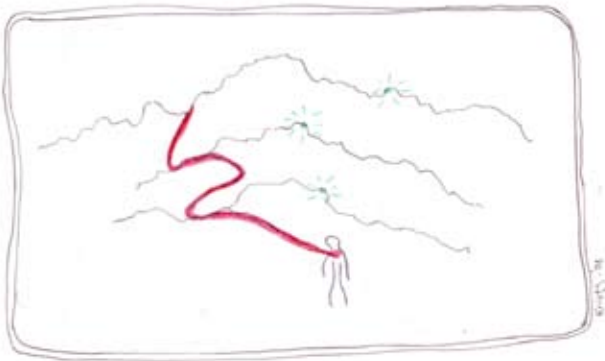


On Narrative Therapy

Re-writing the stories of our lives

There are many ways we can try to make better sense of our lives and one method in particular, Narrative Therapy, offers many useful benefits. Kristy Schubert explains ...

HERE's a bit of a picture to explain some of the ideas in Narrative Therapy. I'll tell you what all the bits in the picture mean.



Those mountains, they're all the things that have happened in your life, from way back in the past until right now, this very minute. They're everything that's happened to you and everything that you've made happen. Those mountains represent all of your life—*all of it!*—from the parts you remember well to the parts you have forgotten ...

The thick line represents the path you make through all your memories to explain how you came to be who you are, doing the things you do now, feeling the way you do about it all. While our explanations about our lives are usually more complex than a single line, this is trying to show that we can only ever pick some events in our lives: only some of the things that have happened to us and some of the things we've made happen, not *all* of them. It's not possible for any single story to capture *everything* that happened in our lives or give every possible explanation for why or how things came to be.

Developing our story ...

So we choose *some* events in our lives, and tell stories that give an explanation of how they link together. We choose these events and construct our explanation based on what we've learned about life from those around us.

“There is always a social and relational history to what a person gives value to,” says Michael White, a Narrative Therapy practitioner and theorist who works at Adelaide's Dulwich Centre. And it's true. We pick up a lot of important stuff from the people around us, like—for example—what a meaningful purpose for life might be, how effective we are in making a

difference in the world, what are perceived as valid ways of justifying our actions and—significantly—what it takes to be worthy of love.

As we filter our life's events through these learnings, we 'internalize' those values: we put them inside ourselves and we form an idea about how valuable or meaningful we are in relation to them.

Then we tread back and forth over this path: we repeat it to others, others repeat it to us and we repeat it to ourselves. And so this becomes the story of our life. It becomes the plot from which we make the predictions about where it's possible for us to go from here. It becomes the basis on which strong themes about ourselves arise.

Feeling saturated ...

There's one more part in the picture, but I'm going to wait before I explain what it means. First, we have to talk about what Narrative Therapy sometimes calls a 'problem saturated identity' (which is one of those sad and heavy abstract terms that people sometimes create when they want to be able to quickly refer to a complex, human state of being).

Take a look at the person in the picture, the one everyone's pointing at. How do you think they're treating him? How do you think he's going to be treating himself?



“When we feel like our identity is the same as the problem—like, for example, “I am a depressed person,” or “I am an abused person”—then how do we take action against that problem? We're left with fairly self-destructive options. And we'll probably experience a lot of negative feelings about ourselves, like disappointment, judgment, anger or even hate.” (White, 2006, a training session)

That picture is trying to show what it feels like when your decisions about life, the relationships in your life, your feelings, thoughts—all of it—seem to be taken over by a problem or, to use terms from Helen Glover's *Recovery-based Practice*, the 'Me' has been taken over by the 'It'.

When this happens, life feels 'saturated' by the problem. 'People often feel like the problem has no borders,' explained Michael White. 'It's as if the problem has permeated everything and has a totality in the person's existence.' In this state, a person often loses contact with their sense of their *own* space in the world. And that heavily-trodden pathway through the mountains seems to reinforce how inevitable the situation is and how unlikely it is that it will change.

A new way of relating ...

In this state, we need a new relationship to whatever it is that seems to have taken over our lives. To work on creating this new relationship, Narrative Therapists do a process called *externalising*, and this little strip of pictures tries to show what is meant by that:



See how the person changes their position in relation to the problem? It's a position of asking questions about the problem. And when we question things, we are acknowledging that we also have rights. Questioning can be a way to create shifts in power balances or prize off the fingers of a suffocating grip of control.

By asking the right kinds of questions, you can give the person an opportunity to reveal their understanding of what the problem is getting up to and what they are getting up to in response to it.

Externalising

Externalisation is a process where we give the person a chance to name the 'it' for themselves; to describe it in their own words. It's an opportunity to understand how far the effects of the problem reach, but also what they don't touch. And we can learn how the person feels about these effects, explaining all the varieties of feelings they might have about this thing in their life (because we rarely feel totally one way about anything!)

The more we can allow space to acknowledge the many and varied ways we feel about something, the more chance we have of choosing a course of action that we can feel okay about, understanding that to honour some feelings, we will have to accept that we will be acting against others, so we'll be partly happy and partly sad, but that's okay). And, after exploring these things, the person has more of a chance of catching sight of what they still hope for: what still makes them feel like themselves, coming alive.

Sparkling moments

Which brings me to that last part of that mountain picture we were looking at, at the start. The part we haven't talked about yet is those little dots with sparkling edges, which are there to represent what Narrative Therapists sometimes refer to as 'sparkling moments'.

'Sparkling moments' are those little or big occasions where you acted on some deep hope or in accordance with some deep value, but—because those moments aren't in the explanations of you that have been repeated over and over—you wave your hand at them and say, 'Oh, that doesn't really

show who I am. It's just an exception.' Because they haven't been incorporated into the dominant explanation of who you are, the moments become discounted, belittled, demeaned or almost completely hidden away ...

One of the things Narrative Therapy does is spend time talking about those moments. A Narrative Therapist gradually asks the person:

- ✦ to describe what it was that happened in one of these moments
- ✦ to give a name to the initiative that was expressed in them
- ✦ to think about what hope or value that initiative might be connected to
- ✦ and, gradually, think about other times in their life when they took a similar initiative
- ✦ and remember people in their lives who recognized these initiatives or shared similar hopes (but more on this in another article one day).

For example, maybe the person did something that protected someone else from abuse. Maybe they call the initiative 'justice' or 'protection' or something else entirely. And maybe they decide that it's connected to a hope that all human life has value, including their own. Or maybe it's connected to a value of justice.

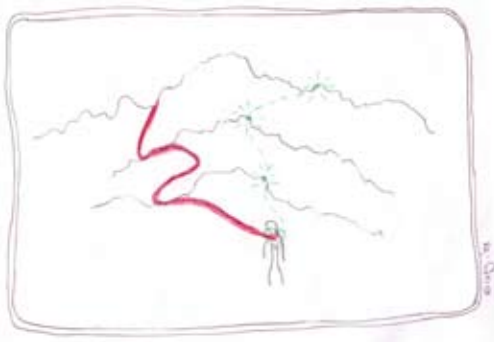
Re-writing our story ...

The point is that the person describes these moments and talks about the initiatives and their implications. Narrative Therapists sometimes call these 'Re-Authored Conversations': using information that's already there to re-write the ways in which a person can talk or think about themselves. In these conversations, we take time to allow the person to become intrigued with aspects of their own life, to discover themselves in a new light.

Michael White seems to enjoy calling this taking-of-time 'loitering with intent': I think he uses the phrase to emphasize that you can't rush this process. The person is stepping into unfamiliar ground, beginning to speak about themselves in ways that crackle with warmth within their frozen sense of self. Like recovering frost-bitten flesh, this process takes time ... gentle, curious time.

Gradually, these faltering, wavering, dismissed and diminished moments become more richly described and more strongly linked together. Through this process, we access new territory in our history and discover themes in those Sparkling Moments—our preferred initiatives and hopes—feeling how these moments have a legitimate connection to our identity and possibilities for projection into the future.

It is, after all, a cry of all our hearts: to be recognised as who we really are and what we can be.



I want to feel that I'm alive
all my living days
I will live as I desire
I want to feel that I'm alive
knowing I was good enough

I have never lost who I was
I have only left it sleeping.
Maybe I never had a choice
just the will to stay alive

All I want is to be happy
being who I am
to be strong and to be free
seeing day arise from night

I am here!
and my life is only mine
and the heaven I thought was there
I'll discover it there, somewhere

I want to feel
that I've lived my life.

lyrics translated from Swedish.
'Gabiella's Song' *As it is in Heaven*. dir.
Kay Pollack. writers. Anders Nyberg,
Ola Olsson, Carin Pollack, Kay Pollack,
Margaretha Pollack. Sonet Film. 2004

Michael White - who has been referred to in this article - is one of the founding theorists on Narrative Practice. Until recently he worked at the Dulwich Centre, an independent centre in Adelaide involved in narrative therapy, community work, training, publishing, supporting practitioners in different parts of the world and co-hosting international conferences. Michael sadly passed away in March 2008, his unexpected death mourned by many people around the world.

www.dulwichcentre.com.au

This article was written by Kristy in late 2007 during her time with MHACA

inside knowledge:

using 'externalisation' to value people with direct experiences as their own experts

by *Kristy Schubert*

'Externalising' is about taking a problem from where it feels all pervasive and synonymous with who you are to a place where its borders are defined and your sense of yourself regains some of its sense of independence from the troubles in your life.

"This process is about defining some space between the self and the problem," said Michael White in a lecture on the topic at Adelaide's Dulwich Centre.

This 'externalising process' can happen whenever we talk to a person as if they are the expert of their own problems and their own experience. It is an empowering process. But what do we mean by this?

A lot of people who have chronic painful experiences—which might be physical illness, mental illness, ongoing abuse, racism, many things—are often put in the position where they're not spoken to but spoken *about*, as if others are the expert and the person is not a keeper of any valuable understanding, even about themselves and their own lives!

Turn it around ...

So here's a basic principle we can all work by: turn it around. Create opportunities for the person to talk about their own understanding of what's going on in their lives. Let them do things like name the problem for themselves (rather than necessarily adhering to diagnostic labels) —describe the effects of it, explain all the ways they feel.

One example of a way to do this is to take a playful approach, where someone takes on the role of 'the problem' and then is interviewed.

"It's a relatively "cool" engagement," explained Michael White. "A sort of meticulous research to develop an expose that undermines the influence of the problem. The goal of this process is to explore the problem's motives, tactics, strategies and dismantle its authority, undermine its truth claims and open up some space for the person to declare their *own* agendas, hopes and aspirations."

Here are some examples of what such interview questions might be:

- ☒ How did you get here? Why did you come? How long will you stay?
- ☒ How do you operate? Who do you hang out with? What gives you a sense of achievement? How did you get influence here? How do you recruit people?
- ☒ What's your plan for people's lives? or What does your work involve? or What are you trying to achieve?
- ☒ What strategies do you use? What are your strongest qualities? Who supports you or who do you work with? or Can you explain your relationship to alcohol? or Who are your friends?
- ☒ Who or what don't you like? What are your failures? What makes you smaller or less powerful?
- ☒ What sort of things do people do to stand up to you? How to your strike back when they do? How can people reclaim their lives from you?

Narrative Therapy Workshop ...

Responding to Hardship & Trauma

by Donna Ormsby

11-12 August 2008

On the 11-12 August 2008, Danielle and I attended The Narrative Therapy Workshop "Responding to Hardship and Trauma" at The Alice Springs Desert Park. This workshop was provided by The General Practice Network NT, especially designed for counsellors, social workers, psychologists, therapists, educators and community workers. The aim of this workshop was to provide tools or 'narrative approaches to counselling and community work' for children and adults who have experienced traumatic and difficult lives.

Narrative Theory derives from The Dulwich Centre, an independent centre in Adelaide involved in narrative approaches to therapy, community work & psychosocial support.

Key points ...

Presented by three key staff from the Dulwich Centre – Cheryl White, Barbara Wingard and David Denborough – the key points of the training were:

- ◆ Key principles of narrative therapy in relation to responding to individuals who have experienced trauma.
- ◆ Collective narrative methodologies for use with groups and communities who have endured significant hardship.
- ◆ Participation in the creation of collective narrative documents, definitional ceremony and song.

Resources:

The Tree of Life: A narrative approach to respond to vulnerable children - Developed in Southern Africa by David Denborough and Ncazelo Ncube, this tool is used to enable children to speak about their lives in ways that make them stronger. It provides a forum for children to speak collectively about the difficulties they are experiencing, and to share stories

and ideas about ways of responding to these difficulties. It is now being used with children in a range of countries and also within a number of indigenous Australian communities.

What Sustains you Through

Hard Times - This book follows a 6-step narrative approach to collecting and sharing individual, family, group &/or community stories and skills for surviving traumatic and difficult times.

Here all attendees shared experiences of hard times, with an explanation of what helped them through those times. These stories were prepared on the first day of training. The second day we all came together to hear everyone's thoughts, whether it be by way of poem, drawing or song. David who had compiled a song from these stories called **Amazing Spirit** sung this to us on the second day.

The training provided people with many different ways to help and support people who lived traumatic experiences. The view was generally from a group perspective but various resources could be molded into a one on one basis.

I found this workshop very informative and would consider using an approach which could be further developed and used in the future. ✕

www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Now here's another important thing to notice: in that last question, we didn't ask, 'How can people defeat you?' but, rather, 'How can people reclaim their lives from you?' According to the workers at the Dulwich Centre, this is a vital distinction.

"We'll often hear a battle metaphor come up," said White, "but we also often hear a 'reclaiming of life' metaphor, and we can exercise responsibility about which of these are sponsored or taken up. Look especially for metaphors that won't retraumatise the person or encourage 'responding in kind' (with violence). These experiences are not something to 'vanquish'," he said. "And we find that battle or contest metaphors are problematic. They can become isolating. And they can put someone in a tenuous state, because they have the pressure of success or failure. Also, 'battle' metaphors can totalise the problem as 'bad'," he explained, "which doesn't allow recognition of some aspects and sentiments of living that might be of value to the person."

Externalising isn't about defeating the problem, contesting it, battling with it. It's about getting to know it and, importantly, getting to know the person's knowledge and experiences of it.

"Through this process, the person can generate a sense of freedom," said White, "a space in which the person's 'self' can exist outside the problem: creating space for their own identity."

This article was written by Kristy in late 2007 during her time with MHACA

