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

References

Foucault, M. (1988). Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the Age of Reason. Vintage Books.

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

White, M. (2007). Maps of narrative practice. W. W. Norton & Company.