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# Journal of Narrative Family Therapy

## Ideas and Practices in the Making

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Special Release, 2018

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## Friendly Introduction to this Special Release by David Epston

Late last year, I entered in to a correspondence on email with a gym to renew my membership. After a few exchanges, I resolved to sign a contract for another year. I made an appointment to go to the gym to do so. When I identified myself to the woman at the desk, she looked at me oddly as if I were an alien, but friendly. She indicated to her side-kick that “he’s here’ who rushed off to the adjoining offices. To my amazement, everyone quickly assembled at the desk to greet me. Even the woman who oversaw the child care center joined them. I wondered to myself if they might be overdoing greeting longstanding gym members and commented to the person who had offered me the contract to sign: “Aren’t you overdoing your welcome!” She was confused at first but then explained to me: “No, that’s not the reason we are here. We all wanted to meet the person who writes letters like you do!” I was somewhat taken aback as I had corresponded at no greater length than I considered necessary or customary. So I enquired: “How do other people correspond with you? What do they write?” She replied: “They text ‘how much’!”

I realized in a flash how even the insubstantial a ‘letter’ I had written was cause for the entire gym’s administrative staff to wish to see who could have possibly have indulged in such a medium. Ever since I have wondered how a client and in particular a very young client might receive such a document. Can we assume that it is very likely that this is the first time for a young person to find themselves represented in such a fashion? I suspect so. For so long, I have considered ‘letter writing’ as something I was ethically required to do. What do I mean by that? In my evaluations, (how many sessions do you consider a letter is worth), I invariably received an average of 4.5. Consequently, to knowingly deprive the client of such advantage, I felt compelled to write after every session. For the reasons that I am a very able typist and over time, the storylines of my previous letters so influenced the lines of inquiry, I was able to write a very substantial ‘letter’ within a half hour. And this was the time I would allow myself. In addition, I considered that the exercise of writing the letter of a session afforded me the opportunity to reflexively appreciate it. Or in some cases, when I found it difficult to write a letter, I realized I needed to make amends for a meeting that didn’t go anywhere. And the letter allowed me to do so. In some ways, writing letters was for me the best sort of supervision, not only as I mentioned above but as well being able with client’s feedback to evaluate my own practice. I consider I have learned as much from writing letters as any advantage my clients tell me it gave them.





While letter writing is a practice that was central to the development of narrative therapy practice, documentation on letter writing in the NT literature seems to have gone missing in recent years. In fact, to my great surprise, in my travels throughout the world over the past several years, it is getting more and more rare to hear from therapists who are actually writing letters in their work. Given the long history of letter writing in narrative therapy and its documented influence on clients and therapists alike, it seems to me that a revival is in order. And I am not talking about a mere return to letter writing as we have known it, but rather a revival that takes therapeutic documentation in new and exciting ways that draw on recent developments in performance and storytelling in an effort to return narrative therapy to a therapy with literary merit.

I am happy to say that such a revival has already begun and the papers here testify to this and to the ways Kay, Sanni and Sasha have taken up therapeutic documentation, in their own style and creativity.

This first paper in this special release entitled “My Romance with Narrative Letters: Counter-storying Through Letter Writing” tells the story of how the history of Kay’s letter writing practices developed under her almost 15 years of supervision with me (DE). While she still uses many of what might be considered ‘traditional’ letter writing practices in her work, Kay highlights how she views her more recent letter writing efforts as the telling of a good story; with a particular focus on ‘actions that move the story forward.’ Kay’s paper is filled with actual letters from her work as a way of showing rather than merely telling about her work.

In the second paper in this special release, entitled “Writing Narrative Therapeutic Letters: Gathering, Recording and Performing Lost Stories,” Sasha highlights some of the new developments in her letter writing efforts that focus on writing in ways that allow people to experience themselves as witnesses to their own life stories. One of the primary ways that she accomplishes this is through actual performances of her letters. Sasha also offers readers with a practical look at the ways that she goes about writing and structuring letters.

In the third paper, entitled “A House of Good Words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents”, Sanni introduces readers to her novel innovation of poetry as a means of narrative therapeutic documentation. Sanni tells the story of how she stumbled upon the idea of turning her client’s words into poems and how the writing of poems supervised her into narrative practice as a result of the ways in which the poems required her to listen, attend, and reflect on the words of the people with whom she works.





It is my hope these innovative papers will spark a revitalization of narrative letter writing practices and that their words will have life outside their pages, finding their way into your work. And if they do, we invite you will let us know where their words and ideas have led you in your travels.

*Note: Each of the papers in this special release have been adapted from a workshop on letter writing that I organized at the TC 14 Conference in Vancouver, Canada in 2017.*





## My romance with narrative letters: Counter-storying through letter writing

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### How My Romance with Narrative Letters Began

From the second time I met with David Epston for supervision in December of 2003, learning to craft narrative letters became almost as important to me for learning to devise counter-stories as studying the verbatim transcriptions of my therapy conversations which David had amended with his own questions. When I arrived at the door of David's practice in Auckland on that December afternoon, David met me with these words:

"Kay, as chance would have it, Wally has just been meeting with me, and I wondered whether you would mind if he joined us for our supervision session today?" Before I had had time to find out who on earth Wally was or why David might consider it a good idea for Wally to join us, "Yes of course" popped out of my mouth. Despite my consent, I wasn't at all sure about the idea especially as this was the first transcript of one of the therapy sessions I had brought to my supervision with David. I was more than a little nervous and already the paper I clutched in my hand was somewhat damp with perspiration. As if it were not enough to be presenting my first transcript, my anxiety was heightened because I had 'failed' my first supervision session a month earlier. I had made the grave assumption that our inaugural meeting would be given over to an introductory chat, preparing a supervision contract to which we would sign, after which away I would run until we met for supervision proper. Surely this is how my experience told me supervision was always done? I should have known that just as David's approach to therapy is uniquely his, so too would be his approach to supervision. At that fateful first session, when David realized that I had arrived empty-handed, he almost threw me out on my ear, but thankfully relented, settling for a firm reprimand and gifting me two more sessions in which to prove myself as a worthy supervisee. This second session had to go well, so the surprise presence of Wally was something of a curve-ball.

The warmth of David's greeting slightly thawed the edges of my anxiety, and when Wally rose to greet me with his broad smile, generous handshake and cosy, bear-like presence I was somewhat soothed. Wally turned out to be Wally McKenzie, a veteran narrative therapist, famous for his practice in Hamilton, and for his narrative teaching on the Waikato University Masters Programme in Narrative Therapy.





“Hey, Kay,” David said as he caught sight of the pages of transcript in my slightly sweaty palms, I can see you have brought a transcript! David, overcome with what I soon came to know as his irrepressible and indefatigable excitement, slapped me on the back and before I knew it he was reading the transcript aloud whilst Wally, chin in hand, listened with the ears of a seasoned therapist.

The transcript was of the second session with Wiremu and Mere, a Maori couple whose fourteen-year-old son, Edward, had found himself on the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ and had taken to joyriding with his mates. Rather than see his son risking the wilds of the ‘West Auckland hood’ on his own, Wiremu had begun to join his son in his drinking and driving escapades, much to the distress of his wife.

When David had finished reading, a fevered discussion followed. Alternative questions zoomed around like silver balls on a table, first one from David, then one from Wally, rapidly followed by another from David and so it went on. Feeling that I was on something of a joyride myself, I held onto to my seat and observed the narrative spectacle unfolding before me. With his usual aplomb, David then announced that he thought a letter was in order. “A letter,” I thought “what does he mean.” I was soon to find out. I left that day holding in my hand, the gift of a two-page letter, feverishly crafted by David and Wally for this beleaguered couple and for their son, Edward.

The letter spoke of how the couple had stuck together through hard times. It acknowledged the injustices and struggles that their son had experienced, and spoke of how despite his understandable anger, his attributes shine through in his care of his siblings and in other ways the letter went on to invite Edward to join his parents in their commitment to put the hard times, together with mistakes they had all made, behind them. It spoke to his parent’s conviction that life could get better for them all and that they all deserved a break. It ended with an invitation to “stick together as a family” and for their son to join them at the next session. Edward did not come with them when we next met. I began our session by reading the letter out loud to Mere and Wiremu.

Here is the beginning of my email to David written straight after my next session with Wiremu and Mere:

“When I read the letter to Wiremu and Mere, it was emotional for them both. Mere cried quietly. Wiremu began to talk about wanting his place back in the family and declared to Mere





that he was no longer going to try to be a ‘mate’ to his son and instead would learn to be a father”.

And so that was how my relationship with narrative letters began, even if it might have been better described as an arranged marriage.

Narrative letters have come to serve as extensions of sessions in my practice. Initially, they became the way in which I made up for what I judged to be mistakes in my conversations with people or when I deemed that there was something missing from a conversation. As David once said to me with humility: “Kay, whenever I have messed up, I have always known that I could write a letter by way of apology.” While I am not immune from the need to write letters for such a reason, and I doubt if I ever will be, nowadays the purpose of my letters is almost entirely to add momentum to counter-storying. Sometimes they serve as counter-story ‘bombs’ designed to explode the Problem Story between sessions.

Over the years, I have learnt how to write various types of narrative letters to serve different purposes. There are letters which act as a reminder of ideas discussed in a session; there are letters which serve to ‘keep the problem at bay’; letters which help to forge understandings and solidarity between the person, family members and friends; letters which recruit communities into a person’s life; letters which are written with a person to send to ‘a community of concern’; letters to respond to emergencies including life-saving letters; letters that I write with someone to another person or persons in their life to bring about changes in a relationship, and more. The letters that David has schooled me to write over many years have included all of these intentions at times. However, despite the form of the letter, their purpose is always to give traction to an emerging counter-story.

### **How my Romance with Narrative Letters Evolved**

For many years (roughly between 2004-2010,) I would submit draft letters to David’s ‘narrative eye’ as regularly as I would submit transcripts. Letter writing became my way of wrestling with intransigent problems in the hopes that doing so would aid me and the people with whom I worked to find quicker and more clever ways to evade the Problem. Along with ‘mind maps’ of possible questions, they were also my ‘drawing board’ for my practice.

For some time, my letters would be impossibly long. I would go through reams of notes to find ideas and the germs of counter-stories themes that I wished to include. Mind mapping of





conversations would give me a picture of the story so far. The maps would lay out the different threads of possible counter-stories before me and make visible possible lines of enquiry to form the backbone of the letter. Sometimes lengthy letters were invaluable with complex problems such as anorexia/bulimia and attempted suicide, as they pulled together vital counter-story threads from sessions and juxtaposed the problem's story and the emerging counter-story, laying each of them bare for all to see. Over the years my letters have tended to become a great deal shorter as experience has enabled me to glimpse the counter-story more keenly and resolutely.

### **How I compose narrative letters today:**

Whenever possible, I write the letters immediately after a session. Letters written straight away have more effect because the conversation is still fresh in our minds (mine and my client's,) and in a manner of speaking, the Problem has less opportunity to displace the Counter-story. I put a time limit on the time I will spend. Otherwise, I can become intoxicated with the emerging counter-story and a fifteen-minute letter can turn into a three-hour blockbuster. Rather than beginning by reading through my notes, I draft the key ideas of the letter in mind map form or by writing them down. I tend to find this easier to do on paper. Once I have a skeleton plan, I read through my notes from my sessions and circle or highlight key phrases. I then type my client's words into the plan for the letter. As David has suggested, I aim for forty percent of the letter to be in a client's words although sometimes this is too difficult or doesn't ideally serve the purposes of the letter. The client's words become the structure for the letter, arranged in a form that best 'tells' the Counter-story. I then ruthlessly edit out whatever does not 'move the action of the story forwards'. I then re-read and edit as I go.

### **Three Letter Examples**

I thought I would end with some examples of very different letters from my recent practice. The letters speak for themselves. In each letter you will see counter-stories unfolding.

This first letter is to 'Leni,' a twelve-year-old girl who was referred to me through the Youth Health Hub, the community wing of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services here in Auckland. The letter was written after the second session. This is what her parents wrote on the referral form:

"As a family, we are struggling with Leni's anxiety issues which have worsened since starting Intermediate School. It is getting increasingly difficult to get her to school as she







worries about having to go to the toilet during class time, etc. We have talked to the school, and they are trying to work around the anxiety, but Leni gets extremely anxious when her school days involve any activities outside of her normal class (sport, drama etc.) Normally, Leni becomes emotional during these mornings and refuses to go to school. We have managed to keep her attendance quite high, but we are usually emotionally drained each morning.

The anxiety over needing to go to the toilet so often is now affecting her out-of-school activities, and she is now refusing to go to her dance classes in case she needs to go to the toilet whilst she is at the class.

Leni has always been an anxious girl, worrying about issues she has no control over. We are looking for strategies to help manage her anxiety. The whole family is struggling because of Leni's emotional outbursts which seem to be increasing. We feel we need to help her before her next transition to high school."

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Dear Leni,

I looked at the date before I started writing to you and realized you had been twelve for a whole week! Do you think that you are noticing being twelve at all? Even though some people might only think of twelve as just being the number after eleven, are you noticing that you are a little wiser and more mature than you were this time last year? If you are, are you noticing that you are more worry-wise this year than last? If you agree that you are becoming more worry-wise, do you think it is most unlikely that as you continue to mature and grow in your wisdom that the worries will ever worry you as much as they did when you were eleven or ten, or nine or eight?

Anyway, I said I would write to you because I thought it would be good to collect up on paper all I have learnt from you about how you have been distracting and calming down the tiger worries. Leni, would you mind letting me know when we next meet if I have got anything wrong in my letter? Can I rely on you to let me know?

I am thinking that perhaps you haven't realized how much worry-wisdom you have now. Do you think there might be some truth in that? I ask this because when we first met, I was expecting to find that the worries had really got the better of you. Instead, I





discovered that you had been using your ability to “pick up on stuff,” that your Mum told me about, and had already worked out that the best way of calming the worries down was to distract them. You told me about how you worked out that distraction was your best anti-worry tactic on your own and that compared to before, you were doing “quite good.”

Between you and me, I had to wonder whether I would be needed at all, and I got worried I might be out of a job. I thought to myself that if you just kept distracting the worries, there was a good chance that your strategy would pay off completely. I decided to hang on in there though just in case. I’ve noticed that worries can get pretty tricky so hoped I might still be of help in a backup kind of a way. After the first time we met, you told me that you had shrunk the worries down to about twenty centimetres from thirty centimetres and then the next time you shrunk them down to ten centimetres. I have to say that this made me think even more that you had become worry-wise and it might just be a matter of time before you got the better of them completely.

That first day we met, you also told me that you had worked out that talking about the worries made them stronger, and so you had stopped telling your Mum about them. Keeping quiet about the worries had worked so well that your Mum even wondered if they had gone! You also told me about another anti-worry tactic you had devised - you had decided to go to a different toilet at school. I didn’t ask you why you did this and now I am wondering if you decided that this would confuse the worries because they were used to you going to another toilet? Is this why you decided to do this or was there another reason?

That first day we also talked about the worries as being ‘tiger worries’ because I got to wondering about whether the worries that have been bothering you come from the same place that lots of other people have told me that the worries that bother them come from. And truth be told, the worries that bother me come from. Do you think its possible, as we talked about, that they come from that old cave girl part of you which kind of got left behind and had not grown up over the centuries like most of the other parts of us have? People say this old, cave girl, cave boy or cave man or cave woman part is a part we needed centuries ago in case there were dangers around like tigers because it helped us to run away from them or to fight them.

Some people also say though that although the tiger worries are trying to protect us, they cause trouble and instead are ‘killjoys’ because there are no real tigers. So there is nothing to get you to run from or fight and they end up running around in circles in





people's heads instead. Do you think that the tiger worries that have bothered you are like this? Do you think they might have been frozen in time and don't realize that there are no tigers in Te Atatu (western suburb in Auckland) ?

Considering you are a very caring person, I am wondering if rather than being scared of the worries as much as you were, you have started to feel a bit sorry for them because they don't know there are no tigers in Te Atatu and don't know what to do except run around and around?

Do you know the phrase "why re-invent the wheel?" Well, I thought to myself "why re-invent the wheel" because you had already found out that distracting the tiger worries worked. Do you remember how we thought that you might have a go at distracting the worries with fun and how last time we met you told me how you and your Mum had been spending time being silly and entertaining each other (and perhaps the tiger worries too,) whilst you were waiting to go to school?

Do you remember that we talked about your dog Henry when he first came to live with you and how he was scared and cried in the kitchen the first night? Do you remember your Mum telling me about how your brother had to sleep with him to stop him crying because maybe he thought he was all alone? Do you also remember how we talked about how your whole family went with Henry to dog training to teach him how to be calm and to behave?

When we talked about Henry, I got to thinking about how it might be a bit the same for the tiger worries. You agreed that maybe they needed training, so they understood that there are no tigers in Te Atatu. We then had a bit of a problem though because the problem with these tiger worries is that you can't see them so how do you go about training them and calming them? We thought about you getting a little furry tiger keyring to put on your school bag to remind you to calm and train the tiger worries. We agreed that maybe you could stroke the little furry tiger on your bag when you sensed that the tiger worries might be about to come along so that you could calm them down. Do you think that this is maybe where your caring nature comes in so handy?

I am so looking forward to finding out how you have been getting on with this new anti-tiger worry tactic.

Yours in anti-tiger-worrydom,





Kay

P.S. Did I spell Henry's name right? I don't want to offend him or you, so please would you let me know? Thanks

After the letter, Leni continued to grow her anti-worry wisdom. We had two more sessions. She is now happily settled at high school.

The next letter was written to 'Jasmin', a twenty-year-old Egyptian, Muslim, young woman after our third session. She had also been referred by the Youth Health Hub. This is what she had written on her referral form.

"I am a twenty-year-old girl who is dealing with homophobic parents. They have disowned me, and I have been living all over the country for the last year. My mood is so low that I have been in hospital four times this year and the police have been involved in helping me as well. I'm currently unsure if I should accept my parent's support and 'be straight' or live with my girlfriend... and be sad? I don't know".

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Dear Jasmin,

Here is your letter! We agreed I would write to you about some of what we have talked about in the hope that this gathering up of the very different strands of our conversation might help you to see them more clearly, and to support you in your attempts to "anchor myself inside of the two worlds I am struggling to live in."

I have been sitting here today, reading through the notes from all our conversations, pondering the ideas, thoughts and feelings that we have talked about and wondering what to include and what to leave out for now. Would you please let me know if you think I have not made mention of something that is important to you or if I have got anything wrong?

Jasmin, when I think of you, I think of that first day we met and how we likened your being shunned and cast out by your beloved family to being a refugee. Jasmin, would you say that for as long as you can remember you have tried to live with a foot in New Zealand and a foot in the miniature Egypt of your family home?





When you were cast out because you were in a relationship with Anna, do you ever suspect that although this casting out was more dramatic that you could ever have anticipated that sooner or later the tensions between being 'a Kiwi' (colloquial term for a New Zealander) and being Egyptian, would have caused a rift between you and your family as you attempted to navigate the territories of both worlds at the same time? Has your love of Anna and your parent's refusal to "accept me being with a woman" intensified and perhaps hastened the tensions that might well have burst through and perhaps forced you and your parents apart at some point or another?

As you wrestled with the heartbreak and feeling "so very lost," you also wrestled with seemingly impossible dilemmas: "My parents say come home, but what is home? Is it worth choosing my family over my partner or my partner over my family? If they love me, why do they not accept me?" We talked about how perhaps your parents' love for you and Anna's love for you are not loves that can be compared; how your parents' love for you is not less than Anna's love for you and Anna's love for you is not less than theirs. We discussed how every culture has blind spots which render some other ways of living so alien that they either are not seen at all or are seen very differently from the inside than from the outside. Jasmin, do you think that same-sex love is so unfamiliar to your parents as an expression of love that, in fact, it does not appear to be love to them? Do you think that perhaps your love for Anna appears only to be a threat to the life that they believe will bring you happiness? If this is true, then is their casting out of you a misguided attempt to force you to choose the only way of life that they believe will bring you and your family happiness? Is it, in fact, a very awkward and confused expression of love?

Even though these are probably not dilemmas that can be resolved, we talked at our second meeting about "can I find a way of living in both worlds that is not a lie?" Do you think it is possible Jasmin, that this question may have come to seem unanswerable to you because you have been very understandably assured that there is a true way of living? If your love for your parents and their love for you is true, and your love for Anna and her love for you is true, then could looking through the lens of a 'one truth' be unhelpful? Would you be interested in playing with the idea of many truths? If so, then do you think it is possible that what is said or done in one world may possibly not believe what is said or done in another world even if they seem opposed at face value?

Jasmin, what do you think of extricating yourself from ideas of 'truth' and asking instead different questions? For instance, what if you were to ask yourself: 'If my family's love for me and my love for them is true, then is it a lie to express my love to them in a way that makes





sense within that world?' 'In their world, can I speak my love for them 'in Egyptian ways' without pretending to love in the same ways as they do?' 'If my love for Anna and her love for me is true, then when walking in Anna's world, can I 'speak love' as a modern, gay, Kiwi?'

Although speaking more than one language of love could be nigh impossible if these worlds collide, do you wonder whether sometime in the future, it may be possible to traverse these two worlds even if it remains hazardous and delicate? If this means agreeing to the pact that your parent's proposed: 'To never speak of this again!', do you think that they and you could find some kind of unspoken understanding that, just as you will not speak of your love for women, that they will not push you towards heterosexual love? Jasmin, would you forgive me if these ideas seem impossible to you? Do they seem impossible or do you think that there may be some virtue in considering them?

Warm regards,  
Kay

I met with Jasmin for three more sessions. She went back to work full-time, and she began to find ways to navigate ways of seeing her parents and her sister whilst remaining with her partner. Previously, her parents had refused to see her, and they had no contact for a year. When I called her recently to talk to her about publishing her letter, she was going through a tricky time after a whole year of doing very well. She is seeing a counsellor at her university.

### Recent Developments

A recent development in my letter-writing has been my 'four-letter-series' for young people, an idea invented from necessity when the mental health agency, which refers to me most of the young people with whom I work, recently had their funding reduced and consequently the entitlement of sessions was reduced from a possible five to eight to a maximum of four. As a way of reconciling this, I decided to shorten the sessions to forty-five minutes and spend the fifteen minutes remaining crafting short counter-story letters.

Here is an example of a letter quartet which shows the development of the counter-story between sessions. The letters are to 'Lucy', a fourteen-year-old young woman. Here is what Lucy's General Practitioner wrote on her referral from:



“Lucy presents with low mood and social anxiety worsening over the last few months. She would really benefit from some counselling.”

Again, I will let the letters speak for themselves and tell you the story of our four sessions. The letters are each written one week apart:

### **Letter after Session One:**

Dear Lucy,

It was a real pleasure to meet you today! Here is the letter I promised. If there is anything that you think I have misunderstood or that I have missed out, would you please let me know when we meet? Would you also mind letting me know if there is anything in this letter which particularly interests you?

Lucy, we mostly talked about “the glass wall” that seems to have appeared, separating you from others and the dreadful loneliness of life behind the wall. You told me how much you would like to be able to reach through the wall, and even that you might consider “letting people in more.” As we talked, it was no surprise to me to find out that you have had your trust most hurtfully broken in the past: not only by other young people but by a teacher, an adult in authority, who should have known better. I suggested to you that just maybe the reason the wall suddenly appeared in high school might have been because your body remembered how badly and shockingly hurt you were in 5th form and leapt in to protect you with the wall. If this is indeed what has happened, then do you think that your body overdid it? In its attempts to protect you, has it left you out in the cold, and you have become a little rusty in the friendship-making department? Do you think that we might be able to teach your body that, slowly but surely it can allow you to risk getting a bit closer to people again?

At the same time as you have the gift of being able to enjoy your own company, do you think that you could give yourself permission to retreat into your own world whenever you need and want to?

As you taught me more about your experiences, it became apparent that you have learnt a great deal from these past hurts. You have learnt to speak out and to stand up to authority. Would you say that the suffering has not all been in vain because by un-suffering yourself, you have learnt to look after yourself better?





Lucy, next time we meet, how about we start to talk about what it is that you would look for in a friend and then we can start 'testing' people around you (even if they are only people who would be lesser friends or acquaintances), to slowly find out if they are worthy of your time, attention and friendship?

Warm regards,  
Kay

### **Letter after Session Two:**

Hi Lucy,

Good to see you today. So, here is a little account of what we spoke about today and some questions that we might both like to think about.

We began our chat today by reading the letter that I wrote to you after our first session. You looked very thoughtful as you told me that you agreed that the "wall had come up when I went to high school because I was going through puberty and it made me more self-conscious."

Lucy, if self-consciousness has grown with puberty, do you think it might also be possible that you might be able to shrink it back down again as you mature more?

Do you think that the difference between now and when you were little might just be that when you were little you didn't need to learn how to be unself-conscious (or out-going,) it just kind of happened, but now as a young person, you have to learn how to do it?

We talked a little about how you made and kept friendships before the wall went up. You told me about a whole group of friends. Melinda was the person that you felt closest to. When I asked you what it would be like if the wall isolated you from others for the rest of your life, you told me that it was if you were "in a bubble" and if you remained in the bubble you would become "a hermit". You admitted that you really don't want this life for yourself and if you did, you wouldn't have come for counselling. Then, you told me something I found very interesting. You likened your friendships to an egg, telling me that "I only need one yolk and the others are acquaintances - they are like the white of the egg." The white is "like a cushion", and "the yolk is very rich". You said that you "feel like an embryo in an egg without a yolk at the moment."







Lucy, did you realize before today that all you may be missing is a yolk? If you find a yolk-kind-of-friend, do you think that the sadness may fade? We had a think together about what your friendship recipe for a yolk-kind-of-friend might be. You told me that they would be:

1-Clever

2-Wouldn't push another away or judge

3-Genuine

4-Someone who has things in common with me

5-Someone who has a degree of honesty

When I asked you how your friend Andrea might measure up against your friendship ingredients, she did very well indeed. We agreed that you might experiment a bit this week to see whether or not it is possible that Andrea might well be yolk-friendship material.

I cannot wait to hear what you have discovered when we meet again next week.

Warm regards,

Kay

### Letter after Session Three:

Dear Lucy,

Well, we are nearly at the end of our conversations. For that reason, it is so good to hear that you feel you have come a long way! You told me today that you have been very happy all week. As we talked, you realized that "being connected to others and the world around me" is the source of "my happiness". In fact, you went on to say that you were worried that this connectedness might disappear but as we talked it seemed that you realized that there is no accident in the sadness that comes; that it comes when there is disconnection. Now that you understand the cause of the sadness, do you expect that from now on you will know what to do, whereas you couldn't possibly have known? Do you think that knowing that re-connecting with others and the world around you will bring back at least some of your happiness might make a world of difference to how this fear that the sadness may return might affect you? Lucy, you said with some surprise that you are discovering that Andrea "meets the requirements of being a yolk-kind-of-friend more and more."

You are even finding it a little "freaky" that you have so much more in common than you thought, even your "love of dragons". We discussed how it is that you have become closer to





Andrea and come to know her more. You told me that you have taken risks with her, for example, telling her that you are coming to counselling. We found ourselves talking about how vulnerability may be a magic ingredient in friendships, because without risking vulnerability, how is trust built?

Lucy, I was thrilled to hear that you have been “thinning the wall and the thinner it gets, the easier it is to break.” Then you told me something very curious indeed: let me repeat what you said: “The more I am aware of the wall, the less it bothers me. It is an illusion, and when I see the illusion, the wall has less power over me, and I have more power over me.”

Near the end of our conversation today you informed me that last year you taught yourself social skills. You described it to me in ways that I wouldn't have expected from someone who had suffered as you had: “I learnt to talk to new people; I learnt to use more of a filter; and I learnt to carry myself with confidence”. You also said that you had made something of an art of “acknowledging when people compliment me and complimenting them back.” I was most delighted and surprised when you told me that “I am changing the narrative by reminding myself of all the good things.”

I was surprised because this kind of counselling is called narrative therapy and what I hope that people will be able to do is “change the narrative.” I thought that what you said was very cool!!!

Lucy, you had said that the sadness can also come at times when “I get the idea I am a bad person because I have done something badly, so I am not worthy of being someone's friend.” What you realized as we were talking was that the bad thoughts managed to “get a lot of my attention in the past, but now I am giving my attention to the good thoughts.” Lucy, as you keep giving your attention to the good thoughts, do you suspect that the good thoughts will grow and the bad thoughts will wither away with lack of care and attention? Will they wither on the vine?

See you next week, Lucy! I can't wait.

Warm regards,

Kay





### Letter after Session Four (The Final Session):

Dear Lucy,

Today was our last meeting. I will never forget seeing you more or less skip up the stairs to my room today, excitedly telling me before we had even sat down that “I have made a very important discovery: I realized why my self-esteem has been so low and I have got it back.” I must admit that I couldn’t wait for us to close the door behind us so you could tell me more! Lucy, you did not leave me waiting. Without even pausing to sit down in your seat, you began to tell me that you had “put it all down to Georgia and Bec’. It dawned on you this week, quite out of the blue, that “Georgia’s behaviour was responsible for my self-esteem slipping away.” Georgia has left the school, thank goodness, but her treatment of you (“she was a complete bitch to me,” you said,) left you vulnerable to mistreatment from your now ex-boyfriend, Bec. “He chipped away at my already crumbling self-esteem, but I had the courage and the strength to end it. I am no longer holding it against myself that I was mean to him. He used to say that I wasn’t funny but Andrea says I am funny all the time and that Bec has the sense of humour of a dry slug.” We decided that Andrea has been like a secret-angel-friend. As you put it: “Andrea has helped me to see what happened without even saying anything.”

When we talked a little more, we discovered that the reclaiming of your self-esteem might never have come about had you not had the courage to reach out to Andrea in the first place to find out whether she might be a yolk-kind-of-friend! Knowing what you know now, Lucy, would you say that Andrea is more like a double-yolker: you know, one of those lucky eggs that has a double yolk?

Your reclaiming of your self-esteem from the nastiness of Georgia and Bec seems to have given you a power over thoughts that you had also lost sight of. As you said, “Whenever I have self-depreciating thoughts now, I tell myself that they are just thoughts and I don’t listen. Before I thought that it was all me and that I was a bad person. Now I am trusting my inner guidance. I feel proud of myself for breaking up with Bec. I had the inner strength to get out. I am never going to let anyone treat me like this ever again. In future, I would get out or stand up. I will pick my friends wisely.”

Lucy, when I asked you what had happened to the wall, you told me that “it’s just not as effective. It is like a hedgerow in England now whilst before it was like The Great Wall of China...





Before there was a big shiny wall and my crumbling self-esteem, and now there is my big shiny self-esteem and the crumbling wall.”

Lucy, it has been a delight to get to know you. Now that you have reclaimed not only your self-esteem but your pride in yourself, do you think there will be anything stopping you? With all that you know now, if nastiness strikes in the future do you wonder as I do you will be able to identify it so quickly that it will simply slide off you as if you have been Teflon-coated?

Warmest regards,

Kay





## Writing narrative therapeutic letters: Gathering, recording and performing lost stories

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### Abstract

When I was in my twenties I was working in Adult Mental Health as a counsellor. I was lucky to be practising in Auckland which was alive with what has become known as Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990). This gave me the opportunity to learn from David Epston (see Epston, 1994; 1998; 2016) and Johnella Bird (see Bird, 2000; 2004) from the outset of my career and exposed me to the power of David Epston's therapeutic letters from my first moments of being a counsellor.

I first met David in 1986 when he generously offered to supervise me concerning the therapeutic conversations I was having with "Chris" who had spent many months in an acute psychiatric ward. The devastating problem Chris was living with had the medical team stumped and they were reaching out for other possibilities. The psychiatrist on the ward asked if David would be willing to assist us. David kindly agreed and Chris welcomed the help. Initially, David, Chris and I would meet at regular intervals. Following each meeting David and I would write a therapeutic letter to Chris. However, thereafter, as I was a staff member on the ward, I met with Chris on my own and then would discuss our conversation with David. David would then write a letter to Chris about what he had learned from me. Against all predictions, and to the shock of many, the problem in Chris's life receded. It was my first introduction to Narrative Therapy (though it was not known as such at the time), and my first encounter with therapeutic letters.

In 1987, the law in New Zealand was amended allowing people who had received care from Mental Health Services to view their psychiatric files for the first time. I was working as a counsellor in an Adult Community Mental Health Service and was invited to be present while some of the people I was meeting with read the accounts in their files (Pilkington & Fraser, 1992). I will never forget how deeply distressing it was for those people to read the psychiatric file's version of their lives. That distress has shaped my passion for letter writing and the



philosophy behind how I document other people's information to this day. Consequently I resolved to write *for* the people I met rather than *about* them.

I developed a practice of consulting with people about what they would like written down in the notes I was taking. I then used those notes to write therapeutic letters (see Epston, 1995; 1998) and it was these that I placed in the file if, after consulting with the person, they gave their consent for me to do so. Together we would carefully consider both the contents of the letter and its potential audience. Unsurprisingly the people I met with were often enthusiastic about using therapeutic letters as a counter document to be placed on their file, as these letters contained stories of their lives that they wanted told.

As I have moved into different work contexts an ethic of writing *for* people has remained though the way I practice it has shifted and evolved. One of the most significant evolutions in my thinking about collaborative documents has been the realization that we are generating a storied representation of a person's life. This awareness of creating a new narrative through which people can glimpse themselves in a new way shapes how I go about writing and using letters therapeutically.

In this paper I am going to share with you:

1. How I go about taking notes with the people I meet with in my role as a counsellor.
2. How I structure many of the therapeutic letters I write.
3. How I perform a therapeutic letter.
4. How I approach speaking with someone about their experience of seeing themselves in the letter they have received to maximise its therapeutic benefit.
5. How I go about writing in the medical file.

The way I write letters and other therapeutic documents is one way a counsellor might approach collaborating with the people with whom they meet. It is not the only way and you will see many creative alternatives in this journal.

### **Narrative therapeutic letters**

Therapeutic letters written by narrative therapists carry the essence of narrative philosophy and are integral to the counselling rather than standing outside of it (Epston, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). They utilize the power of the written word for therapeutic purposes (Crocket, 2010) transporting the counselling conversation beyond the therapy room (Epston, 1994, Stevens, 2010). Narrative letters can be used as potent records of therapeutic conversation to



underline and consolidate what has been discovered in therapy. They acknowledge and engage, building on the therapeutic relationship (Moules, 2003) and the impact of the therapeutic conversation (Nylund & Thomas, 1994).

Most letters are written to record the counselling conversation with the purpose of acknowledging the effect of the problem on a person's life and then to underline the rich alternative stories that emerge (White & Epston, 1990). Therapeutic letters add strength and longevity to new descriptions that come forth in the counselling conversation through giving them written form as well as by creating an audience in the person's community of support. In my current practice working as a counsellor for Hospice North Shore, I meet with families where one person is dying. Time is precious and yet there can be many matters the family wishes for us to talk about. One of my intentions in writing therapeutic letters to the people I meet with is to ensure every moment we have together counts. Writing a letter allows new discoveries and meanings to be remembered and potentiated through recipients reading and re-reading a letter. Narrative therapeutic letters have been found to be worth on average 3.2 therapy sessions (Nylund & Thomas, 1994) and are thus a key part of my practice when time is a major constraint.

I often write therapeutic letters to acknowledge and witness a person's experience of living with an illness especially when they are contending with significant challenges that they may not have been able to share with anyone. However, an account of the effects of the illness on a person's life will not be the well-worn medical story of the disease and their encounters with the health system. In such letters, not only will there be acknowledgement of the enormity and distinctions in their experience if that was an important part of the therapeutic conversation, but I will also often record lost stories of the person's *responses* to the difficulties (Wade, 2007) and how a person's responses reflect what they value in their life. In such conversations, I am listening for and recording accounts that position the person as a morally virtuous agent as this is often invisible in the dominant medical story of their experience.

I also write letters for future audiences. For example, I recently wrote a letter to a woman whose adult children lived overseas and who was in the last six weeks of her life. We decided while she was well enough to speak to record in it previously untold stories of how she loved and valued her children while she was still well enough to speak. Her intention was for her children to read the letter hopefully before she died but certainly after her death. Therefore the letter, while addressed to her, was written with another audience in mind.

These are just a few examples of my purposes and intentions in writing therapeutic letters but I hope they will invite you to consider possibilities for your practice.



Some possible purposes of therapeutic letters include:

- To invite the people I meet with to regard themselves with compassion.
- To potentiate the purpose of the therapeutic conversation by highlighting and strengthening the counter story (also known as the alternative story).
- To ensure key turning points, stories and discoveries are not forgotten but rather taken out of the therapy room and into the person's world.
- To underline questions from the therapeutic conversation especially when the problem has the person strongly in its grip and they feel stuck.
- To carry messages and stories of love forward in to the future.
- For the purposes of acknowledgement and witnessing when a person's story is unknown to others and been so far untold.
- To maximise the time I have with a person. I use letters to ensure every minute of our conversation counts in a way they would wish.
- To invite others into the conversation. For example I find family members who have previously been unwilling to meet with a counsellor decide to meet with me having read a letter I have written to another family member. The invitation may be to join the person as they tackle a problem. For example, Madigan (2008) has developed a practice he calls 'letter writing campaigns' as a means of generating a known community of support for a person.
- To record stories that highlight moral character and the meaning of a person's life. In my practice context I may write such a letter with the intention of supporting a person to die the way they wish to as well as a written legacy of their moral character for surviving family members to retain.

### **Collaborative notetaking**

Collaborative notes provide the content of the therapeutic letters I write. When I speak of collaborative note taking, I am referring to the counsellor gathering and writing notes in the counselling session with the person they are meeting with in an interactive and consultative way with the intention of sharing those notes with the person in the form of a letter.

Taking collaborative notes is important in my letter writing practice because:

- Taking notes collaboratively is a respectful and transparent consultative process that allows me to collect conversation for the people I meet with rather than me trying to remember what was said afterwards.





- The process of collaboration allows me to more easily capture verbatim quotes of what the people I meet with say and record their language and phrases. These quotes and individual forms of expression strengthen their voice in the therapeutic letter I subsequently write to them. This is important because I want them to recognise themselves and their wisdom in the letter in order to more easily read a possible new narrative of their life that we are co-constructing.
- The process of collecting notes collaboratively allows me to capture key questions they may wish to ponder later. Given that narrative questions pursue lines of inquiry a person has often never considered before, this gives a person the opportunity to reflect further and often more deeply on particular ideas.
- Taking notes collaboratively creates a process whereby I can consult with people as to what is important to them that they would wish recorded. This contributes to a letter that has content that is more meaningful to them.
- Collaborative notes save me time. The lion's share of the letter lies in my notes ready to be brought to life in the writing of the letter.

### Introducing collaborative notes in a session

As a way of introducing the idea of taking down notes in a collaborative way I might say to the person:

"I often take notes for people when I am meeting with them. I find most people can't usually remember all that is said in the hour or more we are together and find it useful to have a record. Would you like me to take down some notes for you? These would be notes *for you* rather than the medical file which I will type up and send to you in the form of a letter. Is this something that might interest you?"

I then consult with the person as to what they make of the idea of me taking down notes and writing them a letter. I always follow the person's preferences as to whether they want me to record notes or not. If they have any discomfort or questions, I will explore these, always prioritising what is important to them. There are occasions when I don't write notes: for example, when I am with a family and a person is dying or on occasions when my entire attention is required to follow what is going on in the room with a group of people. Likewise, you may have times when you also deem it inappropriate. However, in the vast majority of times I find it helpful as do the people I meet with that I take down a written record of the therapeutic conversation and subsequently send them a letter.



Once we have agreed it would be useful to have a written record of the conversation, I explain I will send our notes in the form of a letter and ask them how they would prefer me to do that. If a person/s prefers the letter to be sent by email I always take a hard copy of the letter to our next meeting not only to perform but to leave with them in case they haven't printed a copy of the letter and would like one. I might discuss privacy issues at this time or at the end of our meeting together.

There are some safety issues that are important to explore. These include confidentiality and any concerns should the letters be read by another person. I avoid including anything that could cause harm to the recipient of the letter if it was read by another, and I would never include anything that could cause harm to any other person.

I then invite the person/s to contribute to the notetaking. I do this by asking them: "Would you like me to write that down?" when they are sharing a story from their life and, "I'll just make a note of that" if they say something that seems significant to them; or "Would you like me to write that question down for you to think about more later?"

If I have gathered information that is beginning to construct a new and perhaps helpful representation of their life, I might highlight this by reading what I am writing aloud. This might occur several times during an hour-long meeting. As I read the emerging new story lines that the person has perhaps uttered for the first time in response to the questions I have posed, I am seeking to underline and add coherence to the new narrative we are beginning to co-construct. I may also do this with the intention of inviting the person to be a compassionate witness to themselves in a new narrative of their life and identity.

Once a person has received their first letter the process of taking notes together for a letter flows easily and people are far more engaged. I often have people interrupting me to check I have written something down that is important to them. I understand that the person's interest in the notes has to do with them being appreciative of notes that are written down *for them*.

### **What do I write down?**

What I write down will mirror the therapeutic conversation— its spirit, intentions and practices. I want to capture the expressions and words of the person so the narrative I will share in the letter will be easily recognisable to them as concerning themselves and what we have spoken about.



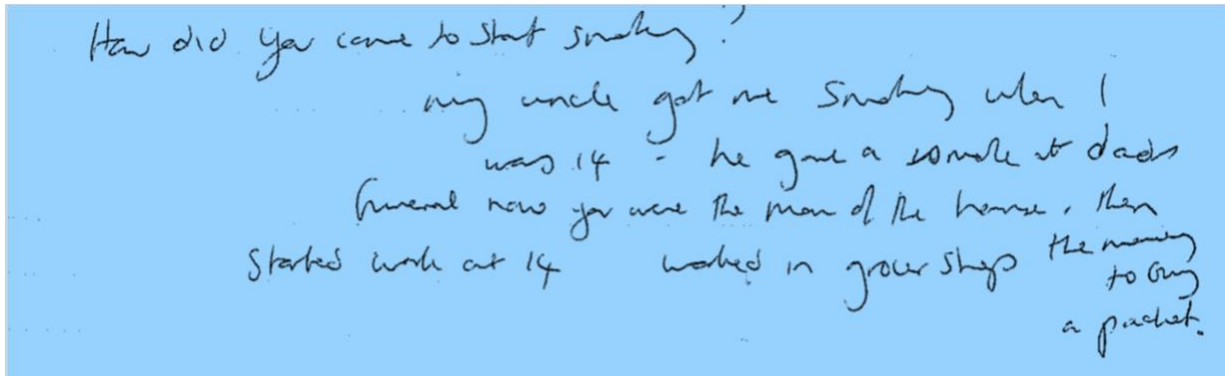
This reflection of our therapeutic conversation may include an acknowledgement of the difficulties people are experiencing in living their lives. I companion many people who are suffering extensively in my role as a counsellor working for Hospice North Shore (Pilkington, 2014; 2016; 2017). If the therapeutic conversation witnesses suffering and explores how a person lives with it and the meaning of their experience, so too will my notes and subsequent letter. Such acknowledgements contain the seeds of an alternative story.

The notes will record the questions I ask and the person's responses as we speak together. I don't record everything that is said. Rather, I will select those key questions and answers that are significant with reference to the purpose of the conversation. If I am unsure as to what is important I ask the person/ people concerned. For example "Is that something important to you? Would you like me to note that down?"

However, as I make notes I am mindful I am writing a narrative of a person's life that will be strengthened and made durable through being written down. Thus, what I write down will reflect what I am *listening for* in the therapeutic conversation and will be informed by the spirit of Narrative Therapy. Therefore, I will record above all else new emergent counter-stories. Likewise, stories of agency, virtue and love inevitably make their way into my notes. In my untidy scribbles, the new narrative we are co-constructing can be traced question by question, answer by answer.

The process of listening for counter stories such as the virtuous intentions informing a person's actions and then noting them down requires me to engage with whom I am speaking and to their experience with an empathy that situates me within the story being told (Frank, 2004). Such listening shapes the relationship and what might thereafter be shared.

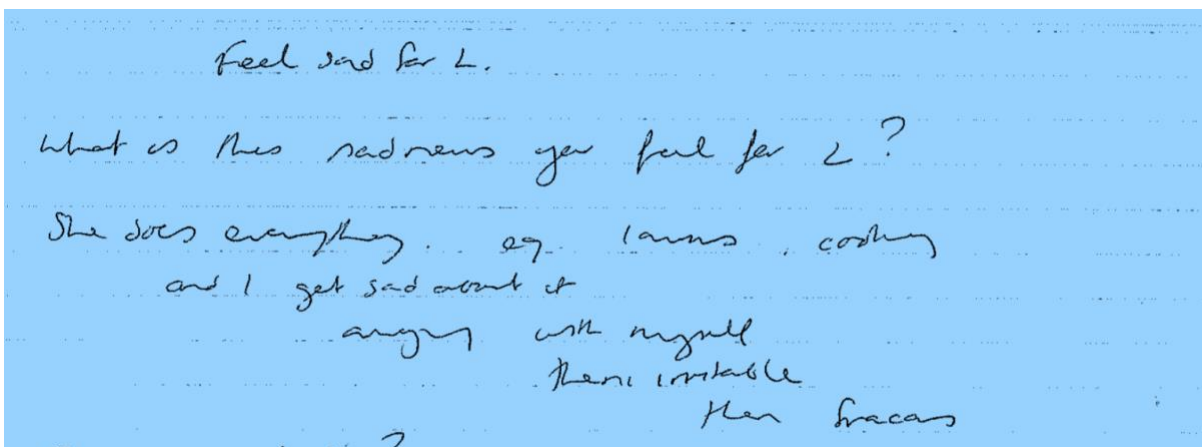
Sometimes people are surprised at how much I can write in a letter from the conversation. I manage to do this as I use my own brand of abbreviations and short hand. For example, I do not write people's full names, only a letter to distinguish them, and I do not include the polite entries into questions but rather only the question itself. In my notes, the word "what" may replace the introduction to the question "Could you help me understand..." and then I will re-expand it and reconstruct what I actually said in the letter. The following examples of my notes and letters illustrate this. You may have your own abbreviations and shorthand.

**Notes to letters: Two examples**


How did you come to start smoking?  
 My uncle got me smoking when I  
 was 14 - he gave a smoke at Dad's  
 funeral 'now you were the man of the house', then  
 started work at 14 worked in grocer shop the money  
 to buy a packet.

**Abbreviated Notation:** S: How did you come to start smoking? C: My uncle got me smoking when I was 14. He gave me a smoke at Dad's funeral 'now you were the man of the house', then money to buy a packet. Started work at 14. Worked in grocer shop.

**Excerpt from letter:** We talked about how people didn't know smoking was bad for their health back when you were young. When I asked you how you had come to start smoking you told me "My uncle got me smoking". You were 14 years old and your father had just died. You left school to get a job to help the family with money. At your father's funeral your uncle told you "You are the man of the house now" and he gave you a smoke. He also gave you the money to buy a packet of cigarettes. I wondered if smoking was seen as a manly thing to do and whether he was acknowledging your willingness to contribute to the household. What do you think he was recognising in you when he gave you that smoke?



Feel sad for L.  
 What is this sadness you feel for L?  
 She does everything e.g. lawns, cooking  
 and I get sad about it  
 angry with myself  
 then irritable  
 then fracas

**Abbreviated Notation:** Feel sad for L. What is this sadness you feel for L? She does everything e.g. lawns, cooking and I get sad about it, angry with myself, then irritable, then fracas.



**Excerpt from letter:** You shared that you “feel sad for Linda”. “Can you help me understand a little of this sadness you feel for Linda?” I asked you. You explained to me all that Linda does around the house. You described her mowing the lawns and cooking and looking after you “and I get sad about it. Then I get angry with myself and a bit irritable with Linda and then there is the inevitable fracas”. You and Linda had a wee laugh then and Linda reassured you she understood. In spite of all you have been going through I noted you were more worried for Linda than yourself.

To Summarise:

- Collaborative notes reflect the spirit of Narrative Therapy. They are not a technique or practice that is separate from it.
- Once the person has received their first letter, they are invariably highly engaged in the process of my writing them.
- Collaborative notes do most of the work of writing the letter.
- Collaborative notes influence the style of the letter – they strengthen the voice of the person you are meeting, enhancing their sense of agency and the possibility of the person seeing themselves in a new light.

### Writing a letter

I write letters as soon as possible after the counselling session. This means the conversation is fresh in my mind and consequently I write the letter more quickly.

When I am writing a therapeutic letter I have a structure I frequently use.

Disclaimers: I begin with a disclaimer. A disclaimer positions me as the author of the letter and as writing my version of the conversation. In doing so the disclaimer acknowledges there could be other versions of the conversation. It invites the person to uphold their knowledge of their life and their experience of the therapeutic conversation by stating they hold editorial rights (Rombach, 2003) and encouraging them to correct anything I may have got wrong. I find this important as I do get things wrong from time to time or the recipient of the letter might revise what they said at the time. I welcome any changes or comments they share with me. A disclaimer underlines that the letter contains information that is written *for* them rather than *about* them.



## Examples of disclaimers

*Here are the notes I said I would give you a copy of. They can't quite capture the rich descriptions you offered of your experience however I hope they will serve to remind you of our conversation and be of use in whatever way you would like them to be. If you want to change anything in any way or elaborate further I would welcome your comments and adjustments. It was lovely to meet you and share in a little of your experiences. This is the letter I said I would send you. This letter records my version of the conversation rather than yours, so I may not have gotten some things right or I may have missed some parts of the conversation that were important to you. With that in mind please feel free to change them or add to them in any way that improves their usefulness to you. You have full editorial rights!*

*It was lovely to meet you again. Yesterday's conversation brought forward stories of your courage, your wisdom and your ability to speak up and advocate for your life in circumstances that understandably silence most people. This is my summary of what we discussed. As I have said to you it is only my version of our conversation and as you are the most knowledgeable person concerning your own life, please feel free to change or discard anything that doesn't fit for you.*

*This is the letter I said I would send you recording some of what we spoke of. As it records my version of the conversation rather than yours I may have got some things wrong or said them in ways that don't fit for you, so please feel free to make any changes or add to them in any way that improves their usefulness for you. You have full editorial rights!*

*It was good to meet with you and hear something of how you are living with this illness and about the love you hold for your family. This is the letter I said I would write from some of the notes from our session. As it is my version of events and I may have got things wrong please don't hesitate to let me know if you would like to make any corrections or add to what I have written. I would welcome hearing more about your experience.*

*This is the letter I said I would write to you from the notes I took during our meeting together. As this letter is for you rather than the file please let me know if you would like to make any alterations or edit them in any way. I may not have got your words down as you would like or you may have had further thoughts since we last spoke. I would welcome any suggestions that improve their usefulness to you.*





*This is the letter I said I'd give you. As it contains my version of the conversation rather than yours, I may have got something wrong or not quite put it in the way that you would have. So please feel free to change them or come back to me with further thoughts. My hope in writing some of the conversation down is that it will give you the chance to think further about anything that was important to you. I'm aware I don't know the spelling of everyone's names so do let me know what they are when I see you next.*

In many of these disclaimers you will notice that I am offering editorial rights to the recipient of the letter. I am indebted to Rombach (2003) for this practice.

I tend to repeat different versions of the same disclaimer to save time. You may have quite different disclaimers that suit your style and context for practice. However, you are welcome to use mine if you wish or change them in any way that suits you.

### **The main body of the letter**

The style and length of the therapeutic letters I write reflect the age, health and preferences of the person I am writing too. While letters to an adult comfortable with the written word may be longer, letters to children may be short, imaginative and with illustrations. I may send shorter letters to people who are very unwell with little energy or to a person when there has been a brief interaction on the phone. Alternatively, there are times when I am meeting with a person and exploring possible meanings for their life and the letter I write may be very long. If a person is uncomfortable with written language or can't read, I may write a letter with content that is intended to be read aloud by another person. In short, I adapt the letter to best serve the person it is being written for.

### **Letters as stories**

A good therapeutic letter situates a person's experience within a story. There are many possibilities of how the story of a person's experience may be written. For example, it may be a story that describes the unfolding of the therapeutic conversation or it may have nested stories from a person's life that fit within the story of the therapeutic conversation.

Sometimes the letters I write are representations of a life story. These letters stretch across the span of a person's entire life and are especially helpful with people who are struggling to make sense of their lives as they approach death. The letter to Craig and Linda that follows later in this paper is one of a series of letters which recount Craig's life story as he shared it within the



therapeutic conversation context. It was written with the purpose of underlining some of the new identity descriptions we had discovered for Craig that were more helpful for him as he lived with extreme disability from his illness as he approached his death.

While in life story letters I may paraphrase some of the stories, my usual style is to story a letter using my questions and the person's responses (See the letter to Claire at the end of this section). I either quote the person verbatim or use their language and expressions. I do this to centralise the person's voice in the letter so they can see their wisdom and more readily recognise themselves in the new narrative we are co-constructing.

### **Content and structure**

The content of the letters I write are directly drawn from the notes I have written. While all my letters are different there are some patterns to the content. There is likely to be an acknowledgment of the challenges the person is facing early on and the effect of those difficulties on their life. I may record the deconstruction of unhelpful discourses that we have discussed and the person's responses to such difficulties. I include in the letter story lines and identity descriptions that challenge the problem's description of the person. I also highlight the person thinking or acting with virtue wherever possible.

Counselling conversations can move back and forth between themes as we venture into new terrains. In order to write a narrative in the letter that has fluency and is easier for the person to recognise I may re-order the notes by grouping together some conversation that have a similar theme.

### **Tone**

I also reproduce the tone of the therapeutic conversation in my letters. This means that I not only record the content of the conversation but some of the flow and context. An example of this is in the "notes to letters" earlier in this paper when I included the laugh Craig and Linda had in the letter, "*You and Linda had a wee laugh then and Linda reassured you she understood*" to match the tone of the conversation.





## Extending questions

I sometimes use extending questions in my therapeutic letters (Epston, 1994). An extending question is a question that wasn't asked in the counselling conversation but perhaps occurs to the counsellor after the therapeutic conversation has taken place and is then included in a therapeutic letter. Extending questions relate to the content of the counselling conversation but amplify it further in a therapeutic direction. Often the people I have met with reflect on extending questions and significantly develop the emerging counterstory between meetings. An extending question can add to the new narrative. However, while extending questions can be useful they can easily be overwhelming. The number of extending questions needs to be judiciously considered and care is required to ensure they relate to what was discussed. I do not use extending questions often as I include so many questions from the therapeutic conversation. However sometimes they can be useful. You may find an example of an extending question in the last question to Claire in the letter that follows.

I like to finish letters warmly and often express looking forward to meeting with the person again (White & Epston, 1990). I often repeat an invitation to discard anything that isn't relevant to the person (see Rombach, 2003) reflecting my stance that the person knows more about what is important to them than I do.

### Example of a therapeutic letter: "Dear Claire"

The letter to Claire was written to a woman who had met many counsellors who drew on different ideas than those that inform Narrative Therapy. She had had extensive contact with Al-Anon<sup>1</sup>. Claire believed that the way she had cared for people previously in her life was pathological and saw little value in herself. When I met Claire, she was caring for her close friend Ann who was terminally ill. After our first meeting I wrote her the following letter. One of the intentions I had in writing this letter was to create a document whereby Claire could easily see her own wisdom about her caring for others.

*Dear Claire,*

*It was good to meet with you today. Given what the last year of caring for Ann has meant for you, we agreed that documenting your experience in a letter could give you a better chance to remember and reflect on our conversation. As I said to you today this is*

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Anon is a group set up to support partners of people who are addicted to alcohol. Al-Anon is part of the organisation Alcoholics Anonymous. The group follows a program called "The Twelve Steps".



*for you, not the medical file, so please change it in any way that improves its usefulness for you. You may find I haven't got your words quite right or haven't described things quite as you would like them so please don't hesitate to make corrections. You have full editorial rights and please use them as you see fit!*

*When we met you explained to me that your friend Ann is dying and that you are caring for her. You said you were looking after Ann because her husband Daryl hadn't felt able to do so.*

*You explained to me that you had made the decision to come to counselling as you'd been having some strong feelings of "anger" that had caught you "unawares". You had recently gone for a walk and discovered you were feeling "very angry with Daryl" and the way he was "handling Ann's illness". You said it was important that you sort out your feelings before Ann died as you felt if you didn't, they could impact her death in a "bad way".*

*I asked you what had brought forward these angry feelings. In response you told me that you thought Daryl wasn't "supporting Ann properly". When Ann had confided in you that she felt "very alone" you in turn felt "really mad with him". You said you couldn't believe the way Daryl continued to work even though Ann was on her "death bed".*

*I asked you, "What ideas do you hold about how a person might support their partner when they are dying?"*

*You eloquently replied, "One should enter into their world with curiosity, concern and compassion. To be a companion".*

*You told me the reason you have been angry is because you are a "caretaker and co-dependant". You said you wondered if you were "projecting" your ideas onto Daryl but you remain convinced that "because death is something we have to do alone, companionship becomes more important".*

*"What beliefs does this recognition of the importance of companionship when someone is dying represent?" I asked you.*

*You told me that you believe "human suffering can be unfair" but that "suffering can be relieved by sharing love". You referred to your convictions that "giving and receiving love" is what makes your "life meaningful and joyful".*



*When I asked you how you had developed these ideas and how they had become important to you over the course of your life, you said you learned this the hard way through “my deprivation as a child”.*

*I then inquired, “How did that deprivation develop your appreciation of love?” You told me that you were so unhappy as a child that you went out searching for love. You went on to say that “my spirituality supports my appreciation of love”. “What do you call this appreciation of love?”, I enquired. “Connectedness” was your reply.*

*You spoke of gaining this knowledge through caring for your husband when he became very sick.*

*I responded, “How did you come to recognise that connectedness might be important to you as you care for Ann and her family?”*

*You spoke of how good it feels to be “connected” and how much it means to you “to be connected to something bigger than myself”. “I am part of something meaningful” you said.*

*“What do you think Ann notices about this connectedness that she might appreciate?”, I asked you. You had no trouble in replying to my query.*

*“It gives her the feeling she’s not doing it alone. Ann feels cared for”.*

*“What could be influencing the way Daryl connects with Ann at this time?” I wondered aloud. You explained to me you are trying to understand where Daryl is coming from. You’ve wracked your brains trying to understand.*

*“Is it possible he believes he is doing the best for his family by continuing to work?” I speculated.*

*You thought about this but said you just didn’t know. That made me curious and consequently I went on to ask,*



*“Do you have any ideas about what might possibly be influencing the way Daryl is responding to Ann dying?”*

*You readily explained to me that Daryl’s mother died in a horrific car crash a couple of years ago. You were of the opinion that Daryl had been deeply traumatised by this. He had been very close to his mother and she died at an already difficult time in his life. When you spoke of this I wondered how you thought the traumatic death of his mother and living with a loss of that magnitude might be influencing him now. You told me you were sure this was “colouring Daryl’s experience”.*

*You described how Daryl talks as if Ann is going to recover especially when he is speaking with her. However, he has revealed to you he might know she is dying by making a reference to her funeral yesterday.*

*“Could it be that Daryl does know that Ann is dying, but prefers not to talk about it?”, I asked.*

*You pondered this question and said you weren’t sure. Ann had confided in you telling you they had cried together recently, but then there were other times when he seemed completely disconnected. Daryl had shared with you he feels more able to cope when he is busy at work. It was your opinion that “this was just avoidance” which made you “furious with him”. However, you noticed that, in those moments when you and Daryl talk together about what is happening to Ann, his “authenticity dissolved” your anger.*

*“What do you think Daryl brings to this situation as a man that is different from you as a woman that might be influencing the ways he uses to cope?” I inquired.*

*You considered that Daryl might be worried about his finances once Ann dies. You were wondering if Daryl might be ensuring he had a job to return to. On the other hand you thought that caring might be something he wasn’t familiar with, especially the more intimate aspects of such a profound task.*

*By the end of our conversation you observed the anger you had been concerned about had disappeared. You expressed some gladness about that as you didn’t want it to get in the way of connectedness when you went around to visit Ann and Daryl.*



*I found myself considering your commitment to do the right thing for them. I wonder what they would think if they knew of the immeasurable care you give to your relationships with them both? As I mentioned to you at the beginning of this letter, this is my version of our conversation so please feel free to make any changes. I'll look forward to meeting with you again soon.*

*All the very best for the next week,  
Sasha Pilkington*

### **The value of performing new narratives**

When I next meet with the recipient of a letter I always discuss it with them. This usually occurs early in the conversation once I have checked there isn't something we need to attend to urgently. I begin this process by seeking their permission for me to read the letter aloud. I then perform the letter. By performing the letter, I am referring to me reading the letter as I would a story or play in tones that honour and express the conversation it represents. For example, I ask the questions in the manner they were asked in the counselling conversation. I perform the entire letter without pause so as to generate for a person an uninterrupted experience of themselves in the new narrative. I then inquire if they see themselves in any way differently through the 'eyes' of the letter.

Performing a letter creates an *experience* for the person listening where they can imagine themselves in the new narrative of their life that the letter tells. The reading of the letter transports them into the new story and gives them a different view of themselves that may invite self-compassion or to see virtue or beauty in their life, sometimes for the first time. They can then take this experience outside the therapy room and consolidate it each time they re-read the therapeutic letter.

Prior to attending Tom Carlson and David Epston's workshop on "Insider witnessing practice" (see Carlson & Epston, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c) I would pause while performing therapeutic letters and ask the person additional questions. However, I revised this practice after hearing and reading their descriptions of "Insider witnessing practice" and the power of someone witnessing themselves in a new narrative.

The effects of performing letters and then interviewing people about seeing themselves in a new light has upheld my decision. People have described having a transformative experience of themselves through hearing the letter performed. I have also begun to ask more questions



about that experience. Some questions I have asked people about their experience of being an audience member to the performing of the letter include:

- When you glimpsed a little of yourself and your life in the letter, what did you see that may have been somewhat different from before?
- Was this for the very first time?
- What might you call this view of yourself?
- Was there anything about what you heard in the letter that gave you cause to pause and appreciate yourself differently in that moment?
- Did any of what we talked about strike you differently now that you've had time to reflect and you've heard me read the letter?

The following transcript is of a conversation in which I asked "Craig" and "Linda" about a letter I had just performed for them. Craig is an ex-truck driver who was unfamiliar with articulating in words how he feels. He is in the last three weeks of his life. In the previous counselling conversation he had described himself as "no good" and "useless". Before the following conversation, he had just listened to me performing a letter which contained many stories illustrating his loyalty, work ethic and dedication to his family.

Craig: I was quite chuffed<sup>2</sup> to get that letter and hear it now... some of the things that was said... they got to me. Things that happened... you know....it choked me up there a couple of times.

Sasha: In what way would you say it choked you up?

Craig: Yeah... yeah... kind of made me sad. No ... Not that (pondering). What would you call that? (calling out to Linda who is making tea)

Linda (calling from the kitchen): moved

Craig: Yeah... moved.

Sasha: May I ask, when you had this experience of being chuffed and moved and choked up, what it was in relation to?

Craig: What I said to you about me. And that you wrote it back to me.

Sasha: Were you moved by yourself when you saw yourself in the letter?

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<sup>2</sup> Colloquial English meaning pleased, satisfied, quietly delighted



Craig: Yeah yeah... I was. (modestly)

Sasha: May I ask you Craig what was it like to be moved by yourself? Would that be a usual thing for you?

Craig: No no. Very seldom I would get moved by myself, aye love? (calling out to seeking the opinion of Linda whom he refers to as 'love' here)

Linda (coming back and joining us at the table): Not by himself but he's such a humble guy. It was to see his story written down like that and you reading it like that. It's the first time in his life that's happened. Maybe it just made it mean a lot.

Craig: Yeah yeah specially with me being at the stage I'm at now... like I feel I'm useless you know... and I got that letter and I think, "Well you weren't useless". You know what I'm saying?

Sasha: Was there anything in particular that caught your eye about yourself and helped you realise you aren't useless?

Craig: All that stuff I've done maybe. Saw myself different. In a different light ...

Sasha: May I ask how did you see yourself that was different?

Craig: Hard to explain... Can't explain things well... like quite a good guy, maybe (he says this like he can hardly believe it and is delighted). The reading of it and the people involved, made me think of people who are around to help.

Sasha: When you said you saw yourself as "quite a good guy" could you help me understand what sort of good guy you meant?

Craig: Like the kind of guy I would like to be friends with!

This conversation continued and along with the above exchange is recorded in the following letter to Craig and Linda. As you will see the fact that Craig recognised himself as "a good guy" allowed some previously untold stories of his life to become known.

*Dear Craig & Linda,*

*It was good to see you both and talk more about your life Craig. This is the letter I said I would send you recording some of our conversation. Please feel free to change anything that I haven't got quite right. I would welcome any alterations that improve its usefulness to you. You were teaching me about a way of life that is unfamiliar to me*



*which may lead to some rather interesting spelling on my behalf. Please excuse any mistakes. I will be a willing learner as to the proper way when I next see you!*

*We began by talking about your experience of receiving the last letter I sent you. Craig you described how you had felt for the first time “chuffed” and “moved” by your own story. You said seeing your story written down made you see yourself “in a different light” and realise “I’m not useless” which the illness had previously had you thinking about yourself. You even joked with me that through the eyes of the letter you saw yourself as “quite a good guy” which Linda you emphasised was unusual given “Craig is such a humble guy”. I started to wonder what might happen if you were to continue seeing yourself in this “different light” and whether there might be any effects on how you live with the constraints of not being able to breathe easily.*

*As we began to talk further you mentioned you thought I might not want to talk about what you called “dark days” and times when you were “on the other side of the track”. However, I was keen to learn from you about the experiences you have had in your life.*

*You explained that by “the dark sides of the track” you meant experiences such as being in the orphanage and living in residential homes and on the streets. You said you “hung out with the wrong sort of people”. When I asked you what you meant by “the wrong sort of people”, you told me that “they weren’t the wrong sort of people to me” and that you were referring to “homies”, people who live on the streets and you said “I was like that”. I asked you what you meant when you said “like that” and requested you tell me a little of your life on the streets and the people whom you lived with.*

*You told me there were four of you who were friends and that you hung out together in Wellington. “We survived on pinching stuff”. When I asked you what sort of stuff you pinched, you said “Food; pies, sandwiches and cakes”. I inquired how many you took and you explained that you only took what you needed. I asked you “how come you didn’t take say 20 pies?” and you shared with me that you were making sure your supply wouldn’t dry up. There was thought and planning in how you ensured you had enough to eat; was there thought in other aspects of what you did to survive? You talked about also “stealing milk” and being “bought pies by girlfriends”. You were between 14 and 16 years old at the time. “At night we’d go to the movies and then for our bed we’d go down to the station and hop in the empty railway carriages. We used newspapers to wrap ourselves in. One morning we woke up and we were at the coast!”*

*“What sort of life would you say it was?” I asked. “Pretty good” you told me. “We were good mates.”*





*I was interested in learning more about this mate-ship and what it was like. You told me you all had the same tattoo which you'd given yourselves on the same day. You explained you were loyal to each other, prepared to fight for and look out for one another. If one of you were hurt or sick the others would take care of that person. You said; "There is no better friend than a boob friend". I didn't know what a "boob friend" was and what made them the best of friends. You taught me that a boob friend is someone who has been in jail or in one of the training farms. You said they made the best friends because they knew how to survive and had been through the mill.*

*"What do they learn about friendship on the other side that makes them such a good friend?" I asked you. You kindly explained that they know survival, what to do, and that there is understanding because they've been where you've been. You said you build a bond inside jail and it's still there when you're on the outside again. When I asked how someone would know this bond exists you said it was in the way you "mingled", that there was "a closeness" and in the manner in which you "looked out for each other".*

*At the beginning of our conversation you had referred to "those people" who lived on the streets with you as "the wrong people" but as we talked we had begun to speak of some qualities in those relationships that sounded quite different from the image that description conjured up. I asked you whether you thought there was more to people who don't have a home than some of those descriptions like "the wrong people to hang out with" suggests.*

*You told Linda and me a story of how you and a mate "absconded" from a training farm by hiding under a tarpaulin on a goods train and made it all the way to Auckland. I asked you what you would call this kind of mate who you can count on and who you survive with and where loyalty is incredibly important. You told me how they were your brothers and you called each other "Bro". We spoke together about the kind of people you all were. Linda, you said Craig's mates were "rugged on the outside but soft on the inside, nonviolent and good people" like you Craig. We talked about how you and your mates never abused the system by taking more than you needed and so it never got taken away. "Same as the fisheries. Only take what you need" you said.*

*From your stories, I wondered if poverty and not having a home to go to had led to you and your mates getting labels such as "no good" that you didn't deserve. "Do you think that people can be good and live on the streets?" I asked you. We talked about that and the ethics by which you lived.*



*“Do you think there’s an ethic in not taking more than you need?” I asked. We then researched other examples of you living by a moral code. You spoke of the way you looked out for each other, your loyalty and your relationships and you shared a story of your encounters with the motorbike boys.*

*I was curious about whether you thought that the time on the streets had prepared you for later life. You shared with me that it had been good training in going without. When you were married and hard up, you found that easier than most people.*

*I asked you whether the loyalty that had been so important in those early relationships had shown up in other places in your life. You told me that “all the jobs I’ve had I’ve always given the boss my best” and we remembered your long years of exemplary service at Caltex.*

*I asked you some questions about this:*

*“How did you learn this ability to give of your best?” We briefly reflected on the story you told me last time of mowing the lawn for your father and how you continued to try your best in spite of being told it wasn’t good enough or being hit over the head. I was curious about why you hadn’t skived<sup>3</sup> off.*

*“What was important to you that you gave your best?” I asked and we all wondered if this had been something you had done all your life. You weren’t sure. We revisited the way you protected your life and that of your sister from your father that terrible day because you were doing your best to look after her and listen to your mum. We wondered what you made of going on giving of your best in your life when you were “wacked over the head” and when your effort wasn’t noticed. I wondered what you made of yourself and never giving up. Linda you said it was because Craig had “a good heart” and because of “the lessons he learnt on the streets”. Craig, I asked you “Is loyalty and not giving up on giving your best something you are proud of in your life?”*

*You pondered this. I asked you first what your neighbours, your friends and then your family would think if they knew you had never given up on giving your best in spite of “being knocked and knocked”. You looked possibly a bit flummoxed as you said you’d “never thought of it” but Linda said “his kids would be proud of their Dad”.*

*I wondered if these qualities had been of any use to you in living with this illness and the particular difficulties you have to put up with.*

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<sup>3</sup> Colloquial English meaning shirk, play truant





*You thought they could have. You said “I’ve been thinking I’ve just got to cope. Got to live with it.”*

*When I asked you how you went about this “coping and living with” you said you had no choice and that you had to keep surviving. I wonder now if you’ve had any further thoughts about how you go about coping and surviving especially with the limitations the illness has placed on your life.*

*I asked you if a familiarity with tough times had given you any skills that were helpful in living with an illness that can’t be cured and to thinking about the end of your life. You replied “Well I don’t need to pinch any food!” and we had a good laugh.*

*We spent some time talking about the time you lived in an orphanage when you were six to ten years old. You shared with me what a happy time that was for you and described how you developed some skills like “fitting in” and getting on with people. We noted again that loyalty was important in the friendships and working in together.*

*I asked you how these skills had shown up in your life and you Linda talked about how perceptive and what a good judge of character Craig is. We also talked about how the two of you, against everyone’s predictions, have had a long and happy relationship.*

*Craig, when I asked you as I started to summarise: “What do you think it is about you that you’ve been able to develop all these skills and make such a successful go of your life as a husband, father and loyal worker?”*

*You pointed to Linda. “As far as I’m concerned it’s all her”.*

*There was a fair bit of joking at this point about it being the two of you and you being a team. I think finally Craig you agreed “It takes two”!*

*I then asked you, “Craig, when you look back on your life and realise you have done many things no one thought you could do, including you, what do you make of it?”*

*You responded by saying “Maybe I have a bit going on. More than I thought”. And Linda reminded us of all the people who want to help because they respect you. We reflected on your loyalty and ability to get on with people and agreed that coming to the end of life with such a loving partner, close family and friends reflected as Linda said “What a good man you are” and what you’ve “done with your life”.*

*I’ll look forward to seeing you both next week. Thank you for sharing so much of yourselves.*



*All the very best,  
Sasha*

### **Collaborating to write respectful notes in medical files**

Counsellors are required to keep records of therapeutic conversations with the people they meet. Therapeutic letters can in some practice contexts be used as notes for the file (Epston, 1994, Pilkington & Fraser, 1992). When I practiced as a counsellor in a university student counselling service the files had no audience and were kept only for legal reasons. In consultation with the people I met with, we agreed to keep the letter recording the session as documentation for the file. However, in most practice contexts there is an audience to the file that is important to consider.

I am currently a member of a multi-disciplinary palliative care team. In this context, therapeutic letters are almost always too detailed to be used as notes for the file as it is viewed by many health professionals. Instead, I consult with the people I meet as to what they might like written in the file. I explain how the organisation keeps records and ask them questions such as,

- “What would you like the team to know about you so they can care for you in the way you would like?” and,
- “What would you like me to write in the medical notes from our conversation today?”

These questions generate information for the medical file that is appreciated by nurses and doctors wishing to better serve patients and their families, and by the person themselves. Information coming from those we seek to serve enhances care and improves relationships. Consulting with the people I meet as to what they would like documented about them allows me to infuse medical assessments (Madsen, 2007) and records (Epston, 1994, Pilkington & Fraser, 1992) with the spirit of narrative ideas giving a new audience the opportunity to know the person in ways they would wish to be known.

### **A Collaborative Story: Creating a performed narrative that invites self-compassion**

After I attended a workshop on Insider Witness Practice (Epston & Carlson, 2017) that David Epston and Tom Carlson with colleagues presented at the Therapeutic Conversations 13 Conference in 2016, I wondered whether a performed story might generate an *experience* that allowed a person to see themselves in a new light. I further considered whether such an experience of witnessing themselves in a shaped, co-constructed narrative could endure as



letters do outside in a person's world, perhaps providing a turning point or pulling together threads of a counter-story.

Letters are written in the first and second person for example "I then asked you how do you go about..." whereas in a story I would be writing in the first and third person. I wondered if writing in the third person would create an added distance whereby a person might witness their own story as another person would. I asked myself "Would this increase the possibility for self-compassion?" Furthermore, a story would provide me with the means of sharing my own thoughts in a new way.

"Claudia" her partner "Tom" and I began meeting together when Tom was in the last weeks of his life. After Tom died, Claudia expressed a strong desire to remember every detail of the time between when she took Tom home from hospital until he died. Claudia describes her life richly with words. She had been through one of the biggest losses a person can endure while parenting young children and yet struggles to find compassion for herself as she misses Tom whom she describes as "my best friend". With these thoughts in mind I invited Claudia to join me in writing a story of our conversations together.

As part of that invitation we discussed how we might go about the process. To begin with I gave Claudia some examples of stories I had written previously (Pilkington, 2014; 2016). While these stories were composite stories, I hoped to provide her with an idea of what form such a story might take. We decided that she would pick pseudonyms (Claudia and Tom) and have full editorial rights. I also invited her to consult with a trusted person in her life to see if they had any concerns before we signed a consent form. As the writer of the story I wanted to capture Claudia's words and phrases so she could easily see herself on the page and so we agreed to record our counselling conversations. I then would give Claudia a copy of these recordings along with transcriptions. Claudia had the option to change her mind at any point and I took some steps to make this possible for her should she wish it. For example, I emphasised that the story was for her and what was helpful to her was my priority. I underlined that if the process wasn't useful to her we would stop and again suggested she speak to a trusted person in her life. If they had any concerns that also would be a reason for us to discontinue. However, Claudia was enthusiastic as was the person she consulted. Together we decided to write a story recording those details she wanted to remember and I hoped creating a telling of her life that would allow her to see herself in new and helpful ways.

As time went on Claudia became concerned at the pathologizing impact of dominant Western discourses around grieving and this provided another purpose for the story that was meaningful to her. In it we would challenge unhelpful ideas for a wider audience. Another



addition followed when the story was almost completed. I offered Claudia the postscript as an opportunity for her to speak directly to the reader. As Claudia already has so much to do with parenting young children and is grieving we have agreed that I will interview her for her words and then write this postscript and she will take the role of overseeing editor.

While Claudia is a co-author of the story "A Small Hope" she has chosen to remain anonymous. Therefore, we agreed that I would also change any details that could identify her or Tom.

The following is the storied version of our first and very brief telephone call together. As you read it I invite you to imagine being Claudia listening to me perform it. I would also like you to consider how the story adds to what might have been an incidental and forgotten exchange.

### **A Small Hope: A cupful of time folded in with love**

"It's urgent" the community nurse told me solemnly. "Tom was told he was bleeding internally yesterday by the doctor at the hospital. When he heard nothing could be done to stop it he asked his wife Claudia to take him home. Understandably they are reeling, this has all happened so fast. We have offered counselling support and Claudia has agreed. She's asked if you could ring after 10 o'clock so you don't wake the baby from her morning nap".

I walked back down the hallway towards my office reflecting on what it might be like to receive such news. Just after ten o'clock I telephoned. Claudia answered.

"Hello... it's Sasha speaking. I'm one of the counsellors from the hospice. I understand you might be interested in meeting up with me. Have I got that right?" I inquired. Quite often people have another understanding from a referrer so I was tentative in order to give Claudia space to say what she wanted.

"Yes, that would be great" she replied.

"How would tomorrow suit you?" I asked thinking of the urgency of the situation.

"Look its very kind of you. I know it's Friday tomorrow but it's going to have to be next week. I'm sorry. I promised our 5-year-old I would bake a cake with her tomorrow. It's her birthday and I promised" Claudia apologised in a rush.

"Are you the kind of mother who honours promises?" I asked with a smile in my voice.

I heard her let out a long breath.

"She's been looking forward to it all week" Claudia told me.



Warmly now, we began to make a time to meet up. In the back of my mind I was thinking about Claudia prioritising a promise to her daughter Imogen when she was possibly having the worst time of her life. Images of baking with my own young daughter many years ago floated through my mind.

What might Imogen remember of this time when her Daddy was dying and when promises were kept to her 5-year-old self, I wondered? What might she say about the way she was cared for by her mum at such a terrible time?

I also appreciated Claudia's ability to put me off and say what she wanted. I was aware it wasn't easy to delay health professionals and especially to honour the wishes of a child. I looked forward to meeting Claudia and Tom and learning more about them and what they valued.

I performed for Claudia the first four chapters of the story just after the anniversary of Tom's death. Claudia described the experience as seeing herself "through Tom's loving compassionate eyes". She felt a sense of connection to Tom and the way he saw her which in turn allowed her to have a compassionate experience of herself.

As the months have passed by, the narrative in the story has gained strength. Claudia told me recently that reading a transcript or a chapter is "a bit like seeing you" for counselling and that she had done so in some hard times. The story is nearly complete and I look forward to speaking with Claudia further about our collaboration and the way she understands the impact of seeing herself in the story then.

## Reflection

It is now more than three decades since I first began writing therapeutic letters. My commitment to letter writing remains undiminished and is continually nourished by the responses of the people I write too. My intention is to write letters that enhance the therapeutic value of the counselling conversation and honour an ethic of writing *for* a person rather than *about* them. It is an evolving process that I continue to work on and learn from. I hope some of the ideas that I have shared may be useful to you in exploring how you might develop and sustain your own therapeutic letter writing practice and perhaps even venture further into creative ways that therapeutic documents might feature in your own practice.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank “Craig and Linda”<sup>4</sup> who so kindly shared their letters for this paper. This paper is dedicated to Craig who generously shared his stories with me.

I would like to thank “Claudia” for journeying with me into unknown territories and “Claire” for allowing me to share one of her letters.

I would also like to thank David Epston who introduced me to therapeutic letters and inspired me to keep writing them.

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## A house of good words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents

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*I'm quite a proper person - at times -  
she said.*

*But now, the responses are pouring in  
and I am conspicuously absent,  
yet again.*

*Secretly,  
these things mean a lot to me,  
and I have a lot to say.  
Can I please say something else,  
with hands freed by your grace?  
You see, there's just no going back.*

*(Tiffany Saxton's 'rescued words' from our conversation regarding the writing of this paper.  
Tiffany will make a few guest appearances in this paper as my colleague and friend and fellow  
poet... And incidentally, the **effervescent oxygen mask to my plane crash.**)*

### Dear David, Dear Tom,

I had a dream last night. I dreamt that I was called in to write an essay in a classroom at a school. I showed up on this day carrying a box of odd items:

1. a golden fountain pen
2. a painting of what can only be described as hungry ghosts
3. a photo of a woman looking out of a car window on the passing prairie landscape
4. a stash of yellowed old cards with quotes on them
5. a shimmering toy dragon

However, when I took my seat in the classroom, I was asked to hand over my box of items and my pen and given a promotional pen still in its plastic wrapper to write with instead. My heart sank in horror. I stared at the writing on this promotional pen which seemed to read "RSP",



which might stand for “Rescued Speech Poems,” or otherwise some awful composite of retirement savings plans and a French call to respond.

David, Tom, you asked me to write up my recent presentation on the practice of writing poems in response to therapeutic conversations. I felt honoured by your request and so I have been looking over my notes for said presentation. But, my dears, I have come to the conclusion that there is no going back! That particular hot mess has blown up, blown over, and I sit here back home at my office amidst its fertile ashes. I would much rather write you some thoughts from this new place of beginning life. What do you think?

I would venture a guess that you two might gladly humour me in the escape from any promotional pens in plastic wrappers and take a tour with me of the box of odd items instead!  
***So let us go then, you and I...***

### **1. A golden fountain pen**

The practice of writing poems in response to therapeutic conversations crept up on me slowly and steadily over the course of my life and work. Its beginnings reach far back into my life as a young person. I went to school in a small town, in Austria, outside of Vienna, where children still wrote with fountain pens and were taught to admire musicians, artists, and writers of all kinds. Poetry was all around me then. My parents read poems to us. My teachers read poems to us. In fact, my German language teacher of 6 years dramatically *performed* poems to us. His performances of his favorite poems (many of which he read to us again and again over the years) were booming and breathtaking, enough to stun any class of unruly and derisive teenagers into silence. He also required and insisted that we write essays in response to the poems, and deliberate on the meaning of the sometimes ancient words to us in our personal lives. He scrawled his encouragement and enthusiasm for any sincere efforts of writing such essays in huge oversized letters in our notebooks.

Since that time, I have heard many people expressing that they do not “understand” poetry and that their own encounters with poetry in and outside of school had been anything but inspiring. My appreciation of my teacher’s larger-than-life passion has grown with the understanding of how he rescued me from a fate of viewing poems as obsolete curiosities that can only be approached by a chosen few. He opened my ears to hear how lines written long ago could come to life and accompany me everywhere I went. My life, thanks to him, was rich and teeming with imagery: the crows flying overhead were never the same after hearing “their”



poem. The panther caged in a zoo, the couple stirring silently in their coffee cups, the overflowing fountain, the dog that barks in the night, the soldier without his armour carrying a flag, the weeping woman – they all came to life and afforded me with riches to live by. In moments of great chaos, I still find myself remembering and repeating lines from poems – the words and their rhythm settle me and bring me solace.

When I left Austria to move to Canada as a young adult, my best friend, who had sat right next to me over the past six school years, gave me a tape recording of her rendition of some of those poems that this teacher had read to us. The rhythm and cadence of his reading mingled with my best friend's voice as I listened to the tape over and over on my travels in this vast new country. The poems spoke to me of home. They taught me that words can be with us to suspend our gravest moments of loneliness. They gave me hope that I might yet belong, perhaps not in any country in particular, but among its people and their words.

## **2. A painting of what can only be described as hungry ghosts**

Recently, Tiffany and I sat down for lunch to reflect on her thoughts after a round of particularly mind-boggling team-work, and she sighed, "I am so hungry..." A poem was born:

*This is hungry work*

*With you at the table*

*I want to eat words*

*So yes, please*

*Give me your round cracked words*

*Your tart chewy words*

*Your liquid honey words*

*And tell me my friend*

*How words seeped into your blood*

*And effervesced in your veins*

*And plopped to thought bubbles*

*That you only had to read with your mouth.*

*Tell me*

*I am so hungry.*

I now know that the practice of writing poetry in response to therapeutic conversations came to me as a series of hauntings by hungry ghosts. The ghosts were hovering about me on a snowy afternoon at the University library when I was desperately looking for "templates" to write better letters for my clients. I stumbled upon an article by Christopher Behan about what



he termed Rescued Speech Poems and was immediately taken by a sense of delight and wonder. I found myself thinking about how transcribing the speaker's words into a poem might make it possible to "rescue the said from the saying of it" (White, 2000). I tucked this idea and its delight away in my mind.

The ghosts looked on quite sincerely a half a year later as I sat under the tree outside of my office building on a sunny afternoon. I sat there in a daze, thinking about the person who had just left after our conversation; her words swirled and echoed in my mind, and would not leave me alone. I thought about how on earth I might write a letter to her and let her know how profoundly she had moved me, and how I had caught a glimpse of her spirit, shining through the problem story she had caught me up on. 'This will be a lengthy letter full of quotes,' I thought a bit mournfully as I contemplated the impossibility of doing justice to what I was experiencing by way of a wordy letter and its quotes.

The ghosts were impatiently stirring in the corners during a conversation with my supervisor, Alan Parry, when he asked me the question, "If your frustration could speak, what would it say?" Now, in hindsight, the question might have been amended to 'If your frustration could speak, and wasn't permitted to simply incriminate you for your failure to be a better therapist, what would it say?'

The answer to that question might have been another question: 'If I cannot reproduce Michael White's beautiful maps in my work and if I also do not have the wits about me to ask the beautiful story-telling questions of David Epston, what the hell CAN I do?'

**Where are the bells that I can ring?** How can I deliberate together with people on the living of their lives in some way that would honour their character and expand the horizons of possibility? How can I compellingly show my regard? I felt myself to be a thoroughly witless person with no useful understanding of maps to show me out of the territory of the swirling words. But the words! They followed me home; they startled me awake; they kept coming to me in the kitchen and in front of the bathroom mirror. "I want to replace the kitchen god for the sake of my daughter!" I heard in my mind's ear every time I walked in to my own kitchen. "I am the great gadfly!" I heard when I was sitting with my friends at the bar. "I am a mountain of a girl" I heard while sitting in tiny waiting rooms. "This is my body, this is its shape, this is its pain, and this is its healing," I heard in front of the bathroom mirror. I felt myself to be sitting on a treasure but not knowing what to do but sit, ever more uncomfortably. **Who is hoarding all this rare work?**



### 3. A photo of a woman looking out of a car window on the passing prairie landscape

I take some pleasure in imagining what the ghosts might have been doing on the day when the first poem crept onto an actual page on my computer. I do know that on that day, the pressure of time and happy accident came to their aid. It was my last day of work before a vacation and I was sitting in my office with a stack of therapeutic letters to finish. Time was of the essence as the evening light had already turned from dark to darker. It had long been my habit to start a new letter by reading over my hand-written notes from the conversation and then transcribing my client's verbatim quotes onto an empty page on the computer. The letter to be written would be formed around these quotes of the person's own words, and would include some questions and thoughts of mine, opening and closing lines etc.

That evening, I started as usual, lifting quotes from my notes onto a new page, intent on forming a letter, but for some reason I stopped and looked again at the seemingly random collection of the person's words on my page. It read:

*I feel haunted  
By the emotional scenery.  
It goes past and I see  
Upset, anger, depression, anxiety, lethargy  
- Familiar landscapes.  
Oh and then, of course (how could I forget?):  
Work, work, work.*

*But I want to MOVE  
I want to BREATHE.*

*With everything I have done  
Am I able  
to recognize the winds?*

*So instead of taking it in,  
Taking it on  
In silence  
I SPEAK  
Until the edge is gone.*

I sat back and thought that it looks and sounds like a poem. (The ghosts might have felt a case of "Duh!" or "Whatever took you so long?" at this point.) In my defense, at least I felt a strong



hesitation about going in and “breaking up” these sentences with my questions and thoughts. I could see that she had already expressed what she wanted to about both the problem (described here as the “familiar landscapes”) as well as her intentions for her life apart from the problem (“to move, to breathe, to recognize the winds, to speak”) and that my musings might not be required; in fact, any musings of mine might detract from her own words. And the last line, to speak until the edge is gone, was breathtaking to me in its ‘knowing’. Therefore - and significantly prompted by time pressure to move on to the next letter - I thought perhaps I will give this poem to the person who spoke these words exactly as is and see what she might make of it.

As I was preparing to meet with her again after a week’s vacation, I had many questions about the ethics of what I was doing. I worried that she might feel uncomfortable about seeing her words put together in this way; I was concerned that the poem might have misrepresented what she was wanting to say about her life; I fretted that I might be immortalizing her dilemmas by presenting them to her in black and white and by having had the temerity to call the writing a ‘poem’. I admit to hoping that she might not come to our appointment so that I might have a little more time to write a proper letter for her. But she did. And after some apologetic explanations to her about the strange form of the ‘letter’ she had expected and clumsy invitations to please refuse it, I finally read the poem aloud to her. To my all-out surprise, I saw her becoming tearful during the reading. After many moments of silence that I did not know how to fill (thank the gods!) she said quietly, “This is so beautiful. I had no idea that I sounded like this. I had no idea that I knew this.”

In fact, after a few years and hundreds of other poems later, I can say that this is one of the most common responses people utter upon being presented with their own words in poetic form: a sense of surprise and delight about hearing their words and catching a glimpse of themselves as the speaker in a slightly different way.

This first ‘poet’ and I went on to have a very different conversation as a result of opening our meeting with my reading of her poem which I had contrived. She expressed that for the first time she recognized her own idea, “speaking until this edge is gone”, as a legitimate tack to take in response to her dilemmas. I found her suddenly eager to tell me about other times in her life she had done something of this sort. And this was soon followed up with an account of many more steps that she had taken now that she had perceived her own knowledgeable.



Her response to the poem was a turning point for both of us. For her, it meant a vision of someone who knew how and what to say about her own life. For me, it hurtled me into the venture of writing Rescued Speech poems in earnest. After she left my office, I sat there and thought, 'What if I could inspire something similar in more people? What if I could start more conversations, not with my own words or questions, but with what people knew to say the last time we spoke and see where that might take us this time?! And, pray tell, how might this change the spirit of my conversations with the people I meet?'

#### 4. A stash of yellowed old cards with quotes on them

Ever since that day of the first poem, I have been deeply curious about the 'real effects' of the practice of poetry writing on the people on the receiving end of such poems. Some of these 'effects' come in the form of words, in people's expressions in response to the reading of a poem. Other effects, such as a change in my relationship to people or the change in the spirit of a conversation, remain a bit more elusive, more sensed than spoken.

In a recent conversation with Tiffany, she said to me, "Do you remember, Sanni, when it used to take three sessions for a person to feel like I got it, I got what they were trying to say and have some trust in that? Have you noticed how the poems leap over two entire sessions to get there as soon as they hear the first poem?"

So perhaps the poems leap. Perhaps they forge trust. Perhaps they speak secret messages in between the lines, messages of forgotten wisdom, of togetherness, of a suspension of shame and of courage in the night.

Jane (2008) writes that:

*Perhaps this way of working has captured my attention because it is in these moments of receiving poetic documents, or in the experience of hearing poetic versions of their conversations read out to them, that I have most consistently witnessed the people consulting me stepping into a space that exoticises the domestic, the everyday, the taken for granted and the unquestioned in their lives. It is within this context that I have most regularly witnessed people positioning themselves as curious co-researchers or anthropologists, engaged in the pursuit of making the familiar in their lives unfamiliar. (p.94)*

Inspired to inquire into such claims, I have recently begun to collect and categorize people's responses to hearing their poems read out loud to them. Below are excerpts of this





'categorizing' work, with titles lifted from some of my favorite poems to express the possibilities of themes for the effects of poems. The quotes refer to my transcription of people's responses to questions such as: What was it like for you to hear this? What does hearing this get you thinking about? What moved you? You smiled, - why? Do you recognize your words?

### **Come Now, This World Is Wiser Than You Think**

- *I did not know I knew this...*
- *When you were reading this, I felt like I am understanding deeper the changes I am going through...*
- *I wouldn't have remembered any of this; because these things are harder to remember; the problem overwhelms me...*
- *This is so moving to me. It is shocking to hear this. Shocking in a good way. I did not feel I had shared that much, and now I am so surprised...*
- *When you read it out loud, it feels like an expansion. It expands my consciousness, there is another dimension, and I think: 'Did I really go there? Did I really know to say this?'*
- *I don't always speak so positively. These words see so much beauty in me...*
- *You make it sound so beautiful (tearful). You are such an asshole! I wore make-up today! I wasn't going to cry...*
- *It helps encapsulate my feelings; I remember I spent most of that meeting crying; now when I hear it again, I think: 'why is this so moving?' I think these are tears of recognition; I am feeling the gravity of those lessons...*

### **To Achieve the Together-Coloured Instant**

- *I have never experienced this way of counselling before; I feel so well heard; I realize now how I need to tell my story. And you capture the spirit, the visions, images, and values of what I am holding.*
- *I love that so much. You make it sound so good. I want to hang it somewhere. These expressions: "to light up this ordinary life", "the I that wanted to be here", They were not so pretty when I said them. It seems to me that you are writing what I am saying. It's hard to remember we talked about. You are creating a language to what happened. It's easier to remember when we create a language together.*
- *That's the amazing thing. You are really listening in your poetry.*



- *You listened to my story; and you wrote it as if from my own perspective; you wrote down the heart of what I was expressing...*
- *I am blown away, by the idea that you spent the time on this. I can't believe you did this for me. Hearing it makes it real, and there is something else, an injection of love and caring into my words...*

### **You Wouldn't Hang me? I Thought Not.**

- *There is something bizarre about offering this: it doesn't shame me. For the first time in a long time, I am not ashamed of this.*
- *Somehow, when I hear you read my words, I feel stronger, more affirmed, I don't feel as flawed; it went inside; under my skin.*
- *It feels so evocative. When I listen to this, I forgive myself (somehow) more each time because it feels reasonable and rational to be where I am and to have experienced what I have experienced...*
- *The very first thing that stood out to me was the first sentence; here it is acknowledged so plainly and openly; in my life it is my secret. And here it is. Oh my secret. But it's okay. With you, it's okay.*

### **Lie With Me, Courage, At Night**

- *May I have this? I want to tape it to my bathroom mirror. I want to see it when I wake up...*
- *When you are reading this, I realize even though I am in the dark, even though I am in the ocean and there is no direction, I know I was known. I hear this like music and it says to me someone is with me, someone is thinking of understanding me. It is profoundly meaningful to be known.*
- *Every time I read these... I know 'fireworks' sounds corny... but I feel ribbons of electricity and color explode all over again....*
- *Maybe I can go to another counsellor and they might say, "Yes I understand. I am with you." but it is not like this. A poem can touch me. I was just speechless in that moment when you were reading it, like some spot inside my heart was touched which can be only touched by a certain kind of art rather than the formal trained language of therapists. This is its power. And suddenly my life is not so miserable, not so pathetic.*



## 5. A shimmering toy dragon

People who come to consult with someone like me often bring with them particular ideas or visions (or metaphors or pictures-of-the-mind) of the process of such a consultation. Our cultural context strongly encourages an image of the unfolding of therapy along the lines of what Michael White might call an “ethic of control” (White, 1997). Within this image, it is the expertise of the therapist that is to form the center of the consultation, and there is a sense that the therapist with varying amounts of collaboration with the person will somehow bring about changes in the person’s life.

This image also operates on me as the therapist. I notice its beckoning call whenever I feel myself starting to long for “the one fell-swoop” of action, or what Michael White termed a particular definition of “effective action” (White, 1997).

In her reflections of Wittgenstein’s ideas on “pictures”, Cressida Heyes (2007) writes that “we must approach the world with some kind of picture, that we are held captive by a picture for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably”.

The pictures that might be pressed upon me about myself as a therapist might take the form of an ‘analyzer of things’, an ‘arbiter of normal’, a ‘legitim�er of experiences’, a ‘deliverer of techniques’, a ‘pattern detector and breaker’, a ‘strategist for Christmas-time despair’, a ‘karaoke therapist’ (this term originates with Kay Ingamells) emulating Michael White or David Epston...” etc.

I will let you in on a secret. Poems may possibly serve to rescue people’s words, and the people who consult with me may experience all sorts of things as a result. But my secret is, the writing of poetry *rescues me*. It rescues me out of the clutches of this ethic of control, of the pressure to deliver the solution that takes the form of “one fell swoop” of a single decisive action that will fix it all.

It does this for 4 main reasons (this is a preliminary list from where I am sitting now):

**First**, the writing of these kinds of poems necessitates a deliberate attention to the speaker’s actual words. It requires faithful note-taking and encourages me to pour over people’s spoken words, both during and after the actual therapy session. In the therapy session, this has immediate effects of my deliberately slowing down the pace of the conversation, of “my



reading back what was said and clarifying meanings”, of “noticing what we don’t know yet (rather than making assumptions)” etc. When I take notes in order to write poems from them, a spirit of care and deliberation about how we speak about our lives ineluctably finds its way, seemingly taking over the conversation.

Tell me, dear reader and receiver of half-baked goods, what would you think or feel, if you heard the following sentence, spoken to you casually in a therapy conversation:

*“I come from a long line-up  
Of store-bought EVERYTHING.  
But I have been baking as of late.”*

Would it halt you in your tracks? Could you hear the cadence of beauty of the seemingly ordinary words, put together this way? Would it form a stirring 3-line poem in your mind’s eye? And would it change your conversation, or perhaps your life?

And, just for the fun of it, since we are on the topic of baking and half-baking, here is another glimpse into words spoken, that we as witnesses might not want to pass by or let disperse into the ether without a trace:

*“I might tell you sister  
If I catch a glimpse of your daring life alongside mine  
But do not hang me stranger  
Don’t you hang me out where only freight trains run  
Clickety clack  
I do not come to you from the pages of holy books  
Or fairy tales  
I come to you straight from the middle of the grocery store  
And I have one question  
To revolutionize a woman’s life:  
Where THE FUCK is the baking aisle?  
Because grocery stores are bothersome  
For those of us  
Without keys to E-Z-Bake.”*

And would you then believe me, if I told you that I am sitting on dozens of poems that take a position on the matter of baking alone, each more searching and risking than the next? And, what do you think happens to me, if I should find myself baking on any given sunny afternoon?



Outside of the therapy session, I notice that the writing of poetry helps keep me on track with my wish to sidestep ideas of control. When a person leaves my office, I might feel overwhelmed by particularly vicious problems and oppressive contexts. I might sit there and feel a familiar sense of if-only-I-knew-ALL-the-wisdom-in-the-world. But then I remember: I have the person's words! And in those words, there are always characters walking themselves into initiatives, longings that dared to be spoken, dangers that are drawn into full view, whispered wishes dreamt into being, protests against trespasses sworn, questions about the matter of living noted. What I now realize is required of me is that I only have to keep faith in following the threads of those words in my writing.

**Second**, poetry takes on a unique and specific shape on paper. It lends itself to the transcription of speech in stanza form as it closely follows the pauses, silences and emphases of speech; therefore it can be more immediately accessible than the cleaned up prose of most transcriptions. In addition, poems, for lack of a better description, leave room on the right side of the page. They 'breathe'; they do not require complete story lines or finished sentences; they allow for multiple voices and complex descriptions of seemingly unrelated topics. Christopher Behan put it this way:

"Poetry has space between to describe multiplicity, tentativeness, and ambiguity and is perhaps better suited to render visible these subtle stories from therapy conversations" (Behan, 2003, p.1). Dear reader, perhaps a poem might make these ideas more visible to you:

*Have you heard a story of longing  
A soul's longing for belonging?*

*This is a story with a dangerous edge  
Told against a backdrop of vicious words  
Like "sinner" and "abomination" and "illegal"  
Or just "ill."*

*This is a story with companions  
Who came to my house late at night  
Inches from the TV while my parents were asleep.  
They came to me on the pages of books at the library  
And on other pages hidden in the bottom of my locked drawer.*

*This is a story with many voices.*



*One of them my own:  
On Thursday January the 24<sup>th</sup> at 9.20AM  
I sat with Karen in the closet  
And said  
"I am not going to see Mel Gibson because I am gay."  
And Karen's voice joined mine in safety:  
"I am not laughing. You are not the only one."  
And Charlie.  
I can hear his voice clear as day  
That day when I stood outside the church door.  
Charlie and the round table.  
You saved my life Charlie.  
You and my anger that day.*

*This is a story of longing  
A longing that grew within me like a seed  
No matter what they called me.  
It is a longing that knew  
Of a life  
Of a lover  
Of a transformation  
Of a belonging  
At the round table  
And under the beauty of a billion stars.*

*This is a story of longing  
That has asked me to risk myself  
To hazard my heart  
For the right kind of peril.*

*This is a story of longing.  
And it is not finished with me yet:  
I can feel it  
And I am both frightened and emboldened.*

*You see, my longing stands by a doorway now  
Laughing  
Beckoning  
Saying*



*"Come now  
I am not laughing.  
You are not the only one.  
Because oranges are not the only fruit, honey."*

As an alternative to the 'ethic of control', Michael White proposed an 'ethic of collaboration' that might encourage people to co-investigate those easily overlooked actions that "contribute to the establishment of a foundation of possibility in persons' lives" (White, 1997). Sheridan Linnell (2004), in leaning on the work of Couze Venn, writes about a metaphor of "an apprenticeship to the other" as a possibility of understanding her own "ethical self-constitution" in her work. This metaphor suggests that the self is formed always in relation to the other, not only through learning and reflection, but an experience of connection. The other metaphor is the "rescued form of account-ability" (not accountability as a normalizing technique of the neoliberal self): literally the "ability to account" – "our ways of telling about this work, the skills and practices involved in producing rich and multilayered accounts...." (Linnell, 2004, p. 51).

The following is a lively rendition by a client of mine of the idea of an "ability to account:"

*For so long, I lived in anticipation that words would be bad  
Because we learn:  
We learn  
The gravity and power of words.*

*I did not know  
That the power can be harnessed  
-How words are used  
What is said  
And who is speaking.*

*But I know now  
I can live in a house of good words.  
So we wrote poems  
On the floor  
On the beams in the walls  
On the bedroom drywall.  
Poems on eating and drinking, on friendship and wild geese  
And kindness*



*-It was worth the death of a Sharpie.*

*Home does not exist in floors or a ceiling  
But in standing on each other's shoulders  
To write our intentions all around the house.  
Home is not a place to watch TV  
But to live off our connection.  
Home is a house of words,  
Those of our friends, our poets, the strangers we meet,  
Ourselves.*

*For a long while I was anchored in another house  
And silly in my restlessness:  
I can't sit through this.  
But now I am not scared to sail  
For a house of good words on the horizon.*

Imagine a house of good words! Imagine an "ability to account!" Such ideas press different metaphors upon me as the therapist: 'a rescuer of words'; 'a witness'; an 'apprentice'; 'a poet'; 'a fireworks specialist'; 'a person with an ability to account'; 'a wordsmith'; 'a person intent on contributing to the foundation of possibility in others' lives'; etc.

If all of this should sound a bit vague or overly theoretical, let me share a poem that might shed some light on what I wish to express. This poem was written by my friend and colleague Keri Murray at a Narrative Gathering of therapists here in Calgary. At this gathering, I was interviewed about "the ethics that drew me to this work" and Keri rescued my words in to the following poem:

*I think about how I sit there in my office  
After a person leaves.  
And how I ask myself:  
'With what sort of sense of herself did she leave?  
'What do I wish for with this person?'*

*And then I remember  
A conversation I had long ago.*

*I was subjected to the sort of ritual humiliation they speak of.  
He wanted to talk about my body*





*He asked me for numbers  
He asked to see the scars  
And whether my parents loved me.*

*And in an instant, I became just another resistant client  
In front of him.  
I answered nothing  
I looked out the window.*

*And then I cried.  
I wept and looked out the window  
And said nothing.*

*After a long silence  
He shifted and said,  
“What do you dream about for your life?”  
And I thought  
THIS is a conversation I CAN have  
And I started talking to him  
About my dreams of going to university  
Of how I wanted to write, how I thought I could write, and learn.  
I spoke about my wish for having different relationships with men,  
My dream of having children.*

*He listened for a long while.  
And when I was finished  
After another long silence  
He asked:  
“Can you promise me that you will go and do all the things you just said  
And never come back here?”  
And I looked at him  
And said, “Yes’.*

*We shook on it.*

*Whatever he assumed about me in one conversation  
Was unmade in the other conversation.  
I left  
With a sense of respect for my life.  
And he let me leave  
With a sense of respect for my life.*



*So when you ask me  
About the ethics that drew me to this work*

*I think of my wish for people  
To leave my office  
With a sense of respect for their lives  
Underfoot.*

**Third**, due to their unusual form (the lack of requirement for the shiny completeness of sentences and ideas in prose text), these poems have opened up a unique way for me to play with ideas. Writing in poetry form allows me to pit the horrors and hauntings of a problem story against a confection of possible counter-story ideas with no regard to orderly sequencing of life experiences or the flow of a therapy conversation. In fact, I would propose that the poems have quietly supervised me into strange territory in my therapy sessions: I can no longer un-hear or bypass people's unique dictionaries in describing the living of their lives nor can I refuse invitations to see dilemmas as breathtaking dramas, taking place in grocery stores, gynecology offices, and seemingly ordinary bedrooms. Due to this strange supervision, I ask strange questions, in which every word matters: but WHAT did you bake? -It may matter whether it is lemon cakes or rye bread. The taste of lemon cakes, I have found out, spells sanctuary for a woman, whereas rye bread puts another in touch with her ancestors. But WHAT did you steal from people's gardens? It definitely mattered that it was rhubarb and carrots as sustenance for 2 young people's escapes from the horrors at home rather than random vandalism.

A poem comes to life only in the distinct and irreplaceable nouns and verbs of a person's life - note that I did not add adjectives to this list, as we are currently running on a dry spell on adjectives in our conversations with each other. I might venture that the more matchless the vernacular of a story, the more universally recognizable and delightful it rings, even in stranger's ears.

Consider the following poem, in which patriarchy is delightfully re-termed as "sandpapering" and "domestication" efforts:

*I roam a world of smooth  
And I am weird and jagged  
You see, I tried to be smooth  
And it nearly killed me.*



*Every day, I am still offered  
Sandpaper to smooth my skin with  
Only now I decline.  
I have suffered too much  
I have watched that life,  
The bondage of domesticated life  
In this city of miserable people,  
To think that sandpapering is the way.*

*Do you know what I did instead?  
I went to float naked  
In my un-sandpapered skin  
And I listened.*

*When I got really quiet  
I could hear my heart beating  
Just for me  
And for my children.  
I could feel my limbs extending:  
My legs have strides  
And my arms wrap around  
And my body that bore my children  
Is full of magic and life.  
I am a woman on this earth  
And my breath has many different colours.  
I am at sea  
And it tantalizes me  
It calls me:  
Give me your ideas,  
Your revolutionary ideas.*

*This is my primal home.  
And welcome home, daughter of mine.*

In my late-night writing sessions, the words that are spoken to me in my office have taken on an urgency: construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the session from earlier in the day, find the person's own words, deliberate on the political context and the teeming master narratives of our time, implicate the suspect authorities, and show, as compellingly as you can, your client's



substantive and beautiful wrestling with timeless moral questions. “Counter-mock the white-maned lions”, a woman said, - the “white-maned lions” are the enforcers and lieutenants of master narratives, or in other words, dominant understandings.

Consider the following attempt:

*This has been the theme of my life:*

*Doing things I “can’t” do.*

*Recently it has meant*

*Saying Yes*

*When I mean it and*

*Opening my fists*

*To touch another:*

*I say Yes instead of “I can’t.”*

*My combined Yeses since December tell a brand-new story*

*About me and what I can do, yes.*

*I barely feel I am the same person, yes.*

*My Yeses came to me*

*Unexpectedly and surprisingly last night:*

*I could no longer*

*Let him do what he wanted to do and disregard me.*

*So*

*Instead of pretending*

*Instead of pleasing*

*Instead of being who I “ought to be”*

*-The pretty girl who says Yes by being quiet*

*I said No.*

*And that was true.*

*I never knew that by saying Yes*

*My No would change places*

*And grow firm.*

*In the history of all the pretty girls*

*Who has had the courage to say*

*Yes or No*

*And really mean it?*



*Or better yet:  
Who has ever asked a girl  
What she wanted and really meant it?  
Every other time I regretted it the next day  
But today I feel free.  
I would like him to understand the difference when I do want to  
He shouldn't enjoy it when I don't want to.  
Physical touch is a conversation.  
And wouldn't that be just a new and  
Marvellous thing if I said Yes  
When I wanted to?*

One final example to reflect the honour and privilege I feel to accompany people in these searching conversations:

*War taught my grandfather  
Burning images into his soul  
And my grandfather taught my father  
Burning punishments into his hand  
And my father taught me  
Screaming the last of the burns  
Over our heads.  
The beating of my heart that I feel  
At the table,  
The look on my father's face  
As he is watching my children's elbows on tables  
And hears the gulps of water -  
These are the ruins  
Of an ancient war  
Pressed onto and into our bodies.  
These are the lingering effects  
Of trespassed humanity  
Of those who were big and strong.  
My father's kindness is not for others to see  
But I caught a glimpse nevertheless  
In the normalized violence  
He lived.  
I don't need a token,*



*I am a woman  
I breathe in colours  
I was raised in a secret garden  
Recently baptized in salt waters  
And my arms are home and relief  
For those who are hurting.  
I am big and strong  
And big and strong  
Enough  
For expressed kindness.  
And to stop this war  
And this hate  
At this table  
On this night  
And for all nights to come.*

**Fourth**, the writing of these poems beckons me to step into the realm of imagination. Alan Parry recently took my mind on a grand tour of the history of this rather forgotten and largely scorned practice of imaginative soaring. Here is an excerpt from this conversation:

*Imagination suffered a forgetting  
In the West  
Next to all things scholastic, theoretical, empirical  
And dry.  
We have to be reacquainted.  
Where is Plato when we need him?  
Where did the Sufis disappear to?*

*CBT tells us that we govern our own thinking  
But this is an illusion.  
Thoughts come to us  
And we launder them  
And embellish them.  
We make or break our stories this way.  
Don't be close  
Don't show anger  
Don't exist  
We have to escape the fates of these stories.*

*But how might we give ourselves over?*



*What if imagination was a valid source of information?  
What if we were to imagine  
That our lives were governed by soulfulness?  
What if the whole idea of "As if" came to us anew  
And we lived in the world 'as if'*

*Sanni  
You better be careful with yourself  
If you don't watch out  
If you linger over  
What someone just accomplished  
Pretty soon  
You'll find yourself imagining  
A whole life.*

Alan is paraphrasing Vladimir Nabokov (1972) in the last stanza here. The original quote from the novella "Transparent Things" reads:

*A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the experienced miracle worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish.*

In the rather irreverent words of a song by the Cat Empire, I say, "Welcome fishies, to my hook...."

### **Dear David, Dear Tom,**

I suspect that this rather lengthy letter will spawn many more questions. I suspect I will have no answers. But perhaps I will live the questions and live my way into their answering. Or perhaps, I knew all along when I was very young, standing and listening to poetry being performed by one passionate teacher that poems can make our minds soar. Poems can reveal our world to us. Poems can ask us to take a position on the living of our lives. Poems can invite us to put down the weight of our aloneness for a moment. Poems can belong people. Like the sound of a violin in a busy building can settle a man's heart and tell him, "Welcome back, Jessie. Tell me where you have been. I will listen. And together, we will imagine just where you will go."



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