect selves. But this beetle, covered in white hair, was in fact not infected by a zombie fungus. This white hair was all its own.

James, a University of Queensland PhD student, snapped a picture and took some notes. When he returned to university, he searched for anything he might find about the white-haired beetle, but his investigations into the taxonomies of known insects in this region came up short. So, he wrote an email to experts at the Australian National Insect Collection and learned that he had in fact discovered a new insect. And not just a new beetle, but a completely new species. James' discovery had single-handedly restructured the known taxonomy of the genus of beetles. An extortionary discovery on an exquisitely ordinary day.

Discovery in the understory

James Tweed is a scientific researcher. A bug scientist. He loves looking under rocks and turning over leaves to see what he might find. But little did he know that he would be at the center of a new discovery in his field. And this discovery almost eluded him. It camouflaged itself as, of all things, a bird dropping.

Though this story is a wonderful little anecdote for how discovery is often hidden in plain sight, the reason I call upon James' discovery story has to do with where this discovery took place. You see, James made this discovery in what is known as the rainforest Understory, an ecosystem layer sandwiched between the canopy up above (the Overstory) and the forest floor below.

The understory of a rainforest is known for being a hostile environment for rainforest vegetation due to limited access to light resources. Blanketed in shadow, life in the understory struggles for survival as plants fight for sips of light cast down from above. Beams splash on the forest floor like illuminating pools, offering fleeting opportunity for sprouted life to drink their fill. It's a brutal landscape as far as plant life goes. One where life must adapt to survive. And as

far as ecosystems go, a testimony to the diversity of life hidden away in the shadows of the forest overstory above.

Discoveries that make a difference

Discoveries like the one James made are rare. But when they are stumbled upon, they have the power to rewrite the story of what is possible. In the case of the discovery of *Excastra Albopilosa*, or "from the camp", the story of what's possible for how beetles camouflage themselves and blend into their environments has been fundamentally altered. Discoveries like these in the context of narrative therapy, where unique systems of knowledge and skill might be mapped, are entered into through what Michael White called unique outcomes.

But unique outcomes, like *Excastra*, often blend into their surroundings. They are a part of ordinary life and are too easily overlooked. At first blush, they are taken-for-granted details, obscured by their sameness. But when a therapist doing narrative therapy asks about a unique outcome embedded in the story of a problem wreaking havoc in a person's life, the potential for a discovery is made available to be investigated, and the "bird dropping" is given a second look.

The difference, however, between noticing a new species of beetle covered in white wispy hair and investigating the details of a problem story as a unique outcome comes down to how attention is drawn to the details of the unique outcome.

Questions that call attention to interesting experiences must themselves be interesting things

David Epston has long made a career of asking remarkable questions. I once quipped with David at a workshop that the way he asks questions is not dissimilar to how a comedian delivers a good punch line: build tension with the setup and turn sharply into the absurd, unusual, and unexpected.

Narrative questions, to my way of thinking, are questions that are doing something special. Though narrative therapy certainly doesn't have a monopoly

on the art and craft of asking good questions, narrative therapy does have a lot to say about what makes a question therapeutic. A therapeutic question, in my view, is one in which the person asked is invited to reflect on their own experience by making important, difference-making distinctions. They are questions that render the scene of important events visible in the mind's eye and direct one's imagination to the exquisite details of the story being shared. They are questions that ask someone to innocently re-view the historical events relevant to the therapy in ways that energize the imagination and electrify the story with entirely new ideas and conclusions for what's possible. They are questions that more richly describe what was happening at the time, and what it was like for the person to be there at the scene of the events being discussed. Resulting in the bulking of thinly known experience, giving the story, what Hilde Lindemann calls "heft" (1998).

- *Did you worry your worst fears were preparing to swallow the courage you'd been collecting up for yourself when you finally decided to confront your partner about the way they were treating you?*
- *How did you fight the fear back and give your relationship the chance to turn a new leaf?*
- *How did you know you were ready to take your first step when you stepped through the fear social anxiety worked so hard to keep you in?*
- *Was this the first time you stepped out of line of the life anxiety was building around you, or do you have a record of defying the strict requirements anxiety demanded you live your life by?*

Questions like this paint the scene of the dilemma in the mind of the person being asked and inquire about the autonomy they were in possession of to act "out-of-step" with the problem story that had come to define their identity and life. To look further into how questions call attention to a person's history in ways that vivify and guide, we'll look at a conversation David Epston had with a young woman named Lee-Marie.

David Epston and Lee-Marie: Illustrative questions that re-view history

Below is a conversation David Epston had with a young woman called Lee-Marie. At the time of this conversation, Lee-Marie was a university student attending a ceremony hosted by a university where David taught in New Zealand. As was customary, David would be encouraged to invite someone from the audience to be interviewed about some achievement of significance for the purpose of demonstrating how asking narratively enriching questions works to supply personal histories with new, invigorated life. What David didn't know, however, was that one of the members sitting in the audience was Lee-Marie, a girl who, 18 years prior, suffered from the life-threatening effects of anorexia nervosa. David, alongside Michael White, met Lee-Marie then and interviewed her and her family about how she might stand up to anorexia and its life-ending intentions for her. Now twenty-nine, Lee Marie is lucky enough to say she stole her life back from anorexia and would credit the conversation she and David had together almost two decades earlier.

Much can be said about the conversation below, but for the purposes of this piece, I want to draw attention to David's ability to co-narrate Lee-Marie's already-lived experience; to re-author or *tell again* that which already occurred. Notice what's happening in your mind's eye when you read David's questions. What do his questions help you to "see"? Pay attention to how they guide Lee-Marie to notice the details in her understory; how they help her map her experience by encouraging a closer look. Notice how David artfully paints the landscape of the conversation with rich detail.

David: Why are you so proud of the Problem from the Past that you overcame somehow or other?

Lee-Marie: I think the most important thing is that I feel I have a life now. I am really proud of that. And I have a family. And I am studying for this degree.

David: Do you consider if you hadn't overcome this Problem from the past, It (anorexia) would have taken over your life?

Lee-Marie: Yeah definitely!

David: Where do you guess It would have taken your life to if you hadn't overcome it?

Lee-Marie: I was thinking about that today and got so upset thinking that I wouldn't be here alive. (*vigorously shaking her head*).

David: Is the fact that you are here a testimony to you as a ten-year-old girl and your mother and father and the family you come from?

Lee-Marie: Definitely! *(uttered with absolute confidence).*

David: If you could acknowledge your ten-year-old self for overcoming a Problem that could have taken your life away from you before you had hardly lived it, what would you acknowledge your ten-year-old self for?

Lee-Marie: Just to be thankful to that ten-year-old for overcoming it so that she went on to lead the life I have led so far. It makes me really appreciate my life.

David: Is there anything in particular that you would like to appreciate her for, now that you have 29 years to look back on her life?

Lee-Marie: Definitely the kids I've got today. They are the biggest things. And of course, meeting my partner.

David: You may not be aware that the Problem you overcame as a ten-year-old would have been regarded at that time as almost impossible to overcome. What was so remarkable about you and the family you come from that you did so in merely 60 minutes?

Lee-Marie: I definitely think having really strong parents and not putting me in the hospital. Their will to keep me going was a big one, and also the help from your therapy. It all actually happened when we met. It came about from that.

David: Can you trace the 'will' you speak of in your mother and father to your grandparents in any way?

Lee-Marie: I can because it was actually my grandfather who noticed and pushed it. And he kept telling my family that something wasn't right. And so it was he who was very strong about not giving up. That was huge! And he phoned you.

David: By any chance, were you the apple of your grandfather's eye?

Lee-Marie: I think so...YES! *(nodding her head in agreement and smiling generously)*

David: Can you tell us a story that might convey that to us?

David demonstrates how his questions are powerfully influential in guiding Lee-Marie's and our imagination. It's like he's taken her by the hand and walked her into the museum of her own life, marched her into the exhibit called "Anorexia's Defeat by Lee-Marie," and began to ask story-enriching questions while seated with her square in the middle of the exhibit floor. His questions gently pry. They invite Lee-Marie to slip between the cracks of what is taken-for-granted and usher her into the understory of her own experience; peeking past the canopy of what is "known", spilling her reflective mind onto the forest floor below. His questions paint her right into the scene of her own life and ask her to share the news of what has been sparked into life by such intriguing inquiry.

Narrative therapy is interested in what's newsworthy in a person's experience. This idea, inspired by Gregory Bateson's "news of difference that makes the difference" (1979), is a principal idea that doesn't get the attention it deserves

when discussing the craft of narrative questions. Let's take a closer look at this idea for the purpose of better understanding how the notion of unique outcomes came to be.

"News" isn't new unless what's new about it is newsworthy

In what is consider to be one of Michael Whites most groundbreaking articles, "Negative Explanation, Restraint, and Double Description: A Template for Family Therapy" (1986), Michael argues that change within family systems can occur when "news of difference" – otherwise known as information about difference (Bateson, 1979) – breaks through the bulwark of established "presuppositions, premises, and expectations that make up the family members' map of the world".

> The ability to select out and respond to information about difference depends very much upon the recipient's restraints, the network of presuppositions. This network provides a map that is the context for the receipt of new information that ascribes meaning to percepts. News (information about difference) of events "out there" is transformed into descriptions in the form of words, figures, or pictures, and it becomes "stories" via explanation (p. 1).

Difference-making news (information) can only be noticed as having the potential to make a difference when it is different enough to be noticed as distinct, such that the new information might endure as a meaningful meaning-making resource. When families come into therapy, rehearsed meaning-saturated stories are shared about the problem that has come to make trouble for the family; what Linde Hildemann called 'problem-saturated stories.' These stories, supported by a host of resource-rich stock plots, supply members in the family with knowledge to map their understandings with explanations for why the problem. These plots are embedded in culture and are circulated in society through various sites of distribution, such as entertainment media, and "tell" of what's normal, healthy, developmentally appropriate, and so forth.

News, new information that can make a difference within a family system, can only break through if the news is different (interesting, sparkly, compelling,

alluring, etc.) enough to inform and therefore alter the current relational formations between people in the family. In other words, when a family gets into the business of addressing problems, if all they focus on are the bird shit falling from the sky making a mess of things, they will have trouble seeing the rare, reality-changing discoveries hidden in plain sight.

But encouraging a closed-off family system to make new meaning of potentially newsworthy information requires more than happenstance and good luck. Therapy must alert a family or an individual to the potential for what might be discoverable and therefore story-able. The therapy must spot potential entry points into alternative accounts of history by listening for the contradictions in the story, like hairline cracks in a mirror, and use language and grammar that vivifies interest to open gaps where new meaning can be collectively made by the family system, therapist, and anyone else involved. In some cases, the therapy must stop the conversation and ask, "You've been telling me of *this,* but can I bother you to take up an ounce of interest in *that* over there?"

Questions that position the conversation as a first-person accounting

Most modern therapies orient a professional's listening skills towards a symptoms-as-explanations model. Clinicians today are taught to be experts at spotting and classifying life dysfunction, social, executive, or processing deficits, and or any manner of skill or knowledge deficits. Professionals are taught that their responsibility is to be discerning of "medically" relevant dysfunction; to listen in the scientific mode. These dysfunctions are discerned against a backdrop of what is often deemed healthy or "normal". This isn't to say this type of listening is inherently ineffective or wrong. But it is to say that orienting your therapeutic ear towards spotting and exposing deficits will have you listening in a very specific way. But unlike most modern helping traditions, narrative therapists are trained to listen and respond in the *narrative mode*.

Listening to someone's complaints in the narrative mode bends the listening ear away from details that reveal distinctions in deficits and towards something different; details that suggest a potential for moral agency. Listening in the

narrative mode encourages helpers to ask questions that build along the margins of what is known, such that opportunities for rich story development might be spotted, exposed, and tended to. Narrative therapists are eager to ask about strange and anomalous story details that highlight a person's struggles for self-realization, hope, desire, or longing. Questions such as these might anticipate a "special knowledge" (Epston, 2018) that was relied upon during ordinary and mundane moments of life.

Though our questions are important, it is the answers they generate that matter most in therapy. To ensure the conversation maintains the focus on the experience of the client as the primary source from which therapy draws, asking questions that invite the client to "look again" with different eyes encourages their participation in therapy as having the "important half" (Epston, 2018) of the knowledge central to the therapeutic endeavor. Therefore, to maintain an orientation towards experiences that thickens the story, narrative therapists ask questions that invite clients to maintain a first-person perspective while standing outside of the story being told.

While operating in the narrative mode, questions focus less on the ideas a person has about how life ought to go and instead invite a person to build knowledge along the border between what they *know* they've experienced and what may still be experienceable. We are asking them to investigate their experience and retrieve something different. This is a difficult task without the aid of an outsider, a therapist, who can stand outside of the story being shared, inviting the client to stand alongside them to account for what might be difficult to see through the already-established view of lived experience. Having a way for someone to tell of their experience again as an author, with agency over how the story might be told, requires a kind of stepping outside of the story being re-viewed.

Outsight: Seeing one's self from the outside

Tom Carlson (2020) offers us an important theoretical framework that could be considered a significant leap forward in how to conceptualize the notion of "witnessing". Tom tasked himself with looking into the theory that drove much of

Michael White's “Outsider Witnessing Practice”. In his research, Tom came to understand that it was towards a theory of outsight that Michael was operating by when building a practice around Barbara Myerhoff’s Definitional Ceremony. Outsight, as Tom outlines, is an orientation of viewing one’s life and lived experience as if it is being looked upon, like reading about a character in a book (2020). When one steps out from behind their own eyes and takes a position of looking upon their life, they are granted the opportunity to make distinctions about the conditions the character is operating within (Carlson, 2020). By standing outside of the story, one is better positioned to experience the story as an author, rather than a character; for a character operates their life in response to the conditions their story is set, while an author has the right to set the conditions by which the character's story will take place.

I am of the firm belief that the notion of “re-authoring” requires, first and foremost, a commitment to externalizing the conditions that one might be responding to as a means to re-author their lives in new and meaningful ways. This is in effect externalizing. But the purpose of this style of externalizing is not to simply separate a problem from a person such that it can be fashioned as an entity wreaking havoc in a person’s life. No. It is externalizing for the sake of inviting a person to take on “authorial agency” (Morson, 1994) such that they might witness themselves responding to a problem with intelligence, integrity, dignity, self-concern, courage, intention, and/or any other form of moral character.

Looking upon one’s own life through the filter of the first-person perspective

When listening for how problems operate, narrative questions ought to orient the inquiry through the eyes of the person seeking care. I submit that therapeutic questions are markedly more effective when they invite the client to reflect on their experience through the **filter of the first-person perspective**. Story developing questions that ask about experience through the filter of the first-person perspective are questions that ask a person about what they remember, what they prefer, what they hope for, what they intended, what they desire, and or what they long for (Paljakka & Carlson, 2024). They are questions that inquire

about what their concerns and conclusions are in relation to. Michael White (1990) outlines this for us saying:

> The narrative mode redefines the relationship between the observer and the subject. Both "observer" and "subject" are placed in the "scientific" story being performed, in which the observer has been accorded the role of the privileged author in its construction. When we locate a therapy within the context of the narrative mode of thought, stories about life are considered to have been constructed through "the filter of the consciousness of the protagonist." Thus, the transcendental "we" and the "it" of the subjectified person are replaced by the pronouns "I" and "you" of the personified person (pp. 82 - 83).

In the context of problems, narrative therapy is interested in the significance of the important details of the story that tells of what the person is up against, and what is being relied upon to survive, manage, press forth, hang on, hold firm, stand against, for and with, or fight back. By concerning itself with "stories about life [that are] considered to have been constructed through the filter of the consciousness of the protagonist" (White & Epston, 1990), narrative therapy is positioned to open up gaps in the story where there is a lack of information about how the person is endeavoring to realize their own moral potential. By asking questions through the filter of the first-person perspective, we are honoring the consciousness through which the person seeking care, the protagonist, has constructed their stories about life and how these constructions are organizing of what is possible and what is not. This is to say, a therapy that operates by the principle that life is lived in coordination with how it has been constructed is subject to being re-constructed in ways that open possibilities for how it might be lived otherwise.

I will attempt to demonstrate two forms of inquiry that ask about problems, their effects, and the person's resistance to said problem through the filter of their first-person perspective.

Show me, don't tell me

The first form orients the conversation's **awareness towards how one is affected by the dilemma/problem** that is determined to be the source of suffering. The second orients **awareness towards one's noble response** (Paljakka & Carlson, 2024). These two orientations help to guide how we might structure our questions in ways that orient the conversation towards the knowledge, skill, hopes or moral character that are being alluded to, but remain hidden from view due to the obscuring nature of dominating discourses (dominant ideas that shape thinking, experience and life) that are defining of how the story is allowed to be told.

Questions that call attention to the conditions that contribute to the suffering someone is coming into therapy to address grant the therapy the opportunity to re-author these conditions with the help of the therapist. But it is through the "filter [of] the consciousness of the protagonist" that the therapy must orient to preserve the authorial agency of the client. Below are examples of these two question orientations based on the Lee-Marie conversation from earlier.

1. Questions that orient awareness towards the *problem effects* on the person:

1. Do you consider if you hadn't overcome this Problem from the past, IT (anorexia) would have taken over your life?
2. Where do you guess IT would have taken your life to if you hadn't overcome it?
3. You may not be aware that the Problem you overcame as a ten-year-old would have been regarded at that time as almost impossible to overcome.

These questions, while asked through the filter of the first-person perspective, provide for the telling of the problem and its effects. They keep Lee-Marie in the scene of the story being asked about. And ask her to expound on how her life might have been affected by the influence of the problem had the problem been permitted to dominate her day-to-day living. And they encourage her to tell of her

experience in a dramatic way. In other words, the questions set her up to tell a dramatic story.

In the example provided above, David is not asking about the problem's motivations. He *is* asking, however, about what her perspective suggests about the course her life may have taken should she have followed the lead of the problem's prescriptions. To my way of thinking, this is in service to telling a story built around narrative tension (Baroni, 2015). This subtle distinction puts Lee-Marie in the driver's seat for how the story is constructed. And affords her the authority to illustrate, through her own words, what she dramatically navigated at the age of ten.

2. Questions that orient awareness towards the *person's noble response* to the problem:

1. Is the fact that you are here a testimony to you as a ten-year-old girl and your mother and father and the family you come from?
2. Is there anything in particular that you would like to appreciate her for, now that you have 29 years to look back on her life?
3. What was so remarkable about you and the family you come from that you did so in merely 60 minutes?

These questions ask Lee-Marie to share the details of her lived experience as a protagonist, acting in concert with some special sets of knowledges, abilities, or family inheritance in defiance of the problem of anorexia. Once again, David is asking her to "tell the story of" her 10-year-old self's resistance to the problem through the filter of her first-person perspective.

Therapy in the narrative mode inquires into the experiences of the problem through the person's resistance as observed in conversation through the filter of the first-person perspective. This orientation keeps the client in the "outsider" position while preserving the client's authorial agency by asking questions only the client can answer. This puts the clinician in the position of truly asking questions they don't know the answers to. The therapy doesn't ask about general knowledge or presuppositions that are generally agreed upon. But instead, asks clients to "fill us in" on the intimate and interesting details of how they came to

understand the peril they experience their life being in, and what they might be doing in response to its unforgiving influence.

Animative descriptions and energizing verbs: How our questions make overlooked experience "leap off the page" and into the lap of conversation

"Knowledge is not the discovery or reconstruction of a latent meaning, forgotten or concealed. It is something newly raised up, an addition to the reality from which it begins."

– Pierre Macherey

Knowledge is generated, not discovered. Our capacity to re-view our lives and make sense of what is selected for re-view is not an act of remembering. It is an act of re-generation. And in the act of generating knowledge, language is heavily relied upon to give its constitution shape, texture, tone, and direction.

Words, and how they are used, matter in therapy. And though there is much to say on this topic, my intention here is to call attention to the aesthetics of how our questions and responses assist persons in making new meaning along the margins of what is already known, vis-à-vis storied.

What makes a good story

Good stories captivate. They pull the reader along, word by word, and do so by energizing the plots momentum with accelerant verbs and animative descriptions. They show the reader what's happening without telling them. They share enough to provide an orientation towards the plot while inviting the reader to supply the story with information of their own design and imagination for what might be happening behind the scenes of the story and its characters.

Narrative therapy is a therapy that operates along the same principles; it helps our clients to tell interesting stories about their ability to resist problems by inviting their awareness towards unique knowledge, surprising insights, and unexpected twists of fate, moral quandaries, and the perils of moral decision-making. This is in service of connecting them with the intentions that might be standing behind the acts of life that give texture and nuance to day-to-day living.

But the details of lived experience that provide entrance into these unique stories are often coded as benign and are therefore easily overlooked. So, it is the responsibility of the outsider, the therapist in this case, to express their interest in wanting to know how those seeking therapy are actively engaged in responding to problems by showing curiosity towards those details that show even just an ounce of story-telling promise.

Thickening the story with animative description: Energizing verbs and a grammar that holds it all together

Problem stories monopolize the meaning-making authority of the individual they inhabit. Put another way, successful problems find success by limiting the spectrum of possibilities for how one might experience what troubles them. Problem stories survive as problem stories by remaining "thinly known" (White, 2003).

In *So You Want To Do Narrative Therapy: Letters to an Aspiring Narrative Therapist*, Sanni Paljakka and Tom Carlson (2024) offer us another way of thinking about how thinly known accounts of life and lived experience come to govern how a person makes sense of the circumstances they seek therapy to resolve. They have introduced the term "Unstory" to delineate the ways dominant ideas circulated in modern culture disenfranchise a person from their meaning-making authority. An Unstory is a "labeled account that flattens experience into an identity conclusion"(Carlson, personal communication, 2026). Tom goes on to elucidate further:

> "I am a failure," or even "failure is my problem," doesn't yet have narrative form; it has category, judgment, and foreclosure. The same is true of medicalized descriptions that invite people to understand themselves as having depression or being anxious — these can quietly unstory people from the specificity of their lived experience (Carlson, personal communication, 2026).

Unstories are the “antithesis of a story” (Paljakka & Carlson, 2024). They displace the story-ability of lived experience by centering ideas rather than telling tales of the terrible, magnificent, strange, and wonderful things that result in a protagonist who struggles, puzzles, pushes, and/or prevails over problems. They make fallow the landscapes where meaning-making might otherwise take place. Explanations like complicated grief, personality disorder, or major depressive disorder obscure what might otherwise be revealed if the story of what the person is up against were more thoroughly developed. In many kinds of therapy, clinical descriptions for problems are offered as a starting point for providing help, often resulting in conjecture masquerading as therapy; a plot that is “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” (Bergson, 1900, as cited by Baroni, 2015).

Narrative therapy is interested in thickening stories up by rescuing details, resurrecting and historicizing experience (White & Epston, 1990), and making new meaning – unique meaning – in the rendering of stories that might not otherwise be crafted due to the obscuring nature of professionalized language. Below is a continuation of David and Lee-Marie’s conversation. In our continued analysis of how questions help to bring a unique experience to life, such that they might help to thicken up a person’s storied experience, we are going to look at how David uses his questions to set the stage for storytelling by painting, with poetic description, potential leads for Lee-Marie to narrate her life further. I would like to call attention to how David uses animative language and energizing verbs to intrigue the curiosity of Lee-Marie.

Let's pick up where we left off…

David: By any chance, were you the apple of your grandfather's eye?

Lee-Marie: I think so...YES! *(nodding her head in agreement and smiling generously).*

David: Can you tell us a story that might convey that to us?

Lee-Marie: *(looking skywards and laughing out loud).* Yeah, definitely.... him having to sit around and watching me dance around his living room for half an hour. He definitely suffered through that.

David: Can you remember, as a little girl, the look in his eye when you were dancing around his living room?

Lee-Marie: *(putting her fingers to her eyes).* He always had a glitter in his eyes. He was always smiling!

David: Are there any stories that you know of from your paternal family that are told about how they don't give up when the going gets tough?

Lee-Marie: There were bad financial times, and they just kept on going. Nothing gets them down, and they do overcome it in time and just think of other ways. I've seen it. They can be very strong in that way.

David: Can you tell me something you have witnessed in this regard?

Lee-Marie: They lost completely everything, and they built another business up again to be even better. They were going through a lot of stress. *(shaking head vigorously).*

David: If your grandfather were here and I asked him this question, can you guess what he might have said: "Lee-Marie's grandfather, were you at all surprised when you learned that the apple of your eye- your ten-year-old granddaughter Lee-Marie - overcame a Problem thought to be almost impossible in no more than 60 minutes?" How do you guess he might have answered?

Lee-Marie: *(smiling)* I think he wouldn't be surprised. No! I'm sure he wouldn't be surprised.

David: Can I ask him another question? "Lee-Marie's grandfather, why were you not surprised, when to be honest, I could not quite believe it when I learned what Lee-Marie and her family had gone and done

immediately upon leaving my office?" What would you guess he might say in reply?

Lee-Marie: I think that he knows we are fighters. Yeah, fighters! He has seen that nothing actually will stop us.

David: Is that 'fighting spirit' reflected in the way your family has engaged in athletics?

Lee-Marie: Absolutely...my father and brothers have excelled- they almost went to the Olympics and excelled in professional sports.

Animative descriptions in storytelling questions

This section of the transcript invites Lee-Marie to explore the story of being the apple of her grandfather's eye. He invites her to "tell a story that conveys" this, then thickens the story by asking a question that animates the scene by imbuing it with a little girl dancing around the living room. Her description of dancing around the living room is thickened with his next question.

> *Can you remember as a little girl the look in his eye when you were dancing around his living room?*

This question animates the scene from which this storytelling takes place and invites Lee-Marie to vivify her experience. It is my belief that a good storytelling answer in narrative therapy starts with a good storytelling question. They provide guidance to a client by priming their imagination with anticipation for how they are being invited to narrate their lives.

Energizing verbs

"Find the action in a sentence and express it in a verb."

– Deirdre McCloskey, Economical Writing

Stories require energy to keep the plot from stalling. And verbs supply texts with a story accelerant. They are the energy a reader's meaning-making mind uses to build the plot's momentum. If we're asking questions that help do the work of storying lived experience, then our questions should help to keep a story alive. If a narrative therapist is helping a person tell interesting stories about their life, then the verbs we use in our questions do the work of energizing the momentum of the story's progression.

I've been told I ask "loaded questions" in family therapy. At best, I suspect this has something to do with asking questions that are seen as influential in the conversation; at worst, I might be a little too interested in what I've given priority to, though I could be wrong about this. It's my belief, however, that every question is a loaded question. But I use the term *loaded* in a different way than what might be considered conventional. In my view, a loaded question is a question that primes the person being asked to (a) experience a gap in their knowledge about what they believe they "know," (b) arouses suspense or surprise in them upon their review of what's been asked about, and (c) inspires them to take authorial action to resolve the gap the question curates. I'm of the strong inclination that our questions should not shy away from the dramatic. In fact, I believe a good storytelling question is filled to the brim with the potential to curate narrative tension. And the verbs we choose in our questions help to slingshot a person's imagination into the space where answers are just waiting to be developed.

Putting it all together in therapy

I'd like to tell you a story about a friend of mine. Will is a teacher for a local high school and is in his mid-thirties. He's happily married and has a 4-year-old daughter. And though she can be a handful, he's head over heels in love with her.

But Will carries a tremendous burden around with him that interferes with his fathering and other parts of his life. He is in an ongoing and intractable dispute with the school administrative staff where he works. Will is also black and is all too aware of the socio-political burden of being a person of color in a political climate that refuses to acknowledge the systemic and cultural bias that disproportionately disadvantages people who look like him.

Trouble at work

The story goes that he, a fiercely stubborn and strong-willed person, found himself at odds with an administrator on campus one day. The dispute led to him being followed by this administrator back to his classroom without due cause. He felt the person was aggressive and unprofessional, leaving him to feel threatened by the behavior. That night, and for the next two weeks, Will would find himself waking up in the middle of the night in total panic. He took the next two weeks off from work in the hopes that this would quell his anxieties, but what he didn't expect was to find himself stuck in a perpetual state of reciprocal hostility and ongoing antagonism from the administrative staff from both the school and the district.

For many, this kind of thing would be a minor inconvenience chalked up to a collegial dispute. But for Will, this action has led to a protracted state of stress and anger. All of which his family now bears the brunt of, despite his best attempts not to let it. This is because Will has endured a powerfully shaping experience in his past that left him, a black man, profoundly skeptical of anyone who holds authority over his head.

Paralysis strikes

When Will was 23 years old, he was struck with paralysis from his waist down to his toes due to a mysterious inflammation around his spine. He had just graduated from college and was on the cutting edge of the beginning of his life as an adult. His doctors, not knowing the cause of the inflammation, gave him a damning prognosis. A catheter was painfully "installed" in the hospital, and he was discharged into the care of his mother and father with almost no medical

guidance or treatment. An excerpt of his self-published book (Terry, 2018) illustrates the scene when he learned of the fate he was doomed to:

> *The doctor walked in and told me that they weren't sure what was causing my paralysis. "The MRI's indicate that your spinal cord is inflamed. The inflammation is causing your paralysis and unfortunately there is no way to reverse the damage that was done…I'm sorry". I didn't want to accept this and immediately asked, "does this mean that I'm going to be paralyzed for the rest of my life???" The doctor looked at me and simply replied with a "yes, it does".*

Will goes on to share the story of how, through a fierce refusal to accept this fate, he came to regain feeling in his legs and recover his ability to walk. And how, over the course of a year, he would teach himself to walk and toilet himself without medical intervention. This personal determination, coupled with the love and support from people like his wife, is often credited as the source of motivation that has carried him on in his recovery, which continues to this day.

Fast forward to the present, Will and I started working together because his wife was becoming increasingly worried that he was "deteriorating mentally", losing his temper with her, and was increasingly irritable and short-tempered with their daughter. So, she reached out to schedule a phone consultation with me.

The consultation call

On the day of the consultation, I was running behind by a few minutes. When I finally had the chance to reach Will, I could tell he was not happy with having to wait. Though we joke about it now, at the time, it was no laughing matter. Will was seething. He explained to me that we had a phone consultation at a specific time and that it was my responsibility to make sure I managed my schedule, and accused me of being unprofessional. The conversation was not going well. He went on to explain that he has no patience for medical professionals because he's been jerked around by doctors, administrators, and past therapists. He had me

dead to right with being late. But I did my best not to take the heat personally and eventually had a chance to summarize Will's justified frustration.

Brian: Will, I'm really sorry you're feeling upset about my mismanagement of time. I have to say, it makes all the sense in the world to me that you would be as upset as you are about this. Especially given how much adversity you've made it through in your life. It sounds like my belated call has demonstrated to you that I might fall right in line with how you've been treated in the past. I can't imagine what it might be like to have to deal with something like this, given your history.

Will: *(Exhales)* Well, yeah. I appreciate you saying that, Brian. It sounds like you might get a little bit of what it's like for me to be jerked around by my medical professionals. It's traumatized me, and I get so upset and completely lose my mind. And my wife and daughter get the brunt of it at home. I've done therapy in the past, and though the guy was nice, it wasn't helpful…

Will goes on to explain that he went through an EBT (evidence-based treatment) program with a therapist who "didn't listen" to him and just had him complete handouts. I reassured him I didn't have any handouts I could provide due to my lack of knowledge about what it's been like to live the traumatized life "medical neglect" set him on. And if he was still open to setting up an appointment, I would happily agree to meet. He warmed up and agreed. We seemed to be on good footing. So, it was with considerable caution that I gave a necessary caveat to our initial meeting.

Brian: I'm glad you're open to meeting, and I think we could cover a lot of ground together. But I have to ask one thing, and I cannot meet with you unless you agree to my terms.

Will: *(With skepticism in his voice).* Oh yeah! What's that?

Brian: I need to let you know I've never worked with someone with your history. Sure, I've worked with trauma before, but I have no reference for what it's like to be working in a hostile work environment with people who seem to overlook a powerfully life-shaping experience, such as paralysis that led to medical neglect. I'm going to need your guarantee that you're going to let me in on how it is that you're making it through such incredible circumstances, even if it feels at times that you're simply unable to keep your head above water.

Will: Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I'll teach you all you need to know what it's been like to live a day in my life

Peeking into the understory

The stage was set for the two of us to get into Will's untold understory. Will and I have been working together weekly. He never misses a session. He had been teaching me about what it's like to be a teacher at the school where he works, how his "trauma triggers" send him into a "spiral", and about his exhaustive efforts to respond to the circumstances of his hostile work environment. There was lots of ground to cover. Will also made sure to teach me about his medical condition. He wrote a book about what his experience was like to lose his ability to feel his legs. He brought it into session early on when we first started meeting. But what I was mostly interested in was how he was finding ways to hold his own against what we called "the Bad Mood" that he would find himself in while at school. I was interested in getting into the understory of how he has been finding ways to build more trusting relationships with his colleagues and overcome "the

Bad Mood" that has been so powerfully shaping his experience where he works and with whom he works.

The exchange below was in a session where Will expressed to me that he had responded to something that helped him hold "the Bad Mood" off while at work. Worried that Will might overlook his agency to act in accordance with something other than the bad mood, it was my responsibility, I felt, to make this unique outcome interesting enough to warrant investigation from both of us.

Brian: …you've been in class these last three days, right?

Will: I've been teaching. I've been teaching, yeah.

Brian: How has this [good] mood *accompanied* you to school?

Will: Great, man. I mean, I am having great times. That's even when I'm not doing well, and I'm like in here and like being the worst version of myself in front of you, like stressing. I don't have that in front of the kids, which is honestly not to my detriment, like that's why I'm able to go…

Brian: *(Abruptly interrupting).* But with respect, I would *expect* that of you, frankly, you know what I mean? Like a *Bad Mood* might try to *tear you down*, but you find it in you, someway, somehow to make sure that that *Bad Mood* doesn't *cover you up* when you're with your students. My guess is that the *Bad Mood* has full reign, or at least significant reign…over your relationships with your colleagues or maybe the administrators. When your…good mood is with you, do you find that you are *resonating* differently with those staff members that you typically have **bad blood** with?

Will: Wow, man…[yeah]…it did happen. Like one of the vice principals, who's a complete dickhead…Like I saw him yesterday, and he said

good morning to me, and I said good morning back. *(Laughing).* And I know that might seem small to you.

Brian: …That does not…seem small at all.

Will: *(Enthusiastically).* Not small.

Brian: That feels tectonic.

Will: And I did this *(waving his hand in a gesture of "Hi!"),* I did that, I did one of those. So, you know what I'm saying? I did one of those, and it was a big deal, man. So, to answer your question, what it's been like with the kids, it's been like it usually is, but augmented, like I'm happier, like, and I'm noticeably happier. Internally and externally, it's been freaking great.

In the exchange above, my question invited Will to "get beneath the surface" of a particular moment at school he referred to as "being in a good mood". He started telling me about how this good mood affected him in his classroom with his students. Now, you may have guessed, but Will is a good teacher. At this point in our working relationship, there is no doubt about that. So, the story of how his "good mood" helped him teach had no gravity to it. We might as well talk about the kind of car he drives to and from school. The question I asked was intended to redirect his authorial attention towards what else may have happened, to *look again* at the story of this particular day in which a good mood won out. The question, one that illustrated the conditions in which his bad mood should have prevailed, led to a lively review of how an alternative mood succeeded, warming him up to his "dickhead" vice principal. And this set the course for us to discuss further how this act might be the beginning of warming relations between him and some of the staff he's come to feel so negative about.

Discussion

In this article, I've spent a considerable amount of time making the case that unique outcomes are both a point of departure from the internal logic of a thinly known story about life and entry into what I've called the understory, lived experience that has yet to have been incorporated into the larger system of knowledge that serves as meaning-making resources. The Understory metaphor I call on is simply meant to be used as a device to assist therapy in its pursuit of untapped resources from which to build alternative plots and new stories. Furthermore, these points of entry into alternative landscapes of meaning are obscure and easily overlooked and require a commitment from the therapy to call attention to them by making them gleam. Michael White referred to these gleaming expressions as "sparkly moments". I am proposing that narrative therapy, as a collaborative therapy, requires a commitment to using language that vivifies these potential points of entry into unique outcomes. And I believe that narrative therapists can spend time developing these skills in consultation with each other as they develop their artistry in the way they ask their questions.

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