**Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy**

**Founding Editor: David Epston**

ISSN 2767-3766

**October 2026 Special Release**
**Editors:** Tom Stone Carlson, Sanni Paljakka, marcela polanco, and David Epston
**Associate Editors:** Kimberly S. Rodríguez Jiménez and Sydney Yang

**www.JournalCNT.com**
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## Foreword: Dear Reader

Welcome to this special edition of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy written by colleagues at DISPUK—Danish Institute for Supervision, Teaching, Organizational and Individual Counseling and Therapy—in Denmark.

We are honored and thrilled to share with you some of our work around documentation and letter writing. Before we set off, we would like to thank David Epston and Tom Stone Carlson for inviting us to do this special issue.

The issue began with a question David posed to Camilla Schjørring about writing an article and soon grew into an enthusiastic exchange of ideas at DISPUK, with seven of us ultimately contributing to this issue.

And it has been fun. Not just because it gave us an opportunity to work together on this project, but because we are all fascinated by the effects documenting and writing have had on our work over the years.

And because we love language! This powerful tool we hold has the strength to create, form, and re-form stories. We love that humans found a way to preserve language. We learned to write. Socrates was a bit concerned about the effects of the written language. He worried that it might fail our memory, because the written language, once it is written, parts from the experience floats around not as memory, but only as reminders of what we have experienced. We tend to agree. The written language fails to capture the nuances of a memory.

So how come we love to write? We love to write because writing is also creation. Writing is an opening opportunity. When we write, we create images, stories, identities, thoughts, even emotions. And every creation holds the power to affect the world. This can be scary, but it also provides hope. We can participate in

making changes through our language. And we can hold on to those transformative creations through our writings. Maybe we are not just human beings but human becomings, to paraphrase the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

This love for language and story development has been at the heart of DISPUK's work over the past 35 years. Standing on the shoulders of Michael White and David Epston's work, we have continued exploring how narrative and poststructuralist ideas can be brought to life in creative ways. In this issue, you will have the opportunity to join me and some of my colleagues at DISPUK in our exploration of the possibilities that written language offers in developing helpful practices to support the collaborative work we do with the people who consult us.

In Tine Mølgaard's text, she mentions narrative practice as a political practice. DISPUK has a long history of applying a narrative framework within leadership/management, therapy, pedagogy, supervision, teaching, and other trades where a critique of the power of dominant discourse is relevant (that's basically everywhere). This is because we believe narrative ideas to be helpful in a broader context, and because some of the stories we meet in therapy are the result of harmful structural practices in our culture.

Sometimes, what leaders, social workers, teachers, and others do in the process of reproducing culture—often without that being their intention—can have harmful effects. We want to help change that. This issue is inspired by that work.

We all teach, supervise, and practice therapy close to the practices and thoughts presented by Michael White, but we believe that any theory or related practice must consider the broader cultural context and power structures when it is practiced.

You will find examples closer to "classic" narrative therapy, but you will also get an opportunity to read about practices that we do outside the context of therapy.

You will get a chance to read about:

**Invitations: Shortcuts to a Relational Narrative Practice.** In this article, Martin Nevers, CEO at DISPUK, shares his experiences and perspectives on invitations as an important first relational step in therapy.

**For Me, Starting a Conversation Without a Letter Feels Like I'm Only Half a Therapist.** In this article, Camilla Schjørring shares her reflections on five letters following five different sessions and their impact during a six-month process of therapy with a young couple. She concludes the article with six points to consider for therapists who want to get started with writing narrative letters.

**A Pine Says Thank You: On Finding Agency in Relationships with Places.** In this article, Lasse Hauge explores how, in narrative practice, we often associate re-membering with human relationships. But Michael White reminded us that places, too, can be members of our life stories. Through practices like brief therapeutic letter writing, these relationships can be given voice.

**"What Are You All Meeting About Now?"—A Story About an Angry Voice, a Supervision Room, and a Magic Pen.** In this article, Lisette Valter, then working as a psychology supervisor at a residential facility in social psychiatry, draws on a fairy-tale–inspired supervision session held with a resident. The article explores how poetic rendering can open space for multiple voices and new possibilities.

**How Journalists Can Tell Stories Without Making Sources More Vulnerable.** In this article, Olivia Nepper Winther explores how journalists can tell important stories without leaving sources more vulnerable than before. She reflects on the need for new ethical practices when working with people in vulnerable positions and introduces outsider witnessing letters as a concrete method to support sources after interviews.

**How a Letter Can Enlarge the Small 'p' in 'politics'.** In this article, Tine Mølgaard explores how a letter can expand the small 'p' in politics into something much bigger. She reflects on a rebellious letter-writing practice—created together with her colleague—that began as a response to inadequate structures in schools and daycares and grew into something with a capital 'P'.

**Writing Letters as Therapy.** In this article, Lone Kaae Morell demonstrates how writing (and exchanging) letters is not merely a method, but an ethical and political practice. Lone shares a five-week therapeutic process in a letter exchange with a woman.

**Afterword: What Is the Spirit of Narrative Practice?** In this afterword, Lasse Offenberg reflects on the spirit of narrative practice as it appears across the seven articles in this special issue of JCNT. He explores what unites these written practices and the assumptions about people that underlie them. Drawing on Hilde Lindemann Nelson's concept of morally degrading identities, he examines how narrative practice resists such identities in everyday life. Instead, he highlights how these practices insist on seeing people as moral agents.

We hope these articles will inspire you and perhaps open up new thoughts, perspectives, practices, conversations, and not least new ways of working with writing.

Greetings from Denmark,

All of us in DISPUK

# Invitations: Shortcuts to a Relational Narrative Practice

Martin Nevers, DISPUK

*This paper explores how written invitations can serve as relational practices in narrative therapy, particularly when working with children and young people who approach therapy with hesitation, mistrust, or prior disappointment. Drawing inspiration from both narrative practice and psychotherapy outcome research, I propose that therapeutic relationships need not depend solely on time or face-to-face meetings. Through examples of what I call 'invitation letters' to three young people, I examine how relational qualities can be nurtured before the first session, inviting collaboration, recognition, and safety. The paper positions written invitations as an active narrative practice that can create shortcuts to relation building that honor people's stories before they enter the room, as well as allowing the therapist to show up even before the physical meeting. I will also present a structure that makes letter writing easier to overcome if you lack time or find it hard to write.*

Let me start with an example of one of my latest invitations. I hope it will serve as an anchor to hold on to when moving through my initial points. At the end of the paper, I will give voice to Alex and Andy (Alex's dad), who received the invitation.

> *Dear Alex,*
>
> *My name is Martin, and I visited your parents' workplace today to teach conversation skills to your parents and their colleagues. During one of the exercises we did, I had the opportunity to hear a bit about some of the concerns Andy has been having lately. As you probably already know, they are about whether you are okay with your life these days.*

*The conversation made me want to write to you, so that you could also hear some of what your father shared. Just to be clear, I should start by saying that although the conversation began with your father's concerns about you and his wish that you might speak with me, the conversation was about him—not about you. Your mother was there today as well, but she was not in the same group as Andy, so for now it is only his words I can pass on 😊.*

*One of the things Andy said was that he wondered whether his worries might mainly be based on his own history, because he recognizes so much of himself in you. He told me that he did not do very well in school himself and often felt very different, as he grew up in Jutland in a kind of hippie lifestyle that was very different from that of his classmates. He also shared that for a period he was bullied quite severely, until he discovered that violence was a way to make the bullying stop.*

*He explained that those experiences have stayed with him like a kind of self-surveillance camera that is always watching to see whether he is good enough or whether he fits in. And this camera has a special function—it only looks for mistakes.*

*Andy said that this camera has often caused him to distance himself from social situations and, at times in his life, not to strive for what he really wanted, because it can feel safer not to try than to risk failing.*

*When he looks back on his life, he is actually quite satisfied with what he has achieved and the life he has built with you and your mom, even though there are things he wishes he could have been without experiencing. At the same time, he is concerned about whether you are truly doing well, and more than anything he wants to be sure that he has done what he can to help you navigate a youth that he partly recognizes from his own life, yet which is also completely different from his.*

*Our conversation made me think of many of the young people I have spoken with over the years who have experienced bullying. I often think that if you want to find a best friend, you should find someone who has been bullied, because in my experience they have learned the hard way what not to do to others—they know firsthand how much it can hurt. I wonder if you can relate to that.*

*I believe that when your father suggested it might be helpful for you to speak with someone like me, it is connected to the fact that, later in life, he experienced how valuable it can be to talk to someone about the experiences we carry with us. Not necessarily because it must be a therapist—but because we often do not actually have those conversations unless we actively seek them out.*

*I do not know whether you and I will end up talking or not, but I thought you deserved to hear what your father shared. And if at some point you would like to talk with me, then let us see if we can find a time that works.*

*Best regards,*
*Martin Nevers*

## From Patience to Invitation

I am always quite excited to meet people in conversation. This excitement might lead me to want too much from a conversation. I like that I have the ambition to make the conversation worthwhile, but sometimes it can get in the way of giving space to the person I talk to. I remember many years ago talking with Art Fisher[1], who was a great inspiration to me in exploring and expanding my narrative framework. Art said that often, when talking to men who had committed violent acts against their family members, he needed to have patience—patience for the person to show up, as I remember he put it. He was not talking about showing up in a physical sense, but showing up with all their longings, desires, broken hearts,

[1] Art Fisher, narrative therapist from Canada, has been visiting DISPUK a number of times some years back, sharing his work and thoughts on narrative practice.

and vulnerabilities, making it possible to engage in conversations that explore and develop counter stories to the dominant stories of how men should behave or think in masculine ways in rural Canada.

This made a lot of sense to me then, and in many ways, I still draw upon it in my therapy work. There can be a lot of fear, doubt, unease, and mistrust standing in the way of "showing up"—in the sense that these emotions can keep people from revealing their most secret stories, thoughts, or feelings in the presence of a therapist. Often that fear, doubt, unease, or mistrust has grown through difficult or disappointing experiences with therapists or other helpers in the past.

However, over the last decade, I have become less interested in *patience* as a therapeutic virtue. When we use patience to explain the skill required to be a good therapist, we may miss opportunities for richer story development. I often hear therapists, teachers, and social workers say, *"It takes time to build a relationship."* While this statement often arises from genuine experience, it can sometimes become a way of praising patience as a therapeutic value.

When I hear these kinds of sentences, I tend to resist. I do not think it takes time to build a relationship—it takes *activity*. Time passes no matter what. It is what we do in that time that creates the quality of a relationship.

*Activities* may take time—and more activities may be needed. But if that is the case, then let us talk about what those activities could be. Talking about time as a key ingredient to building relationships without talking about what we want to do with that time makes little sense to me.

## What Makes Therapy Helpful?

A few years ago, I came across the work of Bruce Wampold and his colleagues, who researched what creates the positive outcomes of therapy[2].

[2] Wampold, B. E., & Imel, Z. E. (2015). The great psychotherapy debate: The evidence for what makes psychotherapy work. Routledge.

Wampold's work shows that there is no evidence that any particular therapeutic methodology is more helpful than others. According to his studies, what is more important than your methodology, instead, are certain *relational* factors. His studies point to three elements that consistently influence outcomes:

- A *real relationship*
- *Expectations* created through *explanations*
- A *working alliance*

These categories resonate with my experience. A relevant question now is: what constitutes a real relationship? One image that is meaningful to me regarding this question is from the movie *Avatar* by James Cameron. Here, the Na'vi people greet each other with the phrase: "I see you." Not just as another "how are you?" but rather "I really see you." That phrase struck me when I saw the movie. It made me wonder how much I actually see people when I greet them with a "how are you?" If relationship quality so strongly shapes therapeutic success, we might want to pay more attention to how we meet people in therapy. It's worth exploring what practices can nurture relationships where we can see each other even before the first session.

## We Have to Meet to Relate—or Do We?

I believe in the value of physical meetings. But I have come to question whether therapeutic relationships—and the quality of those relationships—depend solely on face-to-face encounters.

Back in the days before social media, many people had *pen pals*. When I was in middle school, my class was paired with another from a different country. We never met, but through our letters, we formed relationships, and some of those became real friendships. Today, you can see a similar thing happening with kids playing games online with people from all over the world.

So, if the quality of the relationship is as important as Wampold suggests, if physical meetings and the mere passage of time are not the only keys to connection, and if we can create relations without a physical meeting, we might

ask: *How can we begin building a relationship with clients even before we meet them in therapy?*

## Learning from Children

At a conference in Liverpool, I heard David Denborough, with a reference to Michael White, thank the many children who had contributed richly to the development of narrative practice. Without them, he said, the work of Michael White, David Epston, and others would have evolved differently.

I find that to be true in my own practice as well. I think it is fair to say this about all the people I have talked to in my practice. It wouldn't be what it is today without them. But often the children and adolescents I meet in my practice have not produced the idea themselves that therapy might be helpful. Often it is a parent, a teacher, or a professional who contacts me and who has decided on their behalf that seeking counseling or therapy would be helpful or needed.

From these children and adolescents, I have learned that shyness, fear, doubt, and mistrust often accompany their arrival in therapy (this may very well be the case for others as well). For many of them, this makes perfect sense. They have had bad or unhelpful experiences with adults trying to help them. Those experiences have shaped stories of therapy as ineffective, unpleasant, or even humiliating. Who would not want to avoid that?

So, in developing written invitations in my practice, the children and adolescents have played a big role. In my effort to give them a voice and a say in what might be helpful, their (rightful) reluctance helped me to take better care of not just what but also how I invite people. And written invitations have two important advantages over the oral invitation:

One being that the words don't disappear. People have a chance to revisit the invitation if it could be relevant to read or hear the words again.

And the other is that they don't have to be in a relationship while reading the invite. They can reflect on the invitation without being part of a physical relational

moment while they read it. It can be hard to think while looking someone in the eyes. Often, when we want to think about something while we are with other people, we look up because we know we don't risk looking anyone in the eyes, and thus our thoughts are left in peace.

## The Therapy Starts with the Invitation

"Good" therapy needs relational quality, and you can help create (or destroy) that through invitation. The therapy starts with the invitation.

Paraphrasing Michel Foucault, who said that most people know what they do, some know why they do it, but only a few know what they're doing does[3], I have started exploring the norms of invitation practices and the effects they have—and over the last decade, I have been experimenting with writing invitations differently to clients before our first meeting. I always write when I have heard stories of shyness, discomfort, or mistrust, but I also try to make invitations when people seek therapy on their own. I always ask the parents, the social worker, or whoever contacts me to make an appointment for someone else whether this person thinks it is a good idea to see me, and if not, I always send an invitation.

These invitations are not about convincing anyone that therapy is good or necessary. Instead, I want to give people a sense of *me* and of the *room* they are being invited into, to help them decide whether a conversation with me might be meaningful or worth trying.

## "Dear Mona"

My first written invitation, inspired by this idea, was written some years ago. A mother called me because she was desperate to get help for her sixteen-year-old daughter, Mona, who was critically ill from what had been diagnosed as an eating disorder.

[3] Foucault, M. (1988). Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason. Vintage Books.

She told me that Mona had refused every attempt the hospital made to help her—even when they tried to make her eat by force. Eventually, the hospital gave up. Mona's life was in danger, and her parents were desperate and exhausted.

A neighbor of the mother suggested that she contact me. When I asked her if Mona wanted to talk with me, she confirmed my suspicion that she didn't. That was when I came up with the idea of writing her a letter.

I sent the letter to Mona's mother, asking her to give it to Mona and read it with her if that made sense. An unexpected effect was the mother's own response. She wrote to say the letter had moved her to tears, rekindling hope for her daughter. Here is the letter as it was written:

> *Dear Mona,*
>
> *My name is Martin, and your mother wrote to me yesterday to ask for help. She told me that for the past three years you have been struggling with what she called an eating disorder, and that it hasn't improved even though the Center for Eating Disorders has tried to help you. She told me that your experiences with therapy at the center have had you refusing to go there, and to elope when committed to the hospital. She also described that you have "pains in life," which perhaps are about something else and more than the eating disorder.*
>
> *So, I am writing to you now to ask whether you might consider talking with me, to see if that could be helpful for you. The reason I've chosen to write such a long invitation is because I imagine that you may have certain reservations about talking with yet another person about your life, and therefore I'd like to introduce myself a little, so you can get a sense of whether our collaboration could be different from what you've otherwise experienced in the helping system.*
>
> *I don't actually know very much about eating disorders, but you already have three years of experience with it, so I imagine what you*

*know about the subject is more than enough. I have spoken before with young women who have struggled with something similar, but I don't think that makes me an expert in the field. What I do know, however, is something about what is useful when talking with people about their lives. But everything I know is knowledge I have from other conversations or from training and books I've read on the subject. I have never spoken with you, so what I'm really interested in, to begin with, is exploring together with you whether my way of having conversations might be something that fits you. And of course, the only way to find that out is to try talking together* 😊.

*So, if you are ready to give it a go, I would like to invite you to a conversation with me on November 5th at 11 o'clock at my workplace, which is in Aarhus.*

*I understand that the eating disorder and the sense of pain in life must take up a lot of space in your life right now, but you shouldn't expect me to be especially interested in digging into that part or in giving you lots of suggestions about what you should do to get rid of it. I'm probably more interested in getting to know Mona. My prejudice about the treatment system is that they are very interested in talking with people about their problems and what can be done to solve them. Sometimes I get the impression that our helping systems are more interested in problems than in the person who has had problems invading their life. I am probably more interested in you, in what you care about, and in what is important to you in life. That's what I would like to talk with you about.*

*That said, it is very important to me that our conversations are a collaboration between the two of us. You will therefore need to help me avoid acting too clumsy in our conversations. So, if I happen to do something that you don't find helpful, I would very much like you to let me know, so I can do something smarter instead.*

*I work, by the way, in a company called DISPUK, which provides further training for therapists, counselors, teachers, pedagogues, nurses, social workers, and many others who talk with people in their everyday work. Most of my work consists of teaching, and in addition, I travel around to hospitals, homes for children not living at home, and schools to help them reflect on their work. A small part of my work also consists of having conversations with people who contact me because of things they are struggling with in life, and that is also the reason your mother reached out to me.*

*Just so you have a sense of who I am: my name is Martin. I originally trained as a teacher at Odense Teacher's University. I live in the countryside in central Funen with my family. I'm only in Aarhus about once a month; the rest of the time I'm traveling around the country with my work. If there is anything else important for you to know about me, you are very welcome to ask.*

*If, after our talk on the 5th, you feel it would be good to continue talking with me, then I'd like to discuss the possibility of continuing our conversations both when I'm in Aarhus and by inviting you once in a while to come to Funen and talk with me at my home, where I also have conversations now and then. We'll figure out together how that could work in practice.*

*I hope this long introduction to our talk hasn't scared you off. When we meet, I'll try to talk less* 😊*. If there is anything you'd like to say to me or ask me before we meet, you are very welcome to write to me. Otherwise, I just hope to see you on November 5th.*

*I look forward to meeting you.*

*Best regards,*
*Martin Nevers*

## The Helpful Relationship

Mona showed up. She told me that even though she had decided not to talk with any more therapists, the letter helped her to "give it another go."

I had not yet learned about Wampold's research when I wrote the letter, but when I read this invitation today and think about Wampold's three aspects of a helpful relationship, I reckon that the letter created all three: it made me a *real person* rather than just a therapist—Mona actually later said that she thought she was meeting with a therapist, but I turned out to be a human being (this was one of the better compliments I have received); it offered *expectations via explanations* of what therapy might be; and it established the beginning of a *working alliance* that Mona could see herself engage in before we even met.

## A Structure for Writing Invitations

Although we cannot explain relations with time, time does seem to interfere with our work. Since my first invitational letter to Mona, I have tried to come up with orientation points for my invitational letters that help me to create a structure that helps me avoid spending too much time writing these invitations. The structure is inspired by Michael White's framework for outsider witnessing[4]. Since learning about outsider witnessing practices many years ago, I have come to love this aspect of narrative practice because the power of being met by a witness has such great potential. It expands the Na'vi greeting to: "I see you, and thanks to you I also see myself." To me, outsider witnessing creates connections. Often, I invite other people to witness the stories developed in therapy, but I, as a therapist, am also a witness to the stories I hear, and it can be very helpful when I meet these stories with an outsider witnessing response in my invitations.

This approach helps me spend less time worrying about what to write. I believe a great number of potentially helpful letters are never written due to a sense of lack of time—just thinking about the complexity of figuring out what to write may give people a sense of not having the time to write the invitation. Guiding points

[4] I recommend reading Michael White's "Maps of narrative practice" (2007) if you are new to Outsider Witnessing.

or a structure that helps me through the process of invitation writing without requiring too much time to think about what to write has helped me to write more invitations.

The content of my letters, which I try to write in a spirit or tone of collaboration, has the following orientation points:

- I will write about why I am writing this letter. I write about what has happened that made me sit down and write an invitation and the purpose of the invitation. This is the part where I also write about what I have heard about the problem(s) in people's lives, for people to know what I know and to help them get a sense of how I think and talk about this.
- I also write about what I have heard about the person's interests and values, which might tell more about the person than what we might learn when focusing on the problem.
- I write something about what I have heard that resonates with my own life. Small pieces of my own stories help me connect to the person I am writing to, and it seems to go both ways.
- I write about what all the above has made me interested in talking about in our first conversation, while leaving the door open to talk about anything.
- And of course, I will write about the practicalities of where, when, and who else might be there.

To use this approach, I ask the person contacting me (often a parent or a caretaker) a few questions to get a sense of the person they want me to meet. Parents often want to tell me about *the problem*. While that can be useful, it's not my main focus in my initial talk with the parents or caretakers—unless the person they want me to talk to is equally interested.

In my invitations, I try to witness *the person*, not just the problem. I ask parents what their child has valued or appreciated in life, what has brought joy or interest, what has been lighting them up. This allows me to write letters that acknowledge not only the difficulties but also the person's intentions, values, and commitments

that serve as access points to counter stories to the problem-saturated and internalized ones.

It also allows transparency. As mentioned, I want the person I write to know *what I know*—and what I don't know. Sometimes the mere thought of what I know or what I have been told can create concerns about what I might think of people. And if all I know is the problem story, there is little room for alternative stories to breathe. A written invitation can make room for those other stories before therapy even begins.

### "Dear Malthe"

I wrote the following letter after I received a call from 12-year-old Malthe's mother, who told me a bit about what was going on in his life. I used what she told me to craft the following invitation:

> *Hi Malthe,*
>
> *My name is Martin, and your mother has called me and asked if I might be able to talk with you once in a while. She sounds worried about you. She told me that you are not happy about going to school, and that sometimes you have been so tired of everything that you have thought maybe it would be better if you were dead.*
>
> *I know about those kinds of thoughts. I was probably around 15 or 16 when such thoughts showed up for me, and I often talk with children and young people who can also end up thinking that way. It was not nice for me back then, and I don't get the impression that it is nice for those I have spoken with. And from what I heard from your mother, it is not much fun for you, either.*
>
> *Maybe we can talk a bit about those thoughts and about how you are doing in general when we meet, if you'd like? But actually, I am probably more interested in talking with you about what you care about or what interests you.*

*Your mother told me that you are very interested in soccer, and that you think Messi is amazing. Did you know that when Messi was a boy, he was really good at soccer and he loved the game, but his body wouldn't grow properly, and that caused him a lot of problems? It meant that he had to take some medicine to grow so that his soccer life could work out. It seems to have worked pretty well, I guess.*

*My oldest son, Anton, has also played a lot of soccer, and that has meant that I have often gone along to watch his matches. I am not very good at it myself, but I was once a substitute coach for his team when they were playing in a tournament, and that day Anton's team won all their matches for the first time, so maybe I am pretty good at making tactics* 😊*.*

*If you are up for meeting with me, I would love to hear more about why you are so passionate about soccer, why you think Messi is the best, and what it is you are especially good at on the pitch when you play.*

*I have arranged with your mother that we will meet on Friday, February 21st, at 11 o'clock. I live in Funen, so it will probably take about an hour's drive to get to me, which means you probably won't be going to school that day—but if you are tired of school at the moment, that is probably okay* 😊*.*

*I think it would be a good idea if your father and mother came along too, so they can maybe listen to it and help us remember what you have experienced, in case it is hard for you to recall.*

*Take care until we see each other, and I will be looking forward to meeting you.*

*Best regards,*
*Martin Nevers*

## Reflections on Relational Beginnings

As with Mona, the letter to Malthe was a way of saying, *"You are already known, and you are welcome."*

The invitation named the difficult parts of Malthe's life and how I connected to them, but did not stop there. It also recognized his interests and stories of meaningfulness—stories that might serve as stepping stones in our conversation.

Through writing, I try to offer what I would later offer in conversation: curiosity towards what is important to him, respect, and the possibility of collaboration.

I got an email response from Malthe's mother saying that she had started crying when she first read the letter. From the invitation, she got the feeling that I actually understood what her son was going through, and that I was interested in getting to know him, which gave her renewed hope. My focus in this paper is on the effects of invitations on the relations between the client and the therapist. Another paper could be on the effects they have on parents or relatives, which are profound, but that is for another day.

Malthe and I met up, and in our first conversation we talked a little bit about soccer, but mostly we talked about his knowledge of demoralizing thoughts and what he wanted for himself and others in life and in school.

## Be an Invitation—Not an Invasion

I cannot foresee the outcomes of my therapeutic practice. Nor can I foresee the outcomes of my invitations. But I can ask the people I talk to about the influence of the practices I have. I try not to spend too much time around that, as the answers to these questions may only develop stories of the agency of the therapist, and I am more interested in developing stories of agency that have the client as the protagonist.

Nevertheless, researching our own practice is a valuable source for developing one's own practice, and over time I have asked many of my conversation partners about the effects of the invitation I wrote.

I will finish this piece by sharing with you a couple of responses from the people I have been writing to.

One of my most recent letters was the one to Alex at the beginning of this article. Alex was in high school and struggling to fit in. The letter with the more subtle invitation resulted in Alex wanting to see me in a session. We only had one conversation about the troubles that he encountered in school, and after our session I asked him and his dad if they would write a bit about their experience with my invitation.

This is what Andy and Alex wrote back:

*Andy (dad) about the invitation:*

> *"It was really nice to receive a summary of the initial/pre-conversation we had, as a written invitation to Alexander."*
>
> *"Before you sent the invitation, I spoke with Alex about meeting you. He was rather hesitant about it and not really convinced that it was a good idea. But after the written invitation, there was no longer any resistance—he seemed significantly more motivated."*

*Alex's thoughts on the invitation:*

> *"I thought it was nice, and I gained a better understanding of who Martin was—as if I already knew him before I met him."*
>
> *"I got an idea of what he would be like to talk to and what kind of questions he would ask."*

And let me finish this article by returning to where my interest in invitations started: with my letter to Mona. Mona wrote to me a while ago, because she wanted to share with me the impact our sessions 12 years ago had on her and how she is doing now.

I was really excited that she wrote to me, as she has had quite an impact on me and my therapeutic practice as well. Writing this article gave me another chance

to ask her what my invitation had meant for her back then. This was the letter I received:

> *Dear Martin,*
>
> *I will try to write a little about your invitation:*
>
> *Your invitation to conversations was exactly that – an invitation – and not a summons, as I had so often encountered. The fact that it would be a collaboration also meant a great deal to me, and your humble yet wise choice of words awakened something in me. I believe that we both had what in therapy would be called "tolerance for uncertainty."*
>
> *The fact that you were not an "expert" in eating disorders meant that I was not scared away. And that you preferred to take an interest in ME and not exclusively in my challenge was meaningful to me. It was my mother who reached out, and therefore it might have been natural for others to send her an invitation, but you wrote to me instead.*
>
> *It was a warm invitation which turned into meetings about art, music, poems, and then a little about what was difficult. I have taken a great deal with me into my work about that way of inviting people.*
>
> *Because it must be an invitation – not an invasion.*
>
> *Sincerely,*
> *Mona*

In a couple of weeks, I have a coffee appointment with Mona. I look forward to hearing about how her poetry writing is coming along, hearing about what music she is into these days, and getting more recommendations for art museums I should look up. And maybe she also has some new insights on how to relate to people's stories—be it in the therapy room or in life in general.

*Dear Reader,*

*I am at the end of my little piece on written invitations, but probably still at the beginning of my exploration of the possibilities they hold. I am curious about what thoughts, ideas, or resonances the examples or perspectives I presented to you brought forth, and if you would like to join me in this investigation. I would love to hear about your findings. So let this final invitation be an invitation to you to share your thoughts or experiences with me.*

*You can write to me at nevers@dispuk.dk.*

*I hope to hear from you.*

*In anticipation,*
*Martin*

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# For Me, Starting a Conversation Without a Letter Feels Like I'm Only Half a Therapist

Camilla Schjørring, DISPUK

*In this article, readers will be invited to share in my reflections on five letters following five different sessions and their impact during a six-month course of therapy with a young couple. I conclude the article with six points to consider, which I hope will help others get started with writing narrative letters.*

Narrative letters have been a regular part of my conversations for the past 12 years. It is a practice that has evolved from 10 lines based on 1) "What stood out to me" and 2) "What would I like to talk more about?" to now being more varied in form and content. Today, I write more based on what I would do in the session if I had the chance to do some of it over.

Writing narrative letters between my sessions is a practice that has made me braver as a therapist, perhaps because it has brought me closer to an answer to the question that David Epston rhetorically posed at a conference in San Diego in 2025: *"What is a good question, and what does a good question do?"*[1]

## First Session

Thomas and Mia have just left the consultation room. The air in the room feels heavier than when they walked in. The chairs have shifted during the session, and the markers I used to write their words on the board lie in a messy pile in front of me. A few splotches of ink from the markers have found their way onto my fingers after I eagerly wrote their words on the board.

[1] Epston, D. (2026). What is a good question—and what does it do? A forty-year reflection on inquiry in narrative therapy. Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 9–48.

I put the markers away, gather the glasses and cups onto the tray, and check to make sure the photo of today's poster—which I took and emailed to myself—has arrived. As I carry the tray down to the kitchen, all sorts of thoughts hit me: What could I have done differently? I wonder what Thomas and Mia took away from today's conversation? What did I do that surprised me in a good way? And in a bad way? Did I rush the conversation a bit too much? And what should we talk about at the next meeting?

Back at my desk, I open my email and print out the photo of the chart from the conversation. As I sit at my desk, Thomas and Mia appear in my mind: he with a certain air of resilience and hope, but also pain over the situation; she with a shifty gaze and anguish. I see myself there too, sitting there after dropping my kids off at school that same morning, a bit out of breath as I welcomed the couple with a certain degree of anticipation about what kind of process I was about to delve into.

I glance at the watch that has inevitably become a part of my life as a therapist. I have 30 minutes left before my next appointment. In my mind, I begin a conversation with myself about what lies ahead of the conversation, what the outcome was, and what I might have wanted to do that could have steered the conversation in a slightly different direction than it took. The inner dialogue continues to revolve around what I might have done to amplify and reinforce the moving moments in the conversation, in the hope of making them more sustainable after the conversation ends.

I can already feel the ticking of the clock, and I make a choice in the same way I always do in conversations.

Taking a breath, I begin to write:

> *Dear Thomas and Mia,*
>
> *As part of my sessions with you, I always write a short letter afterward. The letter consists of the sentences you've said that stand out to me and what I've come to think about. I'll bring the letter to*

*our next session, which I'll read aloud. Maybe we'll continue discussing some of what's in the letter. Maybe we'll choose to talk about something entirely different. We'll decide when we meet. The letter is therefore not necessarily intended for you to respond to—it's more of a way to capture what we discuss, and perhaps it can spark some thoughts between our meetings.*

*As I reread your words from the boards, several sentences stand out to me.*

*You, Mia, said, among other things: "Why are things so hard?" "I never get a break in my own head," and when I asked, "A break from what?" you replied, "from my own thoughts" and "from expectations."*

*In our conversation, you talked about the thoughts and anxiety that entered your life when you suddenly lost your father at age 13.*

*You talked about your time in Horsens when you were in your early 20s, when you "hit rock bottom," and you talked about the recent period with a postpartum reaction, where you started feeling better last spring, things went well last summer, and then it all came to a head again during a ski trip and "hit harder the second time."*

*I wonder where reading my broad strokes of your long life together will take you?*

*As I write this, I picture your life so far as an ocean—beautiful, powerful, in motion, with undercurrents, perhaps eddies that, together with movements on the ocean's surface, can create ripples, waves, or perhaps, at times, tsunamis above the water.*

*I wonder what your image of your life together so far would be? Perhaps we can talk more about that the next time we meet.*

*Something else that stood out to me was the final sentences from your conversation. I've put your sentences together as a sort of poem, which goes like this:*

> *We'll talk about everything that's causing me to feel bad*
> *I can't think of anything but Hugo and Thomas right now*
> *Even though I'm feeling down, we're doing better*
> *I have faith that Mia will be okay*
> *I have more hope than I have faith*
> *What matters to Hugo: that we're together*
> *Looking out for each other, asking for help*
> *A sociable little boy*

*As I write down your words this way, the sentence "Even though I'm feeling down, we're doing better" stands out. Perhaps next time we can talk more about your strength as a couple—that you're doing better even though Mia may be in a place with few breaks from thoughts and expectations? What might be some of the things you're developing together in your relationship and in your family that allow you to be doing better even while Mia "might be feeling bad"? I wonder what it might mean for Hugo to have a mom and dad who have "a 'we'" that is doing well even while Mia "might be having a hard time"? Maybe we can talk more about that the next time we meet.*

*I hope my thoughts made sense, and if not—please feel free to let them go.*

*Best regards,*
*Camilla*

I'm rereading my words… Do they capture the complexity while also honoring the couple's words and logic regarding anxiety?

I wonder if my metaphor about the sea came across as too silly, or if it broadens their perspective on lived experience by offering a different language than the one the word "anxiety" invites?

I close the screen after hitting SEND—with a little more peace of mind than before, because the self-reflective questions that inevitably hit me after a conversation are now addressed to them and not just to myself. If I missed the mark—then there's something I need to probe even deeper next time. If my words make sense, then I can only be curious about where we'll end up.

## My Path to a Therapeutic Life Through Letter Writing

For as long as I can professionally recall, I have been enthusiastic about narrative practice, from my time as an intern at DISPUK in January 2004 to today, when I now teach there myself.

I love the ideas, the questions, the ethics, and the view of humanity. I have always been fascinated by the story of the two young men, Michael White and David Epston, who developed a practice that made a difference for the most vulnerable and insisted on being *something different*.

David Epston (2022) writes: "The question that has always perplexed me is how and why some stories stay with us and, in a manner of speaking, won't let us go" (p. 11).

In many ways, this perspective has been a driving force behind the choices I have made as a psychologist and therapist.

Perhaps it was in the spirit of the story about the two young men who insisted on being *something else* that I applied to the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry department under Nina Tejs Jørring[2], who, at the time and in collaboration with David Epston, was working tirelessly to integrate narrative practice into a setting that had absolutely no use for that approach.

[2] The team's approach is described in "Narrative Psychiatry and Family Collaborations" (2022) and JCNT May 2021.

In Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, I became part of a small team. We were the ones who could take on families that no one else could or would help. We were six in an outpatient clinic of over 100 who did something a little crazy and different—but it worked.

David Epston visited our team in 2014, and he quickly became fascinated by the fact that people in Denmark can read their medical records online, including the families who came to us.

I remember that he saw this as an opportunity to collaborate with and honor the families' knowledge. At the time, I probably saw the medical notes more as a space for "the most accurate description of the conversation, where we had to include everything."

David presented the idea of using the 15 minutes allotted for a medical note to write a short letter to the family and then include it in the medical record.

We sat around a round table with David Epston at the head. He gave us the assignment: *"Think about your most recent conversation. You now have 15 minutes to write a letter about what stood out to you and what you'd like to discuss further with the family. Go ahead."*

After 15 minutes, we were now sitting with my senior physician Nina's letter in front of us. She read aloud: "Dear Family X, thank you so much for our conversation."

David stopped Nina and asked, "Thank you for what?" and continued, "If we don't provide our reasoning, then it's just an evaluation."

Small smiles and a slight shake of the head spread among us all. We wrote the reasoning into the note—what the family had made Nina think about, since she felt the urge to thank them. Thus, we had Nina's writing reflect what takes place in the conversations we have on a daily basis, and the rest of the journal note/letter took shape with the family's knowledge and accounts at the center rather than our assessments or opinions.

For me, this roundtable meeting marked the beginning of a therapeutic journey involving letter-writing.

The assignment I left the room with consisted of 15-minute letters that centered on my family's voice and employed a sharp narrative approach—and it made a huge difference for me. It helped me. Perhaps letter-writing isn't about writing long and beautifully. Letter-writing is about writing with the family's knowledge at the center and with my persistent curiosity as the driving force behind questions that can generate content for the next conversation.

Content that I cannot guess my way toward when I write the letter. Whether the letter is short, long, or somewhere in between, I saw the opportunity to write in a decentralized way by placing the family's knowledge at the center AND in an influential manner by asking questions to which I myself do not know the answers. At the same time, the written word allowed me to delve deeply into the wording of each individual question.

And so, I wrote narrative letters after every conversation during the 9 years I worked in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Denmark—9 years with the most wonderful families and a multitude of conversations accompanied by letters, which I wrote in my small, sparsely furnished office at the hospital. These were letters that I brought with me and read aloud in consultation rooms with red, worn-out sofas and water on the table because we'd cut back on coffee.

As the system came under increasing pressure, narrative practice was pushed aside for me, and I started as an instructor and consultant at DISPUK—a place with a narrative heart, but where I quickly realized there was a lot to do. So, for a while, the letters took a backseat to everything else I also had to find time for.

## Sticking with It

The first conversations at DISPUK felt strange. Not least because the rooms were different, the families came voluntarily, and I was no longer part of a hospital with all the bureaucracy and guidelines that it entails. On second thought, what probably felt most unfamiliar was starting my sessions without a letter—without

the chance to read aloud what had been discussed in our last session, what I'd thought about since then, and without an invitation to collaborate on what was important for us to cover that day.

Starting the conversation without reading a letter made me, in a way, a half-therapist. Or, at best, a three-quarters therapist.

Especially if I came rushing in from a supervision session out in the city, it could easily take the first fifteen minutes of the session to get back into the conversation, remember what we talked about last time, what made an impression on me, and the shifts that had occurred. This resulted in 45-minute sessions where I was fully present as a therapist. So, it wasn't long before I started reflecting on how I could regain my full therapeutic presence: How could I be a one hundred percent therapist for the 60 minutes a session lasts?

At the same time, I also found myself looking with concern at my calendar and the many "fence-post days"—as I called them in my own little dictionary—the days when the sessions are as close together as the white wooden posts in a fence. When would I have time to prepare for each session? How on earth could I find my notes, get back into the flow of the conversation, and think of ideas for moving forward in today's session with Magnus, whom I hadn't seen in three weeks? And with Alice, whom I spoke with from 4:15 to 5:15 p.m. after a full day of teaching?

I felt like starting to write letters again—simply because the time spent writing a letter paid off in the form of calm and confidence leading up to the start of the next conversation and during the conversation itself.

Some therapists say they don't have time to write letters. I say I don't have time not to write letters.

## Centering My Own Voice—Letter No. 2

The train's rhythm thumps against the tracks. I've been teaching in Aarhus and am now on my way home. On my computer, I've pulled up a picture of the chart

from my second session with Thomas and Mia. I look at our words and think about the conversation again.

My first letter made sense; Thomas and Mia told me during our second conversation, especially the question about Hugo, and what it might mean to him that, as adults, they can talk about all the difficult things—that made sense to them. They lit up at the idea that, during all the difficulty, they were still doing something meaningful for their son. They had also both been moved by the image of a tsunami that had struck them, because, as the letter had prompted them to discuss—why now? Why the anxiety and all those worrying thoughts now, when Hugo had arrived like a ray of sunshine in their lives? Why had the anxiety returned like a tsunami?

That conversation gave me the opportunity to ask about the time around Hugo's birth, and Thomas and Mia told me about an episode that, as I think about it here on the train, I cannot leave unsaid.

Just today in class, I heard myself say that it's important for people to be seen for their worth. Could I do that more in my letter to Mia and Thomas than I had in my questions during our conversation?

It's not without a knot in my stomach that I'm writing this second letter. A letter in which I'm following through on my idea of putting my own voice in front and center, because right now it's important to me that Mia be seen as more than just an anxious mother who couldn't take care of her child:

> *Dear Thomas and Mia,*
>
> *Here is what stands out to me from our most recent conversation.*
>
> *I especially remember your descriptions of that evening, six weeks after Hugo was born. It was an evening when you, with little Hugo in his car seat, had been visiting Grandma, and when your dog Charlie became critically ill. So ill that he had to be put down that very evening. You also told me that on the way home, little Hugo had*

*stopped crying so suddenly that you, Mia, feared right then and there that you had lost him. You told me that the ambulance had arrived and that the reception at the hospital had been by doctors who made you, Mia, think: "I think they think I don't like my child." You described how they were more concerned with you than with Hugo, and that you could see in their eyes that you looked wrong.*

*As I sit here writing about that episode, I just feel such a strong urge to tell you—that this is not an acceptable way to be treated—to put it mildly!*

*There you stand, new parents, with your tiny little baby in your arms. You've just had to put down your little sidekick—little Charlie, whom you'd been looking forward to having as a "big dog brother"—your funny little guy who made you, Mia, laugh every day and who was so good at snuggling up to you. Your little Charlie, who meant so much to you that you, Thomas, couldn't be there when he was put down. That Charlie, who had been a positive distraction and who was so close to you, Mia. I'm very sorry to have to be so blunt, but of course you're at a loss, and of course the fear of yet another loss lurks beneath the surface when little Hugo suddenly stops crying in the backseat of the car. Of course, the shock and panic are overwhelming as you step into the hospital. Of course.*

*I wonder what you're thinking as you read my words and your description of that evening. Does it make sense—that the word "of course" can be so meaningful here?*

*Or what would be a better word for you? Do you know anyone besides me who would agree that the word "of course" is meaningful? Would the two Falck paramedics? Would the man who stopped? Would the veterinarian, who was really kind?*

*Something makes me think yes—maybe your words about "they gave me a shoulder to cry on" and "they would say it was a normal reaction—given how hard it was for us."*

*Would you say that the reaction says something about your skills as a mother? Or something about your ability to be there for your child? Would you say that the reaction says something about how much you, Mia, care for Hugo? I think they would say "no."*

*What do you think?*

*Those were my words and thoughts after our conversation. I hope they made sense.*

*From one dog-loving hugger to two other dog-loving huggers, Camilla*

The train is about to pull into the station—argh, was I overdoing it with my closing line, "from one dog-loving hugger to two other dog-loving hugger!?"

At the same time, there's a big part of me that wants to emphasize love for animals as ALSO a legitimate love and as something that has been a healing relationship for Mia[3].

I mean, I only got a dog because, in my life as a psychologist, I've spoken with so many people for whom their pets were the only ones who saw them in a way that allowed them to recognize themselves. I read through it—do I emphasize the situational aspect of Mia's distress, the grief over Charlie's death, rather than the sense of her being cemented into anxiety, which I sensed in our first session had happened many times before in her life and which the doctors' glances had confirmed for her? Yes, I think so. I send the letter, the spirit, out and look forward with anticipation to the next session.

[3] Travis Heath spoke about "Language of the Heart" and "Language of the Head" at a conference in San Diego in 2025. I have a feeling that "speaking one's way forward in relation to animals" can give those we speak with the opportunity to speak their way forward through "Language of the Heart."

## Grief Compels Me to Write Myself In—Letter No. 3

Some conversations are hard to forget. The one that is about to unfold is one of those conversations.

Mia enters the room with Thomas; her eyes are clear, and she has made more of an effort than last time. She seems to have changed.

“Thank you, just thank you,” she says, moved. “Thank you for what?” I ask. “Thank you for what you wrote. Thank you for understanding my grief, thank you for knowing that I’m not a bad mother to Hugo.”

I must admit that at this point I’m somewhat perplexed by the firmness in her voice. Part of me is tempted to continue the conversation, but since my experience is that reading the letter at the start of each conversation creates a kind of shared atmosphere—something to bring us together in the conversation—and a way to create a “common thread” between the conversations[4]. I choose to read the letter aloud, even though I’d like to let the conversation continue.

Thomas and Mia listen as I read the letter aloud, after which I ask the questions—familiar to me—to step back from the center of attention again after reading the letter.

I hear myself ask, “Where did hearing the letter again take you?” and “What stands out to you that you think would be important for us to talk about today?”

Together, Thomas and Mia talk about their dog Charlie and the impact their grief has had on them and on the postpartum period they feel has been stolen from them. They talk about what they’ve lost the ability to hold onto, things that are important to them. We discuss norms for “the right way” to spend maternity leave and be parents of young children. We talk about the feelings of inadequacy that arose because Mia’s maternity leave was anything but what’s portrayed on social media.

[4] David Epston interviews a young person about the effect of narrative letters in “Narrative Psychiatry and Family Collaborations” (2022), describing letters as “a common thread between the conversations.”

After they've left, and I'm about to write my letter following the third interview, I'm struck in many ways by a sense of sadness that a young couple like them has so much to live up to as first-time parents. I can't help but imagine how it must feel to stand alone, realizing that life can look different, that life can be guided by norms other than what we see in perfect portraits online.

Rather than demanding that the sadness go away (cf. the stereotypical image that the therapist must set aside their emotions), I felt compelled to write a letter that might give Thomas and Mia a sense of being less alone. My grief compelled me to write myself into the story. What I could recognize from my own life, and what their story had inspired me to start changing in the contexts I find myself in. So there were three of us who could cheer on the idea that life can look different than elegant dinners over perfect coffee sets.

> *Dear Thomas and Mia,*
>
> *I wonder where my letter will find you this time. Perhaps well on your way or taking small steps toward a life with the comeback, the paradigm shift, and the reorientation of values that were some of the things we talked about during our last conversation?*
>
> *Or perhaps well on your way or taking small steps toward realizing the maternity leave that you, Mia, were deprived of due to the difficult start with Charlie's death during your original maternity leave?*
>
> *When I look back at our conversation with words like "comeback" and "paradigm shift" as headings, the following words of yours stand out to me:*
>
> > *The dream of us as a family*
> > *I appreciate what we have now*
> > *One of the things I love is making healthy food for Hugo*
> > *Child vs. feeling*
> > *Now we can give him the best of both worlds*

*No doubt we're working hard now*
*Being in the moment*
*That works right now*

*As I read your words, I can't help but think of the dinners you told me about, and what it is we talk about with each other at those dinners. When I think about my life, a lot of conversations might just be about asking about the latest vacation, the latest repairs on the house, etc., etc., all sorts of external things. With our conversation in mind and everything you described—what works for you right now, what you love, and what you appreciate in your daily lives, but which the "right" way of living overshadows. So, I really feel like asking the guests at my next dinner party about small, intimate acts marked by pride:*

*When was the last time you packed a lunch box you are proud of? When was the last time you managed to shift gears on days that were tough? When was the last time you did something that struck a healthy balance in terms of getting out and about? When was the last time you let your partner come to you, even if it was hard for her to speak right where you asked? When was the last time you asked for help in a way that actually helped you? All of these are things that, to me, can be truly good reasons to feel proud.*

*Imagine how wonderful the world would be if we could do more of that!*

*Best regards,*
*Camilla*

I look out the window and smile to myself: I really mean it! Just imagine what a difference it could make if we made more room for the actions that stem from what's important to us—and less for those driven by cultural norms.

Maybe that's also why I love narrative practice, where people are empowered by being seen for what truly matters to them in life[5].

But why should we reserve that solely for the therapy room?

## If All Else Fails, Lean on the Maps—Letter No. 4

We're now about halfway through the process. A lot is in place and underway.

I head straight home from my conversation with Thomas and Mia and sit down to write:

> *Dear Thomas and Mia,*
>
> *Here is my letter with your words and my thoughts following our most recent conversation.*
>
> *What stood out to me was when you, Mia, said: "I feel better because I allow myself to have bad days."*
>
> *It also stood out to me that a structured routine, time, and preparation are things that do you good and can help you do the things you want to be able to do.*
>
> *I got the sense that it was a bit different for you to start thinking along those lines—something different from what you described, which you might have been more attuned to during your studies and up until now, when you could be overcome by the feeling that "it's up to me when I can fight my anxiety."*
>
> *Perhaps after our conversation, it would be more accurate to say that it is important for you to create the best conditions for being able to*

[5] Approaching people based on their values rather than their problems draws inspiration from Marsten et al. (2016), Narrative Therapy in Wonderland, Chapter 2, "In Pursuit of Children's Virtues: The Wonderfulness Interview."

*experience what you are experiencing now—whatever we call it: anxiety, vulnerability, fragility, or something entirely different.*

*As I write about our conversation and reflect on it again, an image of a feather comes to mind—how it retains its beautiful, light, soft, and perfectly formed appearance when held in hands that cradle it gently and stroke it from the inside out. If the feather is squeezed, bent, or falls into the hands of someone who, out of eagerness or ignorance, does something else—well, then it loses the qualities that make it beautiful and unique.*

*I wonder if my analogy makes sense?*

*When I think back on our conversation and your words about "feeling better because I allow myself to have bad days"—it makes me think of my little 7-year-old son. We just had a meeting with his teachers because he has a hard time, or rather, a very hard time, sitting in his chair during class. His body is restless, and his energy is high, and he sits in his chair a little too little, less than what the teachers think he should. With your words in the back of my mind, I feel like I want to hold on much more tightly to the small opportunities where my son's restlessness can be channeled during class. To give him the chance to have little gadgets in his backpack. Maybe we should go out and pick out some extra good ones together soon?*

*It also makes me think that the times he gets up from his chair might be his way of standing up for something. His way of being able to sit in that chair—it's a much better place to be than thinking that success means he must completely overcome with restlessness.*

*Thank you so much for bringing this to my attention.*

*Best regards,*
*Camilla*

The letter is done. I finished writing it by 4 p.m., and now I must pick up the kids. If I were a smiley face, I'd be the one with a smile and a sweat drop over the eye.

This letter found me at a time when it was hard to write.

I still don't quite know why. Perhaps it wasn't clear to me where the current process was headed? Anette Holmgren said at her farewell reception as director of DISPUK in 2022 that "if everything else falls apart in a conversation, it has been worth its weight in gold to be able to get close to the maps of narrative practice and the more methodological aspects of narrative practice."

That is why I chose to write my fourth letter based on the categories of insider witnessing in narrative practice[6].

And the metaphor of a feather?

It came tumbling down from the sky because a pigeon in the tree outside was cleaning its fur, so two feathers came loose and were caught by the wind. In that way, inspiration for me can come from many places, and writing therapeutic letters can be a sensory acute practice, just as our senses can be at work when we sit in the therapeutic space.

## Writing Letters from Others Besides Myself—Letter No. 5

The mood in the room is a bit heavy. There isn't the same smile I've seen a few times now. We are sitting down as I read the letter aloud. Mia says in a surprised voice, "It can be tough for you, too," and she continues:

"But actually, it was hard to come today because everything is going well. I'm tired of talking to therapists. I've spent too much of my life doing that." She adds: "I'm feeling much better; I feel like I'm starting to figure out who I am. But I worry too much about things that don't worry other people. I'm tired of that."

[6] White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice.* W. W. Norton & Company.

Mia goes on to talk about worries regarding illness, war, and the climate that are taking her breath away, and Thomas nods in agreement.

At this point, I'm struck by the dream of a fully treated client who lives happily ever after. I feel frustrated and distressed that these good people, whom I've known for so long now, still must struggle with something in their lives. I can feel all my therapeutic curiosity fading away in my one-sided focus on wanting to eliminate the problems. Instead, I ask—perhaps, to rekindle my own curiosity:

"When would you say these worries entered your life? And I wonder if the worries have been helpful in any way?"

During the pause after asking the question, I can sense a growing interest in hearing her answer. I also feel a sense of relief that I thought of a question like this, because right here it helped me shift my perspective on the problem at hand toward greater respect for the concerns in Mia's life.

The Danish psychologist Christoffer Haugaard writes respectful letters to aggressive problems[7], and right now I'm sending Christoffer a respectful thought for that logic, because I can feel that the question is sparking my curiosity.

The question becomes the start of a conversation in which Mia talks about the period surrounding her stepfather's sudden death in a traffic accident and how, in many ways, she found comfort in her worries amidst all the pain. Predicting all potential accidents became a way for her to ensure that life didn't fall apart.

During the conversation, Thomas looks up in puzzlement—why are we talking about this?

But Mia continues and says, "I think we're onto something essential here, something I didn't know anything about."

Together, we talk about Peter and the great significance he had for Mia. We talk about Peter's lovable nature, what he contributed to Mia's life, and how she

[7] Haugaard, C., & Max. (2019). Respectful letters for aggressive voices: Max's story. Journal of Narrative Family Therapy, (3), 19–36.

continues to carry Peter's values with her in her life today, and how on special days she wears Peter's necklace[8].

The clock is ticking, and we're nearing the end of our conversation. It strikes me. I wonder what Peter would say about these worries, which are still a part of Mia's life, and which today have led her back into the therapy room she has spent so much of her life in. I wonder what he might say, perhaps something different and more insightful than the one-sided view that worries should just go away, a perspective I initially found myself captivated by. And I wonder what it might mean if Peter could become a more present part of Mia's life than all the therapists she has spoken with over the years, including myself.

Back at the computer, my opening words practically write themselves, because one of the things I love most is when I get the chance to write letters from someone other than myself.

I enjoy working with other people's voices rather than my own, because they usually contain a wisdom of life that I could never even begin to fathom on my own.

I also enjoy working with others' perspectives on the values they share with people, things, and places that matter to them.

It's as if there's something more they can come to know when we give voice to their descriptions of the significant other.

Thus, over time, I have written letters from teddy bears, girlfriends from my younger years, and even the Star Wars character Yoda once found his voice in a letter.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I have amplified and enhanced what the other person was able to say about themselves by articulating the perspective of a significant other.

[8] Chapters 2 and 3 in "Narrative Practice" (2006). Chapter 3 "Map of Narrative Landscapes" (2007).

So that it doesn't seem too strange, this time I'm starting my letter with a short introductory note to Thomas and Mia.

I write:

> *Dear Thomas and Mia,*
>
> *Here is a letter following our most recent conversation. This time, I have chosen to write it differently—as a letter from Peter.*
>
> *Here at DISPUK, we believe it's important to cherish the significant people in our lives, whether they're here or not. You spoke so warmly and in such detail about Peter last time that I was inspired to bring Peter's voice a little more to the fore by writing my letter as if it were from him.*
>
> *I hope it makes sense—and if not, please just let it go.*
>
> *Best regards,*
> *Camilla*

After writing this introductory letter, I now turn my gaze to the board and focus on all the words from the conversation that can give me a sense of what Peter was like, their relationship, and what else characterized the life they shared[9].

In my mind's eye, a portrait of the person I've heard about begins to take shape. I imagine a style, a demeanor, a way of being in the world, and my words seek out the content from the transcript where Mia said something about what Peter would answer.

I focus on keeping my own voice out and begin to formulate Peter's first words, as they were formulated by Mia, and as they were formulated in the conversation.

[9] During the conversation, I have asked for descriptions of the person, animal, or place in sufficient detail so that I can visualize it. For inspiration on re-membering practices, see White (2006, Chapters 2–3) and White (2007, Chapter 3).

*Dear Mia,*

*I know you talked to Camilla about me during a conversation that Thomas was also present for. First and foremost, you should know that I loved being part of a completely ordinary family during the ten years I was with your mother. I remember thinking from day one, "Here is someone I need to be there for." I was happy that in our ordinary family, there was room for me as the nerdy person I am. You should know that I'm glad you could see me as a genius at math and IT, while there was also room for all the joy and fun we shared, and always room for an apology. We had that together.*

*You should also know that I heard how difficult a time it was for all three of you after I passed away. I heard your descriptions of everything that helped you through a difficult time: clairvoyance and guardian angels, just to name two things. I also heard about your thoughts—"Could we have avoided it if only I…," "Is this some kind of test of my faith?..."*

*I am indescribably glad that you and your mother found something that could counterbalance those thoughts.*

*At the same time, I feel like saying to you, in my own loving way: "Come on, Mia, you have to stop crying now"—because you need to know that I don't like seeing you ruled by worries—or by thoughts like: "If I don't worry, then it will happen."*

*I can totally relate to how you feel—that sense of "if I worry now, then I can prepare myself for those life-changing things that might happen" and a body that can succumb to those worries.*

*I know you can't see me, but I was so happy to see the way you made a shrugging gesture toward the end of our conversation—because I totally get that potentially life-changing things can happen. At the same time, I can't help but feel the urge to just shrug it off—or maybe*

*to hold on to the fact that things happen, and we can't predict when. Even with my mathematical mind and my eye for what technology can do—things happen AND, thankfully, things don't happen.*

*What matters most to me is that the joy of life and all the fun that you and I shared get the best possible conditions in your life. When I think about your last year, I'm left with the feeling that you and Thomas are well on your way. That means a lot to me.*

*With much love,*
*Peter*

When I wrote this letter, I didn't know it was based on what would turn out to be our last conversation.

## Peter Had the Last Word

Thomas and Mia called to cancel our next session, and a few days later they sent this email:

*Hi Camilla,*

*Mia and I had a conversation yesterday about how she feels things are going and what she needs in terms of support and counseling.*

*But we both agree that she's getting to a place where she's feeling good again, thanks to your help.*

*Mia has gone all in on looking for work again, and she's now also at a place where she can take care of Hugo on her own without it causing anxiety. As she puts it herself, she can be the mother she wants to be to Hugo.*

*We have therefore discussed that it makes sense for us to put our sessions on hold for a while and perhaps schedule a follow-up session for the fall, since we now know that winter and the dark months can affect her mental state (...)*

*Would it be okay if we cancel our session on Monday and get in touch again in the fall?*

*Best regards,*
*Thomas and Mia*

*And P.S. Thank you so much for your help; we've both been very happy with it and really appreciate it.*

I'm smiling—happy and relieved that it was Peter who had the last word. I never send letters after our last conversation, because it's important to me that the person I'm talking to has the last word.

I don't know how Thomas and Mia are doing today. Fall has come and gone, and I haven't heard from them. That's totally fine, too.

## Final Reflections

This isn't a story about methods and content that guarantee the person we're talking to will live happily ever after.

Rather, I hope that my article can inspire you to write letters so that you can write your way toward becoming the narrative therapist who is important for you to be.

What did I, as a therapist, fail to do enough of in the conversation? What do I feel would have been better than what I did? What questions can bring me closer to the dignified gaze that those we speak with deserve from us? What surprising words and phrases can I capture and write down now that the words can stand still before me in writing?

These are the kinds of questions that drive me.

## Six Points of Attention

If you'd like to try a similar practice, here are six points of focus I've found helpful in my practice of therapeutic letters:

- Start with ten lines and a clear structure: What stood out to me? I'd like to talk more with you about xxxx, and end with a disclaimer like "if this doesn't make sense, just let it go."
- Make sure to read the letter aloud at the start of each conversation, even if it feels like you're interrupting "small talk," which is valued in conventional social settings. After reading it aloud, ask questions to refocus the conversation, such as: Did that make sense? Is that how you remember it? What stands out to you in the letter, and what would it be important to discuss today?
- Work from your own resonance—what comes to mind in your own (therapist) life while you're writing the letter? What do you realize you did during the conversation, and what would have been better to do rather than assuming the other person's motives and intentions?
- As you read through the letter before sending it, ask yourself: Who is the person I'm writing to become in my eyes? Will they be able to recognize themselves in the letter—just as they appeared to me during our conversation?
  Also ask yourself: How close am I to being the narrative therapist who it is important for me to be?
- Keep in mind that letters containing misunderstandings can also lead to new paths. They offer an opportunity to more quickly get closer to where you yourself have overlooked the other person's perspective, or where you yourself may be blinded by norms regarding what a good life should look like.
- Remember that no conversation is perfect or flawless, but by writing narrative letters, you might be just a little bit closer to the right questions the next time you meet[10].

[10] Paljakka, S., & Carlson, T. S. (2024). *So you want to do narrative therapy? Letters to an aspiring narrative therapist.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003478478

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# A Pine Says Thank You: On Finding Agency in Relationships with Places

Lasse Hauge, DISPUK

*In narrative practice, we often associate the concept of re-membering with human relationships that have been significant in a person's life. But Michael White actually reminded us that places, too, can be members of our life stories. A particular place can serve as a witness to life, choices, and hope, and we can explore how we are not only shaped by the place but also contribute to it. Through practices such as therapeutic letter writing, these relationships can be given voice and presence in new ways.*

*This article explores how the relationship with nature and places can become a path to restoring agency—the sense of being able to act—especially for people struggling with feelings of powerlessness.*

## The Sunflower at the End of the Road

As a young social work student, I worked in community care. Part of my job involved visiting an elderly woman daily who was struggling with mental health issues. Together, we drank coffee and rated her mood on a scale from 0 to 10. She often had difficult days, but occasionally she was happy. When I asked why, she would say things like, *"The sun is shining today."*

At first glance, these seemed like random and somewhat passive reasons for her better mood. But when I asked for a little more, it turned out that it wasn't just external factors like the sun's rays that made a difference. She actually did a lot herself to make it a good day: she'd put the coffee on so she could go out and drink it in the sun. And she'd go down and check on the sunflower at the end of the road where she lived. It grew a little every day; she kept a close eye on how tall it had gotten and how it turned toward the sun.

## Looking for Signs of Agency

It became an early example for me of how people, even in vulnerability, are doing agency through small but meaningful actions. These actions may not always be immediately apparent until we look for them.

Since my encounter with the elderly woman and the sunflower, I have worked on listening for and amplifying signs of agency in the people I meet in my practice. I see it as a kind of mindfulness practice: noticing the small actions and initiatives that are all too easily overlooked, but which people nevertheless undertake in their attempt to live a meaningful life.

## Agency as a Counterforce to Powerlessness

The word *agency* refers to the ability to act and influence one's own situation. In narrative practice, we seek to amplify the stories that bear witness to precisely this agency. Opposed to agency is powerlessness—a state that the Danish psychologist and author Dorte Birkmose has described as one of the most draining for both professionals and citizens.

When powerlessness takes hold, we can easily end up shifting it away from ourselves. For example, we might say, *"This is also one of the most difficult families we've had."*

This makes powerlessness easier to bear, but it shifts the burden onto others. In doing so, we keep other people trapped in hopelessness and define them as beyond our reach.

## A House That Takes Care of Someone

Several years after my student job, I was standing one day at my summer house in West Jutland to hand over the keys to a man who had rented it. He told me he was a former soldier, now on early retirement with PTSD after multiple deployments.

It wasn't the first time he'd rented my summer house. He told me he kept coming back because it was a place where he found peace and could breathe. A few months later, when I went up there myself, I felt a quiet sense of pride. As if the house had actually taken care of someone.

I started thinking about my childhood. When my father sold our car, he was happy that the new car could do more than the old one. But for us kids, it was sad. The car held our vacation memories. It had been something and carried traces of us.

It struck me that things and places *are* not just things. Through our use and our presence, they become imbued with meaning. They become co-narrators in our lives. And in that lies a form of agency—not just within us, but in the relationship between us and the place.

## When Nature Has a Voice

In my therapeutic work, I often experience how people who are struggling describe how they find peace in nature. Sometimes I invite them to explore their relationship with a particular place in nature. A place they describe as something that "does something for them."

But as we delve a little deeper into the conversation, it often turns out that they, in fact, also *do something* for the place *themselves*. They choose to go there; they decide on that specific spot; they seek out the silence and feel the earth beneath their feet.

Sometimes I write a short, heartfelt letter *from the place* to the person. A letter that might go something like this:

*"Thank you for cherishing the forest's tranquility. Thank you for looking after the animals and keeping an eye on the light filtering through the branches."*

It's not about poeticizing or romanticizing the voice of the place, but about giving attention to what would otherwise remain invisible.

It's about making the passive active.

When I write such letters, I often see how something shifts in the person receiving them. They realize that they *are* actually *doing something*. That they have an impact. That they matter—even to a place. I thus find that the letters can open a new narrative about the people I speak with as active human beings, even in the midst of vulnerability and discouragement.

## Re-membering as a Practice

When we talk about *re-membering*, it is about re-inscribing oneself in communities one has had an impact on, and not just those from which one has received an impact.

White spoke of asking: *What place have you held in the lives of others?*

I sometimes expand the question to include places as well: *What significance do you have for this place?*

It may seem like a poetic device, but it has a clear therapeutic function: it shifts attention from passive reception to active participation.

When a person discovers that they *have* mattered to another person, an animal, or a place, there is renewed movement in the story of themselves.

## A Pine Says Thank You

As I write this, I find myself thinking of a pine tree near my summer house in western Jutland. When I go out there, I feel a sense of calm. If the tree had a voice, I imagine it would say:

*"Thank you for coming out here. Thank you for taking a break and cherishing the silence."*

The moment I think of the tree's voice, the relationship becomes mutual. I am not merely someone seeking peace. I also *contribute* to peace. I become part of the life of the place.

Finding agency in relationships with places is therefore not about romanticizing nature, but about discovering the movement that is already present. We do something with nature, and nature does something with us.

# "What Are You All Meeting About Now?"—A Story About an Angry Voice, a Supervision Room, and a Magic Pen

Lisette Valter, DISPUK

*This article explores how change is something we can create together when we are able and willing to give voices and words space in new ways. You are taken into a supervision session held with—and not about—a woman with an angry voice. In this supervision, written documents play a central role before, during, and after the session. In this article, I will draw on various written documents, and I will focus on poetic rendering as an example of a written practice that makes room for the messy lived life, the tentative language we use, and openings and possibilities.*

The written documents in this article will, in various ways*, rescue the said from the saying of it*[1] so the different voices, tones, and ideas told can live together, be shared, and inspire. Even though the woman in this article has a voice that can truly shout loudly, it is as if no one can hear what the Voice is saying. It is as if the words disappear and drown in a sea of professional jargon and norms. But because the words were not only shouted back then, but also written down, they can now, 15 years later, be revisited and shared.

Back then we did something that did not change everything, but where everything nevertheless took on new forms and expressions.

## A Real and at the Same Time Magical Universe

This article might sound like a fairy tale, since what happened, in my view, was magical—full of conflict, magic, and a change that left its mark on all of us. Everyone involved did something different, new connections were formed, new

[1] White, M. (2000). *Reflections on narrative therapy.* Dulwich Centre Publications.

areas of collaboration emerged, and new paths opened for us to explore—together and individually.

To make room for the possibilities of everyday life and potential magical encounters, I have used the fairy tale genre as a narrative form in this article. Everyday life is full of small moments when something surprising, something unexpected, and something enchanting happens. When we make an effort to make both the surprising and the familiar exotic[2], what do we then notice, and what becomes possible in and through our written documents, conversations, and encounters with others and with ourselves?

So welcome—you are now stepping into a real and at the same time magical universe, where an angry and powerful voice finds unfamiliar places. The Voice finds unfamiliar and new places in a community at a residential mental health facility, with me, and also even right inside a mayor's office.

Inspired by the fairy tale form, the Voice gets the lead role in this article. The Voice belongs to a woman who, throughout her long life, has been misunderstood, judged, diagnosed, feared, and worst of all—rejected. The more she has been rejected throughout her life, the louder and more powerful her voice has become.

In reading the next pages, real events, sweat, magic, tears, and courage will intertwine.

## Nothing About Us Without Us

"What are you all meeting about now?" the Voice shouts. Loudly and insistently. I stand there, just a few steps away from walking through the door to a supervision session with a group of caseworkers who work here, where the woman lives.

I stand there. I know that the door to doing something else can and is allowed to be opened, but I must start the supervision now. I am the supervisor, and I must keep to the schedule. The Voice has power, irritation, anger, and a resignation

[2] White, M. (2000). *Reflections on narrative therapy.* Dulwich Centre Publications.

that nevertheless makes me stop and reconsider. When the Voice unfolds angrily in this way, it is often asked to calm down or wait, but I do not want to go down that path. The Voice asks a very relevant question—a question that to my ears echoes the recovery movement's slogan: *"Nothing about us without us*."

It is not foreign for me or my colleagues working at the residential mental health facility to think about which doors, meetings, and conversations we open and for whom, but it is not always easy to do when all sorts of norms and political decisions intrude and point us in certain directions.

Back to the moment when the following exchange takes place. My answer to the relevant question is:

Lisette: We are going to a supervision.

The Voice: Another meeting about us that we probably are not allowed to attend...

Lisette: You are welcome to attend. I would very much like to meet with you so we can plan a supervision session where you—and people you would like to bring to the supervision—can participate.

The Voice: Yes?

Lisette: Yes. Can we meet tomorrow, for example?

The Voice: I would like to. How about 10 a.m.?

Lisette: Yes. See you tomorrow.

The next day at 10 a.m., we are sitting in my office. The Voice unfolds with different tones, timbres, and expressions. At one point, the Voice says:

> *"It seems that the staff only knows me from my worst side. And I want to do something about that. In my own view, I am a warm and compassionate person, with a good sense of humor and a bit of a playful streak that is sometimes misunderstood. It is difficult to*

> *change who you are, but I am willing to try if it serves a good purpose."*

I am curious about many things in what the Voice says, and I am also aware of how we can create a framework for a supervision session where we explore together some of what is at stake for the woman in the collaboration with the staff and caseworkers. The Voice talks about the difficult and problematic from her point of view, and we also unfold what the problematic prevents or overshadows.

Here, the Voice takes on a hopeful tone and speaks of a desire for collaboration where one "*is not forced to shout to be heard…"*

After a while, I ask if the woman, as the owner of the Voice, still wants to plan a supervision and whom she wants to invite. The woman decides that we should invite all the caseworkers who work where she lives to join us. Together we find a day to do the supervision and write an invitation to the invited caseworkers. After our meeting, the woman writes me an email:

> *"I am incredibly pleased that we can now try to reach a level of communication that everyone can live with."*

## Speaking Out

Powerful forces are at play when it comes to which voices are heard and which should ideally be silenced. How and to what extent voices are allowed to be heard has, like everything else, roots in culture and history. Throughout her life, the woman has been told by professionals how she ought to speak, act, and behave. In different ways, she has refused to follow and accept the professional guidelines.

Michael White wrote that the feeling of personal failure has never been more widespread, and if that feeling takes root in people's lives over a long period, it

leads to paralysis[3]. Fortunately, the woman has not fallen into the quagmire of paralysis. She speaks and writes in different tones about some of the things that matter and are important to her. She often does so in such an angry tone that it creates not common ground or opportunities but distance and fear.

The conversation in the office has already sparked something in me, but also in the woman. After the meeting, she writes me another email:

> *"I know I can shout very loudly, which sometimes scares people. I enjoy getting attention this way. It gives me a thrill to be able to scare people a little just by raising my voice. On the other hand, it also gives me a guilty conscience and sometimes makes me feel compelled to offer an apology. The embarrassing thing, as far as I can tell, is that it is necessary to YELL at all just to be heard."*

In addition to this email, the woman also sends a full page of text in green font containing nine points. She has titled these nine points *"Positive List."* It is a list full of concrete examples of what the woman does in her everyday life—things she finds meaningful, but feels are overlooked and ignored. In the time leading up to the supervision session, I think a lot about what is important to me as a supervisor, therapist, and consultant at the residential mental health facility, where diagnoses, action plans, assessments, evidence, and professionals are woven into people's everyday lives in ways that are not always beneficial.

## "Do Not Think I Find This Particularly Easy"

If this were a fairy tale, we would soon reach the point where the characters must go through various trials. And that is exactly what we are facing now—both the woman and me.

A week after our meeting, the woman writes me another email, this time in all caps.

[3] White, M. (2001). Narrative practice and the unpacking of identity conclusions. Gecko: A Journal of Deconstruction and Narrative Ideas in Therapeutic Practice (1), 28—55.

She writes: *"I AM SCARED SHITLESS OF WHAT THIS SUPER-VISION WILL TURN INTO!"*

Later that day, I received another email:

> *"Since my memory is not what it used to be, I just want to ask you if, in a moment of discouragement, I canceled our supervision session? I HOPE NOT. Because now I am able to articulate my feelings and the dilemmas that arise due to poor communication. You will get a copy as soon as I am done with it! Warm regards, _____. P.S. (Do not think I find this particularly easy! I am afraid it might end up getting even worse than it already is…!)"*

My door is always open, but since I only work and do not live at the facility, I am not always present, but my email is.

Two days before the supervision session, the woman also writes an email to the city's mayor, in which she mentions that she is going to a supervision session, which she is very much looking forward to. Among other things, she writes that she had a *"nice feeling in her stomach when Lisette Valter suggested that a 'supervision' session could be held*."

With my constant awareness of how I use my power—deeply connected with the Foucauldian and poststructuralist threads in narrative practice—I know that there are no innocent places in what we do in life or professionally. Therefore, I know that I want to be open and attentive concerning what we do, the effects of what we do, and possible new ways of doing.

The email to the mayor gives me the sense that we are on to something potentially good, even though there are many possible obstacles along the way. I hope our supervision can create common insights and perspectives and open us to tones and sounds other than shouting expressions and knotted ways of interacting. The Voice began in this article by expressing itself in a shouting and very angry manner. There are already many more expressions, more tones, and different words.

## The Beautiful Risk of the New

I have also gone through some trials leading up to the supervision. I have especially reflected on how I can create a supervision room and a space where the Voice can find a place and be heard, while at the same time the caseworkers are given a meaningful and respectful space.

I know that the caseworkers go to work and do their best at the residential mental health facility, but what has happened in the collaboration?

It is hard to be yelled at, just as it is hard to be rejected and distanced from. I hope that together we can spot some of the pitfalls and dead ends that have trapped thoughts, actions, and ideas. I know there is more knowledge and there are more possibilities than what is currently creating distance and anger.

I also know that there is more to tell and more to discover, and I look forward to this happening in a space where we are together.

I am looking forward to it, but I also need to muster my courage. I need to have the courage to make it possible for the woman to have a central and important position—even if I do not know how she will express herself. I also need the courage to ask questions. Questions that create space and get close enough to what matters. And questions that can make it possible to collaborate and find paths into the possibilities, nooks, and crannies. I will also need that courage if some of the invited caseworkers have doubts about this different way of doing supervision.

The unknown and the untried are an inescapable part of life. With courage close to my heart, I try to embrace what Gert Biesta calls the "beautiful risk."[4] *Beautiful* because all sorts of vibrant and new things can happen when we dare to embark on a creative and exploratory process together. A process where it is possible to tell, discover, see, and maybe feel new beginnings and perspectives. Or where it is possible to discover the well-known and familiar in new ways.

[4] Biesta, G. J. J. (2021). World-centred education: A view for the present. Routledge.

Biesta writes that he uses “beautiful” because it is an aesthetic concept. He refers to the original meaning of aesthetic as that which can be perceived with the senses. For me, the beautiful risk in the supervision is how the woman can unfold in new ways in which all of us get to know more about what drives her, what she longs for, what she does and tries to do, and that she can tell it with her words and expressions and not the abstract system words and labels. The beautiful risk in this way of doing supervision is that everybody attending the supervision can risk seeing, hearing, and maybe resonating with each other in new and complex ways—new ways that hopefully can lead to new directions, conversations, and collaboration after the supervision.

There is also a risk that the woman expresses herself loudly and with anger. Because we have spent time together before the supervision—talking, writing, meeting—and because everybody in the room has accepted the invitation—I dare to try to give space to the woman and her version in a room where we listened and witnessed her words, actions, ideas, and longings.

## The Magical Pen

In addition to my sprouting courage, I carry a magic pen with me. If this were a *real* fairy tale, this is where the magic would come into play. On my belt, I do not carry a weapon, but a pen with some very special settings and qualities that capture words and bring them to life in various documents.

The Magic Pen is not just any pen. This magic pen can write down other people’s words. Not all words, but words that the pen picks up as important to the person telling the story. The pen can write words down on a flip chart, on a whiteboard, in letters, on postcards, on scraps of paper, or whatever is nearby. The pen writes the words so the people speaking can see and participate in what is being written. It is a pen that wants to create reflective surfaces with the words and expressions people use.

The pen is set to ask if it is okay to write things down before it dives into listening and jotting down some of the sentences, words, and expressions being shared. And it gets excited when the people telling their stories contribute by writing,

adding, drawing, and/or seeing connections and relationships between the words written down during a conversation.

The magic of the pen is powerful. When words are written down, they can be revisited, shared, and live on after the conversation, therapy, or supervision. You can explore what has been said repeatedly, instead of the words disappearing or evaporating in the moment. Written documents and ways of writing are a magical part of narrative practices, where there are creative and endless ways to give form and afterlife to words.[5]

## Poetic Rendering

The Magic Pen can also be set to write poetic renderings where it "...*take people's words and make them—not sound smarter than they are—but make them sound exactly as smart as they are, but in a way, they do not realize they are."*[6]

These are the words of Sara Hauge, a Danish poet and woman who knows psychiatry from the inside. Her words appear in a podcast recorded at a Narrative Salon at DISPUK in conversation with Director Martin Nevers[7]. The podcast is about *The Healing Power of Poetry.* In the podcast, Sara also says that lyrics and poetry can break through the frozen language often used in the larger system.

The first time my pen was set up to make a poetic rendering was in 2008, when I, as a university student, was doing an internship at DISPUK. During the last 18 years, poetic rendering has been a part of my therapy, supervision, teaching, and organizational work. I find that poetic rendering is an expanding and lively part of

[5] Morgan, A. (2000). *What is narrative therapy?* Dulwich Centre Publications; Behan, C. (2003). *Rescued speech poems: Co-authoring poetry in narrative therapy.* https://narrativeapproaches.com/resources/narrative-therapy-archive/345-2/ ; Newman, D. (2008). *Rescuing the said from the saying of it: Living documentation in narrative therapy. The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 24–34; Penwarden, S. (2020). *Developing a thera-poetic practice. The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2); Holmgren, A. (2010). *Fra terapi til pædagogik.* Hans Reitzels Forlag; Paljakka, S., & Carlson, T. (2024). *So you want to do narrative therapy?* Routledge.

[6] Narrative Salon: The Healing Power of Poetry—Martin Nevers and Sara Hauge. https://www.dispuk.dk/podcast-narrativ-salon/

[7] Narrative Salon: The Healing Power of Poetry—Martin Nevers and Sara Hauge. https://www.dispuk.dk/podcast-narrativ-salon/

the narrative practices because it gives space to nuances, contradictions, and the messy life and dilemmas our words try to capture and describe.

And it gives space to emerging knowledge that happens when you talk.

*Translocutionarity*[8] is a concept that captures that: I know what I mean when I hear myself talking. *"Trans" is Latin and means "through". "Locutio" is also Latin and means "the act of talking"*[9]. The concept holds that when we are talking, we discover what we 'see', think and know.

Where do we meet people who listen so attentively that we get our own words back without them being altered, twisted, or corrected? And in a form that also leaves room for the fumbling that almost always accompanies us when we talk about life? With the Magic Pen and the poetic rendering, it is possible to rescue some of the words said.

When the pen creates poetic renderings, it can produce both short and slightly longer texts, but my pen tries to avoid summaries. The pen captures and writes down what sounds important for the person telling the story. It strives to write down sentences rather than just words: powerful expressions, talk that sings, what people do, know, and want, and glimpses of something on its way. When the Magic Pen is set to make poetic renderings, it writes down without altering grammar or words, and without analyzing, concluding, or interpreting. And also, without conforming to the outside world's standards for poetry.

When the poetic renderings are read aloud to the person speaking, we as narrative practitioners read the poetic rendering with pauses and at a pace and with a poetic tone that give the words importance. Reading poetic renderings aloud can create space for words to be heard and felt. It can hit the senses and not just the intellect and the rational part of life. Often people respond to a poetic rendering with the words: "*Did I really say that?*"

[8] Kirkeby, O. F. (1998). *Ledelsesfilosofi.* Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.
[9] Holmgren, A. (2015). Fortællinger, etik, supervision og vejledning. In A. Holmgren & M. Holmgren (Eds.), *Narrativ supervision og vejledning* (p. 43). DISPUKs Forlag.

When I turn to poetic rendering in my practice, I try to make space for sentences and words in a more open way, where there is also room for the tentative, the contradictory, and what is on its way...

> *"But then it becomes unclear, it becomes non-standardized, the psychiatrists will say. And I will reply: Yes, unclear like a good poem. It is precisely through ambiguities that we gain something to work with. Not closing off, or in Sartre's words, clinging, but rather opening by virtue of the possibilities for further growth that ambiguity offers.*
>
> *Perhaps we should strive to establish social systems with a maximum of doubt about who we are—and who others are. To recreate ourselves and others as mysteries. If psychiatrists were to play any role, it would have to be that of mediators of the complexity of who the other person is. They should write short stories about the people they meet. Then perhaps lawyers and the rest of us could understand a little more about both people and events."*[10]

The poetic rendering practice relates to Nils Christie's words and thoughts. In his book *Small Words on Big Questions*[11], he writes that psychiatrists and psychologists should tell stories—whole stories—about the people they meet, and they should be ready to risk the concluding clarity that professional language and documents often strive for.

In line with this, Christopher Behan writes *"that poetry is more able to contain some of the complexities of the spoken word and the richness of the stories of those who consult me"*[12]*.* The roots of the poetic rendering practice contain some of these "thought threads".

[10] Christie, N. (2009). *Små ord om store spørgsmål.* Universitetsforlaget.
[11] Christie, N. (2009). *Små ord om store spørgsmål.* Universitetsforlaget.
[12] Behan, C. (2003). *Rescued speech poems: Co-authoring poetry in narrative therapy.* https://narrativeapproaches.com/resources/narrative-therapy-archive/345-2/

## There Are Boxes All Around Us

Perhaps there is an even greater need for a poetic mindset and practice in our time because we might be in the process of losing the resonant, uncontrollable, and vibrating in our efficient, optimized, and accelerated society[13].

As a human being, psychologist, and narrative practitioner, I wonder how the arts can be a way to inquire and explore everyday life. A way to help us think and act outside of the boxes, and a way to expand our horizons and the richness in our stories, words, and experiences. There are boxes all around us. We create them. Society creates them, and their purpose is to separate, categorize, limit, and define. I often meet people in my practice when they experience that various boxes restrict their possibilities in life and their freedom and flexibility to move around and toward a meaningful life.

The woman who yells in the beginning of this article points towards the narrowing boxes and limits she is put in again and again. Boxes about controlling anger, talking in calm ways, behaving as the rules prescribe, accepting the diagnoses, and, and, and…

Perhaps poetry and poeticization can rescue—not only the words from the saying of them—but also the messier and fumbling descriptions of life so we do not get trapped in our own (and others') words and stories about us and life. If we make space for more complexity and nuances in our stories, maybe we can move more flexibly and freely to and from the limitations and possibilities we meet in life?

## "I Would Like To"

Now the day had arrived. Now it had to make or break.

I had courage on my side, along with a plan for the supervision session. A plan in which the woman could unfold her story in a room with an attentive audience, whom I had given a witnessing[14] task during this supervision.

[13] Rosa, H. (2020). The Uncontrollability of the World. Polity Press.
[14] White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice.* W. W. Norton & Company.

My magic pen immediately began writing many of the woman's words on the whiteboard hanging in the room, so that everyone present could both hear and see the words and various expressions of her voice.

In another article, I would love to write more about what we did in the supervision—how we talked, the questions I asked, how we organized the whiteboard, and what directions the supervision took. But for now, I focus on the written documents that surround the supervision—before, during, and after the supervision.

A little glimpse into the intentions and actions in the supervision room shows that it was important for me both to make it possible to talk about what had been difficult and to talk about the actions, knowledge, and values that were there. I really wanted to give space for some of the important things that were present but not yet articulated and shared. I also wanted to give space for the imagination, so the woman, the caseworkers, and I could start developing concrete thoughts and ideas about *what if…*

After the supervision session, I decided to make a written poetic rendering. There were so many tones and nuances that I wanted to give space and an afterlife to, so they would not get lost in the sea of routine and sneaking standard descriptions. When I created this poetic rendering with my magic pen, I selected some of the words and phrases from the whiteboard.

I chose what I heard as important:

- … for the woman and for the possible collaboration with the caseworkers
- … where there were tones and sounds other than shouting
- … that captured important aspects of the dilemmas and anger
- … for hope

There was so much I wanted to immortalize.

Here is most of the poetic rendering as I wrote it to the woman and caseworkers after the supervision:

***Good collaboration—I would like***

*A wall of silence feels strange to me—oppressive*
*I would like to get to know the staff*
*Just open a crack*
*To be let in*
*Let me know when you are available if you are busy when I reach out*
*There is a lack of joy—it gets so heavy*
*I am a good person*
*I have needs too*
*For example, talking about places I have lived, travels, ex-partners, stressful environments*
*I would like to share a bit of myself*
*I do not bother anyone for no reason*
*I want to help out*
*I would like to be allowed to show who I am*
*For example, singing a song on the karaoke machine.*
*Maybe the staff will sing a song too?*
*I am definitely useful—you get something by giving something*
*I can do a lot of things*
*Group outings and a cooking club*
*Open up a little so people can see that you are human*
*Ask yourselves on your way to work: "What do I feel like sharing today?"*
*Say something nice*
*Say hello*

This poetic rendering takes on a meaningful and important role in the period following the supervision. The multifaceted nature of the poetic rendering comes to life in various ways in the concrete collaboration and conversations, especially between the woman and the caseworkers. Instead of creating one plan with a few decisions, various hopes and ideas are embraced and initiate actions.

Without a plan, there is, of course, also a risk that nothing new will happen, that we will meet on this day for this supervision, and everything will continue as before. I believe the reason that did not happen was that everybody spoke during the supervision in different ways, which provided new insights for the woman and the caseworkers about what was absent yet implicit in the shouting, anger, and misunderstandings. With poetic rendering, the words were also given the opportunity to live on in a non-conclusive and non-closing way.

## The Afterlife of the Supervision

All sorts of things can be written and told about what happened next, but I will once again give space for the woman and her voice.

Four years after the supervision, I received a letter from the woman titled "Regarding the Supervision":

> *"A few years ago, I experienced how 'Supervision' can be used to resolve (or alleviate!) conflicts that have reached an impasse. […] After the supervision, a change has occurred in the caseworkers' behavior. There was not quite the same dismissive attitude when I made an inquiry or approached someone. Furthermore, the hostility I experienced up to that point disappeared, and I am now—and continue to be—met with smiles and kindness when I approach them. […] There is still a long way to go to reach the goal."*

## Life Is—Not Always—the Most Wonderful Fairy Tale

Beyond this woman's experiences and collaboration with the workers at the residential mental health facility, the supervision also had a lasting impact on the possible ways to meet.

It served as a catalyst for several people living at the facility to seize the opportunity for supervision in this way, and in the following years, we held a series of supervision sessions with—not about—people living at the facility.

There were also magical moments and fairy tales in those meetings. Moments where stories unfolded in new ways, making room for something more than the problems that filled and dominated life and collaboration. New stories about initiatives, values, ideas, and actions began to emerge.

A lot of people do not experience their lives as wonderful and magical, but I continually ask myself: what becomes possible when we try to notice the moments, magic and poetry of everyday life—and all that is not yet here, but could become possible and present?

For me, it fuels my curiosity and narrative drive—also when I meet people who live lives marked by great suffering, few words, and few meaningful relationships.

## And Did They Live Happily Ever After…?

Whether the Voice lived happily ever after, I do not know. But what I do know is that for the rest of my life, I will strive to connect and meet with people in ways that make sense. Over the years, this has made my professional life more complex and open, but also more vibrant, community-building, and meaningful.

Something that stays with me concretely in this complexity is an awareness of my courage.

The specific supervision described in this article has contributed to my frequently and continuously asking myself questions such as:

- Are we who we need to be for the meeting/therapy/supervision/process?
- How do we include the voices of those who cannot be present?
- And how can we give those present the opportunity to express themselves and be heard by someone who is not too busy trying to understand or solve what may not yet have unfolded?
- What meaningful and morally uplifting conversations and written documents can we create in narrative practice?

"What are you meeting about now?"—the question that was shouted in front of me many years ago, and which I fortunately did not overlook or rush past, still

stays with me as an important reminder of *how* we meet and *what we meet about* in conversations, therapy, supervision, and other meetings and processes.

I collect experiences and examples of meetings that do not blindly follow standards and conventional logic just because they are conventional. I collect experiences and examples that dare to try something different.

## A Tribute to Poetry

And finally, a tribute to poetry and the work of poetic renderings. At the beginning of this article, I asked if we notice the small moments of everyday life when something perhaps a little magical or surprising happens. Do we have time? Do we take time? Do we dare to stop and make room for the possible amidst all the procedures, plans, standards, and things we must do?

We live in an era of efficiency and acceleration, where there is a strong focus on what is sensible, rational, and controllable. Here, poetry and poetic expressions can create space for more and for something different, making it possible to connect with one another and with expressions that have not yet found a place in our more familiar narratives and stories about life and us acting, thinking, feeling, and judging ourselves and others. Poetry and poetic expressions can save not only words but also the more messy, powerful, and tentative descriptions of what happens in everyday life.

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# How Journalists Can Tell Stories Without Making Sources More Vulnerable

Olivia Nepper Winther, DISPUK

*As a journalist, you are trained to communicate. But when the work involves speaking with and telling the stories of sources in vulnerable positions, many find that they lack the tools to prevent the source from ending up even more vulnerable or re-traumatized than before the interview. That is why, together with psychologist Lasse Offenberg, I have been offering a course in recent years at DISPUK for journalists, documentary filmmakers, and communicators seeking professional development in working with vulnerable sources. One practice from this course that many of the participants—and I as a journalist—have carried forward is writing outsider witnessing letters to the sources. In this article, I'll share my reflections on why it makes so much sense to bring the narrative perspective into journalism—and how outsider witnessing letters can serve as a counterbalance to the loneliness and shame many sources experience after an interview and in connection with publication.*

"Take care," she says. We stand there for a few seconds without moving. Then we hug, and she closes the door behind me.

It's been less than two hours since I stood in front of that same door and knocked. I had never met her before—but shortly after, I was sitting on her couch with a cup of coffee, listening to her tell me about her husband's tragic death.

She cried several times during the conversation; I was moved too, and a couple of times I had to make sure she was okay and checked in with her to see if we should stop the interview. But she wanted to keep going.

"I want to share my story because I hope it can help others."

This is neither the first nor the last time I've heard that sentence.

## The Battle Against Cynicism

Sitting on the couch with my black notebook, I jotted down "good quotes" while the woman recounted some of the most vulnerable and difficult years of her life. When I put "good" in quotation marks, it's because these were the quotes I knew met one or more of the news criteria that we journalists have absorbed with our professional mother's milk. Quotes with drama, conflict, sensation, and identification.

In that sense, one could say there is a strong kinship between journalism and narrative practice. Both fields work with stories and plots, and in both fields, we know that we feel a story most deeply when it moves between the landscape of action and the landscape of meaning[1] .

As I will do now, by returning to the woman on the sofa:

The "good" quotes weren't necessarily the quotes that told us anything good or what the woman valued in her life. It was the stories that were good at getting her story out. And that, of course, was why I was there.

It can feel cynical sitting and listening for good headlines while people talk about their lives, but that's my job when I'm conducting journalistic interviews. Just as we, as people trained in narrative practice, listen for glimpses of alternative stories in conversations—my ears as a journalist are always tuned to what is known in the trade as an "angle."

Because as a professional communicator, I know that's the easiest way to get a message across. And the woman in front of me shared her story precisely because she wanted to get a message out.

## What Else Is There to Tell?

The woman on the couch wanted to talk about an inadequate encounter with the healthcare system. How she—and especially her children—had not been offered a

[1] White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice.* W. W. Norton & Company.

spot in a grief support group because her late husband's illness was so rare that it wasn't supported by any advocacy group.

It was a relevant story, which I helped bring to life by finding all the small details and nuances in both the plot and the landscape of meaning that could support this angle.

But I didn't present readers with alternative stories or cracks. In my notebook, I marked the stories that also existed, where the family had been met with warmth and help from doctors and nurses. But I didn't devote column space to them, nor did I spend much time on the moments when life had offered anything other than illness and death.

*"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in,"* sings Leonard Cohen.

But as a journalist, it can almost feel as though you're in the process of shutting the shutters on every crack in the quest for the sharp angle.

The more I've delved into narrative practice, the more I've wanted to let the light in. And fortunately, I'm not alone in this. Two years ago, we launched a course that, to my knowledge, is the first in Denmark to combine journalistic practice and narrative therapy. Several of the students my colleague Lasse Offenberg and I have met here expressed an intention to fight against cynicism in their work.

It is worth noting that the course is not aimed at news journalists covering politics and society, but at journalists, documentary filmmakers, and communicators who encounter people in vulnerable positions—what is known in professional jargon as "vulnerable sources."

Whether they should be called that is, of course, open to debate. As we know, our thoughts are shaped by language, including clichés that have survived from the media itself, and perhaps this group of sources should be called something else that doesn't reinforce the notion that they are particularly vulnerable.

## Looking Out for One Another in a World of Constant Deadlines

Along with the classic news criteria, the word "deadline" is a fixed part of a journalist's DNA. Ever since my student days, I've known that time pressure is a fundamental condition of the profession.

And even though I don't work as a full-time journalist today—my daily work is at DISPUK—I still do freelance journalism, and I have a clear sense that the number of tight deadlines in the media world has hardly decreased in recent years.

Time pressure may be particularly visible in journalism—but it is hardly limited to it. We all live in what Hartmut Rosa calls the acceleration society[2].

Time and again, on our course, we hear from the journalists we teach that they do not have enough time. And sometimes they lack the tools, but they certainly don't lack the desire when it comes to taking care of their sources.

Learning how to talk about trauma without re-traumatizing, following up with sources and keeping them informed about the publication process, knowing what's happening in the comments section—and much more—are tasks that rarely fall within the job description, and journalists are rarely given the time or guidance to develop the necessary skills.

A workday might look like this, not as a purely hypothetical scenario, but as a day that resembles some of those I—and many others—have experienced: Interview a woman about her problematic alcohol use in the past. Write the article. Send it for fact-checking. Make corrections. Forward it to the editor five minutes before picking up the kids.

The next morning, a new assignment is waiting: an interview with a couple whose child nearly drowned in a swimming pool. And while the journalist prepares for the next meeting with all the ethical and human considerations that most journalists, thankfully, consider, the woman from the day before sits waiting. Not knowing how the story will turn out. Whether her wish to help others with

[2] Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity.* Columbia University Press.

alcohol abuse will be fulfilled. Whether she will be seen as brave or as a bad mother. Maybe nervous about how the comments section will focus on her experiences or perhaps – as it happens for many female sources – on something completely else as her appearance.

The journalist knows all this well. But the hours in the day seem insufficient. And the hours available are ones you want to spend—as the craftsperson you are and were hired to be—on making the next story stand out.

That is precisely why I have found that the outsider witnessing letter can serve as a small but concrete tool. It does not require a new workflow or a sweeping editorial restructuring. It often takes just ten minutes.

## Outsider Witnessing Letters as a Response

Below is an email from me to the widow you met at the beginning of this article.

An email I had to write anyway to send the interview for fact-checking, but instead of just writing about the practical arrangements, I ended the letter by using the four categories of outsider witnessing inquiry developed by Michael White (2007):

> *Dear Lise,*
>
> *Thank you for the other day.*
>
> *Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and share the story of Jens's death and the lack of support you were offered. I hope your story will be read by many and perhaps spark a discussion about the right to a support group.*
>
> *I'm sending you the interview here for review. Please let me know if anything needs to be corrected.*
>
> *As soon as I receive your approval of the text, I'll forward it to my editor, and after that, it's out of my hands. This means the article*

*may end up looking a little different from what's attached here, but the quotes won't change.*

*The interview focuses largely on what we had agreed to discuss: the lack of bereavement support groups.*

*But I feel compelled to tell you that there was much else in our conversation that moved me.*

*Something that stuck with me was what you said when you talked about Jens's way of being a father before his illness:*

*"He was so strong. When the kids were little, he'd often toss them all the way up to the ceiling and then catch them just before they hit the floor; they'd laugh and laugh. And then suddenly he couldn't even lift their stuffed animals."*

*As we sat in your living room and you pointed up at the ceiling where Jens used to toss your girls, it was probably the story of not being able to lift his children's teddy bears that struck me the most.*

*But when I read the quote again after I got home, I suddenly saw Jens very clearly in your cozy home. How he, strong and playful, first caught the girls right there, where for a split second they began to doubt he was about to drop them—that moment when you get a very special tingle in your stomach.*

*I started thinking about the Golden Tower ride in Tivoli. There's also that split second when you're in free fall before you feel the ride's steady machinery take over, and it's in those floating seconds that your stomach tickles the most. In a good way—because you know it's safe.*

*It made me think that your girls probably never really doubted that Jens would catch them in the end.*

*That made me think of my own husband, who, like Jens, is the father of two girls, and how he, too, occasionally tosses them high—sometimes higher than my nerves can handle—but never so high that he doesn't catch them. And never so high that they seriously doubt it.*

*Thank you for reminding me of the absolute wonder of being parents with such a Golden Tower. When we sit down tonight to plan next week's schedule, I'll remember to tell him that it's something I truly appreciate.*

*Best regards,*

*Olivia*

The email took me fifteen minutes to write, not the usual five I would have spent just going over the practical details.

When I read it now, there are undoubtedly things that could have been written differently. Still, I work with a fair amount of discipline, aiming to keep an outsider witness email to a maximum of twenty minutes to write—otherwise, I might be afraid I won't get it done next time.

When Lise replied, she had only one small correction to a quote. The rest of the email was about something else: how happy she had been to read the last part of my email. She wrote that she had been touched that I had noticed Jens's way of being a father and that since my email, she and her daughters had noticed and put into words some of the many other stories about their husband and father that also existed, but which perhaps hadn't been given as much space in the years following his illness and death.

## Thank You for Putting It into Words

Lise's story was vulnerable, but she wasn't in a vulnerable position when the article was published. Her story was met with sympathy. It certainly didn't spark

the debate about grief support groups she had hoped for, but the tone in the comments section was loving. Heart emojis and warm words—as is (fortunately) often the case when sources talk about loss.

There was no guarantee that the woman I mentioned earlier would have received the same warmth in the comments section of an interview about her past problematic alcohol use, particularly as she was a mother of young children.

The reactions could be far harsher, especially from people who might have reacted to the headline without reading the article, approaching it with preconceived ideas.

My email read as follows:

> *Dear Caroline,*
>
> *Thanks for the chat the other day—it was great that you had the time and were willing to talk, and thanks again for sending me your truly excellent debut novel.*
>
> *I'm sending you the interview here for review. Please let me know if anything needs to be corrected. As soon as I receive your approval of the text, I'll forward it to my editor, and after that, it's out of my hands. This means the article may end up looking a bit different from what's attached here, but the quotes won't change.*
>
> *One thing that particularly struck me when we spoke was your statement:*
>
> *"Other people's love isn't the right toolkit when it comes to addiction." When you said that, I was reminded of the time when my daughter couldn't walk yet. My love for her was immense. I held out my little finger and supported her as she wobbled along. But she didn't really walk until she was ready herself. It wasn't about how much I loved her. It was about when she felt ready.*

*I have a feeling that you know many people could use a reminder of this. Just yesterday, I quoted you to a friend whose partner is struggling with a problematic addiction. She was very moved. I think your words helped her realize how she sometimes experiences her partner's addiction as a rejection of her love. We had a talk about it.*

*Thank you for giving me the words to start it.*

*Olivia*

Caroline replied that very same evening. After some corrections to the interview, she wrote that she was touched to hear that our conversation had made an impression on me and it made her happy to know that there was at least one person who had taken something away from what she herself called her story of suffering.

My colleague Lone Kaae Morell often talks about outsider witnessing letters as a way to exchange a story with another person.

After Caroline replied to my email, I understood a little better what Lone meant. I sensed that it meant something to Caroline that in the email I hadn't just sent the article for fact-checking but had also shared a little of myself. A short story about me, my daughter, and not least about my friend, whose loved one was dealing with substance abuse-related problems.

In that moment, the dynamic shifted slightly. I was no longer just a journalist who had listened. I was a human being. Someone who shared a story in exchange for a story.

## Working Against Feelings of Shame

It's hardly news that the media landscape has become a harsher place to navigate, especially when you share something that might provoke moral judgments.

That's precisely why I want to make a case for us as journalists to take those extra ten to fifteen minutes it takes to write a thoughtful response to sources in potentially vulnerable positions.

Because in a public sphere where many reactions can be marked by criticism and condemnation, it can make a difference to hear how one's story has touched someone, how it has struck a chord in others' lives, and how it may have given courage or resonance.

That kind of response can help strengthen the person who has come forward—even when critical voices make themselves heard.

My other colleague Anette Holmgren describes shame as the feeling that arises in the moment when I—in the gaze or action of another—perceive myself as less worthy and simultaneously lose the sense of my own worth. In other words: I feel shame when I perceive that the other person or the culture looks down on me, and I lack sufficient self-understanding or self-care to withstand that judgment.

In this sense, the practice of witnessing can be understood as a countermeasure to the feeling of shame, a strategy where the source is given the opportunity to step forward as a human being—not merely as a problem or a case—and where the source can simultaneously emerge as a person who has mattered to at least one other person.

This can shift the experience of standing completely alone with one's story. Now, through their story, the source is not only exposed in a potentially vulnerable situation but also connected, through that same story, to someone whose life they have touched, contributed to, or made a difference in.

## Echoes of Values and Hope

No story can encompass the full complexity of a life lived. In narrative practice, we are therefore concerned with examining the stories that shape our lives—and with identifying the alternative and richer stories that also exist but are easily

overshadowed by the dominant narrative. This gives people the opportunity to live in accordance with what they choose to stand for.

Journalism doesn't have to encompass all of life, either. It can't. It requires angles, priorities, and omissions. A text that tries to tell the whole story often ends up telling nothing at all, because the reader loses interest.

But perhaps journalism, inspired by narrative practice, can strive not to lock a person into a single, unambiguous story. And perhaps, even when the angle is sharp, we can keep in mind that it is not the whole truth about the person we are writing about.

This is precisely where the outsider witness response is a surprisingly simple tool. It doesn't change the article's form. It doesn't significantly disrupt the deadline workflow. But in the email to the source, we can choose to see more than just the problem. We can echo values, hopes, intentions, agency, and what made an impression on us.

And the best thing is that listening and writing are tools journalists already master. Perhaps that is why it is not about learning something radically new, but about applying these familiar tools with a different perspective than the dominant professional logic: a perspective that focuses more on the person than on the problem.

## Feeling Closer to Yourself, Even as a Journalist

Our starting point for a course that combines journalism with narrative therapy has been a desire to ensure that vulnerable sources do not stand alone when facing the public.

However, through the courses—and in my own journalistic practice—we quickly realized that this approach affects more than just the sources. Many of the journalists we have taught describe how working with outsider witnessing letters also affects them personally. The emails provide them with a sense of closure and

greater peace of mind—a form of “aftercare” that many have otherwise lacked, both in terms of time and language, once the story is in the can.

In an industry characterized by speed, criticism, clicks, and constant evaluation, outsider witnessing can become a way to hold on to why one became a journalist in the first place.

Some journalists are driven by the ambition to bring down a minister. Others—and here I include myself—by a persistent curiosity about other people. A curiosity that may not be so far removed from the one that drives therapists.

Perhaps the outsider witnessing letters also serves as a small shield when cynicism comes knocking. Not as a major systemic change. The letters do not remove the fundamental premise of journalism: that we often listen to conflict in a world where there is no shortage of conflict. But they can serve as a counterbalance to the feeling that this is the only thing we’re listening for.

Perhaps they make it possible to be present in space as both a journalist and a human being: with ears pricked for conflict, sensation, and identification, and at the same time with an awareness of the messier, alternative, and still-unfinished stories that don’t always fit the angle.

In a fast-paced industry where distance easily becomes a protective strategy, the practice of outsider witnessing can be a way to maintain connection—both to others and to oneself. Not as a rejection of deadlines or angles, but as a small, quiet act—one that, in just 10–15 minutes, reminds us we are not merely producing stories, but entering relationships.

# How a Letter Can Enlarge the Small ‘p’ in ‘politics’

Tine Mølgaard, DISPUK

Dear fellow rebels,

If you were to write a letter in solidarity with the people you try to help, what would you write? Who would you invite as co-signers? Who would you address it to? And what would be the first step?

I want to share with you an example of a rebellious practice in the form of a letter. Michael White[1] talked about narrative practices as politics with a small ‘p’, but the following shows how it can end up differently. With a capital ‘P’.

One of the things I love about narrative practice is that it is not just a matter of therapy. It’s a spirit. The focus on the effects of power and context, as well as on responses and agency, offers a much-needed perspective in cultures and times where individualization of problems is a dominating tendency. And this calls for both small and capital ‘P’-actions.

To be fair, my co-psychologist-rebel Tori and I didn’t know that our letter about inadequate structures in Danish schools and daycares would become anything more than a “statement of position”, but it turns out that when you state your position, others might follow, and so politics with capital ‘P’ is possible.

In 2022, Tori and I both worked as educational psychologists (in Denmark called PPR-psychologists), spending a lot of time in daycares and schools; the everyday contexts of children. Our job was primarily to help the professionals help children by adjusting their approach. My prior narrative training, during an internship at DISPUK (where I now work), taught me that the closer you get to a person’s story, the closer you get to the contexts the story emerges in.

[1] White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends.* W. W. Norton & Company.

In this job, I realized that witnessing a context can make you understand why stories are shaped the way they are. And this can break your heart. It can also make you want to do something about it.

And so, we did.

We wrote a letter addressed to the politicians of the Danish Parliament, signed by us and 1,200 fellow psychologists. We could not have foreseen the last part, but it sure made a difference. The original length of the letter reflected our hope of making the politicians understand the seriousness and complexity of the situation, and that it is too severe to be dealt with in catchphrases. I'm sure you'll get that, even though I've shortened it for you:

> *August 21, 2022*
>
> *Dear Members of the Danish Parliament,*
>
> *Through our work as psychologists in the Pedagogical Psychological Counseling [in Danish shortened PPR], we witness at close quarters the growing distress among children and young people. We observe it when we visit daycare institutions and schools; we feel it through increasing pressure to refer more and more children and young people to psychiatric services, in the pressure to produce assessments regarding needs for support, and in our meetings with parents struck by frustration and distress.*
>
> *In particular, we experience it in our encounters with teachers and pedagogues who feel powerless and discouraged, when we try to help them shape environments in schools and daycares in which children and young people can thrive and develop. With this letter, we wish to express our deepest solidarity with these professional groups, who fight an unequal battle daily to bring their professional expertise into play under conditions that stand in stark contrast to what we know is necessary for children's development and well-being. As firsthand witnesses to everyday life in daycare institutions*

*and schools, we are deeply concerned about the current rise in distress—though unfortunately not surprised.*

*Unless structures and environments adapted to children's needs are created, and unless conditions are ensured that allow pedagogues and teachers to meet children with patience, engagement, and presence, we see no hope of reversing the negative tendency that has rightly dominated media coverage for some time. In that coverage, the role of PPR has been highlighted, but we miss a focus on the complexity underlying the growing distress, including the everyday conditions that children, young people, and the professionals around them in daycare institutions and schools have to navigate in. As PPR psychologists, we are passionate about our work, but we become frustrated when the conditions do not allow us to apply our professional expertise in a meaningful and ethically responsible way in collaboration with teachers, pedagogues, and parents. Many of us would like to invite you, as politicians, into practice so that you can experience the complexity we navigate every day in our efforts to support a better everyday life for children and young people.*

*(…)*

*We psychologists increasingly feel like caretakers in a house where there is a fire in the loft, water in the basement, mold in the walls, and a dead body on the first floor. At present, the best we can do is help limit the extent of the damage.*

*If the entire child and youth sector had better conditions, we in PPR could actually do what would have a real impact on children's everyday lives and what is professionally meaningful and ethically responsible: to support a good childhood through both targeted and preventive initiatives in collaboration with management and staff in daycare institutions and schools, as well as parents. Currently,*

*however, we are pressured to spend a very large portion of our working hours on writing assessments of children who have ended up in social, emotional, and academic emergencies, even though our experience tells us that we can make the least difference from behind a computer for the large group of children and young people in distress.*

*Reversing this catastrophic course will be a massive undertaking requiring a broad, cross-professional effort. However, as a starting point, we offer the following seven recommendations:*

*1. Ensure that, in practice, there are enough well-educated pedagogues in daycare institutions, with the necessary time and staffing ratios to engage in the important interactions with children that are crucial for their development. This is one of the most important preventive measures.*

*2. Provide teachers with more preparation time to create motivating and inspiring teaching. It is crucial that teaching fits the children, rather than children having to fit the teaching—and good teaching requires adequate preparation time.*

*3. Ensure class sizes that allow teachers to spend time with all students, both in terms of relationship-building and academic support. Some students need frequent follow-up and guidance, and there must be sufficient time and energy for this so that it does not come at the expense of other students.*

*4. Ensure sufficient resources in after-school programs and youth clubs to create high-quality, pedagogically grounded leisure activities with time for presence and meaningful interaction.*

*5. Reconsider time-consuming screenings and tests if teachers, pedagogues, and psychologists do not deem them necessary for providing the right support for the child.*

*6. Ensure that management, teachers, and pedagogues have time to build strong collaboration with parents, PPR, and other collaborators.*

*7. Ensure that PPR staff have working conditions that make it possible to collaborate closely with management, professionals, and parents in the child's everyday environment, in order to create settings where children and young people can thrive and develop academically, socially, and personally.*

*As psychologists, we would like to emphasize that children—and the adults around them—are responding in healthy ways to something unhealthy. It is crucial not to reduce complex and structural challenges to an understanding that the individual child owns the problem. Instead of asking what is wrong with the children, we should ask ourselves what their behavior and distress invite us to understand that we need to do differently. There are no simple answers here, but as a starting point, we urge you, as politicians, in collaboration with all of us who work in this field every day, to be curious about how you can create the foundation for professionally grounded changes that will truly make a difference. Action is needed now—a whole generation's well-being and development depend on it.*

*Best regards,*
*Tine, Tori, and our psychologist colleagues [list of signatures]*

## The "Why"

As you can see, our rebellion was about children and the professionals around them, since we consider the working conditions of the professionals to be the living conditions of children. We could no longer bear witnessing the powerful tendency permeating our culture to understand children as problems (we narrative practitioners never do, eh), ignoring the long range of political reforms

and laws that have made the structures around children increasingly inadequate through the years.

We were driven by the logic in the metaphor stated by archbishop Desmond Tutu: "*There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.*"[2]

To me, this metaphor and logic reflect an awareness of the effects of power and cultural structures on individuals' lives, which is central to narrative practice. During my internship at DISPUK, and later as an educational psychologist, this awareness was further strengthened.

On a sunny day in April 2022, during a conference for union representatives, Tori and I decided that we had to do *something.* Six months later, I was on stage giving a speech in front of the Danish Parliament, side by side with professionals from schools and daycares, parents, psychologists, social workers, professionals from psychiatry, and politicians.

It all started with a letter.

## A Letter Can Make a "We" Grow

Tori and I made it an open letter, and so a nationwide newspaper published it on the same day as it was sent to the politicians. A lot of media picked up the story, and I was interviewed for radio, TV, and podcasts. I assume the number of psychologists signing the letter was the 'show starter', because it's equivalent to more than 10% of all psychologists in Denmark. In a few days, a support-petition was signed by 13,000 people, and two months later a statement of support was published on behalf of 2,500 professionals in schools and daycares. All together, we became a "we".

I'm not sure that an opinion piece would have had the same effect. There's something about the letter form that made it more formal and

[2] Attributed to Desmond Tutu, South African Anglican archbishop, anti-apartheid activist, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. For biographical information, see https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1984/tutu/facts/.

serious in a way. It can be an invitation to a dialogue instead of being a monologue. Only a few politicians answered, but in this case, it was okay. The point was to make a statement. To show solidarity. To stand up for those (children and professionals) whose voices are usually not acknowledged. To shed light on structures that do not support the wellbeing of … well ... anyone …

It would have been very powerful if the letter had been written in collaboration with professionals in schools and daycare settings, and in hindsight, that would have been a beautiful process. However, because of the power and responsibility that come with our role as psychologists, we felt a particular obligation to speak up as witnesses to contexts that did not foster life-enhancing conditions.

As Spider-Man says, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Perhaps those of us who witness the harmful effects of cultural structures also have a responsibility to use our voices in support of others, especially when healthy responses to unhealthy structures, relations of power, and contexts are interpreted as individual problems.

In my view, narrative practice is not only about giving people a voice and creating opportunities for them to speak, but also about using one’s own voice when possible.

## A Rebel’s Choice of Words

If you read the letter, you might have noticed the dramatic choice of language and metaphors, as well as vivid descriptions. It reflects our wish to create images and evoke feelings in the readers’ minds, leaving the message crystal clear: something *must* be done.

The letter form made that possible. We could write and rewrite, and we spent four months before we were finally satisfied with the result. During our editing, we had several focuses:

- We wanted it to be clear how serious we believed the problems to be, and what could be the consequences of not doing anything about it. In that

way, it's impossible for the politicians to pretend they didn't know when "shit hit the fan."

- We wanted to be direct about our respect for and solidarity with the professionals who take care of and educate our children every day. Sadly, in Denmark it's not common that one group of professionals stands up for another, and so we wanted to set an example.
- We used metaphors and imagery because of their ability to evoke feelings, sensations and mental images that make the listener remember complex points in simple ways. For example, we used the following metaphor: "*we psychologists increasingly feel like caretakers in a house where there is a fire in the roof, water in the basement, mold in the walls, and a dead body on the first floor. At present, the best we can do is help limit the extent of the damage*" because it underlines the absurdity of the political belief that professionals in PPR-departments can "outshine" the structural conditions of schools and daycare centers.
- And, last but not least, we wanted to show our will to be constructive, which is why we presented concrete advice that we believed would actually make a difference. We hoped that this would make it easier for the politicians to act.

It was a long and challenging process, killing darlings and balancing the need for readability and the urge to honor complexity. At the same time, it was important to us to express our understanding that the problem was the problem, and that the children and adults around them were not the problems.

We were very aware that our critique of the context and conditions could be (mis)understood as a critique of the professionals, so we had a couple of teachers and pedagogues in our network read the letter before we sent it to the politicians, to minimize the chance of that being the case.

And so, you'll recognize externalizing language throughout the letter.

During the entire process, it felt like we weighed every word. And in a way we did. Because words matter (I know, I'm preaching to the choir), and we wanted the words to create change—to make a difference.

## United We Stand

And in that way the letter form had an advantage for me personally. The weighing of every word helped me guide my flaming indignation—both a beloved and exhausting life companion of mine—in the direction of trying to make a difference by addressing the world in a way that made it possible for it to listen.

And to increase the possibility that the world would listen, we invited others to join our choir. We were inspired by a logic from an ancient Greek fable that says "*you can break a stick, but you can't break a bundle*" or, to put it in another catchphrase: "*united we stand, divided we fall.*"

That is why we shared the letter with other PPR-psychologists across the country before we sent it. This was done through social media, and it turned out that psychologists from other work areas wanted to join our call to action too.

We initially hoped for a few hundred signatures, but girl, were we wrong. Many replied that they were thrilled with the initiative, because they shared our concern but hadn't had the energy to turn their sense of powerlessness into action. I know that feeling.

But in a world and time where the sense of powerlessness can be a frequent guest, I believe we need to stick together. To unite and insist on solidarity, meaningfulness, and respect. To be brave.

And to enlarge the small 'p' in politics.

So, dear fellow rebels: If you were to write a letter in solidarity with the people you serve, what would you write? Who would you invite to sign it? Who would you write to? And what would be the first step?

Sometimes rebellions start with pitchforks and torches, and sometimes they start with "Dear…"

Lots of love and fist bumps,

Tine

# Writing Letters as Therapy

Lone Kaae Morell, DISPUK

*In this article, I will demonstrate how writing (and exchanging) letters is not merely a method, but an ethical and political practice. I share a five-week therapeutic process in a letter exchange with a woman who wanted to confront some traumatic events in her life. She thought she had put the past behind her, but suddenly it resurfaced in the present and startled her. That is why she turned to me. Her letters became active acts, and my replies became poetic testimonies to the discoveries she made. Most important of all was her right to decide for herself what she wanted to feel, remember, write, and reflect, and her unquestionable right to decide when she wanted to read my replies and questions. My letters contained, in part, affirming poeticizations of the woman's skills and values, and in part, I shared concrete knowledge about how unpleasant events can destroy one's sense of self, especially when they are not met with understanding and support. Finally, I posed four questions in the hope that they would inspire her and spark both awareness and reflection—questions inspired by narrative work on trauma and responses.*

## Post Office Box

The town post office by the coast in a small town in Central America. The heat is slowly circulated by large wooden ventilation blades in the high-ceilinged room. The feeling of longing mingles with the feeling of freedom.

I walk out of the post office and sit down in the park next to the vanilla-colored church. The young palm trees cast filtered shade over the older people playing dominoes at rickety metal tables. I opened my letter. The beautiful, thin stationery. "Par Avion," it says. It was sent three weeks ago. I take a sip of juice. Now I am in my own world, undisturbed by myself. I read …

The scene is more than 30 years old, but the feeling is so deeply ingrained in my sense of what it means to reflect on my life through writing and correspondence. Receiving and sending in peace and quiet. I remember my teenage diary and recall it as a calm and safe process. I have never forgotten it, and I practice it as often as I can—privately and in my work as a narrative psychotherapist.

Why does writing work so well? Writing my way to meaning is different from speaking my way to meaning. I don't feel observed while I write. I feel free. I can delete and edit until the words match what I want to express. I have the time and space to let memories, feelings, and thoughts emerge onto the landscape of the narrative and slowly move through connections and differences, intentions, and values—toward the creation of meaning.

## Framing

Over the past few years, I've started experimenting with therapy through writing letters. It began for practical reasons, because someone I was talking to lived on the other side of the country, and I felt that online conversations were becoming too technical and confrontational. That's why I started writing to them.

Since then, I have corresponded with people when it has not been possible to meet in person, and through this I have become interested in how therapeutic processes can take place in ways other than face-to-face meetings.

One of the first things I've had to consider in my experiments with narrative letter therapy has been the time perspective. When you go to therapy sessions, it's at a specific and defined time. When you correspond via email, both parties can, in principle, be working 24/7, which I don't think is beneficial.

So, I decided to set a framework. It goes like this: You send me a message whenever you want; I'll reply after a week. That way, I define the boundaries of our working hours. I'm generally interested in the conditions we provide for people to help them get closer to themselves, their values, and their place in the world.

## A New Way of Working with Certain Aspects of Life

Hanne was a student in one of our courses, and one day after class, she came up to me and asked if I'd talk to her. She told me she'd been working on some things in her life, but in ways different from what she could now see in the narrative ideas. Since she lived on the other side of the country, I asked her to write to me a little—then we could take it from there.

She was happy to do so, and what follows is a five-week exchange of letters between Hanne and me. In between, I'll share my reflections and choices regarding the letters:

### August 20—First letter from Hanne

> *Hi Lone,*
>
> *First of all, thank you for agreeing to help me. We agreed that I'd send you my story, and from there we'd figure out how to make it work practically.*
>
> *Last summer, I invited my oldest grandchild to a Harry Styles concert at the Royal Arena. My good friends were going to drive us—they know I can get a little frantic when I have to both charge the car and find parking— 😊, and thankfully so. We arrive well ahead of time and agree to stop by Fields for a bit of shopping before the concert. However, it's hard to find a place to get dropped off, so Molly (my granddaughter) decides she'd rather head over to the plaza in front of the Arena and buy some merchandise.*
>
> *We get dropped off and decide to go to Burger King and grab something. The weather is nice, after all. While we're waiting for our food, we hear commotion outside, and people are running away screaming. I think, "Harry must have arrived, and the hysteria has started."*

*Shortly after, we hear gunshots, and people in Burger King throw themselves to the floor. The doors are locked, and we're not allowed to leave. We have no idea what's happened. My brain quickly goes into Molly mode. I try to keep her occupied and get her to stand in line, and we just talk. At one point, she says: "I don't like this, I'm scared. We talk about how it's not nice, and that I also think it's strange, but that there's nothing else to do but wait."*

*No information at all. There are young students in Burger King who also have no idea what's going on. They've just been ordered to lock the doors and not let us out. Suddenly we see armed officers in riot gear. My first thought is terrorism, and I remember thinking that we're in a bad place. There are large windows everywhere, so those of us inside Burger King would be easy targets. I try to stay calm to keep Molly as calm as possible.*

*Then the doors open, and we're told by a police officer, I think, to go over to the Royal Arena. There's sort of a route with police officers standing along it. We must follow it. At the entrance, we were searched, but not a word about what's happening. We went inside and found our seats. Some people are crying, and others are walking around like nothing's wrong. It's very strange.*

*We take a walk around the Arena and buy a few things for Molly. Then we wait again and hear various reports from others in the hall that someone has been shot, but again, no one really knows anything. I remember we waited in the Arena from around 7:00–7:30 p.m. without receiving any information, and until around 9:00 p.m., when someone comes out on stage and says there has been a shooting and that people have died. That the concert is delayed because they're waiting for someone who hasn't arrived yet.*

*Then friends and family start texting and calling to see if we're okay. We still have no idea what's happened. We're fine, as far as we know,*

*but we keep getting conflicting reports that the concert will start soon or has been canceled.*

*There are 16,000 of us here, and a sense of unease is starting to set in. People are talking about terrorism and how we're an easy target, and so on.*

*Around 9:30–10:00 p.m., we get an announcement from the stage that the concert has been canceled. The suspect has been caught, but they don't know if there are more. We're to be ushered out and follow the police's instructions. All roads in and out of Amager are closed, and we can only get out via the S-train to Vanløse. The actual evacuation from the building goes smoothly. Some people are having panic attacks, some are talking on their cell phones, and my impression is that we're all being considerate of one another. No shouting or screaming. Everything proceeds calmly.*

*Then we walked in a long line toward the S-train. There are riot-geared officers on rooftops, balconies, and everywhere we look. I remember thinking that if someone were to shoot us now, there's nothing we could do. We still don't know anything other than that there might be more perpetrators on the loose. We got on the train. Along the way, we've been in touch with my friends, and they're going to meet us in Vanløse. It's reassuring to know that. The train starts moving, and we breathe a little sigh of relief. After a short while, the lights go out in the train, and it comes to a stop. I think, here it comes, this is the end.*

*We're all surprisingly calm. A little while passes, then we get a message saying there's a line on the railway, but that we'll be moving shortly. The relief is palpable. Finally, we reached Vanløse and found my friends. It's only once we're sitting in the car that we feel safe. On the way home, we stopped at a gas station to get something to drink. Molly and I can't stay inside. We must go back out to the car. All the*

*way across Zealand until we're home, there are police at most of the on and off-ramps on the highway. When we finally got home late at night, we sat down to watch the news. We must see what happened. We calm down a bit and are both able to sleep.*

*This whole episode, where I felt in danger, has, on several occasions, brought back memories of my first marriage. As I briefly told you, I was threatened with a hunting rifle. My husband at the time was a psychopath or had psychopathic traits, I maintain. He engaged in psychological terror, but so subtly that no one really believed it. I was 19 when I met him, and he was quite a bit older than me. A very charismatic man.*

*My parents adored him, and I was often told that I should be grateful. After all, I got a horse, a car, and we traveled. So, for several years, I was grateful, all the while losing myself more and more. He developed an alcohol problem and became increasingly cruel. He wanted to decide what clothes I should wear when we went out, etc. What I did right one day was wrong the next day. A mutual friend and colleague told me one day that he was seriously worried about me. He saw what my ex-husband was doing and told me I needed to get out of there.*

*We lived on a property where I also had my horses, my dog, and my cat. There were two living rooms, and I announced that I was moving into one of them until I found a place to live. One night, he came into the room where I was sleeping. I woke up to find him standing there staring at me. The dog was lying at the foot of the bed. I saw he had the rifle, and my first thought was just that he mustn't shoot the dog. I didn't say anything; he stood there laughing. Then he went out, but left the rifle unloaded in front of the door.*

*I left, but he pursued me for a long time afterward. It took most of a couple of years before I was free of him. By then I had found my*

*second husband, who, thankfully, was of a completely different mold 😊. I can physically feel it all again as I write about it. It's been many years since I've talked about or thought about my ex-husband, and I haven't felt like it's been a part of my life at all. I was convinced it was a closed chapter, right up until the episode at the Royal Arena.*

*Dear Lone, it's a bit of a mouthful, and I'm not quite sure what I need, but I feel like it's limiting my life. I'd like to be in a close, loving relationship again, but I keep people at arm's length. I find faults to keep them from getting too close. It's exhausting. I've learned to take care of myself, so I don't have to deal with it. I get along with my friends. They know me and my story and let me have it. They don't try to fix me. So that's a little bit about me. There's more, of course, but those are the main points.*

*Warmest regards,*
*Hanne*

## The Resonance Flows

I read the letter about the two episodes several times. The resonance flowed through me in different directions. Thoughts of being on a trip with our grandchildren and nieces. The desire to give and be with them to share great experiences. Seeing their joy, feeling their excitement, knowing they've been looking forward to it, we've been looking forward to it together, and we know it will be memorable. And then imagine… if an unforeseen and perhaps life-changing event suddenly arose, pulling the rug out from under us. From under them—the children. And happiness would turn into tragedy. What would that mean for my understanding of myself—if I were the adult with children who became unhappy?

I could feel that I needed to stay focused and direct my attention toward Hanne and her sense of self.

When I read the second, somewhat older story in the email, I saw a 19-year-old young woman with dreams, hopes, drive, and perhaps also a touch of adventure and openness in her blood. She wrote about falling in love—and yet I sensed the unease. She wrote that he was charismatic and somewhat older than her. Who falls in love like that? I had done the same myself, back when I was 20 and attending folk high school. He converted a car, and we drove around Europe for half a year. With art, nature, and sensuality, but also with his dark sides, which could get unpleasant—and once I thought, now I must leave. In the middle of an orange grove somewhere in Portugal, where the hell had taken him.

Hanne writes: "Now he's shooting the dog." What a cruelty to brace oneself for; to have a reason and the courage to give everything a chance. I wondered what kind of response she might need.

It struck me that her parents had overlooked her. That they hadn't seen her, hadn't empathized with her, hadn't listened—but, on the contrary, choosing to maintain contact with him had belittled her.

The world must not be like that. We must keep our hearts open and stay with the painful things others tell us, even if they are hard to understand and accept.

While I felt a personal connection, I became professionally interested in the stories in the email. Like most of the people I speak with, Hanne described the effects of her experiences—both the interpretive ones and the emotional and physical effects that the memories evoked in the present.

For example, Hanne writes: "*I can physically feel it all again when I write about it. It's been many years since I've talked about or dealt with my ex-husband, and I haven't felt like it's been a part of my life at all. I was convinced it was a closed chapter, right up until the Royal Arena."*

And that gave me an idea to tell her that sometimes you can spot past traumatic events when "the past moves into the present, as if it were the present," as my colleague Anette Holmgren puts it. My guess was that Hanne's sense of self, her

identity, had taken a hit back when she was 19 and that the incident reminded her of that.

### August 20—First response to Hanne

In my response, I thanked Hanne for trusting my approach to letter therapy and hoped it might be of help. I then presented a narrative understanding of trauma, including the concept of value traumatization and the importance of receiving an appropriate social response.

To explore whether a traumatization of the self might have occurred, I asked four questions in the email to Hanne. At the same time, I outlined the process and invited her to reflect on my observations and concepts. I shared my knowledge of narrative trauma theory in the hope that together we could explore the themes related to her specific experiences.

> *Dear Hanne,*
>
> *Thank you so much for writing, thank you for your faith, and thank you for being willing to work with me even though we're not yet entirely sure how we'll go about it.*
>
> *I've read your narration, and I'm struck by the many skills and actions you took—we know these are rooted in values that have a history—but we also know that even if you managed it, and even if you've moved on, things have happened, and the Self has been in danger. Trauma is what happens inside us. Trauma is the effect of what happened, and you describe how those effects surface and impact your life. Anette Holmgren uses the term "value traumatization"—meaning that one's values have been trampled upon, and that perhaps the worst part was THAT it happened?*
>
> *1. That makes me wonder if you could reflect on or recall—and perhaps say something about—what the worst moment was in the first incident and what the worst moment was in the second incident?*

*2. What do you wish someone had done back when you lived on the property and the incident with the hunting rifle happened? Who understood you? And who, perhaps, would you have wanted to understand you?*

*3. In the incident at Fields, there was a catastrophic lack of information, that is, a catastrophic lack of understanding of your situation. What, if anything, did that mean for you?*

4. *What expectations could we reasonably have of public authorities in such a situation?*

*When you aren't met with an appropriate social response after the worst has happened, it can, in a way, feel like a double trauma to your sense of self.*
*"I experienced this, but no one acknowledges that it happened to me, so maybe I'm the one who's misinterpreting it—maybe it's all my own fault?"*
*I also notice that you write one description in the present tense and the other in the past tense—do you have any idea why?*

*Dear Hanne—thank you again for writing and for letting me read along on important matters. Let me know how my immediate response here works for you, and whether it sparks any ideas about what might be good to do next.*

*Best regards,*
*Lone*

## August 27—Second letter from Hanne

Hanne replied that she liked the letter format. In her response, she used my questions as a framework for her answers:

*Dear Lone,*

*Reflecting on your questions works quite well for me. Having to put it down in writing gives me time to think things through, and many memories come to mind. As your keen eye has surely already noticed, I've cut and pasted parts of your reply and am using your questions here to reflect and respond.*

***It makes me wonder if you could recall or reflect on—and perhaps say something about—what the worst moment was in the first episode, and what the worst moment was in the second episode?***

*I've thought a lot about what the worst moment was when I was threatened with a gun. It's very hard for me to answer that. What comes to mind is that the humiliation started long before that moment. Besides the fear, I also think I found a kind of stubbornness (I didn't want to show I was afraid); the fear was inside me, and it couldn't really get any worse. When he laughed, I took it as the most humiliating thing—he thought I was nothing. I remember thinking that he shouldn't have control over me anymore. I don't remember what happened the next day. What I do remember is that I packed a bag, which I hid. I had an agreement with a friend that I could move in with her at any time. It took some time before I moved. I became stubborn and wanted to decide for myself when I would move. Maybe an attempt to preserve my self-respect!*

*At the Royal Arena, the worst part was that I was responsible for Molly and dealing with the uncertainty. It was unsettling not knowing anything, especially since it went on for hours.*

***What do you wish someone had done back when you were living on the property and the incident with the hunting rifle happened?***

*I wish my parents had realized or noticed sooner how my ex-husband was behaving. They focused on how well I was doing—I was spoiled*

*with horses and such—and they always praised him because he was so talented.*

*When the incident with the rifle happened, they didn't help. But my father stayed in touch with him for some time afterward. That really pissed me off. I felt like my father didn't want to see how things really were.*

*I've had many discussions with my parents about it. For a very long time, they insisted that I wouldn't have listened to them. I wish they had seen it and been there for me anyway, until I was able to get through it.*

*It wasn't until I met my second husband that they expressed how terrible they thought it had been for me.*

***Who understood you? And who might you have wished had understood you?***

*When I moved, I also left my job. My husband and I worked together, so I had to step away from that. My former boss offered me a job, and he understood what I was going through. We didn't talk about it much; he was just there. There were friends who understood me and whom I could talk to about it.*

*I wish my family had been there more.*

*I also think I was ashamed of having been in that situation. I should have been able to do something. I fought and lost—that's how it felt back then.*

*At the Royal Arena, I just think I would have liked to have known along the way what was happening. Especially, I would have liked to have known when they had caught the man and there was no longer anything to be afraid of.*

***One description is in the present tense, and the other in the past tense—do you have any idea why?***

*I've thought about that a lot, and I can't figure out why. Maybe because one episode happened a very long time ago and the other happened just a year ago!*

*Kh. Hanne*

### September 8—My second reply to Hanne

In my next letter, I chose to address the two themes I had previously presented to Hanne: traumatization and appropriate social response.

In the first episode, Hanne was not met with an appropriate social response; on the contrary, she was left feeling ashamed and said of the effects: "*It has affected my view of myself. For most of my adult life, I've had the feeling that I had to prove I was good enough. Both to others and to myself."*

The second episode took place in a community, and many people felt it was a shame that they didn't receive information, just as Hanne was fully aware of her deliberate actions throughout the evening: *"I had no doubt about what was important, and I did my best."*

In an attempt to highlight the differences between the two episodes in terms of self-perception, I chose to poeticize Hanne's own words about skills, knowledge, intentions, and values from her first and second letters.

I did this because I knew I wanted to work with Hanne's sense of self and her values, intentions, and skills. Reproducing another person's words in connection with actions one has taken helps to clarify actions as active responses—and thereby strengthens the sense of agency and the sense of an intentional and active self.

In the first poeticization, I highlight Hanne's words about a "we" in particular. I want to reinforce the sense that she was part of a community and that she

created a community. I highlight Hanne's intentions and values through her words about taking responsibility and taking actions that can comfort her grandchild. My hope is that this will reinforce the sense of mattering to others, because it reinforces the sense of mattering to oneself:

> *Dear Hanne,*
>
> *Thank you for your two letters.*
>
> *In your first letter, which you sent to me on August 20, you described the incident from last year when you were at the Royal Arena with your grandchild. You wrote that you had felt in danger and that the incident had brought back memories of your first marriage, where you were threatened with a hunting rifle. I wrote back to you briefly via email, discussing, among other things, the importance of receiving an appropriate social response and the concept of value traumatization.*
>
> *You wrote back that it had been quite helpful to get closer to that feeling of worthlessness. You wrote: "It wasn't so much that he had a weapon, but that he was laughing. That's when the feeling of being worthless surfaced."*
>
> *The trauma isn't the specific event that happened. The trauma is what the episode has done to the person, on the inside, so to speak. I get the impression that the two episodes have affected you differently—and my guess is that last year at the Royal Arena, you recognized the feeling of being in danger—but you were able to act very differently (you acted/spoke/were responsible for your grandchild/were part of a group/etc.) and therefore you didn't lose yourself. Nor was anyone laughing at you; you weren't belittled—on the contrary, there were many of you together in danger, lacking information, etc. You were met with an appropriate social response to the situation. In the story from the Royal Arena, you remember and describe many details about what you did, what you all did, what you*

*thought, what the context was like, what time it was, what people said, what was happening around you—and you were constantly surrounded by other people feeling and expressing the same things.*

- *Later, you write that the worst part was that you were responsible for Molly—I wonder if that might also have been the best part, because it called for action?*
- *What do you think about this difference between the two episodes? About being met with an appropriate social response?*

*<u>Below are your own words about skills, knowledge, intentions, and values from your first letter:</u>*

*I had invited my oldest grandchild to a Harry Styles concert*
*My friends were going to drive us*
*My friends know I can get a little frantic*
*We'll arrive well in advance*
*We'll make plans*
*We decide*
*We decide*
*I think*
*My heart races in Molly's mode*
*I try to keep her occupied*
*We're "just talking"*
*We talk about how it's not nice*
*And I say that I also think it's strange*
*But that there's nothing else to do but wait*
*My thoughts are terrifying*
*I think we're in a bad place*
*I try to stay as calm as possible so Molly doesn't get any more scared than absolutely necessary*
*We go inside*
*We walk around and buy a few things for Molly*
*We wait again*

*I remember someone coming out on stage and saying*
*We're okay, as far as we know*
*Announcement from the stage*
*We're being ushered out*
*It's my experience that we all look out for one another*
*We're walking in a long line*
*We've been in touch with my friends*
*They're welcoming us in Vanløse*
*It's reassuring*
*We breathe a sigh of relief*
*The lights go out and the train stops*
*I think*
*We're actually all surprisingly calm*
*The relief is palpable*
*As we sit in the car, we feel safe*
*When we get home, we watch the news*
*We have to see what has happened*
*We calm down a little*
*And both of us can sleep*

*<u>Your words from Letter No. 2 about skills and values</u>*

*I found stubbornness*
*I thought: He won't be in charge of me anymore*
*I packed a bag and hid it*
*I had plans with a friend*
*I was stubborn and wanted to decide for myself when I would move*
*It pissed me off that my dad stayed in touch*
*My dad wouldn't see how things really were*
*I've had many arguments with my parents about it*
*I wish they had seen it*
*I wish they had been there until I was able to...*
*I wish my family had been there more*
*I should have been able to do something*

*I fought and lost*
*That's how it felt back then*

*When you read these words—about what you learned, about who you became, about what you felt—back when you were 19—how do you think that connects to how you see yourself today? And to your desire to be close to another person, to receive unconditional love, to believe in love?*

*I get the sense that you might have been alone back then—that you weren't met with an appropriate social response, and the Self cannot tolerate that.*

*Let me hear what you think.*
*Kh. Lone*

### September 22—Hanne's third and final letter

After I sent the letter with the poetic rendering of Hanne's own words and descriptions, I wondered if it was helpful enough. Could my poetic rendering serve as an appropriate social response?

It took nearly two weeks for Hanne to reply, during which time my doubts grew. But when she did reply, it became clear that this very opportunity for slowness had allowed her to read the poetic rendering several times and feel what the words did to her.

*Dear Lone,*

*Your question:* ***What do you think about it? This difference between the two episodes? About being met with an appropriate social response?***

*When I look at my own words about taking care of Molly throughout the whole process, I can see that I succeeded. She has no lasting effects from the episode. Reading those words again has made it*

*evident to me that I was quite competent. I knew what I had to do, and I did my best.*

*The episode no longer weighs on me the same way. In fact, it weighs on me very, very little.*

*The difference between the two episodes has become so much clearer. I have a feeling that time with my ex-husband has had the greatest impact. It has affected how I see myself. For most of my adult life, I've felt like I had to prove I was good enough. To others and to myself.*

*When I read your repetition of my words, I realize that I managed to do so much more than I was aware of. That it was largely about a lack of appropriate social response. Stubbornness has taken on a different meaning; I no longer need to be stubborn in the sense of being strong and able to endure (does that make sense?); it's okay to let go when something doesn't feel good or right.*

*It wasn't me who was wrong or not good enough. I was held captive by the norm that material values were most important, and that I should be able to endure staying in a relationship even if it wasn't good. It seems completely crazy now.*

*I hardly know what else to say. I feel better than I've ever felt before. I have an inner peace, and I no longer feel the need to prove anything to anyone. I can hardly believe that the feeling of being worthless ever took root inside me. THANK YOU, LONE.*

*I've noticed that I dare to give a little more of myself in my relationships; I no longer need to keep my distance to guard against what others might see (that I am worthless). I've also noticed that I care less about what others think or feel about what I say or do. It's a relief.*

*The episodes have lost their momentum.*

*Dear Lone, I hope this makes sense,*
*Kh. Hanne*

## My Afterthoughts

Gratitude is the first word that comes to mind. Gratitude for the trust that was shown to me and gratitude that I know what to do as a therapist, because time and again in my narrative practice I have found that the ideas do not fail. I mean the ideas that all people are competent—and that we should shed light on their intentions and values.

I believe in the ideas of sharing knowledge and of balancing the power dynamic between us. My first go-to in my work has long been a quote from Karen Blixen:

*"All sorrows can be borne, if only we place them within a narrative"*[1]

This is where I always start. When I meet people who have lost their bearings in life, people who may have lost themselves along the way amid sorrowful events, I always think of this quote. It is about placing events and understandings within a narrative and gaining an overview of the landscape of one's life.

The point of the quote is that pain becomes bearable when it is given meaning—not as a general, normative explanation, but meaning in relation to what a person values and stands for. We are struck by trauma and moral wounds when we experience belittlement, violence, and threats—and we rise with dignity when we are recognized for our significance to others and to ourselves. That is the point I love and always carry with me.

## The Slowness

In this process, I became absorbed by the unique pace of written language—its slowness and timing—and what it does to another person's ability to step forward

[1] Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen), interview with Bent Mohn, The New York Times Book Review, November 3, 1957.

as an agent in their own life. It gave me the opportunity to work at a different pace, with time to reflect, think, and formulate my questions with greater care.

Since then, I have been wondering whether spoken language sometimes forces questions and answers before they have truly ripened.

I have, of course, also been curious about whether narrative letter therapy can work for everyone. Over the past few years, I have tested it with various people. A young woman I met in talk therapy initially rejected the idea: “I can’t write; I can’t write at all.” Our contact slowly faded. But one day she sent a text message: “I’ve written a long letter to you about some of what’s happened that I never really got to tell you.”

This marked the beginning of a correspondence in which stories of violence and abuse gradually took on a different character. Responses, resistance, and a movement emerged. The shame shifted sides. What had been hidden was now shared and met with an appropriate social response—one that was appropriate for the young woman.

## Decentered—But Influential

The understanding of others as people who always can, know, and want to do something is where I most clearly feel the power of narrative practice.

The trust that it is the other person who is doing the work. I do not step forward as an analyzing expert, but as someone who facilitates a process in which the other person can reclaim themselves.

Perhaps this is precisely where writing takes on its special significance. In the slowness. In the fact that words do not have to come immediately but are allowed to take shape at their own pace.

For in this slowness, my role as a facilitator becomes clearer to me. I am not there to drive the conversation forward or elicit answers. Instead, I can create a poetic framework where the other person has time to find their own words—at their own pace. I filter the words and give them back, while sharing the knowledge I

have. Each time, I am reminded of the value of remaining in a position that is decentralized yet influential.

The rhythm of the letter insists on pause and reflection. Thus, I find that narrative letters support a practice where the other person emerges more clearly in the light of knowledge, values, and agency.

## Afterword: What Is the Spirit of Narrative Practice?

Lasse Offenberg, DISPUK

*The seven articles we have presented in this special issue of JCNT showcase various examples of written narrative practices. In this afterword, I will examine some of what these practices may have in common—a set of presuppositions that shape a particular perspective and a specific way of viewing people. It is a set of presuppositions that manifests itself in the written practices presented here but can also be brought into play in countless other ways. And perhaps it can say something about the spirit of our narrative practices?*

*To examine these presuppositions more closely, I will introduce Hilde Lindemann Nelson's concept of morally degrading identities. Using this concept as a starting point, I will examine some of the practices described in the other articles and highlight how they—perhaps precisely as a hallmark of narrative practices—seek to avoid the assignment of degrading identities that seem to happen routinely in a lot of everyday practices. Instead, they insist on viewing people as moral agents. But first, I want to tell you about a meeting with a massage therapist.*

Many years ago, I had an uneventful experience that I nevertheless keep returning to. At a time when I was also dealing with several other problems in my life, I struggled for quite some time with back pain, so I sought out a massage therapist to do something about it. True to a frugal attitude of mine, I ended up booking an appointment with a therapist who was relatively newly trained but worked under the supervision of more experienced therapists. Even though I had high hopes that the treatment would do me good, it would also be nice if it didn't cost too much.

The day of the first treatment arrived. I lay down on the table, and the treatment began. The therapist quickly identified significant tension around my neck and

shoulders, and at one point, as he worked on a particularly tender spot and I winced loudly, he said in a quite neutral tone: “Does it hurt especially here? That’s where stubbornness is.”

Right then, I could feel my body cringe in silent irritation. I remember stubbornly thinking something along the lines of: “I really don’t think I’m stubborn.”

As far as I recall, I didn’t say anything about it, just grunted a little “oh” and then let my irritation simmer, while in my inner dialogue I apparently told him various truths about how difficult a situation I was in, and grumbled a bit about how he clearly didn’t really see what a good person I was.

He continued working while I lay there sulking. Eventually, he called in his supervisor: a tall, calm, bearded man who seemed trustworthy, though I can’t quite put my finger on why. They talked a bit about how far along we were in the treatment. My therapist mentioned, among other things, my tense shoulders and stubbornness, while the supervisor addressed the muscle tension.

“I don’t know if I’d call it stubbornness,” he said, “—maybe more like persistence.”

From one moment to the next, it was as if a weight had been lifted, and I relaxed and felt at ease in his presence.

## How Do We Want to Be Known?

It’s been many years since I had that experience on the massage table—and yet I remember it clearly. Even back then, I was deeply struck by how much of a difference a single word made: I really didn’t like being called stubborn. I felt misunderstood and unrecognized, and I became irritated and immediately withdrew. On the other hand, I completely opened up when the experienced supervisor suggested that the word “persistence” was a better fit. I felt recognized in that description and wanted to continue working with him.

Even back then, I thought to myself that there must be plenty of people in the world around me who are used to being called far worse things. I couldn’t help

but wonder what it must be like for them. Does it also make them freeze up and withdraw? And soon I also started to wonder if I might be one of those people who, every now and then in connection with my work—and in life in general—calls others something that makes them cringe?

## Perspectives on Narrative Practice

I have been enthusiastic about narrative practice throughout my professional life. Since 2004, I have been employed at DISPUK, where I both teach narrative practice and, as part of my work, conduct conversations and, among other things, work with conflict management.

When I was hired more than twenty years ago, Michael White and Maggie Carey were regular guests at DISPUK, teaching both our students and the staff. Since then, a string of narrative-inspired practitioners—such as John Winslade, Art Fischer, and most recently Travis Heath, Tom Carlson, and Sanni Paljakka—have regularly visited us and shared their practices with us.

Ever since I first saw Michael White and David Epston at work on a slightly blurry VHS tape, I have been inspired and moved by seeing the people they spoke with emerge in new ways in the conversations. People who, often both by their own perception and that of the world around them, had been regarded as having serious problems, as powerless, hopeless, or not good enough—who, in the conversations I witnessed, in an often loitering journey between questions and answers, gradually emerged in new ways. Both for us who witnessed it, and apparently often for themselves as well.

These were conversations in which we heard about small and large steps and about initiatives people had taken. They were conversations in which I was often moved when I heard these people talk about their thoughts and intentions, and how they had tried, in often creative and fearless ways, to take care of what was important to them. And these were conversations where I was touched when they spoke of the people around them—friends, neighbors, grandparents, stuffed animals, and all sorts of other wonderful beings—who had inspired or supported them and had mattered to them and their sense of purpose in life.

I was then—and I still am today—captivated by those moments in conversations and in life when a person, through often overlooked or entirely new stories, revealed themselves to us, and to themselves, in new ways.

## The Special Perspective

In a beautiful passage in his book *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (Gilligan, 2000), the American psychiatrist James Gilligan writes about people's desire to feel known enough to be recognized and worthy of another look.

I have a feeling that this is something that often happened when I watched those old VHS tapes: that we saw conversations in which people were, from the start, regarded as worthy of another look. A look that saw not only all the problems they had so often been associated with, but something completely different that was worth knowing about them. And that through the stories told during the conversations, people became known enough to be recognized for something they wanted to be recognized for—both by others and often by themselves as well.

For many years, I have been preoccupied with learning to ask the questions that bring out those kinds of stories, and I know that many of our students at DISPUK have shared that desire: to learn the narrative questions.

But in recent years, my colleagues and I have been talking still more about something that seems to be there even before the questions. Something without which the exact same formulation of a question is still not the same question. A certain context—a look, a frame, a spirit—that adds to the words.

There is something special about the way Michael White and Maggie Carey, David Epston and John Winslade, and all the other narrative practitioners I have admired over the years, meet and look at the people they have conversations with. And I have a feeling that there is something about the way they see people that might be just as important as the wonderful narrative questions, maps, and ideas for documents.

That feeling only grew stronger when I read how Travis Heath invited course participants to describe what he calls *"the spirits of narrative practice*."

And it grew even further when I read David Epston's article *"How Michael White Came Up with the Idea of Externalizing: An Educated Guess"* (Epston, 2020).

Here, he describes how he and Michael White were intrigued by Thomas Scheff's analyses of psychiatric conversations in the 1970s and 80s. According to Epston, in these conversations, the patient had to admit and confess to being to blame to receive treatment. This became a significant inspiration for the development of externalizing practices—as an attempt to counter what he describes as an "internalizing" psychiatric approach.

And when I was finally introduced to Hilde Lindemann Nelson through David Epston's article *"Moral Character, Moral Agency, and the Genres of the Representation of Others"* (Epston, 2022), and I subsequently began reading her book, *Narrative Repair (Nelson, 2001)*, I felt as though she brought certain concepts into the conversation that emphasized that perspective.

## Morally Degrading Identities

With Hilde Lindemann Nelson came some very simple concepts for the question I had been asking myself for so long: why was there such a big difference in the effect of the two words—stubbornness and persistence?

The first time I came across her was—as mentioned earlier—in David Epston's excellent article, where he introduces Hilde Lindemann Nelson and her concept *of "respectworthiness."*

She uses the concept to describe "the capacity for a person to convince themselves and others firstly that they were worthy of their own respect and secondly of others" (Nelson, 2001, p. 67). There was something about that concept that immediately caught my attention and made me want to read more.

In her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Nelson, 2001), she introduces, right from the start, what she calls *morally degrading identities*.

First, she points out that identity matters for the opportunities we have in life. She writes that "personal identity, understood as a complicated interaction of one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is, functions as a lever that expands or restricts one's ability to exercise moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

She shows how this restriction can occur in two different ways. First, because the way others see us influences how they treat us:

> "The way in which others identify us establishes what they will permit us to do; if they identify us as morally defective, they will perhaps humor us, or hospitalize us, or else treat us with suspicion, contempt, or hostility. This restricts our freedom to act" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

Or as she later writes:

> "Identities mark certain people as candidates for certain treatments, and within abusive group relations these treatments are seldom benign" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

She is very explicit about the fact that this kind of treatment can be downright harmful:

> "A person's identity is damaged when a powerful social group views the members of her own, less powerful group as unworthy of full moral respect" (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

But she also points out that a person's identity can be harmed when they adopt and internalize a dominant group's disparaging or exploitative views of the group to which they belong. In such cases, a sense of self-worth—the belief that one is worthy of full moral respect—is weakened or fails to develop at all. She describes this form of harm as a kind of infiltrated consciousness.

## Not Just Words, but an Entire Identity

Hilde Lindemann Nelson's book is full of examples of people who are assigned morally degrading identities. She mentions people of color and LGBT+ people, but also mothers, nurses, and women, as examples of groups of people who have been assigned morally degrading identities. She views the assignment of morally degrading identities as a widespread phenomenon.

I can't help but think of my experience on the massage table as an example. I have a strong sense that being identified as stubborn in our culture can be morally degrading: stubborn people are easily seen as inflexible and opinionated, as someone who won't listen to reason. In Danish, there's even a term for "stupidly stubborn," but interestingly no term for "stupidly persistent."

That is perhaps why people identified as stubborn can also become candidates for special treatment: we can laugh at them a little, shake our heads at them, roll our eyes, and talk about them—openly or behind their backs. We can view them as "grumpy old men" or "a bit hysterical," and we may not need to take them entirely seriously but can brush them off and put them off.

The persistent ones, on the other hand, deserve our respect …

## Questions for Further Work—and Reading

It's quite a leap I'm taking when I go from talking about Black people, women, and gay people, to talking about people who are called—and thereby assigned the identity of—stubborn. But as I read Hilde Lindemann Nelson, she invites us to ask a few simple questions:

- What words have I begun to use when describing the person I am talking (or thinking) about?
- When I start thinking and talking about a person in that way—perhaps even calling him that, in thought or speech—am I simultaneously assigning him a specific identity? And by extension: Doesn't this often happen in conjunction with the perceptions of a larger, more powerful group?

- Does that identity seem degrading in our culture? Would I myself appreciate being seen as "that kind of person"?
- Am I, by drawing that identity conclusion, simultaneously marking him as a "candidate for special treatment" that isn't benign and thereby limiting his opportunities?
- And does that align with what I intended?

Lately these questions have accompanied me in my daily life. They are with me when I read messages from parents describing their children, whom they'd like me to have conversations with. They are with me in conversations, helping me listen to how the person I'm speaking with has been viewed and labeled, and notice which identities I myself might be on the verge of assigning to them. And they are with me in everyday life, when I read the newspaper or talk with family and friends, and cannot help but notice the assignment of morally degrading identities.

I also had these questions in mind when I read my colleagues' articles in this issue of the journal, and it is my impression that I am not the only one concerned with morally degrading identities assigned in our culture:

It is easy to fall into identifying the shouting, angry, and somewhat threatening female citizen in Lisette Valter's article, and it seems obvious that being seen as shouting, angry, and threatening easily becomes morally degrading, perhaps especially if one is also a woman.

Lasse Hauge writes about how staff, feeling powerless, could speak of a family as "one of the most difficult families we've had," and again I think that being a difficult family could very well be a degrading identity in our culture.

Tine Mølgaard writes about children who react to the cultural structures in institutions—and from the way they react, they are easily identified in morally degrading ways as children with problems.

Camilla Schjørring tells us about Mia, who was received at the hospital by doctors who made her think: "They think that I don't like my child".

Lone Kaae Morell writes about a woman who “fought and lost” and “should have been able to do something”—and in a culture that values winning and action, that seems part of a degrading identification.

In Martin Nevers’ article, there are “victims of bullying” and children “who don’t want to go to a session with a new therapist,” and Olivia Nepper Winther writes about those who are regarded as “vulnerable sources.” When she wonders whether that is a good term to use, I have the impression that she is implicitly wondering if it identifies them in morally degrading ways.

## Thinking Is Also Practice

In *Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann writes about descriptions used in such a way:

> “[…] members of a particular social group are compelled by the forces circulating in an abusive power system to bear the morally degrading identities required by the system. These mandatory identities set up expectations about how group members are to behave, what they can know, to whom they are answerable, and what others may demand of them” (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

I cannot help but think that the identities my colleagues have noted and are countering in their articles are examples of this.

Hilde Lindemann Nelson is quite blunt in her description of the effects of such identifications: “Here we can speak of shattered identities” (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

It is as if the concept of morally degrading identities has invited me to take notice of my own and our collective practices of identification—which otherwise easily take place in a completely everyday manner and often go almost unnoticed.

It is my impression that we live in a culture where we, often without batting an eye, describe others in ways that assign morally degrading identities to them, but for me, the encounter with narrative practice and now, even more clearly, the encounter with Hilde Lindemann Nelson's terms has made it harder to routinely

identify others without pausing to notice it: to consider how I am describing them and what identity I—and we—might thereby be assigning to them. To consider whether, in Hilde Lindemann's words, we are in the process of "damaging" a person's identity and *respectworthiness*, and to take note of the ways of treating them that become possible through that identification.

This made me think of an interview with the American scholar Donna Haraway. In a passage about what she calls "thinking technologies", she says:

> "I find it important to make it impossible to use philosophical categories transparently. […] Rather, I will foreground the work practice that thinking is." (Olesen et al., 2008, p. 35).

As I read Donna Haraway, her intention is to point out that thinking is a practice we often do not notice—and where we often fail to notice the very real effects that thinking has on how we identify others.

She wants to bring both thinking and the concepts we use to think to the forefront, making them so clear and explicit that it becomes difficult to use them without noticing both the concepts themselves and what our thinking does.

I believe that Hilde Lindemann's concepts have done just that for me: brought some of the ways we—and I—routinely identify others to the forefront as a practice we can notice, examine the effects of, and—if we so choose—change.

## Counterstories In Narrative Practice

Since being introduced to the idea of morally degrading identities, it has been a pleasure to recognize a similar perspective in narrative texts when I reread them.

If one—just as an example—reads Michael White's introduction to the work on defining ceremonies in *Maps of Narrative Practice*, he is very explicit in his description of external witnesses as an alternative to what he calls "rituals of contemporary culture that judge and degrade people's lives" (White, 2007, p. 163).

He elaborates on this by writing that “in many of these degrading rituals, people’s lives are measured against socially constructed norms,” and that in the process they are “judged as inadequate, incompetent, disordered, and often a failure in terms of their identities” (White, 2007, p. 163).

In Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s words, one could say that in such contexts, people are assigned morally degrading identities.

I was struck by the word “ritual” when I reread White’s text. Translated into Danish, it might seem a bit mysterious. But I imagine he used it to point out that he was writing about practices that have become so widespread and commonplace in our culture that they have taken on an almost ritualistic character. These might include, for example, grading, parent-teacher conferences, performance reviews, diagnostic testing, and the whole array of practices where people’s lives are measured and evaluated against social norms. Psychotherapy can also take place in this way.

When the woman in Lisette Valter’s article protests, “Yet another meeting about us, which we probably aren’t allowed to attend,” isn’t it because she realizes that it is morally degrading to be seen as someone we talk about, without needing to speak with or listen to her?

Do some of the young people in Martin Nevers’ article, who are reluctant to meet with yet another therapist, perhaps sense that in previous encounters with such adults they have been assigned morally degrading identities and treated in ways they did not appreciate and do their best to avoid subjecting themselves to such identification?

And when Mia in Camilla Schjørring's article thinks that the doctors thought that she doesn’t like her child, isn’t she painfully aware that being seen as a mother who doesn’t like her child is a moral degradation of the worst kind?

## Unsolicited, Know-It-All Helpfulness

Because the normalizing gaze is constantly focused on where people fall short, it often leaves us with an impulse—with the best of intentions—to help those we see, even without their asking for it. We try to guide them forward, make them realize where they are wrong, or shape them to fit the norms.

This often manifests as an impulse to do something *to* the person rather than *with* the person; we may feel the urge to help before we've even asked if help is wanted at all—to teach them to control their temper, believe in themselves more, not take things so seriously, or gain more self-awareness.

Our culture is full of this kind of often unsolicited, know-it-all helpfulness—both in professional contexts and in everyday life. And with Hilde Lindemann Nelson in mind, one might ask whether—precisely in our attempt to help—we sometimes systematically end up assigning people morally degrading identities that make them candidates for special treatment, of which the help itself is one example?

## Counterstories Can Repair Damaged Identities

It is one thing to be mindful of the morally degrading identities I may help assign to others. But in a culture rife with degrading rituals, we must also ask ourselves what we can do when identities have already been damaged by such labels.

Here, Hilde Lindemann Nelson's approach is very familiar to narrative practice. She refers to counterstories as "tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on identities by oppressive power systems" (Nelson, 2001, p. 13).

Stories whose "aim is to re-identify such people as *competent members of the moral community* and, in doing so, to enable their moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. 13).

Stories that make it possible to see the person as a competent moral agent, as she phrases it.

I found myself smiling when I read that, because those are exactly the kinds of stories that captivated me during my first encounters with narrative practice. Stories that re-identified people as competent members of moral communities. Stories about people with feelings and intentions, hopes and dreams.

People who faced difficult situations and did their best to handle them. People who, despite overwhelming circumstances, had done their best to offer quiet or vocal resistance and try to create lives and relationships that were in line with what they preferred.

Or, in other words, competent moral agents.

### Is There a Particular Perspective at Play in These Counter-Narratives?

I recently reread Allan Wade's article *"Small Acts of Living"* and noticed that he writes about a series of practices—including narrative therapy—which, according to him, share "the assumption of preexisting ability":

> "This is the view that people attending therapy already possess the inherent ability to respond effectively to the difficulties they face," he writes (Wade, 1997, p. 24).

Michael White touches on something similar when he—in a quote from the article *"Narrative Practice and Community Assignments*," which I usually have with me when I teach—describes how it is one of his assumptions in *community work* that all communities possess knowledge about life that is relevant for addressing the concerns and difficult situations faced by the members of these communities:

> "We also assume that many of these knowledges and skills […] will be either thinly known or relatively invisible to members of these communities" (White, 2003, p. 25).

A third assumption I find time and again in narrative literature is the assumption that people are never simply passively subjected to what hardship life has given

them—that they always respond and that stories can be developed based on the actions they took in response to the problems they faced.

A fourth point could be the idea of what we can "refer to as people's moral character"—an idea that Travis Heath introduced to us at DISPUK, and which David Epston describes in the aforementioned article *"Moral Character, Moral Agency and the Genres of the Representation of Others*."

Epston points to a moral character that people have often been deprived of "as a result of dominant modes of representation that dominated our professions" (Epston, 2022, p. 8).

What emerges for me is a set of *presuppositions* that help us—even before a conversation begins—to assume that the people we meet are competent moral agents, with the ability to respond, with knowledge and skills they draw upon, and with intentions and values they strive to live by.

They also lead us to assume that their moral character is often thinly or "flatly" described in the problem stories or—as Sanni Paljakka points out more precisely—through some of the *labels* and *unstories* that have been used to describe them (Paljakka et al., 2024).

## Seeing as a Practice

I find it important to talk about the perspectives created by the *presuppositions* we hold. This is partly because of the risk of narrative practices being taken up and used as tools of normalizing discipline.

In a world full of "rituals that judge and degrade people's lives," we see how people who have "learned" narrative practices risk using those practices in ways that suspiciously resemble normalizing discipline.

A so-called narrative therapist can skillfully declare that "the person is not the problem" and begin what by name is supposed to be an externalizing conversation, but on closer inspection—in very normalizing ways—seems to attempt to make women less angry or boys less restless, driven by a silent

underlying assumption that there must be something wrong with the people themselves, since anger and agitation are constantly "paying a visit."

Such conversations too easily end with conclusions about the benefits of a little more impulse control or other ways to keep anger and agitation in check, which would make it easier to fit in.

My impression is that the "thinking practices" and presuppositions that have shaped narrative practices are as important to learn as the questions themselves.

And the more we articulate some of the presuppositions and 'thinking practices' we might think of as characteristic of narrative practice, the more difficult it becomes to fall into normalizing routines that assign degrading identities to the people we work with.

And in the process of doing so, we might be able to say a great deal about some of *the spirits of narrative practice.*

## Looking for That Look in the Other Articles

I think I see those thinking practices, those presuppositions and the kind of gaze they shape again and again in the articles that preceded this afterword.

I think I see it in Martin Nevers' invitations to those he works with: when he writes invitations instead of summons—because an invitation allows a moral agent to decide whether they want to take part in such a conversation, while a summons implies that the person must.

I see the perspective when Martin considers that the young people may have had experiences with therapists and other helpers that make them, as moral agents, hesitant about meeting with a new therapist—and when he tells them about this in the invitation and invites them to a different kind of collaboration.

And I see it, for example, when he writes: "I don't actually know very much about eating disorders, but you already have three years of experience with it, so I imagine what you know about the subject is more than enough"—and in doing so

identifies the young woman as a competent moral agent with relevant knowledge and experience, and invites the establishment of a collaborative relationship that respects those experiences.

I think I see this when Lisette Valter takes the shouting voice seriously instead of simply viewing the woman with the voice as yet another overly angry resident and brushing her off. When she doesn't just hear the protest against staff holding meetings without the residents as mere grumbling but hears it as a relevant objection from a moral agent and responds not just by letting the voice speak, but by listening to it, taking it seriously, giving it influence, and inviting it to supervision.

And when, in her poetic practice, she not only insists on using the voice's own words as they were spoken but also insists that the words contain poetic wisdom that deserves to be written down and read aloud, with all the solemnity a poem deserves.

I see it in the way Lasse notices how people—even in moments of vulnerability—exercise agency through small but meaningful acts.

And when Tine has an eye for professionals who fight an unequal battle daily to bring their professional expertise into play under conditions that stand in stark contrast to what we know is necessary for children's development and well-being.

I see this when Olivia Nepper Winther insists on approaching her sources' intentions to agree to be interviewed with curiosity, and in doing so views them as moral agents who have likely already considered what they hope to achieve by sharing parts of their story with a journalist—even in situations where they know full well that, in the eyes of many readers, these stories may leave them vulnerable to criticism and condemnation.

I see it when she listens to them as a witness and writes witnessing letters in which she tells the people she has spoken with what their words have given her—and in this way makes them moral agents in their relationship with her and in her life as well.

And I see it when Camilla points out that her letter-writing is about writing with the family's knowledge at the center and directs her attention to what Mia's reactions might say about her skills as a mother, her ability to be there for her child or—as a direct counterperspective to that held by the doctors—about how much she cares for Hugo.

We could look at all the articles in this way—searching for signs that the writer has viewed those they write about as moral agents. My claim is that we would find this perspective in all the articles.

## I See You—but How Do I See You?

I would like to conclude this afterword by mentioning an experiment conducted years ago by Jacob Birkler, the former chair of the Danish Council on Ethics. In the experiment, he asked a group of nurses to look their patients in the eyes and say, "I see you."

It is touching, but perhaps not surprising, that the eyes of half of the patients filled with tears when they heard this.

The experiment speaks to how important it is to be seen.

Echoing Hilde Lindemann Nelson, I would add that it is not only important to be seen, but just as important, *how* one is identified when seen.

To me, some of the spirit of narrative practice lies in the avoidance of practices that make morally degrading identifications. In an insistence on presupposing that any person who sits in front of me is a competent moral agent. And that no matter how easily they could be—and have been—identified in morally degrading terms, they are worthy of another look.

That look might be just as important to the development of counterstories as the wonderful questions and letter-writing skills we have come to cherish.

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