

Where did it all begin? Reflecting on the collaborative work of Michael White and David Epston

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As this special issue of *Context* neared completion, I was approached by one of its editors (Máire) to reflect on the significance of the connection between Michael White and David Epston and how their intellectual partnership led to the development of what has come to be known as narrative therapy. Both Michael and David consistently acknowledged the profound influence of their collaboration, and so it is with great pleasure that I take up the invitation to honour this history.

How can I best convey the atmosphere that characterised the early days of the development of narrative ideas? Perhaps the following quote may be helpful:

"One of the aspects associated with this work that is of central importance to us is the spirit of adventure. We aim to preserve this spirit, and know that if we accomplish this our work will continue to evolve in ways that are enriching to our lives, and to the lives of those persons who seek our help" (White & Epston, 1992, p. 9).

This spirit of adventure started close to thirty years ago. David and Michael first knew of each other's work in the late 1970s. At this time, Michael was already well-established in Australia. He was the editor of the *Australian Family Therapy Journal*, was running a two year family therapy training program and doing workshops in Adelaide and interstate. But people in Australia knew very little about David Epston. This was to change at the second *Australian Family Therapy Conference* held in 1981 in Adelaide.

David was presenting a day-long workshop in one of many parallel sessions. Because Michael was involved in organising, he was unable to attend the beginning of this presentation, but at the morning tea break, it became evident that something unusual was happening. The small group of people who were attending David's workshop was giving off a discernible buzz about this interesting but somewhat eccentric man from New Zealand. The talk

over morning tea was that he was a bit of a wild character, with a huge afro, no notes, who was just sitting out the front telling story after story. By lunch time there was a distinct curiosity about this man from New Zealand, and by the end of the day the room was packed as an enthralled audience 'met' David Epston for the first time.

This was the context in which Michael and David began their enduring friendship and intellectual partnership that was characterised by unshakable optimism, a passion over ideas, what seemed like boundless energy, and a real dedication to assist the families with whom they were meeting.

There was so much about their connection which contributed to the development of what has come to be known as narrative therapy. As part of a powerful sense of camaraderie they offered each other rigorous intellectual discussion, a place to share their evolving practices, and opportunities to debate why they did or didn't pursue a certain direction in their therapy sessions.

I remember them meeting many times here in Adelaide at Dulwich Centre to see families. Michael would book in eight families a day and they would sit together and consult with these families. Day after day they'd be joined in delight.

They liked to meet and talk and then go away and try out new ideas. Then, some time later, they would meet up again to see where each other had got to. The first questions they asked each other were always *"What are you doing differently?"* and *"What have you been reading?"*

Their collaboration included stimulating challenges due to their different perspectives. Both were family therapists, but David also came from an Eriksonian background. Both were serious readers but went about this in quite different ways. David read unusually widely, calling on his background as an anthropologist, while Michael rigorously

focused on one author at a time (Bateson, then Foucault and others). In fact, David was known to say that while he himself read a thousand books once, Michael read the same book a thousand times, continually finding new sources of inspiration for therapeutic practice. Appreciating each other's differences was something they shared.

In the early days, if one of them was 'stuck' with a family they were seeing, they would call the other and talk it all through, generate new ideas and then go back and try them out. It seemed like almost every week there was a new development. What's more, the ideas were to be shared:

"... we decided to make our ideas and practice common property and vowed that we would never become rivals. We did what we said we would do all these years up until he died ..." (Epston, 2008, p. 5).

There wasn't a sense of ownership, possession or preciousness about ideas, but instead a joy in offering them out to a world that was looking for new ways of working.

And the broader field at that time was receptive. The 1980s was a time of profound feminist challenge. Ann Epston and I, Michael and David were all vitally engaged with and influenced by the feminist issues of that time. Everything was up for questioning: the gender roles in families; the practices of mother-blaming; the concept of 'schizophrenogenic mothers'; gender inequities in the field of family therapy; male-centred language; heterosexual dominance; the politics of representation, and so on.

It was also a time in which the field was being challenged to address issues of race, culture and the effects of colonisation. The influence of Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave, Flora Tuhaka and others at the Just Therapy Team from New Zealand was significant.

While my overall recollections of those early, vibrant years are of very good times, there were some hard times too. The four



Michael White and David Epston on Piha Beach, Auckland (Photo taken by Ann Epston).

of us (Ann, David, Michael and I) were all social workers in our thirties when Michael's and David's work was suddenly the focus of international attention. What is more, we were from very different backgrounds than the middle-class professional world and had to find our way with this. Daunting and tough experiences were made easier by companionship shared. The four of us became firm friends and were sustained by hours of conversation.

Now, the conversation is an international one. As this issue of *Context* demonstrates, practitioners in many different parts of the world now draw inspiration from both the similarities and differences in Michael and David's approaches to therapy.

I have titled this short reflection "Where did it all begin?" This echoes a statement that David Epston made in 1983 at the *Fourth Australian Family Therapy Conference*.

In acknowledging the contribution of both Ann Epston and Michael White to his ideas and work, David said: "By now, I don't know where it begins and where it ends" (Epston, 1989, p. 118).

This sentiment to me sums up the intellectual partnership between Michael White and David Epston. The origins of what is now known as narrative therapy co-evolved from a shared political philosophy, and through endless hours of conversation.

I would like to thank the editors of *Context* for putting together this collection and, more particularly, for inviting me to reflect on the significance of the connection between Michael and David and how their partnership led to the development of what has come to be known as narrative therapy. With the loss of Michael still so strongly felt it has been significant to me to revisit these histories and to remember those two young

men who set out together on what became an extraordinary journey.

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Note

1. This paper was put together in collaboration with David Epston and Ann Epston.

References

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Influence of Karl Tomm

"From the time Michael and David met Karl Tomm in the mid 80s they all became firm friends and Karl's influence was significant. Karl introduced their work internationally as well as consistently raising questions and challenges that added to the development of Michael's and David's thinking. They all took every opportunity available to them to meet up, especially in Calgary, and work together."