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Ideas and Practices in the Making

Founding Editor: David Epston

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Editors: Tom Stone Carlson, Ph.D., David Epston and marcela polanco

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A Brief Welcome to Part Two on Co-Research

Welcome to Part Two of the Special Release on David Epston's Co-Research.

This release includes a two part co-research conversation on Exposing perfectionism by Victoria, Chloe, Lona & David Epston and a letter by Victoria Marsden about the effects of engaging in co-research conversations on her life and work.

Enjoy!

Up-Coming Releases of JNFT

The next release of JNFT is already in preparation and will include papers on some exciting new work by Christoffer Haugaard from Denmark how is expanding Michael White's work related to narrative ways of working with people who experience helpful and troublesome voices.

A special release is also in the works updating readers on the further development and innovations of Insider Witnessing Practices. This special release on Insider Witnessing Practices will include new innovations in theory and practice and updated outcomes from our interviews with our client co-researchers. We will also highlight the work of therapists and teams around the world who have taken up Insider Witnessing Practices in their unique contexts.





Exposing perfectionism: Part one of a co-research story conversation by Victoria, Chloe, Lona & David Epston

Chapter 1: Why task ourselves with such an undertaking

Our story begins in the middle, where questions of a co-research project concerning anti-perfection lifestyles are put forward

VICTORIA: I am struggling with a whole lot of negative feelings when I think about this upcoming project. I am unsure if it is to do with feeling like I have nothing to contribute, or questioning my right to say anything, due to my lack of contributions of late, or due to something else all together. I am wondering if you could please clarify a few things for me. For starters, what is it that you wish to achieve out of this 'co-research' project?

DAVID: Why task ourselves with such an undertaking? To see what it can do of course! The project is in hopes of making available to a much larger audience via the anti-anorexic co-research project. And since it has never been done before, everything is pretty speculative. As always, Victoria, we are like steam engines that lay track just ahead of themselves as they go. When you are inventing things, this is our fate. But in some ways, it is so much more adventurous than knowing where you are going and what is to become of that – anti-anorexia has been such an adventure from beginning to end.

VICTORIA: What areas do you suggest we focus on as "co-researchers" in regard to perfectionism?

DAVID: I think it is probably best to respond to something that demands attention rather than making up a project. The perfection and university studies seemed relevant to you and Chloe some months ago, but may have gone off the 'boil'. However, such a correspondence I hope will allow for anything of anti-anorexic concern to be entered into it and taken up to see where we can go with it.

VICTORIA: Why and how have you selected the co-researchers, including myself?

DAVID: Yourself, Lona, and Chloe are all people I know who are committed to such an endeavor as anti-Perfectionism, and I suspect the three of you will be about as many as I can manage in terms of keeping each of your voices separate and distinctive. This project will be new for me too.

VICTORIA: Would it be helpful to have a stated definition of 'perfectionism' before we start





- DAVID: this?
Why don't we work it out as we go along?
- VICTORIA: How will we be able to collate comments or even converse with five participants, including yourself?
- DAVID: That will be a test! I am hoping I can figure it out as we go along, I might need you all to be patient with me and I expect there will be, as always, some trial and errors. But then again, how else does one learn the 'new'?
- VICTORIA: I hope that it is ok that I have just gone ahead and asked these questions David. I do not mean to be disrespectful in asking them, they are just areas I would like to have clarified if I could.
- DAVID: Of course not Victoria.
- VICTORIA: Thank you.

Chapter 2: On the boil

The three co-researchers relate insider stories, support, and theorizing around perfection's practices

- VICTORIA: David, thank you so much for responding to these queries. I felt really hesitant about asking, but I am glad that I have done so. If I can be completely honest with you David, since I have asked these questions, I began to feel a whole lot better about this project. Maybe I was feeling that I did not have enough information about it to proceed – being afraid that I might stuff it up. I have a funny feeling that it had to do with something about feeling like I had no control over the process. My stupid insecurities surfacing again. David, I am afraid now that you may feel like I was second-guessing you or something. Please know that this was definitely not the case. I just needed some more information. I am the kind of person who does quite a bit of research and gains all the information I can before I make any decision. Perhaps it was partly this too.

I would really like to be part of this project as best as I can be. For me, perfectionism is present in every part of my life – even to the point of being abused if I do not breathe properly. I was having difficulty trying then to talk about this in general because it is almost like it is part of who I am and how do you discuss this in conversation with another person?

In further response to my questions, you mention that maybe perfectionism is





not having such an impact on my studies as it was before you went away. Before today, I would have said yes this seems to be the case, but, typically, I have discovered that I am not so lucky. In my first paper in the course I am studying, I had to write an essay on my reflections on a particular narrative article. I spent a great deal of time stressing over this essay, and re-wrote it a couple of times. I was dreading handing it in because it contained some personal information that was kind of scary for me to write in an 'academic' essay.

Anyway, I received my marks for the paper the other day and received full marks for this essay. The point of this story was to illustrate the power of perfectionism. With this essay, I received another grade – one from a group work assignment – 2 marks less than full marks. But the thing is that I won't even mention this group mark to anyone because I feel ashamed that I did not get 100% for this one too. Today I have learnt that many groups did not even pass this assessment, so I know I should be ok with my grade, I just am not. To me this is a very clear example of how perfectionism is trying to take over my studies once again. I'd thought I'd share that with you anyway, to illustrate that this issue is still very much 'on the boil'.

LONA: Hi all, I am not sure if this is the way the response is to be done, however, I am not about to allow perfectionism to silence my attempt at responding so here goes: I find it so interesting that Victoria asked what we should focus on as a topic in perfectionism. In reading Victoria's introduction to the letter, I noticed how loud the voice of perfectionism was speaking.

VICTORIA: Thanks for pointing this out Lona. To be honest, I got really defensive when I heard your comment about perfectionism's influence on my words. But thinking back on how I was feeling when I said that, I think that you are absolutely right. Perfectionism had taken my voice and was masquerading as "Victoria". Also to be even more honest, I am feeling a little bit apprehensive about entering into conversation with you as perfectionism has convinced me that I will have nothing worthy to say, and might stuff it up and come across looking like an idiot, so I should not even bother. As you can see, I am challenging this command, but I have little doubt that this will come at a price.

However, tonight I have been inspired by your opening paragraph which includes; "I am not sure if this is the way the response is to be done, however, I am not about to allow perfectionism to silence my attempt at responding so here goes ..." So thank you, Lona, for your words that have given me the courage to give this a go too!





CHLOE: Hi all, I just wanted to add a few random thoughts to this conversation also. As always, I am struck by the fact that Lona and Victoria's words could have come straight from my own mouth. Indeed, lack of time due to university work aside, part of the reason for my delayed response to this e-mail is that I have felt (or perfection has insisted?) that I have absolutely nothing worth adding to this conversation.

VICTORIA: Chloe, for what it's worth, I disagree with this with every inch of my heart and my spirit.

CHLOE: ...However, as I sat here re-reading this e-mail tonight, I was both so morally outraged at perfection's attempts to silence the voices of two women – voices that I respect and cherish – and heartened by Lona and Victoria's courageous stance against perfection in daring to join in this discussion despite perfection's protests, that I have been emboldened to join in this conversation as well. I refuse to let perfection prevent me from speaking out in support and solidarity of you Lona and Victoria.

I was just wondering in light of how difficult I'm finding it to join in this particular 'co-research project' (and from the sounds of it, others are too) – do you ('you' as in any and all of you!) think that perfection might be putting up an especially big fight given what it has to lose from these conversations? After all, we will be putting it in the 'hot seat' won't we?!

VICTORIA: Chloe, it makes such a difference to me to have you here with me (us) in this conversation. You have so much wisdom to share that I would loathe if perfectionism managed to take away your voice here.

LONA: Perfectionism, I believe, has told me for so long that I have nothing to contribute and doubted my right to say anything. Perfectionism would tell me that if what I said wasn't perfect, best I said nothing at all. So for many years perfectionism silenced my voice and my ideas.

Perfectionism built up a hierarchy of good and bad, and split them. Perfectionism became my biggest critic, my judge. I hear the voice of perfectionism still, in the way perfectionism eyes me in the mirror, looks at my breasts, my nose, my body. The way perfectionism conducts the process of self-reflection as a therapist and the way perfectionism talks to her husband – “he is too fat as well”, it says to me.

VICTORIA: I can really relate to this. I hate looking in the mirror as I get the critical run-down





each time I do also. And don't even get me started on how I feel in a swimsuit! The more I think about it, the more I realise just how much of my life is ruled by perfectionism. I feel this need to be the best at everything I do, and if I am not then I feel like a complete failure – a waste of a human being. It also stops me from doing many of the things I wish to do, because perfectionism tells me I'll just screw it up anyway, so why bother.

I can also relate to your comment about self-reflection as a therapist. I am training to be a therapist and my classes involve a substantial amount of practical work with classmates. I can never accept the words of the person I am working with if they tell me I have helped them to see something in a more constructive way, and I always, always come away from a practical exercise thinking, "well I totally screwed that up".

CHLOE: I can relate so much to this. Perfectionism has prevented me from engaging in so much of life due to its dictate that it is better not to do something than to do it and risk not doing it perfectly. I am just beginning to realise now how long perfection has been a part of my life, much longer than its good friend and companion, anorexia. What struck me when reading Lona's description of her experiences with perfection and from my own experiences of perfection is the overwhelming sense in which perfectionism is stifling and paralysing. It gets you (I'm using 'you' in the generic sense of the word) pinned in a corner with absolutely no room to move.

Lona, I am wondering how it is that you have been able to evade perfection in becoming a therapist? I acknowledge that perfection probably still does its best to interrupt your work but it seems to me that you must have come a long way in out-doing or 'un-doing' perfection in order to be able to practice as a therapist.

LONA: Before I became a therapist, I was a hairdresser. Perfectionism dominated the work. I graduated top of my class and was the last to move from being an apprentice to being a fully-fledged hairdresser – why? – because perfectionism told me I wasn't yet good enough, and that I should continue learning to improve. So whilst my colleagues began to earn a living and open their own salons, perfectionism was hooked on self-indulgence. In fact, the haircuts began to take so long I started to irritate myself. Perfectionism told me that if I couldn't do the haircuts perfectly, it would rather I didn't do them at all, so I gave up. This is another trick of perfectionism: it tells me that I should hand over my work to someone better.





So perfectionism used to stop me from completing what I was doing. But I have had enough. Hence I am responding even if I am not sure that I am responding in the right way – why? Because I am tired of perfectionism’s black and white outlook, that there is only one way.

VICTORIA: I too find perfectionism’s “black and white outlook” so limiting, yet I seem to be caught by it so often. Lona, thank you for resisting perfectionism’s claim that you would not respond the “right way”. As you can see from my response, your words and thoughts certainly got me thinking. I am always grateful for this.

Chapter 3: Hard to believe it is just a coincidence

Chloe recognizes the league as a place for community and solidarity, Victoria echoes the sentiment, and David begins his inquiry of perfection’s recruiting tactics

CHLOE: Hi David, I just thought I might share an experience I had yesterday that involved a bit of a ‘run in’ with perfection.

When I was at university yesterday, I noticed that the exam results from one of my classes had been placed on the notice board (everyone in the class had their results listed so that you could compare what the top score was). Of course, perfection demanded that I must know what my results were. Unable to resist, I scanned the list for my results (perfection hanging over my shoulder the whole time).

As it turns out I was quite disappointed with my results. In a similar exam earlier in the semester I got two questions wrong out of 30 (2 too many for perfection of course, but perfection was ‘kind’ to me in that instance and begrudgingly let me off the hook for losing those two marks because I got the top mark in the class by a good 10 marks).

DAVID: Chloe, was it significant in any way do you think that this ‘run in’ should take place when the ‘Sisters against Perfection’ (if I can call you that?) had all had their ‘run-ins’ with perfection? And refused to allow that to silence them, knowing that you all would have to endure some punishment for your insolence? Just wondering as I find it hard to believe it is just a coincidence.

CHLOE: I hadn’t put two and two together at a conscious level (that my run-in with perfectionism has coincided with Victoria and Lona’s refusal to be silenced by perfectionism). But now that you mention it David, I’m sure it is more than mere coincidence as well. My resolve against perfection was certainly strengthened by the courageous stance taken by both Victoria and Lona and knowing that they





- DAVID: are 'out there' also resisting. It gives me a sense of community and solidarity. Chloe, would you consider marks on a notice board would be one of the premier sites for perfection to perform itself in our everyday culture? Can you think of any other premier sites?
- CHLOE: Almost anywhere, particularly where there are numbers involved and these numbers can be compared. The list is (unfortunately) endless.
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I was disgusted that this practice would occur. It totally supports the concept of competition, which perfectionism thrives on, and that capitalist patriarchy thrives on too for that matter! It makes me so angry that educational institutes take it upon themselves to do things like this.
- DAVID: Chloe, can you recall what perfection was saying to you while you scanned the board? And how? And why do you consider it was doing so?
- CHLOE: As I was scanning the marks trying to find my results on the board at university, perfection was saying things like, "Don't just look at your own mark, make sure you look at the whole range of marks so that you can compare how you did with everyone else" and "You know you are going to be disappointed because you are so stupid and you should have studied harder...therefore if you get a low mark (which you will) then you have only yourself to blame".
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I can really relate to this. I totally need to know my grades, and then feel terrible, even if I get 100%. I just can't win with perfectionism. That's why it is so manipulative and destructive.
- DAVID: Chloe, you mentioned that earlier in the semester, perfectionism was "kind to you" when you got two questions wrong on a similar exam, because you still gained the highest score in the class. This is the very first time in 15 years that I have heard perfection show any mercy or kindness whatsoever! Was this a ruse? Was it some form of deception?
- CHLOE: It was perfection's way of 'saving face'. By this I mean that in showing me 'mercy' in this instance, perfection was able to claim credibility (e.g. the voice of perfection saying, "See, I'm not that unreasonable after all, I allow you to get two questions wrong, you have nothing to complain about"). In doing so, perfection deflected any potential for a direct confrontation with it. Whereas if it had said outright "you are only acceptable if you get 100%", then I would be more likely to see the impossibility of perfection's demands. So basically, it was perfection's way of keeping me 'on-side'.





VICTORIA: I can totally relate to you here Chloe. In my experience, perfectionism is not even satisfied with perfection.

CHLOE: However this time I got a few more questions wrong. And furthermore, I didn't come top of the class.

DAVID: Chloe, I hope you don't mind me saying this but I am delighted to hear this! Were you even inadvertently doing imperfection?

CHLOE: Well at least someone is delighted because I'm not! It certainly wasn't an intentional act of imperfection. This makes it all the harder because it means I'm all the more stupid (e.g. If I'd done it on purpose then it wouldn't be a reflection of my intellect. But because I tried my hardest, then my marks just show how dumb I am). Needless to say, perfection was outraged (e.g. the voice of perfection, "You are so stupid – how did you manage to get so many questions wrong? – you should have studied harder"). Anyway, I came away feeling pretty bad about myself.

DAVID: Chloe, did perfection tell you that you surely would be 'better off dead' if you failed to be the best, even if you are all alone at the top of the heap?

CHLOE: Yes, and when I tell perfection that I don't care for grades and other such superficialities, it tells me that I am such a failure at everything else that getting good grades is all that I have. (e.g. the voice of perfection, "It would be all very well and good to renounce having to be the best if you were actually remotely 'good' at anything! But as it stands you are a complete and utter failure at being the kind of person you say you value, and so you have nothing left but to succeed in getting good grades").

However, the part of the whole story that I particularly wanted to share with you is that, although perfection gave me a really hard time (and is still putting up a very noisy protest about my marks), it hasn't been able to totally consume me.

DAVID: Chloe, is this the first time in your life that you have been able to utter that? If so, I am thrilled to be part of even knowing about it via e-mail.

CHLOE: When I was telling mum how disappointed I was by my marks and how I hadn't come top of the class, she asked me how far below the top I was. "Half a mark", I replied. We were both able to have a bit of a laugh at perfection together, which was nice.





- VICTORIA: I also sometimes find it good to share it with someone else when I have an experience like this, to get another perspective on the situation. A perspective that is not coloured by perfectionism and self-hatred.
- DAVID: Chloe, am I right in thinking that perfection/anorexia refused to allow you to share anything of importance with your mum for many years? If so, what would you have me understand the significance of the fact that you were able to seek your mother out as an ally in standing up to the absurdities of perfection? I hope you don't mind my curiosity here but I am getting curiouser and curiouser as I scroll down this e-mail.
- CHLOE: While I am still struggling with perfection over this and am still disappointed because I "could have done better", I have decided that I am glad that I didn't come top of the class.
- DAVID: Chloe, can you imagine what kind of music this is to my imperfection-tuned ears to read this in text? This almost brings tears to my eyes!
- CHLOE: ...Because this way somebody else had the chance to feel that they did really outstandingly well in coming top of the class (and hopefully they will actually appreciate the experience and feel good about it without having perfection to destroy everything)!
- DAVID: Chloe, why do you think you can wish such a person so well when perfection has taken away any satisfaction you might have experienced on those occasions when you stood first? Is this worth considering?
- CHLOE: Hmm...now that it is on 'paper' it doesn't sound as good a story as I thought I was going to be, but I thought you might be interested all the same as I know that you are always one for hearing tales of imperfection.
- DAVID: Chloe, who says "it doesn't sound as good a story as I thought I was going to be"? Perfection, you or me/Victoria/Lona?
- VICTORIA: Chloe, I have so much respect for you for taking this step. Sharing this kind of thing about yourself can be a very scary thing to do, and it takes a lot of courage – but you probably know by now that I have come to really admire this strength about you. I am wondering how much of a part you would say your moral outrage played in making the decision to share some of your own experiences in this forum?





And regardless of the grade you get for this paper, I believe that you have earned the highest grade possible – and more. I don't want to say to you that I know how significant this decision has been for you, but from my own experiences, I will go as far to say that I may have some idea of how difficult it will have been to write and actually hand in.

(Just wondering if you left any smudges on it too, by any chance, because we both know that perfectionism refuses to tolerate printer smudges?! Just kidding!)

DAVID: Chloe, how amazing! What does this say about the 'distance' you have come from perfection that you can now indict it in writing? Does this mean that you are no longer so terrorised by perfection that you 'can dare speak its name'?

CHLOE: The reason why I tell you this is because I am doing something quite unlike I have ever done before and am not sticking to my usual 'tried and true' essay format that I know will get me reasonable marks. So there's another 'up yours' to perfection for you to relish!

DAVID: Chloe, would the "tried and true" be an expression of your wisdom and creativity or of perfection's 'boring old fart' way of writing?

CHLOE: 'Boring old fart' way feels much 'safer'. But I must admit that it is less fun and interesting to write. Writing 'off the beaten track' takes a lot out of me though, so I think I'll stick to 'boring old fart' writing for the most part. However don't worry David, I will continue to go off the beaten track every now and then just to make sure that perfection doesn't settle down and become too comfortable!

Chapter 4: Sisters against perfection

David asks the co-research team uncommon questions and Victoria thinks through countless, tiny ways she resists daily perfectionism demands

DAVID: Victoria, I know I agree with you when you say "it is always wonderful to hear of perfectionism getting grief!" For you, does that have anything to do with the fact that perfection has caused so much grief for you and so many others?

VICTORIA: In my case it does. I become infuriated with perfectionism when it manages to paralyse Chloe, because I know that she is so gifted and has so much compassion and wisdom.





- DAVID: Victoria, when you spoke of Lona and Chloe's outrage allowing you to contribute to the conversation, I noticed that this resonates with Chloe's comment in her recent email regarding 'community' and 'solidarity'. Does the idea of Sisters against Perfection appeal to your mischief-making as well as your moral outrage?
- VICTORIA: It sure does. I truly don't think I would have had the confidence to participate in this conversation if it were not for Lona's reply to you regarding my first e-mail that was full of concern and fear. At first, I also thought that the term 'Sisters against Perfection' was kind of silly (no offence), but it has allowed me to feel supported and able to be involved in this project, knowing that Lona and Chloe are in it with me.
- DAVID: Victoria, you stated, "I just can't win with perfectionism; I need to know what my grades are, but then feel terrible even if I get 100%". I have never known anyone to win with perfectionism, unless you would consider immiseration and death as some sort of victories. Sisters against Perfection, do we need to learn to 'lose' against perfection so it can't tell us we are losers? Do we need to lead 'lives uncommon' (phrase taken from Jewel's song of the same name) to lead our lives at all, rather than 'living deaths'? Is this like anorexia: a matter of life or death? And if so, does perfection have to be contested as fiercely and with the same guile as anti-anorexia?
- VICTORIA: For me it does not feel as much a life and death battle, as did anorexia. But I guess it's kind of a battle between going through life in misery and living life to the fullest. So you could call it a battle between living and surviving.
- As for losing against perfectionism so it can't tell me I'm a loser, I find it more empowering to outwit perfectionism in the most outrageous way I can. Or by directly contradicting it if I am feeling strong enough to do so. This unfortunately isn't always the case though. In regard to living a life uncommon, this is something I strive for everyday.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said, "In my experience, perfectionism is not even satisfied with perfection". Is perfection only satisfied with your immiseration or execution? And if so, what is your counter-morality to support your 'Sisters against Perfection' as well as yourself?
- VICTORIA: I would not call it a counter-morality, but instead maybe trying to listen to what I want and need, rather than what perfectionism demands I must do. This comes into every part of my life; for example, when perfectionism demands I go for a





run, I ask myself if I really feel like doing this and sometimes, if not, I don't go. If perfectionism demands I stay up until the early hours of the morning re-writing an essay I don't really care for, I ask myself if I am tired, and if so, sometimes I just go to bed. Please note though, that I am often not able to resist perfectionism. However, when I do, it is helpful to congratulate myself for doing so.

DAVID: Victoria, in a previous e-mail, you said to Chloe: "I am wondering how much of a part you would say your moral outrage played in making the decision to share some of your own experiences with anorexia in an essay..... From my own experiences, I will go as far to say that I may have some idea of how difficult it will have been to write and actually hand in".

Victoria, do you mind reminding us of how you decided to undertake acts of resistance such as meeting with an acquaintance who was suffering with anorexia? What instills in us the 'courage of our convictions' to live a 'life uncommon'?

VICTORIA: I suppose for me, it often comes down to the price of staying silent. In regard to this acquaintance who was struggling with anorexia, I knew that I had some knowledge that may have been useful to her as she fought for her life. If I was to remain silent about what I have learnt, then I would be giving anorexia more arrows to fire at her. I have learnt that by staying silent about things that matter to me and those I care about, I am in fact condoning them and I want no part of this. I would not call this a 'life uncommon', but speaking out against injustice helps me feel like I am making a difference in the world, and am living out what I believe in. For me, this is very anti-perfectionist and anti-anorexic.

Chapter 5: Canaries in the mines

Victoria shares about the rebellious and spontaneous delight of listening to music, David hypothesizes possible relationships between creativity and anti-perfectionism

VICTORIA: I just wanted to share with you my big 'up yours' to perfectionism yesterday. I have been attending a workshop on creativity over the past couple of weekends. This experience has been a huge rebellion against perfectionism as I was required to dance, sing, paint, draw, play body rhythms, tell stories... etc, in front of 28 other people that I hardly know at all. To be honest, some of it was totally out of my league, but I did have a wonderful day with a leader who works with sound with her clients

To complete this workshop, I was expected to give a performance yesterday on





'my journey' through creative expression. To say the least, I was not impressed with having to use a combination of sound, dance, and storytelling to share my private and personal experiences with the other workshop attendees. There was an expectation that each person shared some kind of struggle they had been through in their life and present this through one of the mediums covered in the workshop. I totally drew the line here, in terms of sharing past struggles, but did deliver a performance (most of which involved a lot of 'creative writing', shall we say!).

Anyway, here is where perfectionism comes in. First of all, I was told that I could not use photography in my presentation as it was not regarded as an appropriate form of creative expression for this exercise. I debated over this for a long time and complained about it to many of my friends. In the end, I decided, stuff it! I 'm going to do it anyway! So I incorporated photography into my presentation, and delivered it yesterday to the group. This was a huge rebellion against perfectionism for me, as it told me that I had to adhere to the leaders' expectations as otherwise I would risk not delivering a 'perfect' presentation (not that this would have been possible anyway!).

This probably does not sound that 'anti-perfectionist', but it was for me; it is very rare that I purposely chose to take a route that may affect my chances of getting the best grade or delivering the best performance. Perfectionism just does not allow it.

- DAVID: Victoria, when you were talking about the creativity workshop you have been attending, it made me think of how the very workshop itself challenges perfectionism. I have always found perfection to be about straight lines, tidiness and about as far away as you can get from creativity...in fact, I would say perfection can 'bore you to death', wouldn't you?
- VICTORIA: Definitely. It paralyses me to the point where I don't even try things. And this is completely boring!
- DAVID: Didn't perfection try to tamper with your experience of this workshop to ensure that all your creativity got sucked out of you and it would dull you?
- VICTORIA: Sure. It gave me a seriously bad attitude and severe resistance to trying anything in front of the other class members. I do think that most of the stuff we had to do was not that helpful, and unfortunately, also steeped in expectation and judgment if one chose not to participate by exercising their right to pass.





DAVID: What should we make of the fact that you did not succumb to perfection infiltrating this workshop? In fact, you seem to have shaken it off for the time being!

VICTORIA: Deciding to finish the workshop was my resistance to perfectionism.

DAVID: Victoria, can you share with us the wonderfulness of that day you so enjoyed, discussing sound and music therapy? Or at least give us a taste of it?

VICTORIA: I will give this a go David... I was totally captured by the leader of this particular workshop; the leader who started the class by playing the Tibetan bowl. From the beginning of the day she was so passionate about her topic – working with sound as an aspect of therapy – that I found it totally infectious and I could not wait to hear more. The introduction that she performed with a First Nation Canadian greeting and a Tibetan bowl that came from Kathmandu was just magic. It really touched me deeply and I wanted to hear so much more of it. I was fortunate enough to get the chance to play the Tibetan bowl later on in the day. Allowing me to do this was a gift from this woman.

Perfectionism did jump on in here though, as I could not play it as well as the leader could, nor could I play it perfectly. But it was such a rich sound that one day I would love to own one. I loved the discussion around how the vibrations were also very healing for the player and for those sitting close to them. She also played a moose skin drum while we did body drumming, which was very moving. I could just go on and on here David, which is a real sign of just how special the day was for me.

The leader showed us some techniques to use with the guitar and with our voice that allowed pure un-censored expression of emotion through sound. This involved just strumming on the guitar and opening your mouth and letting whatever sound was there break free. This was very anti-perfectionist for me as it goes against the idea that I have to adhere to notes, tunes, etc, and make music sound ‘perfect’ when I play the guitar.

DAVID: Victoria, did you sense during that time you were connected with your creativity? If so, what was it like to be informed by something that isn’t about ‘pass’ or ‘failure’? Or that isn’t a commodity to ‘buy’ or ‘sell’?

VICTORIA: It was just magic David. I was totally buzzing for days afterwards. It has also inspired me to explore this area of therapy and way of living more. The whole experience also illustrated that there are others as crazy and passionate as me





out there, and that I do not have to listen to perfectionism's demands that I must tone my personality down and act more like I 'should' – adult-like, boring, and without passion for anything. This is something I am just not interested in, and when I am not exhausted, I try to resist in every way I possibly can.

DAVID: Victoria, does the term 'Sisters against Perfection' resonate with your very experience of the actions you are taking in your life?

VICTORIA: Yes, it does. I don't know if I've ever felt so much a part of a sisterhood, outside of the relationship I have with my own sister. This is quite an amazing experience actually.

DAVID: Victoria, by referring to resisting perfectionism not as much as 'a battle between life and death, but one between living and surviving' do you mean the distinction between a 'living death- being one of the living dead' and a 'lively life- being one of the lively livers'?

VICTORIA: By saying this, I mean that life under perfectionism's rule is about as much fun as not being alive at all. That life without perfectionism's regimes (if that is possible) is a lot more mischievous, spontaneous and downright enjoyable. Of course, life is never always like this, but at least I have more of a chance of experiencing any of these emotions and ways of living than when I am under perfectionism/anorexia's spell.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say over the last few days you have been 'trying out' a life uncommon? Did perfection say you wouldn't survive more than a minute of such a 'life uncommon'? Can you imagine similarly 'uncommon lives' for Chloe?

VICTORIA: I can imagine a life like this for Chloe, and I have great hope that she will one day be able to experience the freedom that comes with living a 'life uncommon'. In fact, Chloe already lives a 'life uncommon' in that she has refused to be silenced by anorexia.

DAVID: Victoria, for our reference, can you spell out in some detail if you don't mind, exactly if and how you congratulate yourself when you resist perfectionism? At the same time, doesn't perfection try to debase you? How do you take the side of self-congratulation rather than perfection-debasement?

VICTORIA: It does try to debase me continuously, which makes it difficult to even identify acts of resistance in terms of perfectionism. However, I am very fortunate to have people around me who draw my attention to acts that defy perfectionism. I





will also go as far to say that I am getting better at recognising them myself. Despite this, I don't know if 'congratulating' myself was a good choice of words. Maybe I should have gone with 'not abusing myself for being so defiant'. This is a step along the way to being able to congratulate myself. I guess that the fact that I do share some of these experiences with significant people in my life (including yourself, and my 'sisters of resistance'), shows that I do place some value on these anti-perfectionist acts.

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned that you found yourself in a lose-lose situation in response to a comment made in an earlier e-mail. I am wondering if this could possibly be a point of learning for us: should we be suspicious when anything is reduced to a lose-lose? Should that be a clue that perfection is out to infiltrate us?

VICTORIA: For me, if a situation feels 'lose-lose' (e.g. if I chose either of the options available, I will lose out), it is a blaring neon sign that perfectionism/anorexia is right in the thick of this situation. That it not only has a starring role, but also is directing everyone else involved – including myself.

DAVID: Victoria, you made the comment about having "learned that by staying silent about things that matter to me and those I care about, I am in fact condoning them and I want no part of this. By speaking out, it helps me feel like I am making a difference in the world, and am living out what I believe in."

Anorexia is resigned obedience to that which anorexia endorses and crystallizes, is it not? Do your thoughts 'resonate' with Helen Gremillion's metaphor for those struggling with anorexia – 'canaries in the mines' – who if they sing out loudly enough will save the miners....but should we consider that in doing so, they should also save themselves rather than die for others? I know these are somber thoughts but then again, anorexia is immiseration, is it not?

VICTORIA: Anorexia only knows misery. I recognise what you are saying here in regard to anorexia, but firmly believe that had I not been witness to the destruction and torture anorexia was inflicting on Chloe and others I came across, I would not have been able to recognise the horrors it was putting me through. Your analogy about the canaries, makes me think that maybe the canaries could start singing to warn the miners, but then join together (as we have done) and find the way out together, singing on the way, to alert those who were unable to hear them the first time.





Exposing perfectionism: Part two of a co-research story conversation by Victoria, Chloe, Lona & David Epston

Chapter 6: The beauty of the song that accompanied it

David and Victoria explore ideas of family through co-research identities, Victoria shares a surprised reflection on how perfection dulls joyful memory, and David pauses to consider the importance of unmonitored expression

DAVID: Victoria, in a previous e-mail, you made the comment “The league has become like a family to me”. Do you mind for the sake of the league to provide some sort of rough and ready history of how the league became ‘like a family’ to you? I find that very interesting.

VICTORIA: Some of this feeling of family-ness is that the league is where I go when I feel like no one else will understand. When I first started conversing with yourself and Chloe, my contributions centred around my routines and difficulties around eating and weight etc. But fortunately for me, now I feel like Chloe is somewhat of a sister to me, as I can talk with her about anything and she is often the person to whom I talk when I cannot talk to anyone else. I feel very lucky about this, as I know that Chloe is there for me even when I feel really bad. I guess this is what I thought it might be like within a family. With Chloe, I feel some sense of connection that goes beyond two people who met through co-research projects.

The league is also a family to me in that I feel like anything I say will be heard with compassionate and non-judgmental ears. I often can’t get in touch with this knowing, as anorexia/perfectionism block it from me, but I am aware of it being there. The family sense also comes in when I think about how those in the league are working together for a common goal – to outwit and destroy the hold anorexia has over us and others it seduces.

For most of my life, I have believed that a ‘family’ is not necessarily a group of people who are linked by blood ties. I have had the privilege of being welcomed into a number of different families in my life and really value the strong bond that can exist between people who have common beliefs and ideas. I guess some would call the league a community, though this word does not convey the extent to which it is part of my life and how important it is to me.

DAVID: Victoria, if hearing the Tibetan bowl touched you in ‘deep places’, I am wondering if perfection keeps you in the wader’s end of the pool in terms of how you experience your life? Does perfection allow you to be touched at all?





VICTORIA: Perfectionism does not allow me to be ‘touched’ by much at all. It demands I maintain this staunch apathetic exterior, in case someone might think I was ‘touched’ by something or someone. Perfectionism never wants me to let on that I have been moved by anything because it would then look like I am not strong enough to resist all temptation to ‘live’ in any way. And if anyone was to know, I would have to become a professional at whatever it was I was moved by anyway. Therefore, it maintains that I can watch from a distance but must disregard anything that might move me, because I would not be able to be a professional when I tried it for the first time, so I shouldn’t bother at all.

On the other hand, perfectionism may allow me to be ‘touched’ by something, but then use this as further proof of my uselessness and inadequacy for not being as good as this person or thing that I was moved by.

DAVID: You spoke of the playing the Tibetan bowl yourself during a break in the workshop. I am wondering what you had to say to yourself and perfection in order for you to go and ‘play’? ‘Play’ is certainly a word I have never associated with perfection... have you?

VICTORIA: I think part of what made it possible for me to ‘play’ was the extent to which the leader’s words and expression had moved me. I find it hard to let go of the power of these words and the way she just expressed herself, with what appeared to be, little or no boundaries. (I am aware that this may actually not have been the case – having no boundaries, but she certainly exhibited a way of being that is much freer than I ever imagine being able to be).

Now that I have said this, I actually meant in my original comment that I ‘played’ the Tibetan bowl during the lunch break. I did get abused by perfectionism for not being able to play it ‘properly’ or as well as the other people who were sitting with me, but the sound just totally captivated me

DAVID: Would you say ‘hard labour’ and perfection go together?

VICTORIA: For me, definitely.

DAVID: What goes with anti-perfection? Play I know, but what else do you think?

VICTORIA: Relaxing. I say this because this has been virtually impossible for me over the past little while. And taking a holiday. I struggle with perfectionism’s claims that unless I am working towards something, a degree or trying to save the world for



example, then I am not doing anything worthwhile. That I am not entitled to do anything for simple pleasure or relaxation because I am not a good enough person, – I'm sure you've heard this all before David. Perfectionism seems to sell people the same lines.

DAVID: You say perfectionism 'jumped in' when you were playing the bowl, but how did you reject its allegations that if you could not play it as well as the leader did, you were some sort of 'loser'?

VICTORIA: I think this had to do with how moved I was by the pure and magnificent sound the bowl gives out, the beauty of the song that accompanied it.

DAVID: Why didn't you invidiously compare yourself to the leader playing the bowl, as perfection would certainly have enjoyed you being deprived of this relationship, wouldn't it have?

VICTORIA: David, I did and still do compare my playing to that of the leader... to the point where I was too shy to really say anything to her during the workshop. Even though I would really like to talk more with her about her musical therapeutic journey, I don't feel confident enough to do so, so I won't.

David, upon reflection, I have my suspicions that perfectionism has dulled my recollections of the day because I did enjoy it so much. Perfectionism seems to have this effect on my memories; it makes sure I only remember (and frequently re-live) experiences that confirm my place in this world as a loser.

DAVID: Victoria, you spoke of an experience after the workshop of playing your guitar in the form of 'unmonitored expression'. I am wondering what you meant by this.

VICTORIA: During the workshop, the instructor showed us some techniques to use with the guitar and with our voice that allowed pure unmonitored expression of emotion through sound. This involved just strumming on the guitar and opening your mouth and letting whatever sound was there out. This is what I was referring to when I was referring to 'unmonitored expression'.

DAVID: Would you say that 'unmonitored expression' embodies everything perfection hates? After all, doesn't perfection have you 'watch yourself' and every expression you make? Isn't perfection a form of surveillance that never ceases, even when you are asleep?

VICTORIA: It does monitor (and judge inadequate) absolutely everything I do. I even dream





that I can't do anything well enough and that others are laughing at me when I try out new things. Perfectionism certainly has its teeth sunk well in when it invades my subconscious while I am sleeping.

DAVID: Can you describe for us what it was like for you to utter a 'pure unmonitored expression of emotion'? Wouldn't have perfection had assessed it as 'good', 'bad' or 'medium'?

VICTORIA: Well, I went away, down the bottom of my garden so no one could hear me, and yes, perfectionism did have me monitor/grade my attempts at expression. But I think that my interest and curiosity in this area/field was too intense to be overruled by perfectionism entirely.

This is an interesting observation. I wonder if the degree to which I am interested/curious about a topic, influences how much room perfectionism has to slip into my experiencing of it. Maybe if something speaks to my spirit – as this music did – then it is more difficult for perfectionism to poison the experience for me.

DAVID: When playing your guitar without heeding to perfectionism's rules and performance requirements Victoria, did you have a sense, however fleeting, of what living your life uncommonly might be like?

VICTORIA: I wouldn't go as far as to call this living life 'uncommonly' David, but it did make me curious to explore this further. In fact, the whole workshop strengthened my longing for a life without perfectionism's crippling input.

Interestingly, I find yoga often has this impact on me as well. Unfortunately, perfectionism/anorexia have convinced me that I am too fat to go to classes, so this is an avenue that I am not able to explore further right now. I would like for this to be different, so I may try and work on it when I have the energy to (but again I can hear perfectionism laughing at this suggestion, as it does not believe I'll be any good at it since I have not been for so long. Perfectionism never misses a beat, does it?)

Chapter 7: Able to recognize the horrors

David returns to questions about living a 'life uncommon' in resisting perfection, and Victoria shares the significance of witnessing Chloe's struggles and heroics against anorexia

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned meeting a number of people at this workshop who are "as crazy and as passionate about things as I am". I am wondering if it might be





possible that those others out there are not 'as crazy' but as 'uncommon' as you?

VICTORIA: This is an intriguing point David. I do find myself drawn to people who are a bit 'crazy/uncommon'. It is interesting though in that there probably are quite a few 'crazy' people out there in the world, but not many have with this craziness, a depth of compassion and ability to appreciate the important things in life. Having said this, I feel very lucky to have a number of these 'uncommon' people in my life.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say that it is perfection's ambition that you look like, sound like, be like everyone else – to be a kind of common denominator of a person?

VICTORIA: I find this an interesting question also David, as it does not fit with the role perfectionism has taken in my life in the past; it has focused mostly on strengthening the hold of anorexia in my life. In my experience, perfectionism and anorexia go hand in hand and I sometimes wonder if anorexia is, in fact, another way that perfectionism can wreck havoc on my mind and body (and vice versa). Anorexia has never wanted me to be 'common'. It has always wanted me to be the best at everything – especially at dying. Perfectionism always wants me to be the best at everything too, but I must also remain invisible to some degree, as drawing attention to myself is not at all approved of by perfectionism or anorexia.

There seem to be so many contradictions, which in itself makes me want to give up trying anything at all and just believe what perfectionism/anorexia tell me. Maybe this is the aim of the lose-lose situations perfectionism/anorexia keep presenting me with.

DAVID: Do you think you might be more at home out there at the slim edge of all the bell curves around norms?

VICTORIA: David, my reaction to this comment was, "I hate bell curves! These are just devices created to make 50% of all who are involved in anything fail!" Who wants to have anything to do with this? Not me! I feel the same way about norms. I want to create my own norms (!), and if this means they break the mould that I was made in... good job!

DAVID: Victoria, in relation to previous comments about norms, would you say that you have your vision when there are very obvious standards and expectations about things (e.g. 'the right way to do something')? This suggests to me that you are





creating your own visions rather than trying to see yourself through other's eyes? What do you think about this?

VICTORIA: I recall having a conversation with someone a while ago in relation to having my own 'visions'. I was talking about how I always feel like I am the person who 'rocks the boat' and who always has something to say. Also that you can pretty much guarantee that I will disagree with a lot of things that are said when I am in a workshop situation. The person's response to my concerns was, "So what?" I didn't really have an answer for this. I responded, "Well I don't want to be the one who is always making waves in professional development situations – the one who always has a different opinion". She said, "Why not?" I really couldn't answer that one either. I still can't really, which is why I'm still speaking up when I have ideas that differ from the ones presented.

DAVID: Victoria, can I ask you what you mean when you say "in my opinion, Chloe already lives 'a life uncommon'? I am pretty sure Chloe will be baffled by your assertion, but I want you to know that I am not.

VICTORIA: Wow David, where can I start? Chloe lives by what she believes in and for me, this is the essence of a 'life uncommon'. She fights for justice and against the evils of anorexia with so much passion and wisdom that it can often bring me to tears. Chloe has fought anorexia tooth and nail to claim back some of the life it has robbed her of, and this must have been a courageous and exhausting struggle. But still she makes time for others around her. She is an anti-anorexic warrior of the highest rank, and to me, this is the ultimate 'life uncommon'.

DAVID: Victoria, in an earlier email, you said "I am getting better at recognising (acts that defy perfectionism) myself" why do you think that is?

VICTORIA: Perhaps due to other people around me, pointing them out to me. Also I can now more easily identify perfectionism's voice in my life than before. Perfectionism used to be so much a part of me that I could not tell where I stopped and it began. Now I would say that I am learning to take more of my life back from it and therefore can recognise its presence more easily as this happens.

DAVID: Do you guess there would be any advantage to you and your sisters for refining this ability to recognise perfection-defying acts as time goes by?

VICTORIA: I can. Although I would say that even though I have a better awareness of perfectionism's acidic tongue in my mind, when I am not feeling very strong or





am under stress I find it almost impossible to differentiate between perfectionism's expectations of me and my own expectations me.

DAVID: Victoria, has there been a time very recently that you responded in a somewhat different way to these "blaring neon signs" that show the presence of perfectionism when you find yourself in a 'lose-lose' situation?

VICTORIA: I cannot think of a particular time. Generally, I try to think about what I want in the situation and if I can do, I will take this route. But more often than not, I have to ride the rip tide out because fighting it is too hard. I guess I will gain swimming strength as time goes on, but for now, it is ok to strategically retreat sometimes.

DAVID: Victoria, you said "I believe had I not been witness to the destruction and torture anorexia inflicted on Chloe, I would not have been able to recognize the horrors it was putting me through". Is this the 'secret weapon of narrative therapy' that you have referred to in the past? Is this why anorexia/perfection always try to cut you off from others so you will never find this out?

VICTORIA: In my experience, this is definitely one of anorexia's most powerful weapons. It makes sure I have a really low self-esteem too, so if anything happens in my life that could be taken to mean something negative about myself (even if this connection is an extremely precarious one), then it can use this with great success against me.

DAVID: Victoria, could the sisters be considered to be 'canaries in the mines', singing to warn themselves and others at the same time? Or singing to the others to warn them at the same time as being sung to, to be warned? Is this how the league works, do you think?

VICTORIA: I do think the league acts in this way. More perhaps in the second suggestion – the canaries "singing to the others to warn them at the same time as being sung to, to be warned". I say this because it is rare that anorexia/perfectionism allows an individual to place enough worth in themselves to be thought of as worthy of being warned of anything. And also, anorexia is at its most lethal when it is working away at an individual's spirit, mind and body, undetected by the victim her/himself.





Chapter 8: I think my spirit was moved

Victoria considers how sharing intimately with others through online co-research has impacted her, David inquires how Victoria parses her voice from the voice of perfection, and both arrive at a place of beauty

DAVID: Victoria, when you talked of having gained a closer relationship with Chloe over the time we have been corresponding, I am wondering if you would say that the ‘virtuality’ of the league has become realer than ‘real’?

VICTORIA: If you mean has the league taken on more meaning for me than a virtual community – yes. Chloe has become a dear friend.

DAVID: Can you see any advantages in having joined such a ‘family’ if we had met first in other circumstances e.g. a therapy group?

VICTORIA: To be honest David, if we had met in a therapy group, I would not be talking to you today. In my experience, therapy groups have been a compulsory ordeal if I wished to remain in my university program, and I don’t agree with the idea of compulsory therapy. I also disagree with forced disclosure or disclosure encouraged under pressure. I have little doubt I would have backed away very quickly if this had not been started on the net. With e-mail, I have the ability to step away if I choose, to take time out and come back when I wish.

It is important to mention that I have felt challenged at times, but this challenging seemed to be respectful and responses were never demanded. If we had met in a therapeutic group environment, I don’t think I would have been around long enough for you to remember my name (unless of course I was trying to tell the other participants that they only had to participate if they wanted to, not because the therapist asked them to)!

During our conversations, I have also been able to take comfort in the idea that these conversations between yourself, Chloe, Lona and me have been in a co-research manner, and not a personal therapeutic one. As you know, I have gained a lot of support and a significant amount of therapeutic input through these conversations, but I think that these were unexpected bonuses. I still would not call our conversations therapeutic in a formal sense. Unfortunately, put ‘group therapy’ in front of any group title, and I am out of there before the roll is called. I acknowledge that my stubbornness probably comes into play here, but this is how I react to group therapeutic situations.





- DAVID: Victoria, you also mentioned going to the league when ‘no one else understands’. Can you say what specifically the league has the capacity to ‘understand’ that others in your life do not possess?
- VICTORIA: League members understand what it is like living through anorexia’s hell and the confusion of having to cope in life without it. They understand how absolutely everything can and is used by anorexia to make me feel like I am enormous, and regardless of how bad it is for my body and mind, that I crave the toxic high I get from starvation. And that I miss being a skeleton. They understand how I miss feeling faint and I long for the feeling of invincibility I get from not eating.
- The league members, particularly Chloe, also understand that although I crave this anorexia-driven life with everything I have, that I must choose not to do all of these things every day... and just how hard this choice is to make.
- DAVID: Victoria, I am wondering if you were able to establish a trusting connection with Chloe because you first ‘knew’ each other through anti-anorexia? And would it be fair to say that if you can know a person anti-anorexically, other ways of knowing one another comes easy after that? Just speculating here...
- VICTORIA: I would hesitate to say that I ‘know’ Chloe, David. But I can say that it was through anti-anorexia that I was given the privilege of being witness to her strength and courage and her overwhelming compassion for other people.
- DAVID: Victoria, when referring to the league, do you think the metaphor of ‘family’ is more apt than the more literal term ‘family’, either by blood or design?
- VICTORIA: Personally, the metaphorical meaning of this term is the one that I chose to value. This is probably not so for many other people though.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said that perfectionism demands you must immediately become a ‘professional’ at whatever you attempt, to justify attempting it. Do you think that this argues then for cherishing the status of an amateur-to (and in-) life?
- VICTORIA: I guess an amateur is able to have more fun and make more mistakes! But I think that through anorexia’s games and perfectionism’s mazes, I would not say I live life as an amateur, but perhaps try to live it more haphazardly than perfectionism/anorexia would like. I still feel like I have a lot of knowledge behind me that I have gained on the battlefield up until now. In addition to this, I have little doubt that there will be many more confrontations to come.





- DAVID: Would you say that perfectionism has you live your life from a distance? As if your life didn't belong to you but is the property of someone else?
- VICTORIA: Yes, this is the case for me. However, I do get to 'live' all of the hard stuff like pain, tears, grief, despair, depression, etc – but most of the fun stuff is watched from a distance. Perfectionism tells me that I am deserving of the hard stuff, but not of the fun stuff, therefore I cannot enjoy it.
- DAVID: Thinking back to your experience of hearing the Tibetan bowl 'sing', Victoria, how significant do you think it was for the exercise of your creativity that the sound of the singing bowl captivated you? In saying you were captivated, this implies to me that perfection was no longer capturing of you?
- VICTORIA: I think it was that the sound was so pure that it was able to touch my heart and soul before perfectionism had a chance to stop it. This may have been because I did not approach this workshop with a lot of enthusiasm. I have always struggled with forced creativity'. Because of this, perfectionism was already so confident that I would hate this workshop, regardless of what took place during the day, that it let it's guard down just long enough for my spirit to be awakened.
- DAVID: How is this aesthetic experience linked to the aesthetic experience you had on the pier overlooking the lake so long ago? (Reference to an earlier conversation).
- VICTORIA: On the lake, I think my spirit was moved so deeply by the beauty and the peacefulness of what surrounded me that perfectionism never got a look in. But also, I was truly exhausted and under threat of hospital admission upon my return to my hometown that I also felt like I didn't have much left. It may have been having access to this sense of desperation that allowed the experience to speak to my spirit – this may have been the last time I would have been able to sit on the jetty for a long time – forever if anorexia had its way.
- DAVID: Would you say that these were 'epiphanies' whereby you 'touched' the sublime and the sublime touched you? Victoria, does this suggest to you how the 'creative' opposes the 'rigidity(ies) of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I would say that beauty and purity definitely oppose the rigidities of perfectionism for me. And the awesome-ness of mother earth. If these come under the umbrella of 'creative', then yes, I agree.
- DAVID: Victoria, I am still very interested in how perfectionism was 'silenced' as you listened to the Tibetan bowl. How did you speak back to perfection when you





- were captivated by the song of the bowl?
- VICTORIA: Actually David, the sound was so pure and wonderful that I didn't have to speak back to perfectionism. It was kind of like perfectionism was on a cigarette break and the bowl started singing and was able to wrap my heart and spirit in a blanket of warm light. When perfectionism returned from its break, it was furious, but it was too late – I had already been warmed by the song.
- DAVID: Victoria, you wondered... "If the degree to which I am interested/curious about a topic influences how much room perfectionism has to slip into my experiencing of it." Are you saying the more you are engaged spiritually, this acts like an antidote to the poison of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I was saying this. But I would choose the word 'buffer', rather than 'antidote'. I say this because an antidote is necessary when someone is already infected or ill. When my spirit is engaged, like at this time, perfectionism was not able to poison my experience of the Tibetan bowl— perhaps due to the buffer.
- DAVID: Victoria, when talking about this experience, you mentioned how this acting outside of perfectionism "strengthened longing for a life without its crippling input" and that yoga also often has this effect on you.
- I have heard this said about yoga, time and time again by anti-anorexic women but do not think I have ever 'put it together'. Victoria, what is there about yoga and its classes that are antidotal to the poison of perfectionism?
- VICTORIA: I haven't really thought about this in the past. But off the top of my head: it may have something to do with the gentle way in which yoga allows me to treat my body. The conversations around building strength so my body will serve me for a long time and so I will be healthy, also help. And the way this form of exercise feels so good – I have never found anything that my body enjoys as much as stretching. I also love the complicated balance moves and poses that are involved. These moves/positions allow me to feel some sort of pride around the flexibility/strength of my body, a feeling I rarely get. Most of the other exercise I engage in is hard, fast and sometimes painful. Yoga can be exhausting, but it is gentle and respectful. I really enjoy the music and the mediation that is involved in yoga too – I find both of these extremely calming.
- DAVID: Victoria, would you say you are finding as time goes by and no matter how demanding it is of you, that when you detect perfectionism/anorexia's presence, you are beginning to make your protests known to them? If so, I am sure we would like to hear about each and every occasion. Isn't that how we will 'build'





VICTORIA: an anti-perfection 'life style'?
David, I think that as anti-anorexia is a very individual thing, an anti-perfection lifestyle is also. I fear that if I was to try and convey/describe an anti-perfectionist lifestyle, perfectionism would snatch it up and use it to torment others for not being 'perfect' anti-perfectionists and following this recipe to a 'T'. So my response to this is... freestyle it up girls!

DAVID: Victoria, you talked about being able to recognise perfectionism's voice more easily in your life. How would you describe to a younger woman seeking your counsel, how can you tell perfectionism's voice from yours? What would you suggest she look out for? By what means would you suggest she discern one from the other?

VICTORIA: A very quick response to this: any phrases that start with "what a loser...", "you can't even..." and almost all other comparative sentences will be the voice of perfectionism speaking.

Other than that, anything that is derogatory seems, for me, to be rooted in perfectionism (and its good pal anorexia).

Chapter 9: A more apt expression

Chloe returns to the dialogue, the team wrestles with important ideas on how experience of co-research and group therapy differ, Victoria gives voice to epiphanies while watching the water

CHLOE: Dear Victoria and David,

I'm not feeling like I have much to say at the moment, but just wanted to chime in to let you know that I'm following this conversation with great interest even if I have yet to jump on in and join it. I'm not sure what is going on that is preventing me from having anything to say, but please know that as soon as I find the words I will join you in discussion.

Sorry,
Chloe

VICTORIA: Chloe, you never need to apologise for not feeling able to contribute to any conversations that involve me. You already are contributing because I can feel you standing beside me. I wanted also to congratulate you for giving voice to the difficulty you are feeling around joining in, even if you can't quite put your finger on exactly what this is.





This is a powerful anti-anorexic skill – not letting it convince you that you have nothing to say. Sending all my strength.

DAVID: Victoria, is it important that you can come and go from our conversations as both of you wish and your circumstances dictate?

VICTORIA: Absolutely. This allows me to participate as much as I am comfortable with and to the extent to which I am able at any point in my life. This really works for me. As I have started to gain more of a 'life', I appreciate the freedom I have with this kind of conversing in terms of when I contribute, along with the opportunity to still be as involved as I wish to be.

CHLOE: My experiences with therapeutic groups have been similar to Victoria's. This form of 'virtual community' has definitely provided me with more of a sense of 'safety' than any of compulsory therapy groups I have ever attended (and believe me, I've been to a lot of them and I was always the sullen one, head down with my hair over my face and curled up in the corner!). The virtual nature of this community has given me the opportunity to tentatively experiment with allowing myself to speak in ways that I would never have been able to face-to-face. Another great thing about a virtual community is that you aren't put 'on the spot' or forced to be a part of it if you aren't feeling up to it, as is the case with therapy groups.

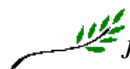
DAVID: Those times in our conversations that you have felt challenged, were you able to bring them to our/my attention?

VICTORIA: I can honestly say that I am getting better at this. I recall a time when I could not talk with you at all David, as I felt so challenged and disregarded – which was in fact the work of anorexia. These days I am better at exposing 'difficulties' with yourself and other contributors before they get out of hand.

Also I try not to buy into anorexia/perfectionism's degrading conclusions that it draws if I read something as challenging in a negative way. I really put in a big effort to ask what the person was meaning before I form a response, because so often anorexia has led me so far off track with its translation of the comment that it would be laughable, if not so destructive.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say that over time you are feeling less or more challenged?

VICTORIA: Over time it has become easier to trust you David and Chloe, and I can usually tell if anorexia/perfectionism is involved in a translation of what either of have





- said, as it does not fit with what I know of the speaker.
- CHLOE: I have experienced this as well. For me, as I have come to know you both, it has not so much lessened anorexia's ability to translate your words (I still find that anorexia does the first interpretation, what comes most 'naturally', and then my anti-anorexic counter-translation comes second), but rather it has enabled me to strengthen my counter-translation so that it is better able to withstand anorexia's counter-argument to my counter-translation.
- DAVID: Victoria, you said that you do not consider "our conversations as therapeutic in a formal sense". Do you consider that a good thing or a bad thing? How do you think we have steered around the ever-present hazard of co-research slipping into 'therapy'? How do we keep the distinction between the two? I am very interested in your thoughts here.
- VICTORIA: David, I think that your generous way of referring to me as a co-researcher and colleague has been part of what has helped differentiate between therapy and our conversations. I have always found you to be inquisitive and curious, but never 'preachy' – which is how a lot of therapy can be.
- I think for me too though is the material I chose to disclose in our conversations helps to keep the distinction apparent also. There are many things that I discuss in therapy that I would never discuss in this environment, and I think that this is a good thing. It is not that I don't trust you or anyone else who joins our conversations, I just know that some things are not to be shared. Also, a lot of the things I talk about in our conversations come from ideas that are shaped in therapy. Many times I have brought up a topic for conversation or linked in an issue that I have discussed at length in therapy and due to this, feel ok to bring it up in this more public arena. I guess I rarely bring up topics I am really struggling with in this co-research forum.
- CHLOE: I was very interested in reading your response here Victoria because although the differences between co-research and 'conventional therapy' have always been blatantly obvious to me, I have sometimes wondered how co-research differs from narrative therapy. Since I have never experienced narrative therapy first hand, I have often wondered what the difference is between these type of co-research conversations and narrative therapy conversations. I'd be very interested in hearing your experiences David if/how you delineate a clear distinction between the two (and more you might have to add, Victoria, given that you have experienced both narrative therapy and co-research).
- DAVID: Victoria, in relation to pro-anorexic websites and virtual communities, as odd as





it may sound to you knowing your opinions on these websites, is it possible to consider in some ways those sites provide something of the same kind of understanding? Although of course at the same time they sponsor anorexia? Can you bear considering this?

VICTORIA: My gut reaction to this was to grit my teeth, and with my stomach muscles going into a serious clench, shout an emphatic *NO!* I can see your point here David, but the difference I think is that anti-anorexic sites give others support, where as pro-anorexic sites are for recruitment. I will never believe that anorexia is a 'lifestyle choice' and that pro-anorexia-anything is a forum for support.

CHLOE: This is an interesting thought...I tend to think that 'pro-anorexia' sites might actually be experienced as providing a similar kind (although different in many respects) of understanding, a sense of community and solidarity, that others such as myself experience in anti-anorexia and the league.

DAVID: Victoria, you talked of being an amateur at something as allowing you to "have more fun and make more mistakes". If that is so, should we consider ourselves amateurs rather than professionals and revel in that decision? When both you and Chloe become 'professionals' after your university studies, will you make it your business to do so as 'amateurs'?

VICTORIA: If I make it that far! I do hope to venture out into the therapeutic world as a learner and not as 'one who has learnt', and I guess that this could be referred to as taking the position of an amateur, rather than a professional. I know that I will never claim to be an expert on anything, that is for sure. I see our conversations as maybe exploring uncharted territory and because this territory is new, we then must be amateurs. But this is ok too. At least we are creating a path for others to follow, and this is more than ok with me.

DAVID: Victoria, you mentioned the sound of the Tibetan bowl "touching your heart and soul before perfectionism had a chance to stop it". Would you say that this is the essence of anti-anorexia – having your heart and soul touched? By the same token, does that imply anorexia/perfectionism are heart-less and soul-less? Does anti-anorexia implicate the 'awakening of one's spirit'?

VICTORIA: Yes, I do feel this way. If my spirit is 'awakened', I feel so deeply that sometimes anorexia/perfectionism cannot touch these feelings – to start with anyway. Of course it may succeed in penetrating and poisoning my awakened spirit at some point later on, but at least I have experienced the joy and awesomeness of what awakened my spirit to start with.





- CHLOE: For me, anti-anorexia most definitely involves the awakening of my spirit, while anorexia involves the very opposite — the deadening, numbing or suffocating of my spirit.
- DAVID: Victoria, when you spoke of how “having access to this sense of desperation allowed the experience of sitting on the pier looking over the lake to speak to my spirit”, would you say that it was that your ‘leap of faith’ that broke the stranglehold anorexia had over your spirit?
- VICTORIA: I am not quite sure what you mean here David. My thoughts were around the fact that at that moment, maybe because I was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the place, I was able to see clearly the deathbed to which anorexia was leading me. I was not able to hold on to this clarity for too long, but having had this insight allowed me to make the decision that I needed to start fighting for my life. Before this point, I do not know if I had realised with such intensity that I needed to fight with everything I had to stop my downward spiral.
- DAVID: Victoria, during such an ‘epiphany’ (e.g. at the lake hearing the Tibetan bowl sing to you), when you review those experiences, do you have any sense of ‘going somewhere else’ e.g. taking leave of anorexia/perfection?
- VICTORIA: Only afterward might I realise that I have been somewhere other than my usual perfectionism-saturated mindset. At that moment, I am more swept up in the feeling of the experience to be able to consider this. It is as if my heart takes on the rhythm of the beating drum and my spirit sings with the Tibetan bowl. As if my stomach calms to the peacefulness of the lake and my mind clears to be able to experience the stillness of sitting on the end of the jetty.
- CHLOE: I just wanted to add that I found what you wrote – of only realising that you have “been somewhere else” until after the experience is gone – very interesting as it resonated with my own experiences. For example, sometimes when I am reading a book I become so absorbed in the story that I am transported from my usual awareness of myself (which is dominated by anorexia and perfection) into the storyline.
- However, I only ever notice that this has happened afterwards when something causes me to revert back to my normal awareness. As anorexia/perfection invade my thoughts once more it is then that I realise I have been ‘gone’ for a while. The same thing happens in other situations where, on rare occasions, I am transported somewhere else.





VICTORIA: I actually had a similar ‘transportation’ experience today at the waterfalls not far from where I live. When I last discussed these falls with a friend, she told me of a pool at the top of the falls that can be swum in, so today I went on an adventure to find it. I took a very steep track that involved a lot of climbing (which I really enjoyed) and ended up at the foot of a beautiful, very deep pool that ended on the lip of the big falls. I really, really wanted to swim there, but was with someone else. As this person was not a confident climber, I went back to get her and we swum further up.

However, I felt very drawn to this pool so decided to climb down a bit further from the pool in which we swum, to see if I could catch sight of the pool I first saw from the top. I managed to sit right next to the water as it was tumbling over the falls, watch it drop into this pool I wanted to swim in. I felt such a connection to the water and relished closing my eyes and hearing the roar of the water and feeling the spray on my face.

When I think about it now, it was a very powerful experience for me – even more than I realised when I was sitting there. The reason for this is that some unexpected/unwanted changes are taking place in my life, but on the edge of the waterfall I was able to let all of that stress go and fully take part in the feeling of this moment.

CHLOE: I always relish your descriptions Victoria. They capture for me so much of the kind of spiritual awakening I have felt at times when I am surrounded by the natural world, but find so hard to put into words.

DAVID: If during these experiences you had some sense of ‘taking leave of perfectionism’, can you consider who and what your epiphany-Victoria becomes? Admittedly hard questions...just respond if they now resonate with your epiphany-experiences in some way or other?

VICTORIA: I don’t really know if I have an answer to this. Maybe that I am able to get more in touch with ‘Victoria’, rather than ‘perfectionist-Victoria’ that I usually live as.

DAVID: Victoria, when you responded to my suggestion of the purity of the sound of the Tibetan bowl acting as a kind of antidote to perfectionism, you spoke of it instead being more like a buffer. Is buffer a more apt expression than antidote? If so, can you help me understand why that is so for you?

VICTORIA: I used ‘buffer’ because to require an antidote, I had to already have been



poisoned by perfectionism. This was not so in this case. I was able to experience the song of the bowl without perfectionism's negative input, due to the power of the sound and how it immediately spoke to my spirit. Because of its purity, I believe it managed to speak directly to my spirit, that perfectionism did not even have an opportunity to try and poison my hearing if it.

CHLOE: I just wanted to say that I found your distinction here between a 'buffer' and 'antidote' very powerful and thought provoking Victoria. It was something I had never thought about before.

DAVID: Victoria, would you say in general that yoga inspires anti-anorexic/perfectionistic practices of the mind-in-the-body and the body-in-the-mind? Does that have anything to do with the fact that yoga does not split the mind and body into two and pit one against the other?

VICTORIA: This is an interesting point David. Upon brief reflection, it may have to do with the Buddhist traditions from where it is partly rooted. This lifestyle is one of such respect of all living things, including one's own mind and body. To me, this is very anti-perfectionist.

DAVID: Victoria am I seeing things... Did you write that your body enjoys yoga (takes pleasure in yoga)?

VICTORIA: I did write this! I feel so alive and so strong and healthy when I am taking regular yoga classes. One day I hope to take them again.

DAVID: Victoria, in our last email, you listed a number of phrases that perfectionism seems to use when tormenting its victims. Do you think it would be useful to catalogue a glossary of perfection practices, all the better to smell them out?

VICTORIA: I don't think all the time in the world would be long enough to do this David. I also think that perfectionism tailors itself to each individual's fears and past experiences. Because of this, I do not know if such a list would be that useful. Chloe might disagree, but this is what I thought when I first read this question.

CHLOE: I feel much the same way. Somehow lists always seem to have an association with anorexia to me, but perhaps when you speak of a glossary David, you are meaning something quite different? I agree that any list/glossary would be very difficult to compile for the same reasons Victoria outlined. However, then I recall how helpful Victoria found what Piper (Jane) had compiled about her anti-anorexic acts in 'living an anti-anorexic lifestyle', so perhaps lists of sorts can be





useful after all?

Chapter 10: A come and go ethic of participation

David writes Chloe a letter on the distinctions he sees between co-research and narrative conversations

DAVID: Dear Chloe,

I wanted to respond to a wondering you proposed in your last e-mail. You said: “I have often wondered what the difference is between these types of ‘co-research conversations’ and narrative ‘therapeutic conversations’. I’d be very interested in hearing your experiences David if/how you delineate a clear distinction between the two...”

Chloe, in some ways, there might not appear much of a difference, however, I suspect there is and Victoria confirms that. It seems to me the distinction lies in the ‘scope’ of the conversation rather than the conversation itself. As Victoria points out, there are some inherent limits to a ‘co-research conversation’ compared to a ‘therapeutic conversation’ which in no ways operates under such limitations. Another way of putting it would be that a co-researching conversation is so much more focused and its intended outcome has to do with the construction of ‘insider knowledges’. Now I would like to think that such ‘knowledges’ are anti-problematic.

In addition, as a co-researcher I do not assume the same ethical responsibilities that a therapist assumes in a contract. Co-research has a ‘come and go’ ethic of participation, something which you have suggested has particular merit. However, in saying all this, I suspect our conversation has blurred the boundaries between the two and we have had to be on ‘our toes’ to keep it separate.

I think we all took risks here but goodness knows, your life was worth any sort of risk and I would do the same thing without a moment’s thought.

Yours anti-anorexically,
David

Chapter 11: Stepping outside of it

Victoria shares her tool for counter-translating perfectionism, anti-anorexia is cast as spiritual awakening, and the conversation comes to a close (for the time being)

DAVID: Victoria, you said: “Over time it has become easier to trust you and Chloe and I can usually tell if anorexia/perfectionism is involved in a translation of



what either of you have said, as it does not fit with what I know of the speaker.” What would you say substantiates your counter-translation over anorexia’s translation of what I/Chloe might say?

VICTORIA: The most obvious way that I can tell if anorexia/perfectionism has translated comments made by yourself and/or Chloe is that they are really negative and nasty. When I read comments such as these in the way that anorexia/perfectionism wants me to, I try to make myself stop and think “would David or Chloe really say something like this about me? Does this comment fit with what I know of either of these two people?” And I often think “maybe but I am not 100% sure”, so I use a tool that has helped me a lot over the past couple of years – verification.

I can recall many times when I have asked you David if your intended message was the one I got. At this point, I always struggle with “well, what if you/Chloe are not being honest with me?”, but it does not take long for me to remember all of the times when you both have been of such immense support to me. I usually then am able to take your reassurances to be true.

DAVID: For example, what do you need to know about a speaker to ensure that anorexia cannot translate them and their intentions, purposes, motives, etc?

VICTORIA: The main thing for me is that I trust them. Since trust is not an easy area for me, it usually takes a bit of time. During this time, the person will have shown that they are trustworthy and I will know a bit about who they are. This is quite important, as I really need to know about a person’s beliefs and values and how they work with other people in terms of relationships, before I feel confident enough to question their comments or conversations. Prior to this, unfortunately anorexia/perfectionism have free reign. Perhaps this may shed some light on why I do not have that many friends – anorexia/perfectionism tries its hardest to kill any signs of friendship before they have even begun to grow.

DAVID: Victoria, you made the comment: “...I just know that some things are not to be shared.” I suspect you have said a great deal in the few words in the above. Do you mind if I try to ‘unpack’ this conclusion you have reached? Firstly, what things do you know are not to be shared?

VICTORIA: David, if I answered this question, I would be sharing the things I am choosing not to!

DAVID: How do you think you learned what to share and what not to share?



VICTORIA: It centres around safety for me. If I do not feel safe with any topics, then I do not enter into any conversations around them. This is a practice that I undertake in the outside world also. If I know that I could be terribly upset, angry or unsettled by a topic that arises or that I feel really, really strongly about something to the point where I do not know if I could be respectful of opinions that differ from mine, then I do not share them. There are many things I do not share in therapy either and this is my choice. I know that I have the right to make these choices and regularly exercise it. I firmly believe that what is in my mind and in my memories can be shared if I chose to do so. Under no circumstances will I be forced to share them regardless of the consequences of not doing so. I am very protective of my mind and my spirit, because few other people in this world are.

Basically if I am in doubt about sharing something, then I will remain silent about it. (I am aware that black and white thinking may be around here, but I am also conscious that I do not have to bare my soul in any circumstances just because of this.)

DAVID: Victoria, you spoke of your spirit being awakened when you feel something deeply. Would you say that anti-anorexia (or an anti-anorexic life style) is, in essence, 'the awakening' of one's spirit? Is it a kind of turning away from the material world?

VICTORIA: For me it is like being so touched by something that I am almost carried away by it. I can lose touch with everything else in my life for a while and truly feel the experience as it is happening – for example, hearing the Tibetan bowl, or sitting on the edge of (or under) a waterfall.

DAVID: Victoria, can you think of any more experiences that have awakened your spirit so we can start musing over what is common to them? Or perhaps 'uncommon' to them?

VICTORIA: Another experience that comes to mind is when I was with wild dolphins in the Bay of Islands. I was so captivated by these amazing creatures that I had to hold on with all of my might to stop myself from jumping right out of the boat and joining them!

DAVID: Victoria, what do you think this experience at the waterfall – of being able to forget all that was happening in your life and "fully take part in the feeling of this moment" – foretells? What is all this symbolic of in the life you are leading and are about to lead in the near future?





VICTORIA: I had not thought about this, but I guess it could reflect how I am learning not to get so overwhelmed by difficult parts of my life. It also makes me think of how experiencing the raw and awesome beauty that can be found in the bush and at the beach is kind of like a natural drug for me. After an amazing experience like swimming at the falls or climbing cliff faces in the bush, I often feel so much stronger than beforehand. It is interesting actually how many of these experiences that touch my spirit are undertaken when I am alone. It makes me wonder about some kind of resilience within people that may be triggered by 'going bush', as they say.

DAVID: Victoria, again would you say that anorexia is 'materialist' and anti-spiritual? For example, it tries to reduce the marvelousness of the body to calories and body fat % ? It tries to reduce 'embodiment' to looking at yourself in a mirror and on a weigh scale?

VICTORIA: I would say this. I would also say that it ties very nicely into our materialist world – everything is reduced to success or failure. This is not a lifestyle I am interested in, and hopefully will not be ensnared by in the future. I am still surprised at the number of people who do not yet dream of stepping outside of it.

End note

This conversation drew to a close here due to other commitments from all parties. However, it does not signal the end of our thinking about and challenging of perfectionism.

Instead, it is a record of our findings up until now.



A forward and backward look on co-research by Victoria Marsden

Dear David,

Thank you for sending me the documents of the co-research that Chloe, Lona, you and I engaged in around 2003. I have chosen to write to you about this in letter form as this is how our conversations went over that time. Some fourteen years later, this conversation definitely feels like a lifetime ago. In some ways it was, as I now live a very different life. My life is now my own, that is, my life is no longer controlled by anorexia, perfectionism or any of its other co-conspirators.

I often marvel at the impact the conversations that you, Chloe and I had on the shaping of a life outside of what anorexia had in store for me. When I think of what was most significant during that period of my life when I was wrestling with anorexia for my very soul.

‘The three musketeers’ as we called ourselves, holding anorexia’s demands up to the light on a daily basis was definitely one of the most important. Although I am now astounded at how I managed to go about my daily life under such scrutiny from anorexia/perfectionism, I remember how much I looked forward to the sound that an email had arrived from you and Chloe.

The hours we spent ‘talking’ were some of the most profoundly shaping experiences of my life to date. Chloe and I were “the canaries in the mine” (Gremilion, 2003), living out the obsession our society has on weight and appearance. We had been ensnared by the most evil of nets, that of anorexia, and we were fighting side by side against it.

I was struck by the tentativeness at the very beginning of this conversation. Chloe, Lona and I, all educated and knowledgeable young women struggled to speak into this space that you were opening up David. I can hear the fear of anorexia and perfectionism’s retribution sitting behind our initial words. I can also see the irony in perfectionism asking us to remain silent until we could contribute to this conversation perfectly.

Something that stood out for me though is how quickly we found our voices at the thought of perfectionism silencing the others. We all made use of the words ‘morally outraged’ at various points and experienced strength and courage when sharing in others standing up to perfectionism and refusing to remain silent. We also spoke of ‘fury’, ‘anger’ and ‘outrage’ at how anorexia and perfectionism were treating each of us. You called this “the secret weapon of narrative therapy” David and I think you were onto something important here.





Bearing witness (Weingarten, 2000) to the atrocities that anorexia subjected Chloe to over the five years that we talked offended me in such a way that I felt I had no moral choice other than to stand up for her. It was my standing up for *her*, and Chloe and Lona in turn taking a stand against anorexia and perfectionism for *me*, that eventually it gave me the courage to start to do so for myself. This is something that I often draw on in my practice when working with the problem of anorexia. For many that I meet with, activating moral outrage against abuse and harm done to others is so much easier than activating moral outrage against the abuse and harm done to themselves. I was reminded of how feminist theory teaches us that the personal is the political (Hanisch, 1970) – that the despair anorexia brings to the lives of others is personal to me too.

I think one of the richest learnings that I have taken with me from the conversations with you, Chloe and Lona is how important it is to take a stand against anorexia (and all the other forms that disordered eating takes) in both my practice and in the world as a whole. Speaking with Chloe and others certainly taught me the depths to which anorexia would go to abuse those it was attacking and that it had and has no limits. Taking a moral stand against anorexia is something I feel comfortable doing in the therapy room and find it helps position me in a way that not-speaking this would not. It aligns me with the person I am meeting with, rather than risking any unintended and unspoken collusion with anorexia somewhere along the way.

This position is one that has taken me a long time to find as there are so many discourses out there about the therapist remaining neutral in the therapy room. And, I am happy there are those who call on counselling as a site for social justice (Kahn & Monk, 2017), because speaking this moral position feels very important. As cited in Khan and Monk (2017, p.10), Waldegrave (1990) states,

“Therapy can be a vehicle for addressing some of the injustices that occur in society. It could be argued that in choosing not to address these issues in therapy, therapists may be inadvertently replicating, maintaining, and even furthering existing injustice.”

This captures a fear I hold— that if I remain silent anorexia will convince those I am talking with that I agree with the plans it has for their lives (or deaths). Contributing in any way to the power anorexia holds over those it torments in something I want to actively resist.

David, you asked me how I might introduce my moral position to those I am working with. One way that I do this is that I often ask about what anorexia is saying to a person while we are talking. There is usually some hesitancy from people to respond to this question as anorexia is then exposed. Due to this I offer some possibilities - is it saying “Victoria doesn't know what she is talking about?”, “She is full of it, what does she know?!” or “Don’t listen to her, she is just trying to make you fat?”





I then ask for permission to speak for myself, rather than allowing anorexia to speak for me and this provides space for me to put my moral stand against anorexia into words. It also means that anorexia is not able to convince people that I agree with anything it is claiming or demanding of them. I take care not to centre myself in this conversation, and instead I speak directly to what anorexia might be telling people about them as we talk.

I am really interested in the fact that Lona and I have gone on to work as therapists. For me, I know these co-research conversations contributed the most to what I use today in the counselling room. I found that these knowledges, learnings, and ways of understanding both anorexia and the world at large quickly became a part of the way I think and breathe. It was a delight to learn about some of the theory that informs these discourses and knowledges when I began my formal counselling training. In some ways I did things backwards by living these before learning about the theories and knowledges that inform them. I found this to mean that I was positioned in what felt like quite an unusual way when I began my formal study to become a therapist, and it took me a while to realise that a lot of what I know and believe was quite different to my fellow students. Connecting with theory and formal knowledges about social constructionism, post-modernism and narrative ways of working almost felt like I had come home but in an educational setting. I had found my professional people!

Some years ago I was reminded of this in a somewhat painful way when submitting an article about hope and disordered eating to an online narrative journal. During the review process, one reviewer took offence at how I had not acknowledged the influence of the Archives of Resistance in my writing. This took me by surprise at the time as I had not gone to the Archives while writing it. The knowledges were and are such a part of the way I think that I had not thought to link them to those who have contributed to the Archives. This living and speaking anti-anorexically is so much a part of the way I view the world that I sometimes forget that this is not the way others think or view the world. When I reconsidered this matter, these thoughts and knowings were born and nurtured in the conversations Chloe, Lona and the others who joined us over those five years we shared.

Once I moved past the mortification I experienced at another professional thinking I had plagiarised the work of others, I realised that I might need to speak to how I have come to my learnings in my professional world and how I am taking these forward in my practice.

Lona and I making the choice to go on and practice as therapists also speaks to the incredibly pervasive discourse out there that if you have ever lived with disordered eating, you should not be a therapist in this field. This is something I personally disagree with as the knowings that I carry with me from my own journey position me differently in the counselling room. I do not routinely share my own experiences of anorexia with clients as I believe that doing so without careful consideration of the impact this might have on the person in therapy and on the therapy itself can shift the focus from the person in the room onto me as therapist.





However, this does not mean that there are not times when I do make this choice and as long as I am careful about how I have this conversation, I have found that making visible the shared understandings of living with anorexia adds a richness to the therapy. This can be as simple as sharing with people in counselling that I have had my own experience with anorexia. I take care to speak to how our experiences cannot and will not be the same but that I do have some understanding of how vicious and torturous living with its demands can be. I then shift the conversation back to the experiences of the person I am in counselling with. I am careful not to centre myself in this conversation as my intention is to close the space that anorexia might be creating between myself and the person I am talking with by telling them that I don't have a clue about what they are dealing with.

One of the most significant learnings for me as a person and as a therapist during this writing were the conversations David, Chloe and I had around strategic retreats and comebacks (see Chapter 13 in Maisel, Epston, & Borden, 2004). This was a powerful conversation that we shared and one that I often draw on in my conversations with people in therapy. One of the metaphors that we discussed was that of being caught in a riptide. Here in New Zealand, a country that is surrounded by water, many people have experience of the strong currents in the ocean and the danger one can get into by swimming directly against the current if you find yourself caught in a rip. Each year there are public education campaigns around what to do if you are caught in a riptide and how to identify them. The conversations you and I shared with Chloe about how directly challenging anorexia can sometimes mean you might experience a severe backlash from it as punishment. We likened this to being caught in a riptide and that, rather than fighting against the fierce current, it could sometimes be wise to allow yourself to be swept out to the back of the waves, rest to recover some energy, swim sideways and then make your way back to the shore, stopping to recharge if and when needed as you go. When comparing this to how vicious anorexia's response to a direct challenge can be, I took a lot of strength in knowing that I had the option to side-step the direct assault, rest and then make my way back to challenging anorexia when I had recharged.

Another metaphor that came out of these conversations was one based around cycling. Given your love of cycling David, this seems particularly fitting! Choosing when to slip into the wind stream created by the momentum of my 'sisters against perfectionism/anorexia' and letting them lead for a while was lifesaving at times. Resting occasionally and allowing myself to be carried along by the momentum of these women who were prepared to take the lead when one of us was flagging, created a very important community of strength for me. I wonder if taking the lead from each other from time to time also gave us permission to fall back when we needed to. The strength of this bond is captured in my reference to the "family-ness" of the League in this conversation. I still think of Chloe as someone who knew me more deeply than anyone else and I miss her a lot¹.

¹ Chloe sadly died in 2007





It is interesting to me that Chloe, Lona and I were navigating life under perfectionism's unforgiving gaze and David, you would throw in queries like "Were you even inadvertently doing imperfection?". I remember the thought of such an intentional act against perfectionism filling me with horror. I recall thinking, "David, how on earth could a person do this? How could they choose not to push themselves to achieve perfection?" However, a few days later I was doing just that with my decision to submit an obviously imperfect university paper for assessment as I had intentionally not followed instructions, thereby risk a failing grade.

Reading back over the witnessing you did and of the different ways Chloe responded to her Mum's and perfectionism's attempts to consume her around her exam marks, shows just how important celebrating those "sparkling moments"² are in the lives of those we talk with in therapy. David, your recognition of these events in our lives was so heartfelt. I am moved re-reading them today. It reminds me of the power of witnessing and I believe David that you witnessed the beginnings of the person I am today in the conversations we had.

I can also see the impact of witnessing and speaking to the effect this witnessing had on each other in our words. It speaks to the witnessing practices (White & Epston, 1989; White, 2007) I call upon in the therapy room to this day.

The other aspect that I carry with me into my work as a therapist from this writing experience with Chloe is that of 'translations and counter-translations'. To this day, I often recall the conversation that explored how anorexia and perfectionism translated every day expressions into criticisms from those around us. Recognising such anorexia translations allowed us to then critique them, undoing their effect. As an example, a friend might comment "Hi Victoria, you are looking so much better than when I last saw you!" Within a matter of seconds, anorexia had translated that to "Hi Victoria, you have put on so much weight it is quite disgusting!" Instead, we could together counter-translate that by considering what we knew of those who had spoken to us and what we assume their intentions were with the greeting. We could then come to the conclusion that it was unlikely, if not impossible, for that friend to be making any kind of comment about weight or disgust, and in fact, they were likely noticing the colour in our face, the spark in our eyes or the smile we had given upon seeing them.

Connecting this with what we knew of those who had spoken them became an important part of being in the world for me. I learnt to put in place a level of counter-translation that protected both myself and the relationship I had with the person who spoke. This is a practice I talk about with clients who are struggling with not only disordered eating but depression, despair and other such difficulties.

² A synonym Michael White used from the mid 90s for unique outcomes





I am often amazed at how gracious you were David to continue talking with Chloe and I for such a long time. Teasing these ideas out with people who understood what it was like to live suffering the torment of anorexia and perfectionism meant we could short-cut the explanations that would have been needed had we been talking with someone who did not. I marvel David at the respectful, curious enquiry that you took up with us over these years. I never felt like we had to do much explaining to you about what it was like to live with anorexia. Your questions always opened up space for our voices to be heard, and this is sorely lacking in a life ruled by anorexia. I feel like these conversations were the ground upon which my identity grew. They provided a place where my thoughts and ideas were valued and I was seen as separate to the anorexia and perfectionism that took up my days and nights.

I truly wonder if I would be alive today if we did not talk so deeply, so often and so openly. It is with great sadness to me that Chloe is not around to share in life after anorexia. We spoke of sitting together in our grandmotherly years on a veranda in our rocking chairs, wrapped up warm and sharing stories of our lives as the sun set over the jetty. Instead I continue to think of her in the colours of the setting sun.

Yours against anorexia,
Victoria

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