

Building agency in the face of urban tragedy: A narrative counselling case study

By *Thomas Power*



Thomas Power is an elementary school counsellor in Southern California in the USA. He can be contacted by email: tompson007@hotmail.com

Abstract

This case study documents a narrative counselling relationship with an adolescent residing in a post-juvenile hall residential facility where I worked as a life skills counsellor. The contents of his problem story included being molested, becoming homeless, having to forcibly witness his brother's rape by his step-father, and being exposed to the use and selling of drugs at an early age, the latter being what had landed him in a juvenile detention centre. 'Externalising' language was used to aid him to separate from his identification with the problem story. Next, we discussed the impact this problem story had had on the various areas of his life. I looked for contradictions within the problem story in order to facilitate a transition to a preferred story. His passing of the GED exam, his skills in using verbal abilities to avoid fighting, and his interest in art and music all became a bridge to his new 'preferred story. Though I eventually lost touch with him, he was very pleased with his new life in which he was gainfully employed and attending community college.

Keywords: narrative therapy, school counselling, juvenile hall, residential facility, identity stories, trauma

Editor's note

The language used by 'Tre' in this article is sometimes rough and borders on both profanity and verbal violence. It no doubt reflects the worlds in which he has lived. We have edited his words a little in order to be sensitive to readers' responses and in order to avoid appearing to represent such verbal violence as in any way "normalised". But we also have tried to preserve some of the flavour of Tre's language and the ways in which it is authentic to the struggles of a young man exposed to terrible violations in his own life. This is a fine balance and we apologise in advance if there is any offence created. That is not our intention in publishing this piece. We would argue that counsellors do need to be willing to walk at times alongside those who have lived life in the tough lane where all is not pretty.

This is a story of a counselling relationship formed on the principles of narrative practice (Freedman & Combs, 1996; ; White, 2007White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2007). Narrative counselling involves working with stories to effect changes. The plural of 'stories' is significant. Narrative counsellors assume that there are always multiple stories at play in the construction of a life. Not all of these stories are experienced as problematic but some may be. There are also other stories that often lay masked and hidden beneath the weight of problem stories. The task of narrative counselling is to identify openings to these stories and to grow them through careful questioning. This counselling story below serves as an illustration of how this process works. It emerged out of a practicum exercise in a school counselling class dedicated to developing skills of school counselling using the narrative metaphor (Winslade & Monk, 2007). I shall tell the story and include explanatory comments on it along the way.

'Tre' is a 17 year-old Mexican-American male who resides in a residential treatment facility which houses and schools probationary minors. It is an 'open placement', or a post-juvenile hall facility that allows clients more freedom than juvenile hall, but less freedom than 'normal', 'free' adolescents.

I first met Tre about five months ago, when I was thrust into the role of being one of his Life Skills Counsellors. Because I work on the overnight shift, I rarely had a chance to interact with Tre except in the mornings when it was time to wake him for school. However, he stayed up late one night and was complaining that he would '... never pass (his) vocabulary test' that he had the next morning. I studied with him for twenty minutes and found him to be a very bright, sensitive, and artistic young man who was struggling with the reality of being on probation and of being offered few prospects for a positive life in the future. I gave Tre a few 'tricks' on how to memorise the vocabulary list by using his artistic, visual memory, and vowed to work with him further in the near future.

When I received the assignment in graduate school to 'mentor' a student, I saw my opportunity to create more time to spend with Tre. I asked him if he was interested in receiving personal tutoring in school, and he was happy for the opportunity. However, after our first meeting, Tre let me know that he had more pressing problems he wanted to discuss, so he and I started a counselling relationship that was based more on Tre's personal difficulties than his academic troubles.

The following account retells the counselling story with Tre over five one hour sessions and outlines Tre's story, his life difficulties, as well as the process of our uncovering and creating a 'preferred' life story. Narrative counselling is built on the assumption that events in life do not automatically produce effects. Our experiences, and by extension our identity, depend on how we story life events. Many people experience being handed readymade stories about who they can be. At times, as you will see with Tre, these stories can be overwhelmingly problematic. They frequently feature totalising identity conclusions (Winslade & Monk, 2007). But life is also more complex than can be contained in any one story. Even in the most oppressive of circumstances, there are stories of resistance, of refusal to remain oppressed, of unfulfilled intentions to change, or of beauty in the midst of ugliness. Individuals harbor preferences for something else than who other people say they are. This something else is the 'preferred' story. The alternative story recorded here is built on the heretofore unacknowledged strengths that Tre has overlooked while being under the influence of the 'problem' story.

Our first session was not taped, due to logistical considerations. It included a confidentiality contract, relationship building, and exploratory questions that sought to pinpoint what Tre saw as his greatest life challenges. Also covered in this first session were the establishing of regular meeting dates (Sunday nights) and a regular meeting time (7pm).

Tre's greatest concern seemed to revolve around reconciling the influence of his past upbringing with his present condition. He told me that his negative family influences had caused him to be 'locked up' (in residential placement) until he turned eighteen, and he expressed some anxiety about his impending life direction when he became that age. He articulated a desire to graduate high school, but was currently failing many courses. When asked what he wanted out of counselling, he said, 'To find out what to do with 'mi vida loca' (my crazy life)'.

At the start of our second session, I reminded Tre that our sessions would be recorded and subsequently reviewed by my professor, and he reiterated that it did not pose a problem to him. I gently repeated to Tre that he was invited to speak of issues and concerns that he deemed acceptable for sharing, and, if at any time he did not feel comfortable, he was to let me know.

My first question revolved around the issues leading up to his current status of probation.

'I got locked up after some (woman) stabbed me in the back over some chronic (marijuana)'.

I asked him how drugs came into his life, deliberately using an externalisation for the first time. Externalising conversations involve speaking about problems as if they were third parties in the room and inviting clients to separate themselves from problem stories grammatically. In Michael White's aphorism, 'The person is not the problem: the problem is the problem' (cited in Winslade & Monk, 2007). I therefore carefully did not ascribe drug problems to his personality but spoke about them as external influences affecting him. This externalised question started an outpouring of his childhood and how his mother was involved in heavy drug use and prostitution. He recalled a time, at about five years of age, when his mother hid a 'baggie of "chronic" under (his) blankets' just before police burst into his family's apartment. He barely remembers his dad. The only thing he remembered was his parents always fighting, with his mom often being the aggressor.

He remembers 'knowing about sex' by the time he was four years old. He recalled seeing pornographic material all over the house, including in his bedroom. I asked him the effects of knowing about sex at four, and he said, 'Well, there was that 'other thing' that happened'. Tre was referring to times when he was sexually molested by his mother. He had told me of these times in an earlier conversation. He also added that he had to, '... watch his brother get raped by (his) step-dad', and how Tre had been held back by his mother when he tried to help his brother out. He recalled screaming and crying, begging for his stepfather to stop. Tre was visibly upset by this time and was crying somewhat. He also remembered always seeing 'fuck-books' all over the apartment.

He then told the story of his family being homeless when he was six years old. Along with his mother and little brother (his father had left by this time), he was living on the streets in San Diego for a couple of years. Eventually, Tre's aunt took him and his brother in to live with her. However, Tre's aunt was also very abusive to him. She would 'whip (him) with an extension cord' for punishment. It was because of the marks left by this punishing 'rod' that Tre was referred to the school counsellor/psychologist for the first time. He was removed for a while from his aunt's home and placed in a foster home, from which he ran away several times in the few years that followed this placement.

I was speechless. Coming from an abusive upbringing myself, I could have guessed some of the horrors that had brought him to this place, but I wasn't prepared to hear the depth of hurt and betrayal he had witnessed at such a young age. Nonetheless, I felt I didn't want to fully

express my shock, as I thought doing so might not allow him the dignity of sharing his feelings, thoughts and reflections on these atrocities.

Tre said that he had been in therapy as long as he could remember. His first sessions, in fact, revolved around 'play therapy' because he 'could barely speak any language', let alone English. He said he had been diagnosed with 'depression' at this early age and had 'been depressed ever since'. He said that he, 'talks a lot about (his) problems, but nothin' ever seems to get better'. Once, within this same conversation, he said, 'I guess I'm just going to be a fuck up!' In addition to his depression diagnosis, he had been diagnosed with ADHD, and some kind of ill-defined mental ailment his therapist labeled 'histrionic'.

After he shared that he had 'been depressed', as well as the above-mentioned tragic events that led to the depression, I saw an opportunity to externalise these feelings, events, and diagnosis. I asked him, 'So, you've stated what various therapists, counsellors, and teachers have called your problems, but I would be interested in what you would call them?' I was interested in inviting him into the expert role of describing these problems in his own terms.

Without hesitation he said, 'I would call it "Bullshit", man'. For the remainder of the session, Tre and I outlined (on paper) the effects of 'Bullshit'. This inquiry forms the next step in a narrative inquiry after the naming of the problem in externalising language. It involves mapping the effects of the problem (as it has been named) in various domains of living. The aim is to detail these effects as much as possible, all the while continuing to speak in externalising language and at the same time staying alert to possible gaps in the influence of the problem story.

I asked him what effects 'Bullshit' had on him, and he stated that it '... makes me want to eat too much.'

I asked him to expand on this and he said, 'No, Dawg, you've seen me and all the shit I eat. I eat cookies, cakes, ice cream, you know, anything that tastes good but makes me fat.'

I asked him, 'What are the consequences of being fat?'

He said, 'Other kids make fun of me, and that makes it harder to make friends. I try really hard to be liked; in fact I try too hard, Dawg!' He went on to explain that he thinks 'Bullshit' keeps him distant from people, and "... not trusting them, you know?' He went on, 'If I'm a "fat ass", it makes it hard for me to have any "Homies", because they "have to" make fun of me. They don't want to "chill" (associate) with no lard ass!'

I asked him if 'not trusting' and 'keeping people distant' was an effect of 'Bullshit', and he said it was. Again I was using externalising to invite him, not so much to 'own' the problem but to separate from it.

In an attempt to further map the effects of 'Bullshit' and to draw the distinction between this problem story and the upcoming preferred story, I asked, 'It would seem that "Bullshit" has some future planned for you. If you were to continue listening to "Bullshit", where would you be in ten years?' This kind of question continues to explore the effects of the problem story, but projects these effects into the future.

Again without hesitation, Tre said, 'Dead..., homeless...or "locked up" (prison)'. I asked if this was okay with him for 'Bullshit' to lead him toward these outcomes and he said, 'Hell no!' My intention in asking this seemingly obvious question was to invite him to take a position on

the problem and its effects. This practice grows out of Michael White's (2007) 'Statement of position map' for therapeutic conversations. Tre's emphatic statement of opposition to the problem story is a small first step towards changing it.

His taking a stand against the influence of 'Bullshit' also provided an ideal opening for further questioning aimed at the creation of an alternative, preferred story.

The preferred story

After Tre had taken a stand against 'Bullshit', I asked him if there was ever a time in his past where 'Bullshit' wanted him to do something but Tre had refused to listen.

He could not think of anything at first, which in itself is not surprising when a problem story has gained a level of dominance in a person's life. I reminded him of the first week he had been in this 'placement' when a peer had come rushing into his room and had 'dissed' (disrespected) his mother and nationality. I reminded him that he had approached the resident, a resident who was much smaller than himself, and had asked firmly and directly not to '... "smash" on my family. I never said anything against you or your family, so please treat me with the same respect'.

Tre did remember the incident with some humor, and said, 'Well, you know, Dawg, I can't go "postin' up" (threatening/assaulting) on no fool who don't even know what they talkin' about'.

I asked him if 'Bullshit' was telling him something at that moment, and he said 'Yeah, it was tellin' me to smash on that fool!'

I asked what made him not listen, and he said, 'I want to get out of this placement, fool! You think I want to look at this shit (his placement situation) forever?'

I told him I would imagine he would want to be free, but I also asked him, 'What was important about freedom?' At first he didn't believe I would ask such a question, but my strategy was to get him to acknowledge another side of him that wanted something other than what 'Bullshit' wanted for him. Such curiosity about apparently taken-for-granted assumptions is typical of narrative counselling. It invites the articulation of personal meanings rather than standard discourse and it assumes that, in the process of answering such questions, clients take another step into the story they are speaking about.

Tre said he wanted to be free so he, '... can become an artist. Someone who writes poetry, draws, and plays saxophone'.

I asked him what he wanted to call this preferred vision and he said, 'Serenity'. I asked whether times when he was '... drawing, writing poetry, and playing saxophone (were) the times when "Serenity" is most present?'

He said, 'Yes'.

We now had a name for the counterplot to the problem story. Such naming is often useful to organise a number of events into a meaningful story that has thematic coherence.

In order to 'grow' the preferred story of 'Serenity', I asked him to describe other times when 'Serenity' was present in his life. Again, he had difficulty recalling a moment he was in

'Serenity's presence', so I enquired about his recent passing of the GED (the General Educational Development exam in the USA is an exam that is recognised as the equivalent of a High School Diploma) on his first attempt, no less!

He resisted seeing this as any great accomplishment and minimized it, 'Dawg, that shit was easy, anybody could have passed it'.

I reminded him that, even if it were so, and clearly that was debatable, he still had made sure he had woken up early on the three days the test had been given. I also reminded him that the other residents had had those three days off from school and had been free to 'sleep in', whereas he had chosen not to indulge in that luxury.

Tre's affect seemed to brighten as he recalled this. 'Oh yeah, I did wake up, and at 5am in the morning too!'

I asked if it was fair to call that a moment of 'protest against the effects of "Bullshit" and an expression of "Serenity"?

Tre gave a resounding, 'Yes!'

It is important at moments like this for the counsellor not to give up on the fledgling alternative story when it does not appear ready to fly in the mind of the client. It pays to remember that the meanings and identities that have been established under the regime of the problem story would not easily allow Tre to make meaning of these contradictory events in line with the Serenity story.

When I pressed him further (with his permission) about the tools he utilised to pass the GED, thus attaining a moment of 'Serenity', he had trouble again.

At this point, I felt it necessary to give him some feedback on some 'missing pieces' he was leaving out of his preferred story. I said, "Tre, it's like you keep asking me how to build a shed. While you're asking me this, I'm looking behind you at this perfectly built shed that you built. Then I ask you, "How did you build the shed behind you?" and you look at it and say "Oh, Dawg! That's a just a shed I built. What I want to know is how to build a shed!" Tre had a big laugh at this one!

He looked as if he understood what I was saying, and then recalled one of the tools that helped him wake up and pass the GED. He said what had motivated him to take and pass the GED was imagining the faces of those people in his life who had told him he was a 'dumbass'. He objected to being thought of this way, and claimed that both peers and adults alike have always told him he was 'a stupid Mexican'.

I should state here that I am a middle-aged male Caucasian. As such, by virtue of my gender, ethnicity and age, I am from what can be termed the 'privileged' class here in America. Additionally, I hail from California, a state that has a history of discrimination, prejudice and both personal and institutional racism towards the Mexican people (even Mexican-Americans).

Tre's comment about being called a 'stupid Mexican', sounded like he had internalised the racism that is so widespread here in America. I also could sense his outrage at how he was positioned in society. But being keenly aware of our differences in status in relation to the dividing lines of race, I sensed I had to tread carefully here. There seemed to be an inherent risk that I could be perceived in an expert role, thus unintentionally reinforcing both of our positions. Consequently, I took a different tack.

I pointed out that it sounded like 'Bullshit' might have had some allies in trying to 'get its way with you', and reinforce 'its will', but 'Serenity' had defeated 'Bullshit' in this case (for example, by him passing the GED). Being a 'stupid Mexican' is an internalising idea that has the possibility of being adopted into many clients' identity stories. Here I was endeavouring to counteract that possibility, not with direct argument but with the use of externalising language again.

I asked Tre if there were other allies he could call on to counteract the effects of 'Bullshit', and he said, 'Some adults help'.

I asked which adults specifically had helped him.

He mentioned a former teacher who had seen his artistic potential, as well as a few other teachers and therapists who had acknowledged this talent. He also cited a teacher at the residential facility who had always listened to him and had never judged him. He recalled a story from when Tre had been planning to go AWOL and this teacher had said, "Well at least give me a hug goodbye before you go'.

Tre couldn't leave after that gesture. He said that decision had saved him '... from six months more time in the Halls (juvenile hall)'.

Tre had a way of relaying these stories of support, though, with some trepidation. He would always follow up these stories of positive influences with cynically-tinged comments such as, 'Well I would expect that of a teacher', or, 'Well that's her job', or, 'But he just felt sorry for me!'

In a moment of immediacy, I asked Tre if these minimising comments were 'Bullshit' talking to him.

He said, 'No, man. It's just that I have to test people to see if I can trust them. So even when people do nice things for me, I always think there is some other reason they're doing it than to actually help me. I always have to "watch my back", so I never make any real friends, because I won't be trusting them, you know?'

As Tre expounded on the other effects of 'watch your back' (I externalised this), he further emphasised that he always 'got burned' when he didn't listen to 'watch your back'.

I asked him if he thought 'watch your back' was protecting him or hurting him.

'Well ... both'.

I attempted a scaling question here by asking Tre how much 'watch your back' was protecting him compared to hurting him.

He said it was hurting him more (six to four ratio) and that he would prefer not to have to listen to it so much.

I asked if there had been a time when he hadn't listened to 'watch your back' and things had turned out okay.

He said, 'Yeah. Like the other week I met this "bomb ass" girl Laura, and I was "putting her on blast" (making fun of her) big time, and she wrote me a note telling me how much that hurt

her. I wrote her a note back saying something like, 'What do you expect when I have Homies (males) around, I don't want to look like a (wimp)'.

'I then wrote her another note that contained one of my poems in it and she told me that if I ever needed a shoulder to cry on, (she) would be that humble person. Man, that meant so much to me, and no-one ever said that shit to me before! That felt so good!'

Tre also came up with some other exceptions to the 'watch your back' voice.

I asked him if these examples surprised him, since they ran contrary to the 'wisdom' of 'watch your back', and he said, 'Yeah, I never really thought about it that way before, but when I do, I don't know if that "fool" ("watch your back") knows what it's talkin' about!'

We both laughed at this irony.

Our fifth and last session revolved around Tre's upcoming transitions. He was about to turn eighteen, applying to community college and, most importantly to him, getting off probation. He said that he was feeling more able now to deal with his well-earned freedoms.

I asked him what he would do when 'Bullshit' tries to advise him in the future, and he said, 'Fuck that "Bullshit", man! "Serenity" will whip his ass!'

Although I enjoyed hearing his new confidence, I reminded him that 'Bullshit' can raise 'its ugly head' again, and asked him to recall the tools that he would use to defeat it.

He said that he had his drawing, calligraphy and saxophone to help him through those hard times. He said that, 'If I can graduate "placement" and graduate high school, I can do anything!'

At my final meeting with Tre, I presented him with a certificate of GED accomplishment (more as a symbol of overcoming obstacles than an official document) and a list outlining the 'problem story' and 'preferred story'. Narrative therapy has, since Michael White's and David Epston's (1990) book, has stressed the value of documenting in writing what has been talked about in counselling conversations. Such documents are intended to prolong the life of changes through giving them the added legitimacy of being written down. Included in the document I gave Tre were the strengths, tools and strategies Tre had used to overcome the effects of 'Bullshit'. I also recorded past 'proof' when 'Serenity' 'won' when 'Bullshit' 'would have been expected to win'. In addition, I bore witness to his commitment in growing the 'Serenity' story in his life and having it defeat 'Bullshit'. Last of all, I congratulated him on successfully graduating high school and becoming, as he put it, a 'Grown-ass man'.

Postscript

After Tre was released from the residential facility, I stayed in touch with him. He stayed in an adult transitional placement group home in Pasadena, California. He was attending Pasadena City College and taking Art classes as well as a Spanish class. Shortly after being released from this placement, he moved in with his step-mother in San Diego. One night I received a call from him. 'Man, you're never going to believe this', he said excitedly. 'I got a job at a printing press where I get paid sixteen dollars an hour! I'm up for a promotion in a few weeks where I'll get another dollar twenty-five an hour!'

I was thrilled for him. I let him know how proud he must be of himself and how incredible it was that he had come so far.

The following weekend, he visited me and my wife. I had never seen him smile so much. He gave me a bear hug and had tears in his eyes. He thanked me for all the work I did with him, and I reminded him that it was he who did it. I did sense an overly optimistic 'everything-is-going-to-be-alright-now' aura emanating from him, so I thought I might have a little talk with him regarding the possibility of future let-downs. He didn't want to hear it. He told me, 'Man, I ain't going to be locked up ever again! Even if I get fired, I can always go back to college. No way am I listening to no "Bullshit"!' We both laughed, but I think mine was a little uneasy.

I know the rough road that can await a young man with a criminal record. I've seen other young 'boys-to-men' come from this very facility, get a job or go to school, only to end up doing the same fast-money scams and crimes that got them institutionalised in the first place. There's a fine line between beginning a new life free from the shackles of an oppressive institution, and internalising the hopeless oppression embodied by that institution. Tre left our home with a smile and assured me he was on a new path. All that I could do was let him go and trust he would find his way.

After not hearing from him in a couple of months, I called the San Diego number he had left with me. This is what the recorded voice on the other end said: 'We're sorry, but this number is no longer in service. Please check the number and try again'. Here's hoping that, when and if Tre stumbles, he will always try again.

Notes

1. Tre was not his real name. 'Tre' did sign a statement allowing publication of his story.

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