

# The "Tree of Life" in a Community Context

by Georgia, Jovia, Kenny, Lucy and Sandra

**Sandra:** "[...] when introduced to the Tree of Life, [...] I started looking at trees and realise, oh, the trees are going through the same hurdles as human beings, so if the trees can go through that and be able to live another day and don't fall, then even me as a human being I am able to do the same, cause we are all created by God. [...] It's like passing like wind, it will go and it won't fall. If the trees don't fall, so then why should you fall?"

## Where did the idea come from?

The "Tree of Life" workshop began as a Community Project within a community based HIV Service in London; in my practice as an HIV Counsellor at the time, I, Georgia, had come to appreciate the positive effects and the sustainability that Community Work offers to its members. Narrative therapy ideas are very much linked with Community Work and it was within this field that I came across the "Tree of Life". It was the work of Ncazelo Ncube (2006 & 2007), a child psychologist from Zimbabwe, that inspired me. Ncazelo, with the support of David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, developed the "Tree of Life" exercise in her work with children who had lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. The aim of the project was to allow these children to believe in their own abilities, acknowledge their dreams and stand on a safer place from where they could talk about their difficult experiences in ways that are not re-traumatising, feeling stronger in themselves.

David Denborough in his recent book about Collective Narrative Practices reports that the use of "the Tree of Life" as a metaphor to enable people to share stories about their lives has been a common approach within popular education. Following on he informs that the first published version of the Tree of Life that he has come across is by Sally Timmel and Anne Hope (1984), two educators who had been inspired by Paulo Freire (Denborough, 2008, p. 72).

As a counsellor, I was feeling very privileged to be in a position of witnessing my clients' life stories, and together finding ways to create stories that would be meaningful in their present and future. I never stopped thinking though that there must be ways that these people's stories could be honoured and heard by a bigger audience of people than me alone.

I realised that the "Tree of Life" project would be very beneficial to the people I was working with, adults living with HIV. I was aware that many of them had had to flee

their home country and had experienced a lot of loss and trauma in their lives; some amongst them continue to experience a lot of difficulties and marginalisation in the UK as a result of their refugee status; meanwhile, most people living with HIV struggle to deal and overcome the stigma attached to it. I started envisioning how the Tree of Life could offer its fruits to the HIV community. I started wondering how I could help people living with HIV get the chance to re author their lives by telling stories about experiences that might have been forgotten or stored quietly.

My vision was to have the "Tree of Life" workshop facilitated by people who had experienced loss and trauma themselves. And this is how the journey began; a journey that attracted more travellers on its way, who helped to make the most of the Tree of Life exercise.

## What is the "Tree of Life"?

**Kenny:** "The Tree of life is a counselling method used to assist people who are affected in life either by medical or family problems; it's a process used to calm those traumatised by effects of life."

The "Tree of Life" is an exercise based on the idea of using the tree as a metaphor to tell stories about one's life. Participants are invited to think of a tree, its roots, trunk, branches, leaves, etc, and imagine that each part of the Tree represents something about their life (Ncube, 2006). The basic idea about the Tree of Life is outlined here, while the whole workshop will be described later on.

Workshop participants are invited to draw a tree with attention paid to the following themes:

**Roots:** the roots of the tree are a prompt for participants to think about and write on their tree where they come from (village, town, country), their family history (origins, family name, ancestry, extended family), names of people who have taught them the most in life, their favourite place at home, a treasured song or dance.

**Ground:** the ground is the place for participants to write where they live now and activities they are engaged with in their daily life.

**Trunk:** the trunk of the tree is an opportunity for participants to write their skills and abilities (i.e. skills of caring, loving, kindness) and what they are good at.

**Branches:** the branches of the tree are where participants write their hopes, dreams and wishes for the directions of their life.



## The "Tree of Life" Project

The journey started when I invited a group of colleagues and clients to attend the "Tree of Life" workshop in November 2007. My idea was that my colleagues could take the Tree of Life exercise, adapt it and use it in their own practice; as for the clients, my idea was to invite them to co-facilitate a workshop for other people living with HIV. The "Tree of Life" workshop has four parts:

- Part 1: The Tree of Life
- Part 2: The Forest of Life
- Part 3: The Storms of Life
- Part 4: Certificates and Songs

### Part 1: The Tree of Life

All participants were given a piece of paper and coloured pens and were invited to draw a tree. The different parts of the tree would represent something about their lives as described above. Everyone got very engaged with their activity. After completing their drawings, I asked participants to pair up and describe their trees to each other. Having offered an opportunity for everyone to tell the story of their tree, I asked for a volunteer to stand up and tell the story of their Tree to the whole group. Finally, the participants were given time to reflect on their experience of telling their "Tree of Life" story to another person. The aim of this part was to build and acknowledge "a second story" about each person's life; this second story consisted of the skills, abilities, hopes and dreams of each person and the histories of these (Ncube, 2006).

**A participant said:** "I've been able to draw a real picture of my life from the roots to my hopes and dreams and really appreciate things and I am very grateful of who is the real me."

**Another participant:** "[...] I do not think we always realise and appreciate the strengths and qualities that we have and can pass on. I do not think we always realise how much our actions can affect other people's lives."

**Jovia:** "[...] it was so difficult for me at first to put anything down on the paper, as I didn't find anything significant in my life that I wanted to share with the people. And, I think, in my life I have always wanted to bury the past and not think about it because it opens up the bad memories that I have had. But when people started to share their stories I realised that in my past and in my upbringing I have been privileged to have the people that have influenced me and strengthened my roots.

The Tree of Life made me aware of the strength of my roots and helped me recognise the people that have made me the person that I am now. It brought appreciation to my family and all the people that have encouraged me to hold on to my hopes and dreams, and made me realise that I am special and unique. It made me happy because I had a chance to remember the good times and memories I had in the past, especially in my school days, all the songs and my school friends, and to celebrate the things in my life and look back and appreciate life.

In the process, I began to recognise my skills and gifts, things that make me special such as being a good listener, "problem solver", kind and always putting other people before me.

It has given me the passion to achieve my dreams."

**Kenny:** "The Tree of Life is a reminder of one's stages of growing up: people who help one to mould one's life path, those late [no longer with us], alive, professionals, medical staff, social workers, friends; fulfilled ambitions and those to be achieved in future; methods of achieving them."

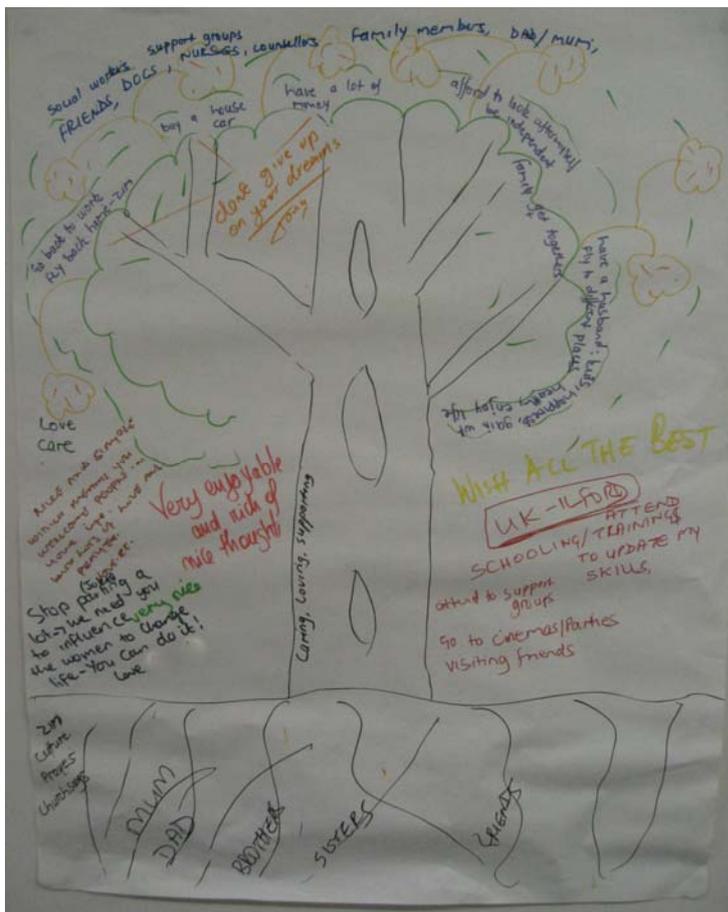


Photo 2: A Tree of Life

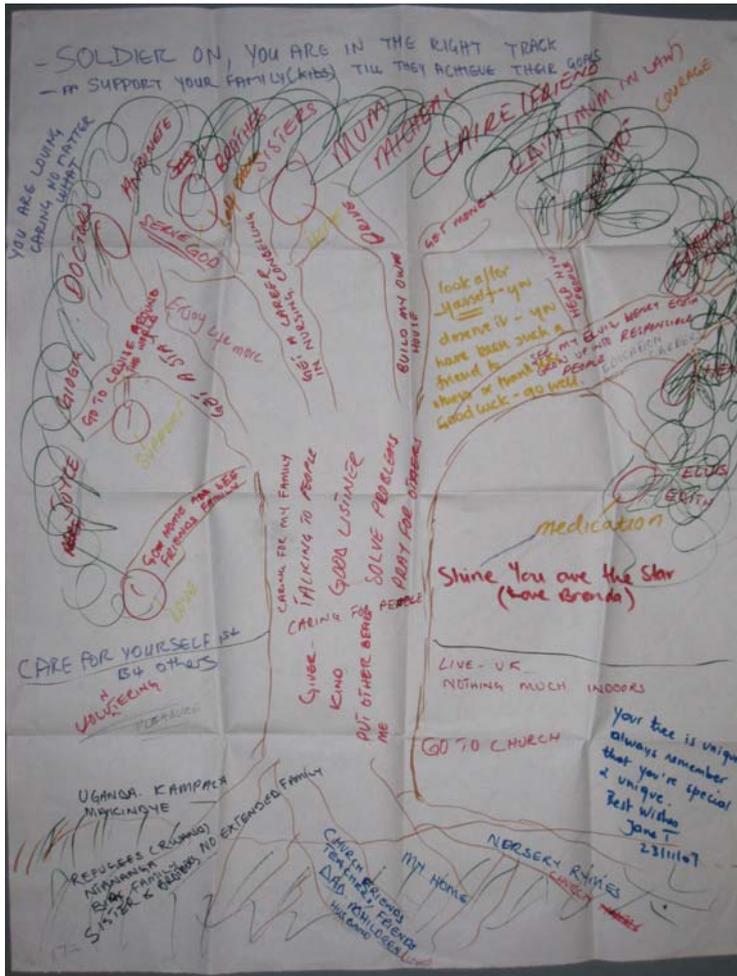


Photo 3: The Tree of Life

## PART 2: The Forest of Life

At the second part, I invited the participants to stick their tree on the wall so as to create a forest of beautiful trees: the "Forest of Life"! I then instructed them to choose one or more trees different from their own and to write words of encouragement, support and appreciation. There was a sense of vigorous activity going on in the room, while participants were moving from one tree to the other reading each other's trees and writing what they were appreciating about each other (see photos 4 & 5). This part ended with all participants going back to their own tree and reading other people's responses to their stories. I strongly remember the feeling I got looking at the participants reading the comments on their own trees: it was the feeling of quiet admiration you get when looking at an exquisite work of art in a museum (see photo 6). Participants were given some time to reflect on their experience and it was not surprising to hear how much it meant to all to have their stories of life acknowledged and honoured by others.



Photo 4: The Forest of Life - participants writing words of appreciation on each other's tree



Photo 5: The Forest of Life - participants writing words of appreciation on each other's tree

Words that participants used to describe how they experienced this part were: "encouraging", "humbling", "blessed", "brings confidence and self-esteem", "makes you happy", "honouring life", "made me feel unique and special", "very inspiring", "commonness", "connection: all different, but all trees!", "You are in a race, but you are not alone".

This part bears similarities to Michael White's (2007) use of outsider witnesses in his therapeutic work. Outsider witnesses can be lay people or professionals who listen as an audience - witness - the "telling" of a person's or people's story. After the story has been told, the outsider witnesses are invited to "re-tell" this person's story by talking about what they heard that they were most drawn to, what caught their attention or what captured their imagination. This process can be compared with the invitation to the "Tree of Life" participants to write on each other's trees words of appreciation and encouragement. Of course, the outsider witness practice entails more: the most important is that the therapist holds the responsibility of interviewing each outsider witness about the following: the expressions they were drawn to, the images that came to their minds as they listened, how these expressions resonated with them and how they have been moved as a result of being present to witness these stories (White, 2007).

### **PART 3: The Storms of Life**

Having created a different place for participants to stand, a place of strength, ability and hope, the exercise then invites people to talk about some of the difficulties and challenges they may be experiencing in life.

Using the tree metaphor again, I asked participants the following question: "As beautiful as trees and forests might be, are they free from dangers and hazards?" The apparent answer was "No"! And I continued by inviting the participants to think of the hazards of their lives, to acknowledge how these hazards affect them and how they have been able to respond so far. People came up with numerous life challenges, talked insightfully about their effects and came up with equally numerous ways of successfully responding to these challenges, while I was documenting a wealth of ideas on a flipchart paper.

The aim of this part is to talk about difficulties in ways that are not re-traumatising. What is unique about this way of talking about "Storms of Life" is that it is a collective experience that makes it easier for people to talk freely about negative stories by creating a sense of distance between the person's experience and the problem. Simultaneously, it unpacks people's knowledge & abilities about how they have already

responded and treats people as experts in life, not as victims of life. It offers participants a sense of hope.

**A participant** talking about what she learnt said: "to overcome the difficulties in life, because it's always going to be part of life"

It would have been nice to end this part with a conversation about times when life is free of storms. Had we had more time available, we would have had the chance to hear stories about joyful times, about people that support us and about how we contribute to other people's happiness.

**Jovia:** "With the storms I realised the things that happened in my life, people I lost; all these things that helped me change my thinking about life. Because when you get storms you get stronger. An illness, HIV, made me realise other goals in my life and I learnt to help people when they face storms. With the Forest of Life I realised that I couldn't have stood strong if there wasn't a forest that I could lean on."

**Kenny:** "The Tree of Life session helped me to realise who I am. What I should do in the future for myself and others. I am now more prepared and have fully accepted my health condition. I have gained hope and trust that with encouragement and assistance from others one can overcome all hardships. This has contributed to my recovery."

## **PART 4: Certificates and Songs**

All new learnings call for a celebration! And what better way to end a workshop than an awarding certificates ceremony! I gave out blank copies of certificates and invited each participant to fill it in for the person who described their Tree of Life to them. The certificate focused on:

1. Their skills and abilities
2. Their dreams and hopes for the future
3. Special people they want to appreciate in life

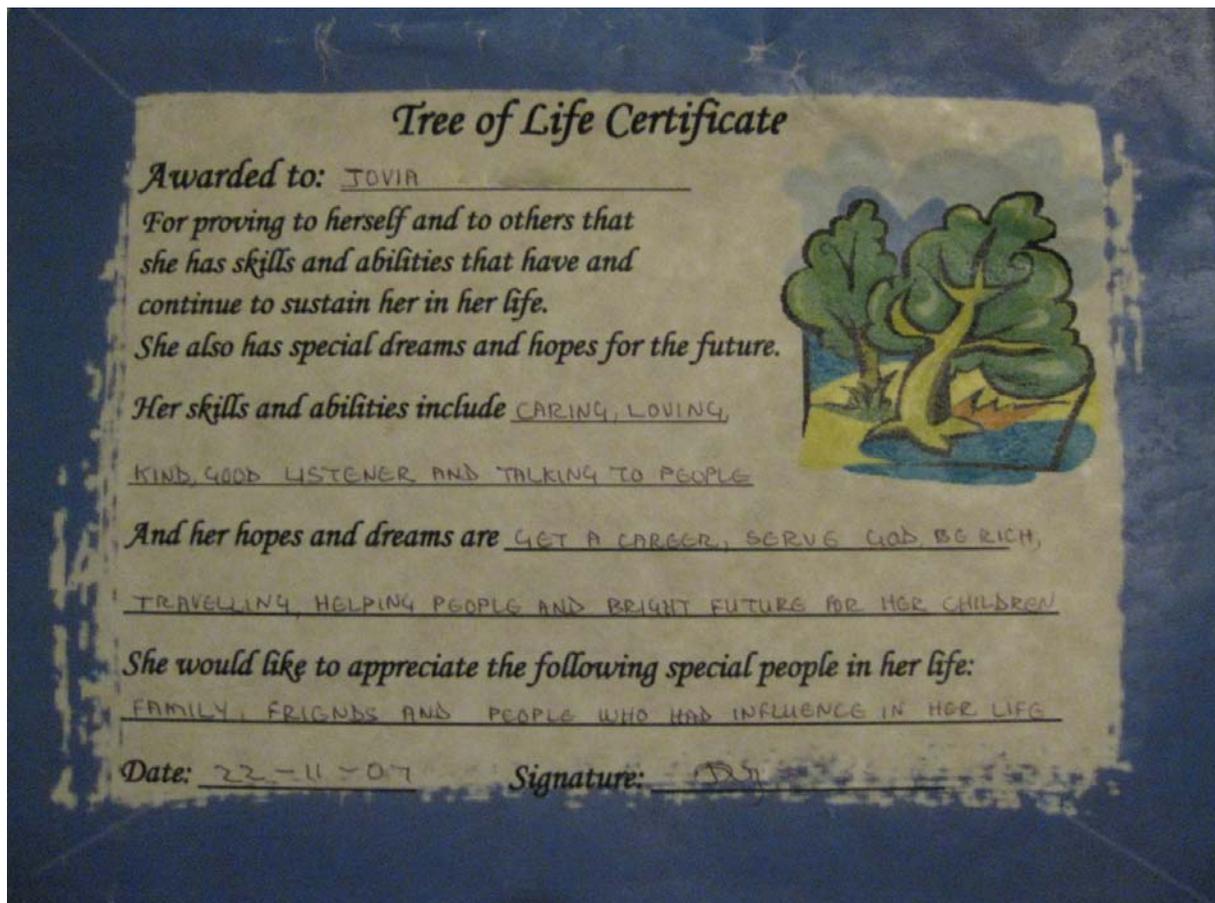


Photo 6: A Tree of Life Certificate

Finally, the same pairs stood up in turns reading each other's certificate aloud and awarding it to their partner. The ceremony was very moving and honouring of each person's life experiences. The certificates (White & Epston, 1990) and the awarding ceremony were a celebration of the new story that each person developed during the workshop.

The celebration could have been completed with a song crafted from the words participants used during the workshop. The song could have included people's responses to the storms of life, abilities, skills and values that came out of the discussions and the histories which informed the above. David Denborough (2004, p.23) writes: *"When the poetic and evocative phrases that people use to tell the stories of their lives are placed into melodies, they become in some way more memorable, more significant, embodied in a different way. When these songs are recorded they can then be played at any time providing an ongoing reminder of a person's particular journey and the skills and knowledges they have accumulated along the way"* (Denborough, 2002).

**Kenny:** "The course has given me strength, courage and strengthened my self confidence. [...] It has inspired me to start chatting about my future dreams and

overcome all the difficulties that I've come through and become somebody who is self sustained, self disciplined and reassuring."

**Lucy:** "[The tree of Life] has made me realise that I am unique in my own way, though we have commonalities, changed my way of life and focus on what I want my life to be like. I no longer keep things to myself as I used to do, but now I am open with what goes on in my life, hence ideas flow from different people, making it easy for me to tackle any problem. It has completely changed my life; I work on achieving my dreams without seeing any obstacle to stop me. I now prioritise my needs, set goals on how to achieve my dreams. Keep myself busy and enjoy life at its most."

**Sandra:** "Tree of Life to flourish: You gave me a gift of friendship and everyday is a gift. [...] knowing more about trees and what they go through, I realised I would relate that to myself. That has given me the courage and determination to be able to pursue my dreams. Now life is more simple for me than I thought."

**A participant:** "Taking life positively and nothing is impossible in one's life."

**Another participant:** "[It] enabled me to look at what is important to me and honour my roots and find who have helped me to become the person and I am and ... will be."

**Another participant:** "Very inspiring and empowering and fun. [...] gave me the opportunity to reflect on myself, which I don't get to do very often. I will for sure use the skills I gained today to empower other people especially for the African Communities."

## **How the Tree of Life spread its branches later**

Having completed the Tree of Life workshop, I invited volunteers to facilitate the same workshop with me for people living with HIV, thus placing them in a position of being experience consultants. Jovia, Kenny, Lucy and Sandra, happily volunteered to become facilitators. We set a date for the workshop, sent out flyers, invitations and we were ready for the big day. In terms of preparation, the volunteers joined me prior to the workshop and we together watched Ncazelo's DVD (Ncube, 2007) and agreed who would present the different parts of the Tree of Life workshop. It was interesting that each volunteer chose the part they had found most helpful or challenging when they did the workshop the first time. And on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2008, we had the workshop

facilitated by people living with the same condition as their "fellow travellers". Below I am quoting what they said about their experience of facilitating the Tree of Life workshop themselves.

**Jovia:** "Facilitating was like talking from my life experience. When I was facilitating I was talking from my heart, about my roots, ground, skills, dreams I learnt that I have from the Tree of Life, things I am hoping to achieve; I recognised people that have attributed in my life and what goals I have to achieve to be where I want to be in the future."

**Lucy:** "Facilitating has brought back my forgotten and past skill of teaching, given me the courage, strength, power to lead and boosted my morale. Made me feel I can participate fully in the community with no difficulties. It revealed my hidden past.

I felt great, on top of the moon, honoured; it was easy for me to fit in and put into practise what I had gained from the workshop.

I would do it again as many times as possible; [facilitating] makes me more open, [able to] share ideas, make friends, widen my knowledge and improve my teaching skills. It increased my confidence, boosted my self esteem and motivated me to share my experiences with many people, which brings a variety of choices on how to deal with issues."

**Sandra:** "The experience of facilitating gave me self esteem and made me be able to stand up and talk about trees relating them to people's lives; because what affects trees is the same as what people go through in their everyday life. [...] Life is not always smooth; there are always ups and downs.

When facilitating, I felt something had been lifted inside me; I was able to give something to somebody else and make a difference in their life. I felt happier inside; it lifted my spirits up. [...] Everyday it's the beginning of a new life.

I would do it again, because the more you get into it, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you appreciate life, because there are always good things ahead of you. It's always good to learn about trees.

**Kenny:** "When presenting I could see people's appreciation with their participation. I have been an instructor before and I could see that people found a meaning and some people changed their life.

Facilitating is one of the best ways of counselling! You are teaching people to counsel themselves by seeing things that are around them and are able to compare with other people's problems.

I felt proud I was able to share the experience of the Tree of Life with others who in return showed appreciation.

I would do it again. When you do it again, you polish your experience. Every time you do it you are developing it, because people come with different ideas you had not thought about."

## Further developments

My dream has been for the Tree of Life to spread out, grow roots, expand its branches and reach people that could benefit from its fruits. Since the end of this workshop, the volunteer facilitators and I (Georgia) have been meeting, writing up this article; at the time of writing we agreed to present our project at the European Conference of Narrative Therapy and Community Work in Brighton in summer 2009. Meanwhile, I have been talking about the Tree of Life to several colleagues of mine, who have then gone away and used the exercise either with groups or individuals with very enthusiastic response! The "Trailblazer Project" for African Caribbean men very successfully used the "Tree of Life" and have lots of dreams about how the Tree of Life can spread even further in the future. The Tree of Life has been expanding its branches in other parts of the world, like in Australia where it has been used in creative and effective ways by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to "*find hidden stories of strength and skills*" (Dulwich Centre, 2009). Maybe it's your turn next...

Note:

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"Michael White's ideas and practices have been a major influence in my practice. The idea of giving voice to life experiences that have not had the chance to be storied yet was significant for me in opening up conversations with clients that were honouring of their lives and that put them back in touch with cherished values and beliefs. Michael White's genuine curiosity about people's lives, his warmth, humbleness and appreciation of life was present in his practice as well as his everyday life and his encounters with people. It showed the therapist's use of self in the professional practice and this gave me the confidence to use myself more in my therapeutic work." Georgia



Michael White and Georgia Iliopoulou at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus in Greece