

Reimagining Narrative Therapy: A Thought Piece on the “Reimagining Narrative Therapy Through Practice Stories and Autoethnography”

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Preface

Now regularly practiced in therapy and coaching, narrative therapy, developed in Australia and New Zealand since the 1980s, arrived in France in 2004. That summer, Michael White, the co-founder of this approach, was invited by a Parisian coaching school to teach the first seminar to discover this radical approach, which combined social justice, literary theory and systemic therapy.

The success of this seminar, attended by only fifteen practitioners, led to the organization of new training courses in 2005, 2006 and 2007, which Michael White, a veritable rock star of family therapy in English-speaking countries, honored with his presence on two more occasions, in 2006 and 2007.

2007 is a very special year for Michael White. On the one hand, he leaves the Dulwich Centre, which he has founded in 1983 with his wife and partner Cheryl, to set up a new center, Narrative Practice Adelaide, with a new team. On the other hand, he is publishing a book entitled “Maps of narrative practice” with Norton on May 31, which little does he know will have a major impact on the practice and teaching of narrative therapy worldwide.

Here's what the Milton Erickson Foundation journal wrote about "Maps" on its release: "Michael White has created here a definitive text of theory and practice.... His prolific work forms the foundation of narrative therapy, summarized and systematically presented for the first time in this brilliant new book.... Beautifully organized and enjoyable to read, it brings theory to life with colorful therapy transcripts in every chapter, and offers examples and instructions for applying narrative practices to the full range of mental health challenges psychiatrists and therapists may face. While this is an excellent, accessible introduction to the field, experienced narrative therapists will rely on its rigor, precision and subtlety to invigorate and perfect their art." Alas, this enthusiastic review already contains the seeds of the rut into which many practitioners and trainers would get bogged down a few years later, in this case by the choice of the

word "instructions".

For on April 4, 2008, while Michael White and David Epston, dissatisfied with the trajectory the spread of narrative therapy seemed to be taking, had planned to meet the following summer in order to put everything back on the rails, Michael dies suddenly of a heart attack while leading a seminar in San Diego. In the small global narrative community, and as far away as Europe, it is an earthquake. The loss of such a talented and charismatic leader in the prime of life provokes the usual mourning reflexes: the emergence of "heirs" proclaiming their legitimacy, the retreat into the founding texts and the rigidification of an orthodoxy protected by self-proclaimed "guardians of the faith", the elevation of "Maps", promptly translated into French under the title "Cartes des pratiques narratives", to the rank of an indisputable manual as the Master's ultimate masterpiece.

However, David Epston, who was his friend and unfailing partner in the construction of the narrative edifice, warned us back in November 2008, at the Memorial in Michael's honor: "Michael was a very humble and discreet person. I'm sure he would be very taken aback by the outpouring of shock, grief and mourning at his death, on the one hand, and the respect and outpouring of tributes from Quito in Ecuador to Seoul in South Korea, from Moscow in Russia to Capetown in the Republic of South Africa, on the other. Michael's worst fear was hagiography. I remember when he told me how worried he was about these versions of his life; I had to look up the word "hagiography" in the dictionary. I learned that it was a literary genre devoted to the lives of saints."

Later in his remarks, he tried to reframe: "He used his 'maps' to reveal the direction he was taking and why he was heading in that direction, while warning us that there were so many directions he could have taken - or that you yourself could take... His intention was clear and reflected his own modesty, namely to make his practice and the ideas behind it as easily accessible to us as possible. In his humility, he often left out the genius and sometimes magic witnessed by anyone who had the opportunity to attend a few meetings or watch his videos."

But these wise warnings didn't prevent "Maps" from becoming in many contexts a kind of editing manual for narrative conversations, adopted as the backbone of their teaching by the vast majority of the many schools and training centers that have sprung up in the last ten years. The downside, as amply demonstrated in the



first part of this book, is the "Googling" of narrative maps, their transformation from their original vocation as a support for wandering into a GPS algorithm. And consequently, the fact that narrative practitioners, instead of connecting to beauty, poetry, justice, or simply to the client sitting in front of them, instead of drawing their questions from the magical source of this conversation that "creates bridges between despair and the birth of new hope", dutifully move up and down the scale, waiting for something unique to happen.

In the years that followed, David Epston, while respecting the grief of an entire community devastated by the loss of its leader, continued to experiment, teach, research and connect umbrellas and sewing machines together. Then, almost ten years to the day after Michael's disappearance, he returned to the scene in San Diego and delivered his famous speech, "Reimagining Narrative Therapy: an Ecology of Magic and Mystery for mavericks in the Age of Branding." In it, he recounts how he and Michael had decided to rethink the whole thing, dismayed that many practitioners were unable to move beyond imitation to gain a foothold in creation. He also argues for a renewed practice of narrative therapy, one that reconnects with "the spirits of practice": "What are these spirits, which I have deliberately pluralized? Here's what immediately springs to mind: enthusiasm, irreverence, improvisation, imagination, indignation in the face of injustice, solidarity with those who suffer, collective creativity and team spirit, a fascination with the mystery and magic at the heart of everyday life. There are others, of course."

The spirits of the narrative approach. That's the subject of the book "Reimagining Narrative Therapy Through Practice Stories and Autoethnography." Replacing the manuals, tools and instructions of all kinds that have flourished over the years, particularly in France where the pragmatism of coaches often favors concrete, documented approaches, with a return to the "spirits of narrative therapy". The path proposed by David and his co-authors is that of clinical case stories, in the style of a short story or novel, in which the therapist, client and family are literary characters. The novel," says Nancy Huston , "is the only narrative form that allows access to what's going on in the other person's mind". Thus, the use of literary form in therapeutic debriefing, as employed by Irvin Yalom or Oliver Sacks, allows unparalleled access to the therapist's inner world and to the intentions that govern his or her choices in elaborating questions, as well as to his or her doubts, hesitations, sometimes regrets, and so on.

This practice, referred to in the following pages as auto-ethnography, is also an important pedagogical innovation in a teaching tradition based on the study of theory, followed by transcriptions of disembodied conversations or viewing of videos, and finally practical exercises in which the trainee endeavors to reproduce what he has learned and seen, and to stage it in the real world, with varying degrees of apprehension. This aspect of the book will certainly be an invitation for teachers to renew their pedagogy, or at any rate to borrow a few aspects of this way of teaching narratives, described in detail by the talented Travis Heath.

But what really nips at the heartstrings are the therapeutic stories themselves. Bring Kleenex. Because the junction between therapy and literature - a junction that the narrative approach operates on a "macro" level, one might say, through its textual metaphor – occurs here at the very surface of the text, in the very epidermis of these tales in which the patient is the hero and the therapist becomes a flesh-and-blood character with his load of hopes and pains. When I say that the patient is the hero, I mean it in the original sense of the word, "person who distinguishes herself by her exploits or extraordinary courage". For beyond the extraordinary course of narrative therapy offered by these texts, it's the life lessons that we retain. The characters of Wilbur and his parents, Julie and Brandon, Jane the Trumpist, Philomena, Dan (Batman) and Megan, and especially, for me, Chuan, the "flower in the storm" accompanied by the extraordinary Sasha Pilkington, remain engraved in our hearts. And it's through these texts that the "soul of narrative practices" becomes intelligible to us, that it takes shape before our eyes, that it sometimes makes us realize that we hadn't understood anything, that it straightens us up and makes us want to return to it with clear eyes and renewed motivation.

This is a book that marks the beginning of a new way of practicing and teaching the narrative approach. But as it happens, this "new" way is nothing less than a return to the most classic and enduring sources of Michael White and David Epston's work: the spirit of adventure, the radical respect, the poetry of the everyday. You won't come away from this book unscathed.

You've been warned.

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