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

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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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