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## Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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

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### Editor's Note

We are delighted to announce the most recent release of the Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy. We are grateful to the authors, who appear in this release, for their efforts in bringing their ideas and their practice to our readers. We hope that you enjoy the papers as much as we did.

The first paper in this issues, “Inspiring Believed-in-Hope as an Ethical Position: Vicarious Resistance & Justice-Doing” written by Vikki Reynolds, Riel Dupuis-Rossi and Travis Heath, explores the relationship between believed-in-hope in the development and nurturing of vicarious resistance and justice doing in efforts to resist despair and personal and collective suffering in contexts of social injustice.

The second paper, “Mattering as the Heart of Health and Human Services” written by William Madsen, Beth Root, and Nina Tejs Jørring, highlights the philosophical and theoretical ideas related to the concept of “mattering” and how practices of mattering have been taken up in their local contexts and agencies.

The third paper, “On Ferocious and Gentle Correspondence Between a Rebel Woman and Worry” written by Chelsey Morton, is a practice based paper that tells the story of Chelsey’s use of narrative letter writing as a means for oversight in her work with a woman in the grips of patriarchal worry.

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Editor's Note



*Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, 2021, Release 1, [www.journalcnt.com](http://www.journalcnt.com), p. 1.*





## Inspiring Believed-in-Hope as an Ethical Position: Vicarious Resistance & Justice-Doing

Vikki Reynolds, Riel Dupuis-Rossi & Travis Heath

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### Still 'Amazingly Alive'

My relationship to believed-in-hope and vicarious resistance has been nourished, inspired and shouldered-up by networks of social justice activists, communities of resistance, teams of practitioners, and people I aim to be of use to, across four decades of struggle, activism and community work. The hope I am talking about is not optimism or positivity, but the hard work of trying to resist despair and resist abandoning people to personal suffering and to collective contexts of injustice. My work alongside people who are suffering has informed and transformed me. I owe a huge debt in particular to asylum seekers and refugees who have survived torture and political violence, people who were inmates on Death Row in the USA, and Indigenous people from Turtle Island (North America) who have survived and continue to resist the political violence of colonization, genocide and assimilation. Despite the darkness of this work, and the contexts of mean and hate-filled politics that create the structures of suffering I respond to, I still feel a spirited connection with activist/street poet Bud Osborne's (1999) poem: "Here we are amazingly alive, against long odds and left for dead" (p.9).

In many ways this writing is a response to the many workers across time who have asked how I have resisted burnout and experienced both sustainability and transformation across decades of struggle in community work and activism. I have invited Riel Dupuis-Rossi and Travis Heath to offer critiques and reflections to this writing because of my respect for their ethics and work, and to invite accountability across domains of privilege and power, making space for multiple voices. I know Riel & Travis to have the moral courage to offer expansive critique and invitations to accountability. We did not write together because we do not want to conflate our important differences. I did not want us to speak harmoniously as that would conceal more than our separate but connected voices could reveal. Riel and Travis' solidarity in this project has allowed me to speak more vulnerably, from my broken-hearted places, and offers, I believe, an ethical container to hold witness alongside critique and a true reckoning with power.

I believe that as community workers we are ethically required to bring hope to our relational work with people who are suffering. This is a recursive, un-ending project of engendering hope and bringing hope to the helping relationship. Three decades of supervising teams working and living in the margins with people struggling against structural oppression and exploitation has also taught me that justice-doing, and enacting our collective ethics, is a necessary foundation for a finger-hold on hope and a possible path for sustainability in our work. Building solidarity teams and creating practices for our collective care have proved to be useful tactics across time and struggles. Sustainability is so much more than resisting vicarious-trauma or burnout; it





speaks to the transformations and vicarious resistance we have witnessed and engaged within relationships with people struggling for dignity, safety, and justice in contexts of structural oppression and hate (Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds, 2011a).

As an activist, therapist and clinical supervisor, my work across time has been to bridge the worlds of social justice activism with community work (Reynolds, 2019; Reynolds & Hammoud-Beckett, 2018). The context of my work is supervision and therapy with peers, activists, and other workers responding to the opioid catastrophe, torture and political violence, sexualized violence, mental health, substance misuse, homelessness, legislated poverty and working alongside gender and sexually diverse communities.

My people are from Ireland, Newfoundland, and England, and I am a white settler with heterosexual and cisgender privilege. I am still immersed in the ongoing work of un-settling myself as a white settler (Regan, 2010), despite my intention to be decolonizing in all of my paid and unpaid work. Tuck and Yang (2012) teach that decolonization is not a metaphor, and means commitments to Indigenous land return and Indigenous governance. I aim to be directed in all my activist work and organizing by Indigenous people (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). As a settler I have set intentions to stay implicated in the ongoing catastrophes (Kouri & Skott-Myers, 2016) of colonization and genocide (Brave Heart, & DeBruyn, 1998) and committed to taking actions.

I position my work as an anti-perfection project to acknowledge that working towards just relations is going to be imperfect because we have not co-created a just society. Engaging in this purposefully messy and imperfect process (Reynolds, 2014a) is informed by queer theory (Butler, 1990), critical trans theory (Spade, 2011), and anti-authoritarian social justice activism (Chomsky, 2005; Buechler, 2005; Shantz, 2011) where we aim to respond immediately to all oppressive and abusive acts. It requires that we take overt positions for justice-doing, defy neutrality, and have the moral courage to face up to and repair the consequences of imperfect actions.

### Believed-in-Hope

Fostering believed-in-hope is hard, intentional work. Discerning believed-in-hope from optimism and positivity is important in order to maintain an ethical stance for justice-doing. Hope is not synonymous with optimism (Weingarten, 2000). I am not optimistic; I am very realistic about what is going on in this world, and I am terrified by it. But my terror does not get me stuck, it activates me, as feminist poet Marge Piercy (1982, p. 88) names it, towards a 'just anger':

“A good anger acted upon  
is beautiful as lightning  
and swift with power.





A good anger swallowed,  
A good anger swallowed  
clots the blood  
to slime.”

Resisting positivity and fostering believed-in- hope is a useful and necessary tactic against despair. Our job alongside people who are suffering is to be the bringers of hope: not to throw up our hands, but to roll up our sleeves. This requires the development of a finely attuned sense of hope, and a tenacious commitment to the moment-to-moment intention to seek out the acts of resistance (Reynolds, 2010; Richardson & Wade, 2008) and moments of justice-doing, no matter how small and trace those may be, and amplify them into a believed-in-hope.

Hopelessness can be a site of privilege. This was a humbling learning for me as a younger activist. I was devastated and empty following my active participation in solidarity struggles with Central and South American countries responding to the dirty wars of the 1980s, which were backed by American imperialism and capitalism. I was bereft, de-energized, hopeless. Then I came across these words from Brazilian scholar and popular educator Paulo Freire (1970): “Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair, but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice” (p. 72-73). I was confronted with an awareness of how my relationship to hopelessness was inextricably linked to my privileges, especially as a white citizen in the global north. Global south activists, coming from less privileges than I hold, were responding to the darkness as a call to action, requiring them to maintain a hold on hope in precarious contexts. This absolutely inspired me, and lit a fire in me that has kept me of use—a fire I must guard against the systemic privileges that work to extinguish it.

### Resisting Despair

The etymology of the word ‘despair’ comes from Latin for ‘without hope’, and is related to *spīritus*, which means breath or spirit. From this, ‘despair’ can be understood to mean: an absence of spirit. I believe bringing a relational self and a spirited presence to the people we work alongside is an ethical requirement of the work. Un-spirited work is more than merely problematic: it calls to question our ability to do our work ethically, or at all.

Psychology and the helping professions’ commitments to objectivity and neutrality can lead to despair. Professionalism can bring a silencing of all things ‘political’ and ‘religious’. This can easily morph into designing helping relationships that are silent about both power and the sacred. This silencing stance bolsters and reinforces the very conditions of an unjust society that are the root of many people’s suffering. Taking an overt position for justice is itself an act





of resistance against despair; I have found that this is required to care for my own tender relationship with hope.

I spent a decade across the 1980s and 1990s immersed in the death penalty abolitionist struggle; I was involved with multiple groups' efforts to organize international campaigns and direct actions against the death penalty in the USA and internationally. I worked for over twenty men on death row in the USA. All of these men were executed by the state. Many people commiserated with me about these men's deaths, but some of the messages I received implied that I had wasted a decade, or that I could have done more effective and useful work. These invitations to despair were compelling. But I was transformed by my work with those men on death row, those men who offered me two powerful teachings, without which I would not be able to do any of my work that followed. The first is an adage from Death Row activism, that everyone is so much more than the worst thing they have ever done. I did not know this, but twenty men on death row taught me this because they had the courage to reveal themselves to me as human beings: as persons, artists, relational beings, spirited persons, and as men who have enacted violence against women. The fact that I am a woman who has survived violence at the hands of men positioned me as a meaningful witness to these men's connections and belongings to humanity. The fact that I resisted their deaths, not because they were innocent, but because I did not believe any state should allow itself to kill people, held meaning for these men.

Resistance to the death penalty also taught me that the binary of winners and losers is a hope-destroying approach to doing-justice. I do not mean that I had no hope of saving a man's life or that I have abandoned hope of ending the death penalty worldwide; I was adamantly resisting state killings until the last moments of each man's life. But I was not judging the usefulness of our collective resistance on whether or not we were able to stop the oppressive power of the American government's killing machine. Our work was meaningful and useful because we treated people who were deemed inhuman with dignity and respect, and for many of these men that relationship made a significant difference in how they faced death. They knew they were not entirely abandoned, but accompanied by others thus maintaining their connection to humanity, if not to life. Despite the invitation to despair and hopelessness, resisting the death penalty amplified my commitment to resisting despair itself and bringing hope against the darkness, against long odds.

### Bringers of hope

It is our collective ethical obligation as practitioners to bring reasonable hope, a believe-in-hope, an embodied hope to our relational work with clients, and not to steal the hope they have. When services and individual workers transgress against people, we actually steal hope from them: either through being 'the help that doesn't help', or transgressing in oppressive ways, such as unethical practice that leads to child apprehension. When we do poor work in a





helping profession, the consequences are not just that we are not useful. Our poor actions make it prudent and intelligent for people to resist further connections with professionalized help, and thereby create barriers to getting life affirming services they need. Our response to the harms caused by other workers has to resist blaming individuals and move into collective accountability. We then act to make repair of the ruptures we have caused as professionals, both individually and structurally. Our job is to step up and create a space in which there is a possibility for hope to grow.

Bringing hope is not the sole realm of workers, as people inspire and transform workers in reciprocal hope-inspiring relationships. When we track ethics in community work we centre the most vulnerable person in the relationship, which is the person we work alongside. At this intersection of power, it is the role of workers to bring hope. Simultaneously, workers need to resist invitations to what Teju Cole (2012) calls the “white saviour industrial complex” which elevates workers and disappears and makes invisible the resistance, wisdom and work of people. As workers we are not the victims or heroes of our work, but required to have enough access to hope in our lives so that we can be the bringers of hope. This is hard work that requires collective care and practices of sustainability beyond self-care.

Shouldering up workers as they respond to peoples’ suffering that is connected to exploitation and oppression requires that I bring hope to the supervisory relationship. My approach to this has been inspired by a teaching I received from a Tibetan monk, who was himself a survivor of torture and political violence. I was working in Dharmasala, India with the exiled Tibetan community at a Centre for Survivors of Torture; my role was to bring innovative practice, and help workers amplify people’s acts of resistance as part of our own resistance, as practitioners, to Psychology’s portrayal of people who have survived torture as traumatized and broken people (Reynolds et al, 2014b). We were constantly responding to tragic losses of life, human suffering, genocide, and torture. In the darkest moments I was flirting with despair, and asked this monk-brother how he kept his hope alive in the darkness, especially when a statistical analysis of our work would say we were not meeting any outcomes and were in fact losing ground. He referenced an adage from his tradition that went along these lines: Things are not this bad because we are doing nothing or are ineffective. Things are this bad and no worse because we are doing everything humanly possible to not have things be worse. I hold this teaching close as a resistance against the tyranny of measurable outcomes and a scarcity of resources amidst an abundance of need. This is especially poignant where I live, in British Columbia: one of the richest Canadian provinces, which has the second highest rate of child poverty and hunger in the country. Shame.

### **Justice-Doing as a Foundation for Hope**

Enacting hope requires an ethical stance for justice-doing, otherwise we might be merely performing optimism, positivity, naivety, or charity. Justice-doing entails more than not





replicating oppressive practices in our relationships with people. It requires the doing of justice with people, engaging the activist project to transform the social contexts in which suffering and oppression occur, and to do this in ways led by people and with accountability to their communities.

Justice-doing means doing dignity with people and witnessing their resistance to abuses of power, both structural and interpersonal. We resist accommodating suffering others to oppressive lives. I remind myself that no one came to this work to harm people, and yet our work can often result in people being trained up to accommodate themselves to poverty, disrespect or racism. To resist accommodating people to oppression, we have to use our collective power to transform the social contexts that make the horrors of oppression and suffering possible (Reynolds, 2019).

When we work in ways that enact our collective ethics for justice-doing—even though the work is hard and heart-breaking—we can have sustainability. The goal of our work is not to avoid heartbreak, but to be able to hold the person we work alongside at the centre even when we are heartbroken. When we work in ways that are unethical, no amount of self-care will keep us sustained, as we will experience spiritual pain, or ethical pain. When we transgress the values and ethics that are the heart of our work, and that drew us to the work, it is not burnout or vicarious trauma we experience, but ethical pain. A collective ethic of justice-doing makes it possible for us to be the people who can bring hope to the helping relationship (Reynolds, 2011).

### **Solidarity Teams & Sustainability**

When I began work with people who had survived torture over three decades ago I knew that I could not keep myself hope-filled, useful and ethical alone. I knew I would need solidarity and I built a Solidarity Team (Reynolds, 2011b) with the intention of keeping me sustained, ethical, spirited, hopeful, and able to practice in alliance with our collective ethics for justice-doing. Solidarity speaks to the interconnectedness of our collective movements towards social justice, and our commitments to resisting oppression on all fronts. A spirit of solidarity makes the interconnectedness of our justice-doing work visible, and speaks to our ethical commitments to recursively carry and sustain each other, and our collective connection to hope.

A Solidarity Team is an intentional group of folks who work as a networked community (Lacey, 2005) that holds the worker up and accompanies them in the sites of ethical struggle and suffering in the work. We bring our solidarity team members into our work in actual and imagined ways. Being held by a networked community allows workers to access more resources and wisdoms on how they can be most useful to people. Instead of thinking of how an ‘expert practitioner’ would intervene, workers can imagine how they might be more useful to this person, and reconnect with their own hope, if a member of their solidarity team was accompanying them with a spirited relationship of solidarity. The role of the Solidarity Team is





to help us resist despair, make ourselves useful, and be the bringers of hope: and no one can do this alone. The Solidarity Team needs to be peopled with folks who have the moral courage to lean in, across our histories of struggle and relationships of respect and dignity, and offer critique. I could not do my work sustainably, or maintain my relationship with hope, without the solidarity of impassioned, brilliant, ethical people who have had the moral courage to lean in and invite me to accountability for the ethics we hold collectively.

### **Vicarious Resistance and Transformations**

Working with people who have survived torture for three decades has not burned me out, and I do not suffer vicarious trauma from it. I sometimes have dark dreams. The world is a dark place, my heart is broken. I have struggled alongside people who are asylum seekers and who have been refused refugee status by my Canadian government. I have been one of the people who has given someone their last hug before they got on a plane to be deported, to be tortured and murdered by their state. That has broken my heart. But that person who survived torture did not break my heart, Canada did. We have denied people refuge in this country, despite the fact that Canada should not be deciding who can seek refuge here (Dupuis-Rossi, 2020). As a nation we have not addressed our own presence as a diversity of settlers on Indigenous territories, which have been unceded and ancestral territories from time immemorial. The Canadian state and its agents have perpetrated political violence and torture and are complicit in race-based genocide of Indigenous women according to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). It is not that I do not have a broken heart from working with communities of people who have survived torture and political violence, I do. But I do not believe the notion of vicarious trauma speaks ethically or meaningfully to my experience. The talk, resources, and investment into vicarious trauma are massive, but it makes me question where is the ongoing dialogue about vicarious resistance?

I have had the honour to witness stories of resistance from people who have survived torture and political violence, both abroad and in Canada. These dialogues have moved me, inspired me, transformed, educated, and challenged me. People have moved me to political action. People have made me question my education in psychology and the trauma trainings that label people as damaged on the inside. People have required me to show up for them and with them in ways that stretched my trainings and knowledge. The Chilean community has sharpened my political analysis. The Ogoni men I have worked alongside, who were tortured for environmental activism resisting the international resource extraction industry's pipelines in their territories in Nigeria, expanded my analysis of what activism was and can be. They forced me to make intersectional connections between social justice activism and what Indian physicist and activist Vandana Shiva (2005) calls Earth Democracy. This was breaking new ground three decades ago. These teachings and spirited connections have transformed me and made me more useful as an activist, worker, supervisor, and professor. Witnessing decades of people's resistance against state and capitalist power has moved me and ignited my own fire





for justice-doing. My own relationship with hope has also been enriched by people I work alongside who have been the bringers of hope for me, as our relationships are reciprocal, and I acknowledge that people have also changed and shouldered me up. These are the benefits and gifts I have received from Vicarious Resistance.

As a supervisor I am curious about the ways our work amplifies our hope and transforms us. This has engendered a series of questions:

How has this work amplified your hope: In yourself as a worker? In community? In the possibilities for a more just society?

How are you transformed for having done this work?

What have people contributed to your life, your relationships?

What practices of gratitude and 'giving it back' (AA, 2001) has this work engendered in you?

How are you different in this world for having done this work?

Collaborative Therapy innovator Harlene Anderson (1997) teaches that if we are truly in relationships with people, then we, as practitioners, are also at risk of being transformed. Our work is supposed to transform us, and not leave us untouched or unchanged. This transformation is not best understood as vicarious trauma or burnout, but holds the possibility for bringing us closer to our collective vision for how we need this world to be. We do not want to accommodate people to lives of oppression, and thereby hold up systems of exploitation and oppression. Our vision, as Paulo Freire (1970) unapologetically claims, is to transform ourselves, our societies, and this world in hope-filled ways that are just and sustainable.

### **A story of hope in unexpected places**

I had just returned from a cross-country tour speaking about the opioid catastrophe and trying to promote harm-reduction and dignity-driven practice across many communities in Canada. I was exhausted and stretched. I had a desperate call to meet with a team of Aboriginal workers, who were working alongside Aboriginal mothers to help them navigate the oppressive structures required to maintain their housing and resist the apprehension of their children (Gerlach, Browne & Elliot, 2017). I was honoured to be invited in, and despite jet lag and being very tired I knew I had to respond with action and 'showing up'. People who have survived torture and political violence have taught me that the worst thing is not the torture itself, nor the need to seek refuge and leave their homelands: the real torture is living without your children. Canada has more Indigenous children in state care than during the period of Residential schools, and this contravenes the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007, p.5 Article 7, 2). To enact my commitment to a (trying to be) decolonizing stance, I knew I needed to respond to this team of Aboriginal workers and the





mother-led families they support. But I was not just tired, I was also devastated. I am also connected to a team working in a live-in program for youth of all genders struggling with substances, exploitation and oppression in their lives. A youth who was in the program the previous year had died this day of an overdose. This youth died because recovery is not linear, and because there was no Overdose Prevention Site in their community. Donald MacPherson, the Executive Director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, would say this youth died by bad drug policy (personal communication, 2015). The team was overwhelmed with grief. I was trying to respond on many fronts. It was a long, dark, sleepless night.

I awake fitfully, and as I am preparing to meet with the Aboriginal workers, I am straining to be the bringer of hope. I do my self-care practices of plank and stretching as I try to become embodied. I drink decaffeinated coffee and water. The program's workers are dedicated and skilled, but they have also caused harm to each other and to the Aboriginal mothers. I have no prior relationships with these workers, and I am very aware I am yet another white woman professional showing up with a PhD and prestige bolstered by white supremacy. Hope is hard to find. I arrive early and over-prepared.

To my surprise I am met with a circle of about fifteen workers, all earlier than me, and they are nearing the end of a smudge ceremony. They are already enacting the willingness and vulnerability I will need to be able to invite responsibility and enact repair, which gives my believed-in-hope a place to start. A young worker approaches me and non-verbally invites me to smudge. I am hesitant to engage in spiritual practices not my own, but I have also been mentored to participate accountably when invited in to sacred spaces, and to be careful what I take out. When the young worker has finished brushing me down with an eagle feather, she puts everything aside. Then she comes to me and says kindly, "Do you know who I am?" I say she is familiar but I don't remember where we know each other from, or her name. She says, "You were my therapist" (on the team where we had just lost the youth to the opioid catastrophe). She introduces herself as Sarah-Anne Mitchell (her real name, as she wants to be identified in this writing). She tells me she has twenty years free from drugs, that our program and workers are part of how she got her life together. She also says she has five children, and none of them are apprehended by the government. I feel elated, joyful: full of hope. I ask if we can take a selfie on my phone, and we do. I send it to the youth substance misuse program, where the workers share this story of hope, of how youth can and do find liberation and meaningful lives. We can hold this hope in a tension alongside the heartbreak and rage of the youth who has died. Sarah-Anne says to me, "The creator sent you to us and our families today". I say, "The creator also sent you to me today".

### **Borrowing the hope of others**

Acts of hope-filled solidarity continue to humble me and shoulder me up for this work. We are not meant to do this work alone, nor are we required to rely on self-care and individual





resilience, or some equally obscure personal trait, to keep us alive in the work. There is a fluidity in our collective work that allows for and requires an ebb and flow of hope around and between us. In moments when hope is hard to grasp, it is possible to borrow the hope of others.

When it became undeniable that the present opioid catastrophe was more than a bad run of drugs, and that it was going to be reminiscent of the AIDS pandemic, where people died because they were not dignified as human, I despaired. I was thinking that I could not do this again. I met with a beloved friend from decades-past AIDS activist days. My friend held space for my pain and heartache, but resisted my despair by lending me his hope. He said, “yes Vikki, you can do this again, and you will do this again”. That night he sent me this writing from the Talmud, which is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology (Steinstaltz, 2009):

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.

Do justly now.

Love mercy now.

Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work,

but neither are you free to abandon it.”

### Dedication

To Trey Helton, Tara Taylor, Sarah Blythe and the team at the original Overdose Prevention Site, OPS in Vancouver; to Zoe Dodd in Toronto, Stan Kupferschmidt in Ottawa, and all good folks responding to the opioid catastrophe and deaths by bad drug policy who continue to enact and re-create fierce, creative, life-saving acts of resistance that amplify my hope.

### Acknowledgments

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Vikki Reynolds is an activist/therapist from Vancouver, Canada, who works to bridge the worlds of social justice activism and therapy. Vikki is a white settler of Irish, Newfoundland and English folks, and a heterosexual woman with cisgender privilege. Her experience includes supervision and therapy with peers, activists, and other workers responding to the opioid epidemic/poisonings, torture and political violence, sexualized violence, mental health and substance misuse, homelessness and legislated poverty and working alongside gender and sexually diverse communities. Vikki is an Adjunct Professor and has written, keynoted and presented internationally: [www.vikkireynolds.ca](http://www.vikkireynolds.ca)

Riel Dupuis-Rossi is a Two Spirit therapist of Kanien'kehá:ka, Algonquin and Italian descent. Riel grew up in their traditional territories, off reserve in Hamilton, ON and Montreal, QC.

Riel has been providing decolonizing and culturally-centered Indigenous trauma therapy to Indigenous adults in the unceded Homelands of the Coast Salish Nations since 2011. Riel holds both a Masters in Curriculum Studies and a Master of Social Work. Riel's clinical specializations are in historical, transgenerational, complex and shock trauma therapy.

### Reflection by Riel Dupuis-Rossi

As an Indigenous person, my hope lies in what I have inherited from my Onkwehon: we Ancestors and relatives. As an Indigenous person, my hope lies in the fact that under the layers of collective grief is sacred knowledge of a way of life that upholds, centers, respects and lives in harmony with All of our Relations: the Earth, the Sky, the waterways, the forests, plants, sacred medicines, the mountains, the animals, the water life and the winged ones/birds.

My hope is born of reclamation: the subtle yet powerful act of reclaiming one's right to love as an Indigenous person and of those acts of greater magnitude which include our communities' defense of our lands. These acts, whether they be deeply intimate or greatly political, are the equivalent of moving mountains and changing tides. I see Indigenous Peoples' courage in this respect and this courage unfolds on a moment to moment basis.

My hope is alive in the knowledge that as Indigenous Peoples we have complex governance and kinship systems that are based in philosophies and language systems that reflect deep respect and care for all living things. My hope lies in the fact, that as the Original Peoples of this land, we have the skills, competence, insight, wisdom and the time-honoured experience of how to live in our Homelands in a way that is peaceful, honourable, kind, loving and deeply generous. We are a healthy people and we live this health-despite being subjected to relentless and brutal systemic attack by the Settler State.





The poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, child abuse, chronic disease, high rates of suicide and chronic suicidality, cultural dislocation, disproportionate rates of incarcerations and alarmingly high rates of child apprehensions are all forms of violent oppression under colonial rule but it is not who we are. They are the impact of 500 years of colonial war against our Peoples: genocidal warfare, forced relocation, reservations, residential schools, criminalization of our ceremonies, dislocation of our traditional governments, the intentional flooding of Indigenous communities with alcohol and drugs, imposed poverty, police brutality and the ongoing abductions and murder of Indigenous women, girls and trans peoples. These symptoms of colonial violence are not ours to own. Our Indigenous histories, philosophies, governance structures, our songs, ceremonies and medicines contain within them knowledge of who we are and it is hopeful and prideful.

Even those who purport to practice anti-oppressive approaches often do not take the time to see us for who we truly are. The directionlessness of settler society, the poverty of capitalism, the emptiness of a market economy, the darkness of institutionalized settler religion, the incompetence of settler governments—all of these get projected onto us as Indigenous Peoples. We are forced to bear the misery, the suffering, the poverty and the criminality of colonial oppression. All of this stands in sharp contrast to the wisdom, wealth and grace of our traditional governance structures, economies, cultures and spiritualities which exist in respectful alignment with All of Our Relations. It is in the inheritance of ancestral knowledge and in the care that it took to pass it down over generations, despite over 500 years of genocidal attack, that I find hope. It is here that I also find truth, courage, integrity, strength, humility, reverence and honour.

We, Indigenous Peoples, are not souls lost in a sea of pain, darkness and despair. We are Onkwehón: we, the Original Peoples of our vast and most sacred territories. We are the inherent and rightful Leaders, Knowledge Keepers, Healers and Ceremonialists of these lands. And the lands upon which we have lived since time immemorial recognize, claim, care for and protect us even as we live, survive and resist the unspeakable violence of ongoing attempted genocide. But the desecration has nothing to do with us and everything to do with how the settler state and its benefactors live and govern. The oppression to which we are subjected is the disease and the criminality of the settler state. Violence, theft, desecration, oppression, darkness and despair is the history of the settler state and its citizens. It is not our history. As Indigenous Peoples, we have histories as old as time itself and it is in this history and its continuity that my hope is inspired.

My hope also lies in the possibility that one day settlers will turn their gaze, with all its unconscious abuse of power, away from us, Indigenous Peoples, and begin to take a good hard look at themselves. My hope lies in the possibility that one day, settlers may realize that their nation and their governments are illegitimate and that no amount of anti-oppressive practice will ever justify their existence. To Indigenous Nations, Canada is an illegitimate, illegal occupying force. It is not an entity that has potential for redress or reconciliation. It is a





presence that is inherently violent and unjust. It is from this clarity that hope can be created. But this will require that even those with anti-oppressive commitments take an honest look at themselves and be truthful about all of the ways that the unearned privileges bestowed upon them by the Settler state are still held onto tightly and with great force.

Travis Heath is an adopted, cisgender man from United States of America of mixed racial background (birth father was Pardo, from Brazil, and birth mother of German and Polish descent). Travis works as a psychologist and professor in Denver, Colorado. Travis has a therapy practice that operates on a radical sliding fee scale, and he works with many people on the margins.

### Reflection by Travis Heath

For some time, I have felt exasperated and exhausted by what I've started referring to as "the cult of positivity." Don't like how you feel? Well, only you can choose your attitude. Do you weigh too much? Look at this diet or workout plan. Feeling the stress of your job? Just engage in self-care. This reduces the idea of hope to nothing more than a commodity to be bought and sold. It also positions happiness as the highest end. And it sets up those of us on the margins to feel as though we're never quite good enough.

I'm not interested in finding hope, at least not the way they have defined it. Hope becomes a tool of the colonizer that pulls the wool over our eyes and tries to make us believe we are actually pawns in the neoliberal game of life. If we just work hard enough and study well enough, we too can make our own luck and cultivate the skill of happiness.

I've discovered their hope to be at worst a lie and at best a mirage. It's based on the idea of a republic and a constitution that was never created for me. Hope, just like so many other things, has been co-opted by the machine. How do we take it back? Or is it time to blow it up and start all over again? How do we find hope we can believe in? Might hope be something we have to construct anew with each person we are in conversation with? How does hope on the margins look different than hope in the middle?

As Vikki pointed out, this is certainly not a project that can be successfully navigated from a place of neutrality under the guise of professionalism. People I've been in conversation with have taught me that it takes a kind of fierce humility to locate and elevate the hope we find on the margins. This brings me to a story of a person I share with his consent. He asked that I call him by the pseudonym "Julio." Specifics of the story will also be omitted per his request.

Julio is a 23-year-old man of Mexican descent. His parents came to the United States shortly before he was born. As such, he was a citizen of the United States by birth. He experienced violence in his home growing up as well as overt racism in the small town in which he lived





most of his life. This began to try and steal hope and a lot of other things from him relatively early in life. When he turned 18, he enlisted in a branch of the military. He was off to combat a short time later. He told me, “I had no idea what the fuck I was getting myself into. I thought it would be like a videogame or something.”

Someone who had seen me in the past sent Julio my direction because he was having thoughts of no longer wanting to live, and he was on a waiting list still months long at the local VA Hospital. He was concerned about not being able to pay, which I told him was of no concern since I work on a radical sliding fee scale. We made an appointment for the next week.

Upon his arrival, he told me some stories about things that happened while he was in combat. He said, “I’m a piece of shit. Look at what I’ve done. There’s no other way to say it. I’m a piece of shit. Everything that everyone said about growing up must be true. I’m just a Mexican piece of shit.” It was as if in this moment any remaining hope separated itself from his body.

Without giving it too much thought, I asked, “Do you think sometimes groups that are capable of behaving badly like the military can mandate that otherwise good people do bad things?” He stared back at me and declared, “What?” I repeated the question. After 30 seconds or so of silence, he replied, “I don’t know. I mean, no one has ever asked me a question like that before.” We decided that this was the kind of question he might be better served to live with for a while rather than just answer outright.

He came back to our next meeting with a sense of urgency in his speech as well as in how he was holding his body. “You remember that question you asked me last time? I couldn’t get it out of my head. Every time I started to think I was a piece of shit, I was like, nah, good person, bad group. It’s not like the whole military is bad, but it can go bad. Really bad.” I asked, “When you said to yourself, ‘good person, bad group’, what started to happen in your life?” He had an answer at the ready, “I started to feel like there was hope for me again. I thought, maybe I can live this life.”

Obviously, this conversation continued over a period of months and contained quite a number of twists and turns, but when I recently asked Julio what moment he thought was most important in our work, he relayed the story I just shared. For the purpose of this writing, I want to propose that we co-created a believed-in-hope that resided on the margins. The politics of hope at the center had been trying to squash Julio’s believed-in-hope ever since he was a boy. As a young adult, the system mandated that he behave in a way that betrayed his own ethics and values and then had the audacity to try and blame him for it. If dominant systems are too often the thieves of hope, perhaps conversations committed to justice-doing, however imperfect they may be, are one potential antidote.





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## Mattering as the Heart of Health and Human Services

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### How We Came Together

I (Bill) began years ago to explore the concept of mattering. It grew out of my work encouraging practitioners to view themselves as appreciative allies to the people they served. (Madsen, 2007a, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2018a; 2018b, Madsen and Gillespie, 2014). As I developed trainings with Beth Root, a frontline child protective worker at the time (Root & Madsen, 2013), and with Nina Tejs Jørring, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and family therapist in Scandinavia, the practices of mattering became more powerful. In this article, we share our stories and ideas with you in the hope that they might bring inspiration, joy and energy to your work as they have to ours.

I (Beth) was originally trained as a narrative and solution-focused therapist. For several years I provided in-home family therapy before becoming a child protection worker for almost seventeen years. I have recently returned to the field of trauma therapy. The world of child protection is a chaotic mixture of bureaucracy, social work, law enforcement, court hearings and help. At the center of every situation brought to the attention of authorities is a child. The more complicated the circumstances, the better the odds are that the child's needs will get lost under layers of rules, guidelines, policies and paper.

Workers respond to everything from a child having too many unexcused absences at school to a child dying at the hands of their caregivers. Of course, the people who go into this field want to help kids and families. The best child protection workers possess a combination of steel nerves and uncommon compassion. No parent is excited about having the government, in the form of a child protective worker, knocking at the door, and, therefore, a sophisticated ability to handle reluctance is a required skill for managing the job with dignity.

The field of child protective services is in dire need of a thorough commitment to mattering practices – from managers and supervisors to workers and families. The act of opening a child protection assessment is inherently marginalizing of parents and sometimes of kids and often involves an already marginalized family. Such an assessment could also prevent further abuse and neglect, increase safety, or even save a child's life. The practice of mattering holds firm to the relational stance that the worker will seek ways in which parents can have ownership and influence over the help being offered which leads to investment, which subsequently leads to

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longer lasting change. For the worker, consistently mattering clients is a lifeline, and as Nina has found, a way to prevent burnout.

I (Nina) was simultaneously trained as a child and adolescent psychiatrist and a narrative family therapist. Since then, I have dreamt about working in a mental health service that adheres to the narrative ethical values of collaborating with families and using their wisdom alongside medical knowledge. My colleagues and I founded a Family Therapy Team inside a traditional Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Denmark in 2009. My vision was to combine the best ideas from different helping worlds that work with families who are troubled. We take a family, rather than individualistic approach, combining narrative therapy and biomedical science to address mental health problems. Our practices are based on four principles: respect, curiosity, trust and hope. We adhere to a few mantras: 1) When one suffers, everyone in the family suffers. Thus, everyone should be helped; 2) It's not the child that is the problem, it's the problem that is the problem and 3) It is not the family (or the parents) that is the problem. The family has the key to solving the problem.

In collaborating with Bill, the focus on mattering spoke to me as a fundamental principle in our work. Mattering gave a name to what we had been doing without having the words for it, leaving it vulnerable to being forgotten, twisted or ignored. We experienced the power of putting into words those fundamental principles that sometimes seem just "basic proper manners." When Bill introduced us to mattering, some of my own previously marginalized practices became honourable. Psychiatric illness is not an individual illness. It is relational in its very nature. Two symptoms, shame and blame, are common in all psychiatric illnesses, and in many ways the most devastating of them all. In that context mattering becomes crucial in our work.

### Some Thoughts about Mattering

Mattering is the art of seeking ways of engaging with people labeled as "clients" that honor their experience and knowledge, combine their wisdom with our professional expertise, and collaboratively invite clients' influence in our work with them. The process of mattering facilitates more accountability and effectiveness. Mattering encourages involvement, involvement leads to investment, and investment leads to lasting change. We believe the heart of our work is the attitude or relational stance in which workers approach families. I (Bill) have previously written about a relational stance of an Appreciative Ally to characterize a relationship in which people we serve experienced helpers as "in their corner, on their side or, to use more political language, standing in solidarity with them to help them develop preferred directions in life" (Madsen, 2007; Madsen & Gillespie, 2014). My own conceptualization of a relational stance of an Appreciative Ally is embedded in a post-modern or post-structural approach to helping efforts in which helpers move from a role of experts with specialized knowledge repairing dysfunction to allies assisting people to envision and develop more desired lives with attention to everyday concerns. The importance of relational connection is confirmed by both the common factors literature in psychotherapy (over 40 years of research) and child





welfare literature that highlight the central importance of relational connection (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2004; MacKinnon, Duncan, Miller, Wambold & Hubble, 2010; Mackinnon, 1998; Thoburn, Lewis, & Shemmings, 1995; Trotter, 2006).

Ten years ago, I (Bill) was asked to consult with a state district attorney's office in the middle of the country that was beset by problematic race and class issues. Rather than beginning with a more traditional approach of supporting marginalized folks and inviting privileged folks to acknowledge their privilege, I began by having participants connect with each other around their personal experiences of feeling de-mattered. One exchange that stood out was an interaction between an older, highly esteemed white male lawyer and a younger Latina woman who worked as an administrative assistant. She asked if he would start because she was nervous. He shared a story of feeling marginalized at summer camp when he was new and trying to fit in with other campers who had previously attended the camp. He spoke about feeling shunned by other kids when they put peanut butter in his underwear while he was taking a shower. The experience held great pain and shame for him. The younger woman listened with empathy because it resonated with her own experience of being forced to join a project that bussed inner city kids to affluent suburbs to offer opportunities for a better education. She spent four years of high school never feeling like she fit in and dealt with repeated micro-aggressions ("Oh, you're the token black kid who we're supposed to help along"). When she spoke, the lawyer realized the difference between his pain at a six-week summer camp and her pain at four years of high school did not compare. The exchange of stories had a powerful effect on both participants.

Adroitly listening to others' stories can become transformative for the witness as well as the storyteller. While these two stories did not compare in terms of their effects on the people telling them, the process of telling them did have a significant impact. The Latina woman felt heard for the first time in her office, increasing her sense of connection. The lawyer learned something interesting and outside of his usual bubble of experience. He became invested in educating himself about the broader socio-cultural/economic/political context in which problems arise. While this exchange did not in and of itself lead to an examination of systemic racism, it did set a different tone for subsequent discussions within the group about mattering and de-mattering (or privilege and oppression). We believe this example highlights the importance of beginning difficult conversations on a foundation of relational connection, a more effective practice than beginning with a foundation of critique and division.

### **One Example of Mattering and Marginalization**

To further highlight the difference between mattering and marginalization (or de-mattering), we will juxtapose the experiences of two different mothers who attended school meetings with groups of professionals to discuss their respective sons. Maria is a new social worker who had been consulting with Bill. She went to her first school meeting with a working class white mother and a group of experienced professionals. She felt lost in the sea of jargon in the meeting and found herself questioning her worth as a developing professional. In the course of





reflecting on her experience, she wondered what that meeting might have been like for the child's mother. At her next meeting with Ms. Smith, Maria asked about her experience of the meeting. Ms. Smith responded, "Well, honestly, about five minutes into the meeting, I knew that attending this meeting was one of the stupider decisions I've made in my life. It was clear you people had no use for me, and I felt lost and completely inept. But one good thing came out of it. My son learned his lesson when he came home. Believe you me, he now knows to never get me into a meeting like that again. Believe me, he now knows that."

I believe this group of helpers did not get up that morning with an intention of eviscerating this mother's self-confidence or ensuring that her son would get a good beating. They simply engaged in common professional ways of speaking. Yet their helping practices positioned the school team members in a particular relational stance with the mother that had some very negative effects on her and her son. Our interactions with the people we serve have very real effects.

Following this meeting, Maria, the young social worker, resolved to engage parents and caregivers differently in future meetings. At the next school meeting she attended with a different family, she jumped in at the beginning to ask if everyone would be willing to start with a quick introduction with names, roles with the youth, Fernando, and how long they had known him. The team went around - name, teacher and 4 months; name, school counselor and 3 months; name, child welfare worker and 5 months, etc. They came to Fernando's mother, who seemed a bit confused as she introduced herself as his mother and hesitantly said, "How long have I known him? I guess I've known him his whole life." Maria replied, "So you've known him much longer and better than the rest of us put together. As we all work together to help Fernando have the best school experience possible, are there particular hopes you have for our work together and things that you think are important for us to know about him?" After the meeting, Fernando's mother said to Maria, "I loved the way you started that meeting. It made me feel very welcomed and involved, like I had something to contribute. I'm feeling much more hopeful about myself and my son."

We can view the second school team meeting as one that had strong mattering effects for the mother and the first school team meeting as one that unfortunately had powerful marginalizing effects on the mother. While the second mother had a more favorable experience in the meeting, that experience also had powerful effects on her sense of herself as a mother and her subsequent interactions with her son. In this way, mattering not only promotes relational connection, but can be transformative and life changing. Engaging people in ways that they feel mattered, opens possibilities for them to experience themselves differently and change their life stories.

We want to highlight the usefulness of thinking about mattering as a series of practices rather than inherent qualities or characteristics. We could think of Maria as a "mattering" person - a part of who she is and what she brings to her work and life. We could also think about the ways in which Maria "does" mattering. What are some of Maria's practices of mattering? While we





believe that the attitude, relational stance or spirit we hold while engaging the people we serve with mattering practices is key, we think this conceptualization of mattering practices holds a number of advantages. It allows us to trace distinct actions and ways of relating. Maria suggested an introductory go-round in the spirit of “contact before content.” Maria asked each participant to state how long they’ve known Fernando. She then commented on the Mother’s wealth of knowledge about her son and solicited her suggestions for the team in making school as successful an experience as possible. If mattering is viewed as an inherent quality, you either have it or you don’t. If it is viewed as a set of practices, helpers can become more conscious about when and how to engage in such practices and further cultivate them. Similarly, we can become more aware of inadvertent de-mattering or marginalizing practices and more conscious in selecting other ways of relating. Viewing mattering as a set of actions allows us to focus on particular practices as potentially problematic rather than simply viewing the offending practitioner as a problem.

The possibilities that this process opens up are quite powerful. Engaging people in ways that they feel mattered is transformational. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) explored the degree to which junior and senior high school students felt they mattered at home and in school. Compiling data from four large-scale surveys completed by 6,568 students, they found that students who felt they mattered had higher self-esteem and scored better on measures of depression, anxiety and negative affective states. Males who felt they mattered were much less likely to engage in delinquent activities. In another study, Nancy Schlossberg (1989) found that college students who felt like they mattered in their schools were more involved which led to more learning and personal development. Beth and Bill have found in providing training and consultation to child welfare systems that parents and caregivers who feel they matter in interactions with child welfare workers develop more constructive and less problematic relationships with their children. Mattering practices can lead to more respectful and responsive services and open possibilities for significant change.

Narrative therapists have found that we tend to organize our lives through stories to provide a framework for making sense of the world. Life is complicated and filled with too many events for us to be able to hold them all in our consciousness. A story line consists of events in a sequence across time organized according to a theme or plot (Morgan, 2000). At any point multiple stories of identity are available to us, and no single story can adequately capture the broad range of all our experiences. We also experience events that fall outside any single story. However, particular life stories are drawn upon as an organizing framework and become the dominant story about who we are, what is important to us, and of what we are capable of doing. These life stories make our world coherent and understandable. In the words of Michael White and David Epston (1990; p. 11), life stories “prune from experience those events that do not fit within them.” Life stories shape our experiences by promoting selective attention to some experiences and selective inattention to others. Experiences that don’t fit within a dominant story become invisible and phenomenologically non-existent.





The stories of our lives are not simply our own. They are received from and embedded in family of origin and broader cultural contexts that organize our sense of self and our relation to the world. These are not just stories that are held, but stories that are enacted. Interactions between helpers and clients have the potential to invite people to live out particular life stories.

Consider the different experiences of the mothers in the two respective school meetings. Professional helper interactions have the potential to give rise to life stories that might lift people up and carry them forward in life or drag them down and constrain possibilities. We can pose the following questions to ourselves about the effects of both formal meetings and ongoing contact with families:

- What might be clients' experience of this interaction?
- How might this interaction affect their sense of self?
- What can we do to enhance the possibility that they will have experiences that carry them forward rather than limit them?

The expansion from a focus on the content of meetings to a focus on the process of such meetings holds the promise of moving our approach from the completion of required tasks to opportunities for transformational life experiences. As a reader, we encourage you to consider this an invitation to reflect on what gives your work meaning and purpose, what sustains you in dealing with the daily bureaucratic demands in your work, and what might help you reconnect to the values that brought you into this field. If the time you spend in meetings was used as an opportunity to make a difference in people's lives rather than to complete a checklist, what effects might that have on your experience of doing your job? When we pose this question to participants in trainings, we consistently receive responses suggesting that shifting the focus to clients' experiences during such meetings would make the meeting more relevant and transformational.

### **Naming as an Important Part of Bringing Mattering to Light**

One piece of feedback we've received from workshop participants is that the naming of mattering itself promotes attention to better practices of mattering as well as an analysis of inadvertent professional practices that might have marginalizing or de-mattering effects. In Danish culture, the tradition of Hygge gives language to the power of naming something in a way that brings it into being. Hygge practices are also practices of structural mattering that have a name.

Hygge (Nina writing) is a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Louisa Thomsen Brits (2017), a British-Danish writer, describes hygge as a state of mindfulness: how to make essential and mundane tasks dignified, joyful, and beautiful, how to live a life connected with loved ones. The concept's philosophical and spiritual underpinnings are "a practical way of creating sanctuary in the middle of very real life." Hygge is a feeling of belonging and warmth, a moment of comfort and contentment. Hygge might be best translated to cozy. An example is sharing lunch at work. Everyone brings food to share, creating hygge. Our purpose is to make the lunch break a





context very different from the rest of the day. Everyone is of equal value (no matter our titles). We can relax and be mindful of each other, not of the work.

The hygge practices signal that we have made an effort for participants to feel appreciated, welcomed and important. Just as hygge gives language to a particular way of being in the world, mattering offers language for a way of practicing the art of helping.

### **Frontline Practices of Mattering: Re-membering**

“Anthony” was taken from his biological parents when he was born. He was adopted as a toddler, and the adoption failed six years later. Anthony was 8 years old when I (Beth) became his social worker. He was again placed in foster care. He again was in need of a forever family. Anthony experienced what I would consider to be one of the most serious types of marginality – being expelled from one’s family. He was first expelled because his biological parents couldn’t parent him. The second marginalization occurred because his adoptive parents wouldn’t parent him. When I interacted with Anthony, I was acutely aware of the state of marginality in which he was living, along with his need to know he mattered.

Anthony had the unique experience of traveling to China with his adoptive family where they visited the Terracotta Soldiers. He had pictures of himself standing among the soldiers. He loved talking about them and became animated when describing them. He once said to me, “Some of them are broken and scattered all over the place. Someone needs to bring them all back together!” I responded, “Sounds a little bit like what happened to your family.” His eyes grew to the size of dinner plates at the thought. How do we matter a little boy who has been marginalized right out of his family twice? Anthony struggled for a time after his placement. He had meltdowns at school, some behavioral problems at the foster home and difficulty calming down.

“Re-membering” is a narrative practice that views each of us as having a membership to the Club of Life – like being a member of the YMCA or Lifetime Fitness. You could call it a Life Team, a community or village, depending on what metaphor best fits. Our Life Team has influential members such as our spouses, parents, kids, friends, teachers, therapists, etc. Some members of our Life Team we welcome because of their positive influence on our lives. Some members we don’t welcome due to their negative influences, and we probably need to downgrade their memberships. Occasionally we might need to “re-member” our team. Some of our positive members might have passed away – a grandma we were particularly close to who still influences our life decisions through her memory. Maybe an historical figure like Martin Luther King or John Lewis could be a member of our team, or a fictitious character like a Chinese Terracotta Soldier – particularly for a kid.

I wrote letters from the Terracotta Soldiers to Anthony. I got the idea from a narrative therapist David Marsten after reading an article he co-authored (Marston, D, Epston, D. & Johnsons, L. 2012). I looked up Chinese surnames and named the soldiers. I used Google Images of the





Terracotta Soldiers and added one picture of a different soldier to each letter. I used encouraging words that Anthony had used in conversations with me.

I asked Anthony's foster dad to give him the first letter. "This came in the mail for you," he said. His trauma therapist gave him the second letter. "This came to my office for you!" His foster care social worker brought him the third letter. Anthony had told me the week before that he was nervous about starting school. The foster care worker gave him the letter along with a backpack of school supplies. Anthony read the letter out loud, was excited that the therapist, foster care worker, the foster dad and I were all mentioned. He never questioned who had sent the letters.

In a subtle but powerful way, we re-membered this marginalized little boy into a Life Team of people, experiences and words that mattered him. The practice of mattering settled him. One year later on adoption day, he was able to carry his new sense of belonging and mattering into his true forever family.

### **Eyebrows Down**

Aaron was 8 years old when his father brought him into my office for therapy. He had a scowl on his face that met me (Beth) from fifteen feet away. At our house we call this type of facial expression "Eyebrows Down," and we are tempted to stay clear of whoever is wearing it, at least for a little while. Aaron's mother had died about ten months prior to our first encounter. Accompanying his intense Eyebrows Down scowl was complete silence. Aaron wanted his mom back and did not want to talk about what had happened to her or how he felt. I met his angry expression and off-putting energy with, "Aaron, all of you is welcome here." In other words, "Every part of you matters – even the difficult parts." The scowl immediately softened.

The only words spoken in our sessions came from me. My little client "spoke" through drawing and writing. Every now and then a therapist encounters a kid who was born to draw, and Aaron was one of those kids. Every speck of each page was covered in beautiful colors, wispy lines and vivid movement. Aaron's heart was saying, "I want to move forward" and "Don't make me move on without her" at the same time. We wrote a story about what had happened to him and to his mom that came alive through his artwork. He set the pace of the work, chose what he wanted to write and draw, never speaking a word in session. He maintained influence over my help throughout the process. His silence was met with my unconditional acceptance and mattering stance as if I were saying, "I'll stay with you even when your eyebrows are down."

Aaron's story included memories of his mom, how much he mattered to her, how much she mattered to him, how he felt when she died, things his dad loved about him, and a glimpse into where he and his dad and brothers were headed. Upon the completion of his story, we had a little celebration with mini cupcakes he picked out, we played silent games that he had created, and then Aaron moved forward without his mom.





## Supervisory and Organizational Supports for Mattering at a Frontline Level: Learning the Art of Mattering

I (Nina) continue to explore how we best teach mattering. Good supervision is certainly a necessary factor in learning to care compassionately, to bear witness also to difficult feelings. Witnessing your patients or families' feelings should be something that sustains you in the job.

Imagine that you are on your way to supervision. You have just had a conversation with a family with loads of problems. You are deeply frustrated. You are disgusted by the mom's acts in the sessions, feeling incompetent and angry with yourself for not being able to protect the kid against verbal attacks from the mom. Your goal is to help to control this mom's behaviour.

You begin your retelling of the session and how you feel. Your supervisor asks you: "What would you want to be better at, if this supervision is helpful for you?" You answer: "I want help to control the mom, so she doesn't speak so vile to her daughter!". Imagine that your supervisor responds this way: "Ok, before we go there, would it be ok, if I ask you a series of other questions?"

- "What do you really like about this mom?"
- "If you think about all the time you have spent with her, what do you really respect about her?"
- "What dreams and hopes do you imagine that she has for her child? For her family? For herself, as a mom? As a woman?"
- "What fears do you think are haunting this mother?"
- "What values do you imagine guide her in her actions?"
- "Which of her values and dreams do you really respect her for sticking up for?"
- "What about her would you be curious to know more about?"

While you read these questions, what do they do to you, here and now? I am curious about how it is to read all those questions, just after being put into a situation of imagining oneself being pretty angry with another human being! Your answers would guide how I would proceed, and how many of the above questions I might ask. But I might continue down this lane:

- "How do you feel towards this mom now, compared to when you entered my room?"
- "What do you think made this difference?"
- "Now that you feel this new way, what would you like to be able to do, when you see the family the next time?"

I imagine that by now you will have another answer. One of my former supervisees told me about her experiences with these kinds of questions: "Every time I left supervision with you, I felt good about myself and the family I had received supervision on. Then I looked forward to speaking with them. I believe that happens, because you have a curious, compassionate concern for each and every family that you instill in me." She spoke about not judging the parents on how weirdly or incomprehensibly they act. She reminds herself that they have lived





several years with a strange and evil disease while attempting to avoid it and to protect themselves and their families from it. Of course that might lead them to act in strange ways. This mindset allows her to feel compassion and respect for the families she meets.

### **Building a Mattering Organization**

When assessing the broader context in which mattering and/or inadvertently marginalizing interactions occur between practitioners and those we serve, effective mattering at a frontline practice level requires supervisory and organizational support (Madsen, 2014; 2016). When workers feel they matter within their organization, they are much more likely to engage youth and families in a more mattering fashion. Research supports this idea of a parallel process.

Charles Glisson and colleagues have researched the influence of organizational climate and culture on our work. In one study of 250 children served by 32 public children's service offices in Tennessee, they found that a strong organizational climate, characterized by low conflict, high cooperation, role clarity, and strong workplace relationships, was the primary predictor of positive service outcomes and a significant predictor of service quality (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). In another nationwide study of mental health clinics in 26 different states, they found that agencies with healthy, strong organizational climates had half the employee turnover and sustained new programs for twice as long as other organizations (Glisson et al., 2008). The stronger organizational climates were characterized by high expectations of workers who had input into management decisions, had discretion and flexibility to do their work, and were encouraged to seek out new and innovative ways of working. Workers had a clear sense of how they fit in the organization, a sense of support in their work, and buffers against work overload and emotional exhaustion. This research coincides with other studies on organizational resilience that suggests the importance of emotional support for workers, high expectations of them coupled with a belief in worker success, opportunities for workers to contribute, and an organizational tolerance for ambiguity and change (Sheridan, 2012). The combination of these studies highlights how organizational climate can be beneficial for the people served and the workers, and also impacts finances and budgets. The cost of replacing workers has been estimated at 40% to 70% of their annual salary, when all related costs of recruiting, hiring, retraining, and team and organizational disruption factors are considered. Improving organizational culture not only creates the possibility of better helping, it also turns out to be good for business.

Organizational climate and culture are created through daily interactions. How people interact is profoundly influenced by the organizational culture. At the same time, those daily interactions shape the organizational culture. Certain leadership practices help to bring a spirit of reflection, appreciation and shared learning into an organizational culture. In my work (Bill speaking) with agencies to develop institutional structures and organizational cultures that support a more respectful and responsive way of engaging families, we consistently reach a point where a senior leader reflects, "This started out as an effort to shift our clinical approach. I realize now that what we're talking about is not just a shift in clinical philosophy, but also a





shift in management philosophy.” Yes indeed! While acknowledging power dynamics within organizations, we believe that all organizational members can actively contribute to a mattering culture.

I (Nina) encountered two parents who described their experience with our program. They said they knew from the first minute they entered the waiting area that this would be a good place for them because of the way our secretary had greeted them. I was a bit bewildered. What did our secretary have to do with clinical conversations? She greeted them as long lost friends, as people she had looked forward to meet and expected to like. The parents said, “If the secretary (Jette) acted that way, we just knew that the people in this workplace would be good people.” In my eyes, Jette takes mattering to an art. She makes every single person entering our offices know that they matter to her. She cares deeply about each family member we see. How can she do that? She is part of our team. She participates in our meetings and clinical conferences. She has the same legitimacy to speak up, ask questions and voice her opinions as the therapists. We acknowledge that she spends time with our families in the waiting room, she makes observations, and she engages with them in ways that leave them feeling treasured and important. She often has conversations with a parent or a child that she can relate to us later. She contributes to the nuanced and multicolored understandings we hold of the families we meet. However, if we did not let Jette know that she and her work matter to us and to the families we serve, then her ability to matter the families would be lessened.

Some of the most exciting work I (Bill) have done recently has focused on supporting mattering practices throughout an organization (Madsen, 2016). It takes everyone, not just the “clinical staff” to weave mattering practices into the fabric of organizational cultures (e.g. leaders, administrative staff, tech personnel, janitors, all agency members). Through focused inquiry, we have elicited best existing best practices of mattering throughout different teams and agency staff and then worked with them to expand upon that. This has sometimes been a challenging process, but is definitely worth the effort. If we are serious about building mattering cultures, it helps to include everyone within an organization.

Our current national and international narratives speak of embracing diversity, focusing on resourcefulness, believing in working collaboratively, and being committed to accountability. However, too often we do not quite walk that talk as much as we could. Full support for a second order change in how we help marginalized families requires a commitment by leaders to bring the values and principles of collaborative family-centered practice into their organizational cultures, often in the face of larger bureaucratic and funding pressures to the contrary (Jorring & Bredahl-Jacobsen, 2014; Ejbye-Ernst & Jorring, 2017; Madsen, 2007a, 2007b, Madsen & Gillespie, 2016). When we envision mattering practices, we see the challenges and obstacles ahead. We have been learning about the ways in which Appreciation benefits the Appreciator as well as the Appreciated. We believe that mattering conversations with families have mattering effects on practitioners as well. We hope this article raises some





interesting questions, invites reflections on your own work, and provides some inspiration for future mattering practices.

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## On Ferocious and Gentle Correspondence Between a Rebel Woman and Worry

Chelsey Morton<sup>4</sup>

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Her name is Aurora. I don't remember if she was wearing a weird sweater the first time we met in my therapy office, but I do know she told me that she "loves herself a weird sweater" which made me pay attention. I couldn't help but be wholly endeared to a person invested in this kind of wardrobe and styled alongside a sense of humour. It gave me a bit of a sense of who she might be; sometimes soft and furry, other times bold, interesting, and unafraid of making a statement. We started with comments on the textures, weaves and knits of sweaters and it led seamlessly to an earnest conversation about some of Aurora's "complaints" (Note: We are using the term "complaint" with reference to its Latin roots: "to speak with lamentation"). She had taken great care to write out these "complaints" in a cherished notebook so they could be studied in their fullness and hairiness – a bit like when weird sweaters leave traces of their fibres behind that end up showing up in all kinds of places. Aurora went on to name her "complaints" about the accusations and finger pointing directed at her honourable name and womanhood. Together we looked at the most noteworthy items such as:

1. "YOU ARE TOO NEGATIVE." This one, Aurora explained, was often followed by well intentioned advice that sounds like: "WHY CAN'T YOU JUST..." (insert: be more positive, not take exception to the unfairness of this moment, be happier, show some gratitude, stop caring so much). Only this was neither easy nor necessarily desirable advice for Aurora to follow. And nevertheless, the sense of failure that followed such accusatory advice-giving sent Aurora to pull her sweater over her eyes.
2. "THAT'S JUST LIFE." This sneaky little diminishment attempted to tell Aurora that complaints are not worth speaking into existence or taking note of at all. "Suck it up." A "good girl" would know how "lucky" she was and not dare muddy the waters by lamenting the shortcomings of a society that presses women to stay docile and compliant.
3. "QUIT BEING SELFISH." Perhaps the worst of the lot, this claim had the ability to unravel all of the deep care Aurora had woven into her relationships. It whispered: "when you do what makes sense for you it is uncharitable and unkind." "When you say NO it is only because you think you are more important than me." "When you refuse an offer for your very own good reasons you are slapping me in the face."

Aurora was sorrowful in her tearful confessions of her labelled failings. Her first request for therapy was for me to help her "be more positive." In taking in this request and further listening to her, I could hear her dissatisfaction and her doubts and questions about these accusations. The friction of such accusations was wearing her down to her very core and she

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began to puzzle out loud what “positivity” might look like against a backdrop of inequity. If I were to endeavor to simply support Aurora in a search for positivity, I feared I would take my place alongside the finger-pointing accusers who shape such messages in the minds of women. In a situation such as this, I would rather side with complaining in lamentation style as a way to learn about her experiences in the world and the questions they had left her with. I wanted to know why others had pointed their fingers at Aurora and how she had managed to express so vividly the ways in which these accusations had left her restless.

It was then and there in my little therapy office that Aurora and I began an inquisitive correspondence with each other through our conversations. These conversations centered what mattered to Aurora and how she had trained her eyes to see beyond the superficial glitter of positivity into the gritty edges of her actual experiences. Our spoken correspondence later took to the page in a “Dear Worry Letter” which I will share with you in this paper.

### **ENTER WORRY: The Filter Free Variety**

Aurora called it “worry.” She described how she felt this worry inside her body like something that would “hollow her out.” She said it settled over her like the slow fade of a dimmer switch of a light and before long she found herself in darkness and feeling blind. Whenever she dared to express this sensation, it was somehow misrepresented by others as a “problem of negativity.” This was not the first time I had heard how a woman’s lived experiences and struggles came to be represented and explained away along the lines of gendered cultural narratives. It has been unnerving to me to see, time and time again, the compounding effects of these master narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 2001) on a woman’s life. In this case, Aurora was compared to iron standards about how women ought to be grateful, uncomplaining, and, most preferably, compliant to the demands of positivity from those around her. The effects of requiring gratitude and positivity also worked to keep Aurora from knowing something about how society was not working in her favour and, in many cases, actively working to keep her silent.

Aurora made this clear to me when describing a moment of feeling a lack of confidence about taking credit for her work and sharing her expertise about a particular project she was working on. When it came time to share information and ideas it was Aurora’s male-counterpart who was asked to give the presentation. As Aurora sat quietly and listened to someone else share the details of her work, she was keenly aware of how his delivery was met with more respect and credibility than hers might be. Is respect granted to those with the most “confidence,” Aurora wondered? And how is the quality named “confidence” bestowed differentially upon different speakers? As Aurora listened, she was keenly aware of information that was missed and inaccurately represented. An internal debate ensued in Aurora’s mind – she worried about her wish to interrupt and how her corrections would be received. How would either her silence or her speaking out affect her reputation? Would she be viewed as loud and interruptive?





Would she make her point clearly and confidently enough? The sense of unfairness to forego credit for her work was hard to bear. In short, the worries about speaking out versus shutting up roared. Aurora's stories of patriarchy-at-work supervised me into imagining the following debate with patriarchy in a young woman's life:

- Patriarchy: Oh, sorry, did you directly and kindly ask someone to respect your work and give you credit? It was kind of hard to hear you....
- Her: Ummm yes, a few times now. I might be doing it wrong since it doesn't seem to be working. It reminds me of the time people would always look to my colleague for answers for my projects or things I know quite a bit about. Like, Hello! I'm right here with a brain full of answers why aren't you listening?
- Patriarchy: I might pay attention to what you are saying if you had more confidence. How about say it with a smile and some positivity sweetheart. I've been overlooking you because you seem so negative. Chill out. Just relax.
- Her: I'm sorry, you are right. I should be more easy-going. I shouldn't be so selfish by trying to hoard credit for my work. I better get going though, because worry is dimming the lights and I won't be able to see my way home. It's like talking to you has really helped me gain awareness about the 101 ways that I have disappointed people and been left out from things. And shit, I can't even tell anyone. I'll come across as negative.
- Patriarchy: Aha! Now you are making some sense. It is selfish to go on about yourself like that or demand airtime for your ideas and research. I prefer to sign off on this kind of stuff.
- Her: HOLD ON A SECOND! Why should I have to ask twice? This isn't right, you have twisted my words and used them against me. You have implanted your finger-pointing accusations to make me think that I don't deserve a voice around the table. It is all becoming clear. You are not right! I AM RIGHT.

I am grateful to Aurora for her astute discernments and rich descriptions as she helped me see past the seductive binary that "worry" is a "simple problem" to be externalized. In our lively correspondence about "worry" in my office, Aurora and I could not afford such simplifications. Together, we held these complications of her lived experiences:

- Sometimes worry served to diminish Aurora's choices for her life.
- Sometimes, worry served to alert Aurora to some ideas that really mattered to her.
- And sometimes, worry served to engage Aurora's mind in endless wavering while at the same time, making decisions for her.





As an example of this, Aurora told me one afternoon how worry was inserting itself into the conundrum of preparing to move out of her parent's home to experience her life as an 'adult.' She had hopes of living with a friend, maybe going travelling overseas, drinking beer on a patio with friends. She was excited about establishing her own rhythms and creating a life for herself. She dreamt of her future with grand visions. Yet, Aurora loved her family deeply. COVID-19 had brought uncertainty about the health of older adults. She found herself trapped in a dark place with questions about mortality. Worry had her questioning if her family understood that she desperately wanted to spend all the time she could with them – having interesting conversations, sharing meals, working out and watching movies. She could not put their health in peril, nor risk being isolated from them.

These worries could not be so simply externalized as a problem. They were a testament to her biggest hopes and her darkest fears. They spoke of what she loved most and detested most in the world. I became convinced that worry was not only a draining pest but a wisdom that had been attempting to guide her into wanting her life to be witnessed as complex and intelligent; embodied and evidenced. This was a multi-problem:

1. She found herself having fewer choices in her life because of worry's persuasive and seductive ways (Don't disrupt the work meeting)
2. She found herself being described as negative when she was thinking critically about systems created to oppress (Don't be upset by unfairness)
3. She found the worry signaled the most valuable things in her life and brought her attention to these treasures (Don't let go of worry)

### **ENTER MY ADMIRATION AND ASTONISHMENT: the kind that makes me wonder**

At this point in our work together, I remember thinking: "Who notices the patriarchy at work so astutely? Who is unwilling to shut up about her dissatisfaction with unequitable systems? Who is so full of thoughts that they bring a small notebook full of important ideas and reflections to share? Who is so tender with their family that they are willing to forego the rite of moving out in a hurry to soak up all the time with her parents? Who is not so easily willing to give up on the gentle guidance of worry, while not allowing it to make her decisions?"

We discovered a history of Aurora's disruption of silencing practices that endeavour to characterize young women as negative and selfish when doing their own bidding. Aurora related a story of her Grandma's witnessing Aurora's stand against her father's advice while in high school. The family was driving in a car and Aurora had been enrolled in a physics class at the urgings of her father. Her father's wishes were well-intentioned with the hopes for Aurora to prepare for a particular career in a particular sector – her life had been planned for her without consultation and assumed authority. Had Aurora been consulted, she would have expressed her abject hatred of this class and her disagreement with these life plans. The plans did not fit with her hopes for a career, nor did they spark an ounce of curiosity in her. As the





family was driving through the city, on an otherwise unremarkable day, Aurora's Dad casually made these life plans casually visible again by commenting on her enrollment in the next level of physics in the year ahead. On this day, Aurora sat tall in the seat of the car and spoke sturdily with great conviction to her father: "I will never take a class like that AGAIN!" Aurora's Grandmother laughed. She was tickled and proud of her granddaughter who would not go along with someone else's ideas. In this moment Aurora's Dad also knew his daughter would be one to speak out and push the envelope.

Beyond Aurora's instruction of me in the ways of resistance to patriarchy (by speaking up and resisting dichotomous externalizations of naming problems as being all bad), she also trained me in the nuance and subtlety of 'gentle rebels' and 'quiet disruptions.' She taught me how it is possible to resist a problem without foregoing her values. Patiently she explained the difference between the stale stock plot (Paljakka, 2020) of a "heroine" vanquishing her worry and instead, pushing its bounds in a gentle way.

This brings me to the heart of this paper, the letter that marked a turning point and a significant way marker to our work. This letter endeavored to document my learnings about Aurora's living and thinking and feeling with worry. After I had poured over her intimate tellings of her life, I felt both desire and duty to create a therapeutic document that would illuminate the deeply tricky problem of the worry alongside her strong refusals to let it make decisions for her. My wish for Aurora was to see her clarity anew. There is, of course, a long and colorful history of writing letters to problems in the literature of narrative therapy (Marsten, Epston, Markham, 2016). In this letter, I am addressing worry inside Aurora's life in Aurora's own voice, as documented by me in my session notes. It was my hope by writing in this way to give Aurora a glimpse of her discernments and her knowings. My hope was to create a moment of "outsight" for Aurora and to momentarily disrupt the lonesome monologue of "insight" (Paljakka, Stout, Saxton, & Carlson, 2020). I wondered about the possibilities that my unique position as witness to Aurora's struggles, pains, hopes, and words afforded us. What if I returned to her and asked her, "Do you hear yourself? Can we listen again to the sound of your knowing? What would our concentrated focus of listening do to the obfuscations of worry? Do you know how you have been teaching me about living? And may I be someone to attempt to tell your stories back to you? Would it be possible to lend you a momentary glimpse of the admiration and respect that my eyes behold your words with?"

I have known such a longing to be witnessed in my own living and speaking. I wondered and worried a little how this letter might meet Aurora's longing about her living and speaking. Here was my attempt at such a letter.

*Dear Worry,*

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On Ferocious and Gentle Correspondence Between a Rebel Woman and Worry

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*I was just getting ready to establish an ease in my life. Relieve the pressure of a 5 year plan and invest in a new home, but not too far away. Do you want to hold me hostage and keep me in fear? For the generations yet to come may not get to know what they are missing out on. Worry, you bring my treasures so close to my heart it almost hurts. I feel the sting when the clock is ticking. When enjoyment is beyond my reach. When I am running interference.*

*Worry, do they even know that you are a guest in our home? Can they feel your pulsing aliveness when it seems my 20s are being hijacked by a virus that belittles hopes and dreams into bite-sized balls of selfishness? Do they sense you at the dining room table when I anticipate the loneliness of Mom clearing all the dishes by herself again? Do you show up on the steamy mirror after a work-out is done wondering if we may not sweat together for a while? Do they know that in brushing you off with their jokes and good humour that I have fought hard to stay close and keep communication open?*

*Worry, if you had the superpower to propel me toward all that I am trying for, would I find myself enjoying this forced time? Would the rumblings of mortality bring me up against the very stuff of life? Would I choose to hold off in becoming a parent to achieve my career's highest hopes? You are complex worry, filled with subtle nuance playing around with the time/space continuum in my mind. I reject you and then invite you back, because maybe your whispers point out something I am missing?*

*Do you show up with other names making it tricky for me to recognize you? Do you masquerade as conviction, discernment, and daughterly care? Are you under the rule of planfulness, perfect generosity, and sacrifice?*

*I take you seriously and will engage with you transparently. But I will stand up and disrupt you if you try to hollow me out. Can we just be gentle with one another? Maybe for a while?*

*With mixed feelings,*

*Aurora*

What mattered above all else to me about this letter was Aurora's response. I sent her the letter slightly in advance of our scheduled conversation and then we read it over together during our session. The following is a piece of the transcript that captured Aurora's response to me.





- Aurora: Wow (tears) ah. Yah. That's really what I feel and think about worry. That's really well done in terms of articulating it. It's making me emotional because it's so true and reflects exactly...(cry), it's a reflection of me being able to see it in my mind kind of thing. I think the...
- Chelsey: Hold on – can I ask something else...can you say more about the idea that it reflects something. In reading this, is there something different, or I don't know...in reading these expressions, what's the reflection...does that make sense?
- Aurora: I think the reflection would be, just acknowledging that the worry is not, like not that it's not important, but that it's been too over-consuming. It's reflecting on what I've thought in the past and kind of how to rework that for the future almost. Especially the last couple lines: I take you seriously and will engage with you transparently. But I will stand up and disrupt you. Like, instead of like letting me collapse in on myself, knowing that this worry is okay and it's real and it's also almost too much. It's more worry than there should be. But I can use my new found rebelliousness to stop it from being so all encompassing almost. And maybe be more gentle to myself about being so worried about things.
- Chelsey: Would this even be an act of rebellion?
- Aurora: Yah, cuz it's going against what I'm usually okay with, in terms of accepting the worry and being the anxious person that I am. Choosing not to let it take over allows me to have the life that like, I want and want to plan for.

This section of transcript, as well as the conversation that followed, impressed upon me Aurora's capacity to expand her ideas for living beyond the confines of worry while not worrying about being worry-free. What was particularly moving to me, was how Aurora made herself available to the idea of herself as someone with a talent to disrupt normative cultural standards rather than a failed and negative character. Aurora began to see her agency in her purposeful pursuit of rebelliousness to both her internalized experiences of worry as well as her external experiences of evaluation of her womanhood. Aurora started to shape a plan of gentleness into being. Her vision of gentleness as a response to worry, made an impression on me as gentleness is sometimes dismissed as a supposedly passive trait. Aurora proposed a purposeful gentleness as an act of rebellion against norms of "positivity" and "confidence." Gentleness was something that, for Aurora, could "make whole again" what had been labelled as problematic.





### **ENTER DISRUPTION: The kind that takes meaningful actions**

Once the stories of “rebellion” and “disruption” were conceived of and invited Aurora started to create more of them at her workplace if you can believe her audacity. Aurora no longer sits quietly in meetings. She told me with laughter of her decisions to raise a virtual hand and interrupt when she wishes to. Aurora has immersed herself in her work as opposed to the seeking of permissions. She related to me her inventions of her purposeful sentence starters for her calm disruptions: “Well, actually...” or “Let me just add in a few things to what you just said...” Aurora related stories of work trips and networkings with other companies that were driven by curiosity. “Why wouldn’t I take the opportunity to find out what else is going on in the industry,” she asked with sparkling eyes. We negotiated the themes of these stories and Aurora insisted on the words “gentle disruptions” that fit with her quiet observations and her assured firmness of mind. A big smile appeared on her face when this could be written as a win.

Aurora put these winning epiphanies to the test as worry made a new appearance alongside a new manager at her workplace. At our next conversation, Aurora reported that she had decided to take a “proactive approach” to the reappearance of worry. She related to me how she had met with the new manager to share her accomplishments at work and outline her hopes for the role in the coming year. Aurora had purposefully spoken about the projects that excited her and sparked her passions and the investment she had made in studying her areas of interest. Aurora was proud of herself and reported that the conversation went well and that her manager was interested in supporting her with further work that aligned with her areas of interest. Aurora began to see how speaking up countered the expectations of quietness. She also claimed the right to draw attention to her accomplishments without regard to old accusations of selfishness.

In a later session, Aurora came to excitedly report her father’s recent observation that she sounded “like a bit of a rebel!” in her critique of a frustrating communication platform in the workplace that did not allow for direct and transparent interaction. To Aurora, her dad’s exclamation stood as convincing evidence that people could recognize her actions as meaningful beyond “negative complaints.” Aurora related her Dad’s comments to her recent achievement of allowing herself to “have more say” over her own life. Aurora herself exclaimed, “I am not stuck. I can now be mobile and fluid with my thoughts and opinions.”

### **CONCLUSION: ENTER CONFIDENCE- The kind that knows what to do**

As I am writing these lines, Aurora continues to make forays into the conversational realms that would previously freeze her with worry. I happen to know that Aurora was disregarded at a recent performance review meeting. Instead of taking this lack of acknowledgement as a sign of failing at her job, which worry would have previously insisted on as a conclusion, Aurora ventured, in her next team meeting, in her characteristically gentle manner: “Why is my work not being considered as a result of this target?” Aurora claimed this as yet another “push of the boundaries.” In fact, she characterized her own question as “sassy and straight to the point.”





Her boss scurried to respond. I was flabbergasted by this know-how and reminded Aurora about the concerns that initially brought her to therapy. At this, she stated boldly, while smiling mischievously at me, “I guess I can’t say I’m not confident anymore.” I beheld this claim and couldn’t help but notice the bright weird sweater that she was wearing.

