

My Response to Margarita's 'Friday Afternoon' **David Epston**

Margarita, when I heard about your Friday Afternoon presentation and learned of its contents and provocative title, I couldn't wait to view it. Also I knew I would relish hearing your voice again as I recall depending on you and your voice when you were one of the principal translators at the *International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference* in Oaxaca in 2004 ... and how your voice distilled, to my ears, such a beautiful and musical English version of your countrywoman/man's Spanish. I recall too having so many wonderful, lively and very scholarly debates and conversations with Neca, Sylvia, Elena and Nurit from Grupos Campos Eliseos in Mexico, Chicago, Havana, and elsewhere, after workshops and plenary addresses. If you ever want a spirited and serious conversation of 'ideas', I recommend any of the abovementioned to you.

But why couldn't I wait to see and respond to your Friday Afternoon presentation? Some of my anticipation had to do, I suspect, with Cheryl White's requests to me that we 'tell the history' of Narrative Therapy first to a Dulwich Centre Summer School in Adelaide in late 2009 and then as a plenary address at the 10th *International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference* in Salvador, Brazil. And perhaps too, preparing the 'Introduction' to Michael White's 'posthumous unpublished papers/addresses' that were edited by David Denborough and published by W.W. Norton as *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (2011) had something to do with this. Both undertakings obliged me, at times with some difficulty, to reminisce about the 'early days' of narrative therapy before it had come to be known as such. I am speaking of the period from 1981-1989 at which time narrative therapy was still pretty much an Australasian (Australia and New Zealand) affair.

Admittedly, we had the good fortune to run into the excitement of one wave after another of European post-modern critical thought and ideas as they at long last washed ashore here, even though commentators say it peaked in Europe by 1985 and has been running out ever since. This post-modern critique came alongside other pungent critiques e.g. feminist, post-colonial, queer that had their sources in the political and intellectual ferment of the late 1960s. These political and intellectual concerns found their way in to the academy in Women's Studies (followed by Men's Studies, Black Studies, Queer Studies, Indigenous Studies, Hispanic Studies, Subaltern/postcolonial studies, etc). In the social sciences, there were so many 'turns' it was hard to keep up but what most attracted our attention was the so-called 'narrative turn' and reading Jerome Bruner (who is still publishing scintillating book chapters, aged 96!).

Michael often referred to me as a 'poacher' as I took considerable delight in scouring the University of Auckland library for books and journals and bringing them home and scanning them for 'ideas'. We were certainly on the lookout for 'ideas', not merely to further our critiques (we had more than our fair share of critique of the professional practices with which we both had first hand experiences) but something quite distinctive. We were searching for ideas to 'think with' in order to develop a novel practice which would give expression to our critique. This practice became known as narrative therapy around 1990 after the reprinting of the earlier Dulwich Centre Publications' version of *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1989) by W.W. Norton (New York) with the renamed: *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*.

In retrospect, I don't know if 'poaching' was that apt. After all, I/we just didn't go and 'steal' ideas from one place and deliver them to another site e.g. the therapy room. In fact, at the time, I used to think of my forays in the library and journal stacks as fishing trips. I would circulate around, reading 'over' as much I could, browsing at adjacent books or journals to the ones I was searching for, taking 10 or 15 books home at a time once again scanning them for what I thought might turn out to be 'good ideas'. Often, I didn't even get a bite but undeterred, I would return every chance I could find to once again 'go fishing'. When I considered I had caught something, I would immediately Xerox (photocopy) the article/chapter and forward it to Michael. Anyone who met Michael would recall his love of ideas. For him, he cared about them in similar ways to how he cared about those he knew well and loved. As time went by, I realised merely a quote, sentence or phrase was sufficient to excite his imagination and to begin sometimes a very long process of 're-thinking' what we deemed a good idea in to the intricacies of narrative practice.

Here is just one example amongst many I could provide. I recall sending him a copy of a book chapter from Myerhoff and Ruby: *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (1982) by Barbara Myerhoff. I read it and considered it a 'good idea'. Myerhoff's chapter led by many twists and turns from Michael's reading of it in around 1983/4 over the next ten years to some of his most distinctive contributions to narrative therapy. He continually called upon Myerhoff to inspire his thinking about practice right up to *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007). Over the first decade of what was to become known as narrative therapy, so many other currents of thought and practice intersected with it. Sometimes you felt like you do on the penultimate course of your Christmas Dinner ... pleading to be excused from the next course. I might add that ideas such as the ones that were circulating then are no longer so freely available. I believe you have to work so much harder to and travel much further afield. In the 1980s, it was distinctly different.

I know that that Michael and I had intended to more or less 'start all over again' before he died. I reinitiated my fishing expeditions but this time I was loading his computer with pdfs of literary theory rather than posting him xeroxes. I know I was hoping we would engage such questions as: 'what is 'rich story development'? 'how can you tell a 'rich' story from a 'poor' story?' 'is it possible to enrich a poor story so that it achieves the status of a 'rich story'? But that was only what was on my mind at that moment having read and re-read *Maps of Narrative Practice*. Michael reassured me that he had much he also wanted to review and revise and 'go further' than narrative therapy had gone. Michael's untimely death meant that 'starting all over again' never took place in the way I had imagined and anticipated. Would it have been like the proverbial 'old days'? Could we 'poach' some more ideas to invigorate re-thinking the ideas in to our practice and having it lead to places we couldn't possibly have anticipated at the outset? For some time, you are just following your nose thrilled by the prospect of finding another 'good idea'. I am pretty sure that is how it would have turned out but now I will never know.

My thinking at the time was informed by some sort of historical sense that such a reinvigoration or renewal was in order. Last week, I attended a seminar at the *Narrative and Metaphor Special Interest Network*, hosted by the Department of Education, University of Auckland. A very senior scholar spoke of the history of 'narrative evaluation' in educational research which intrigued me given I had been entirely uninformed of this. And of course, when he spoke of some of the inaugural studies in the late 1970's on research as theorising the practice of practitioners, I regretted I hadn't and resolved to see if I can read the literature backwards. It had some resemblances to a project Sekneh Beckett (Sydney), Zachariah White (Minneapolis) and my colleagues on the Dulwich Trainer's Co-research

webpage are currently trying to write up on what we referred to as 'co-theorising' borrowing that term and many of the contingent ideas on which we framed our project from Rappoport, J.(2008), 'Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation' (*Collaborative Anthropologies*, 1, pps. 1-31). However, what struck me even more forcibly were some comments he made to queries from the attendees. He spoke of how the most prominent authority in the field had declared unequivocally that 'narrative evaluation was over in the United Kingdom'. The audience was stunned in to silence as was I. He then smiled and informed us: "That is why I have come to New Zealand. It is not over here yet!"

This gave me considerable pause for reflection. Narrative therapy can now be considered to be 25+ years old. If you review the histories of therapies that had similar intentions and came in to being around the very same time, at least the one closest to narrative therapy at the outset - solution focused therapy - might also be considered to be 'over'. I am saddened by that if I am right here (and I admit I may be wrong) as it was very promising. I recall meeting Michele Weiner-Davis at the inaugural *Therapeutic Conversations Conference* held in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1992 which attempted to convene many of the nascent therapies that shared certain commonalities and similar concerns (see Gilligan, S. and Price, R.(1993), *Therapeutic Conversations*). She asked Michael and myself this question with the best of intentions which coming out the blue took us some time to get the gist of: "Are we married?" When we realised this was in reference to the relationship between solution focused therapy and narrative therapy, our response was: "Well, we're cousins I think!" I don't know if she was disappointed or not by our response as we were soon interrupted by other attendees. Why do some therapies fade away in to half lives and why do some persist? These are worthy considerations given narrative therapy is heading in to its second quarter century.

I am convinced that those therapies that persist are those that continually refresh themselves with ideas and are continually on the move. I certainly see this in some of those developments away from the heartland of narrative therapy practice which to my way of thinking has always been family therapy. Michael and I were first and foremost family therapists as were most of the 'first generation' of narrative therapists. The first conferences we all attended and presented at in New Zealand, Australia, United States and Canada were Family Therapy conferences.

Those current innovative developments I am thinking of include:

- (i) the 'collective narrative practices' of David Denborough, Cheryl White, Barb Wingard, Jill Freedman and their many associates around the world and
- (ii) various forms of the re-invention of narrative therapy as it crosses cultural/linguistic boundaries (most notably in the recent papers of Marcela Polanco: 'Rethinking Narrative Therapy: An examination of bilingualism and magical realism', *JST*, 29-2, 2010 and 'Autoethnographic Means to the End of a Decolonizing Translation', *JST*, Vol. 30-3, 2011 although I am sure others are 'indigenizing' narrative therapy in other cultures/languages) and
- (iii) the re-invention of narrative therapy into other fields of practice (see for example 'Pratiques Narratives' and 'narrative coaching' in France, Denmark and elsewhere). I know there are other examples but I am not trying to be exhaustive here.

Narrative therapy practice has caught the eye of others as well¹. Here is one such example:

"Similarly we have new authors who give us new ways to see the old. David Epston and Frances Hancock's chapter on organizational questioning (*The Craft and Art of Narrative Inquiry in Organizations*, pps. 485-497) is a good example. As pioneers in the narrative psychology movement, they offer a compelling and refreshing example of how we might fundamentally change how we inquire about organization life. Their work suggests ways in which the asking can alter the answering and actioning (pps. 5-6 Introduction to Barry, D. and Jensen, H.(2008), *Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization*).

Some events last week were somewhat alarming considering what was on my mind. I had two papers reviewed for publication in two separate journals and the well intentioned comments of the reviewers gave me pause for reflection. One reviewer asked me to give cause that what I had submitted was narrative therapy and not something else. Another reviewer was far more certain and stated that my manuscript could not possibly be narrative therapy because it failed to pass a certain criterion and required major revisions if it were to be accepted for publication. Interestingly enough, I had submitted both papers with the express desire not to be narrative therapy qua narrative therapy but to rather to extend it to places that as far as I knew it had not traveled to before. So my reviewers' comments were well founded but what surprised me was the certainty of what 'is' or 'isn't' narrative therapy, a certainty I certainly don't share. My interest is considering how narrative therapy can become other than what is has become so far. I see that as vital to its livelihood.

Margarita, it was against this 'backdrop' of recent events that I viewed your Friday afternoon but it was also against less recent events. And I would like to detail them here too so that you will have some measure of very different reasons for my enthusiasm for your 'strange bedfellows' proposal. My colleague, Kay Ingamells, and I have recently submitted a paper to the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* entitled (and you may think there is something uncanny about what follows): 'Crafting Stories of Strengths: The development of narrative interviews as companions to the Clifton Strengthsfinder'. This was a 'wing' of a more formal research study undertaken by my UNITEC colleagues with a relatively small sample of an intake of nursing, counseling, social work and community work students where we contrived an interview schedule to augment and hopefully enrich the more traditional Strengthsfinders computer-based assessment. As much as anything else, it was Kay's earnest attempt to 'bridge the gap' between strengths-based social work² and narrative therapy practice. Like Kay, I consider this a very worthwhile project.

Margarita, I suspect you have done something similar in your recently published book. I can't wait to 'compare notes' with your version. I suspect we will have come up with something very similar; but in saying that, I will keenly attend to our differences.

1. This interest in re-inventing narrative therapy into other fields of practice is reflected in some of the diverse themes in the program for the 2nd European Conference in Narrative Therapy and Community Work scheduled for August 15-17th in Copenhagen. (<http://narrativeconference.dk>). I was intrigued by the three main tracks: narratives of the body, narrativity in organizations and StoryMaking.
2. See Saleebey, D. 2006 4th ed *Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*; Cashen, W. 2005, *The Strengths Approach*; Long, D. et al(2005), *Macro Social Work Practice: a strengths perspective*; Timberlake, E.M. et al(2007), *Generalist social work practice: a strengths-based problem-solving approach*.

But I have to confess to you something I have experienced as 'negative' about Positive Psychology. I have been carrying Linley, A. P. and Joseph, S. (Eds.) *Positive Psychology in Practice* in my cycling backpack between home and work for some days now. I had no idea Positive Psychology - in this case running to almost 800 pages - could possibly weigh so much. I am now on the verge of attending a physiotherapist to get some relief for my sore shoulders.

Although perhaps the project with Kay was leading me in the direction of Positive Psychology, I never really made it. That probably has more to do with other interests that distracted despite my enduring fascination with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his studies of 'flow' and creativity. I have been meaning for some time to combine these notions and when therapists feel 'excitement' and see if I can research this. Why do I consider this an interesting matter for concern? When I am 'reading' the transcripts of people whom I supervise, I am pretty sure I can tell when they depart from ordinary everyday reality and along with their clients become engaged in what might be termed a conversation-in-flow. My colleagues, David Marsten (Los Angeles) and Lisa Johnson (Adelaide) prefer to think of it as 'passing beyond the looking glass in to wonderland' (see Marsten et al, 'The Ethics of Excitement', *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, Vol. 30-3, 2011). Because I have the interview in front of me on my computer screen, it seems very easy to discern the point at which the therapist at least entered this state and later I review this with the therapist concerned, and perhaps with their clients. To be honest, I had not realized Csikszentmihalyi was so central to 'positive psychology' theory and practice.

Your brave suggestion that the 'links' between positive psychology theory and its emerging practice and narrative therapy obviously intrigues me, even if the 'bridge' between the two may seem longer than some other candidates for a 'bed fellow'. But I wonder if 'strange bed fellows' might just turn to be more rewarding than familiar bedfellows. I am pretty sure that is my experience so far. For example, I mentioned how generative it has been for me to read the literature of 'collaborative ethnography' (see Lasseter, E. (2005), *Collaborative Ethnography*). What immediately came to mind when you were mentioning studies and 'catalogues' of character strengths is a question: how many 'character strengths' have been turned up by the far more robust research of Positive Psychology compared to how many the uncatalogued character strengths have been turned up by the local ethnographies of narrative practitioners? I immediately wondered how many more 'wonderfulnesses' we (the parents and I) could have co-researched about their children than we did? I suspect quite a few because I know when you were reading aloud your list, light bulbs started going on in my head. Would it be interesting for someone to 'trawl' over Michael's transcripts and 'catalogue' what he found in his incidental 'researches'? Margarita, do you think the range of narrative therapy practitioners' considerations could be widened by reading this character strengths literature? If so, could you recommend specific readings so I and others could explore this with you? Do you think this would be a very neat and doable topic for a MA thesis?

I know you might consider me 'jumping ahead' in a race that has not even begun but I decided that in response to your Friday afternoon talk and your speculations about how narrative therapy could be fertilised by some of the positive psychology literature, I decided against reading your literature but leave that in your capable and learned hands. This means I can relieve myself of considerable weight by returning *Positive Psychology in Practice* to the library. I wondered if I could better use my time by bringing an antique but venerable

literature to any such conversation. Let's face it, one of the most longstanding considerations of philosophy at least in the western world has been ethics or 'practical morals' which have been concerned since Aristotle with such questions as: 'how does one live well? What is a good life? What is a good person?' Their most common concept is 'virtue'. So, Margarita, back to the UNITEC library where, whoa and behold, to my amazement, the fishing was great. Let me tell you what I turned up in no more than a few minutes. I found 'A Short Treatise on the great virtues: The uses of philosophy in everyday life' (2002). And moreover, reading the dust jacket really recommended it to me. First of all, it was written by Andre Comte-Sponville, a Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne, and was on the best seller list in France for 14 months and has already been translated in to 24 languages. Secondly, a blurb promises that it 'is never obscure'. Now that is unusual in French philosophizing where the most opaque writing possible is de rigueur! But even more impressive for me was that perhaps the last French public intellectual of Foucault/Bordieu/Derridas' generation, the so-called 'maitres de pense' (masters of thought), Tsvetan Todorov (he coined the phrase 'narratology' in 1969) described it as 'scandously original'. To be so original about matters that have been studied and considered for 2000 or more years is saying something. I look forward to comparing his 18 virtues with Positive Psychology's 'character strengths' and narrative therapy's ethnographic co-researches³. I expect there will be a great deal to be gained by 'sleeping around' with very 'strange bedfellows'. I look forward to where this might lead without knowing anything more than that the search for fresh ideas with which to 'think' into one's practice is the means for narrative practices to become other than what they once were.

I also wondered why positive psychology as you hinted is turning away from 'happiness' per se to a much broader conceptualization of 'subjective well-being'? Why I ask is that I recently was reading Zygmunt Bauman's (the so-called seer of postmodernity), *The Art of Living* (2008), in which he subjects 'happiness' to a trenchant critique: 'What's wrong with happiness' (pps. 1-20) and 'The miseries of happiness'(pps. 21-50).

One more question before I go. You mentioned a career counselor who has influenced your interviews. If I heard you right, her name was Kate Wenderson. I obviously misheard you as I cannot find her on a Google search. Could you assist me with relevant references to her? Many thanks in anticipation.

3. Comte-Sponville's eighteen virtues are: Politeness, Fidelity, Prudence, Temperance, Courage, Justice, Generosity, Compassion, Mercy, Gratitude, Humility, Simplicity, Tolerance, Purity, Gentleness, Good Faith, Humor and Love.