Unexpected conversations: some reflections on talking with men

Mark Gordon

Mark Gordon co-ordinates Clifton Centre in Melbourne, Australia, which provides a range of workshops and training in narrative therapy. During 2005 Mark will be based in Canada. He can be contacted by email at narrative@cliftoncentre.com or www.cliftoncentre.com

Conversations with men can lead to unexpected destinations. Narrative practices that enable counsellors to listen for what it is that men value, that explore meaningful relationships, and that avoid shaming or belittling, can result in creative conversational adventures. This paper, by Mark Gordon, was initially delivered as a part of a keynote session at Dulwich Centre's 2nd International Summer School of Narrative Practice, in Adelaide in November 2004.

Keywords: counselling, men, narrative therapy

In this paper I discuss some conversations that I have been sharing with men and the learning that is coming from this. These are conversations that I am really appreciating and I hope to convey this to you.

I'd like to start with a short story.

WHAT IS NORMAL?

Earlier this year I was participating in my third meeting with Jason. In asking Jason how he was finding our conversations I learnt he was experiencing these meetings as helpful and that his initial unease about attending counselling had shifted. Our meeting had come about because Jason's partner had recommended that he consult someone about things that were going on in his life and decisions he was making.

During our third meeting I again checked with Jason how he was experiencing our conversations. In response, Jason started out by saying that he had realised recently that he wanted to spend time with people differently and that he was even considering finding different friends. He then said something that was quite surprising to me. He said: 'You know, you're the most normal person I talk to'. Now this was the first time this had happened to me. This was the first time someone had described me as 'normal'. I've been described in lots of different ways during my life, but up until this conversation with Jason, normal had not been one of them. I guess everything is relative!

I thought this was an appropriate place to begin this paper because I often hear from men, including young men, that they want their lives to be 'normal'. Initially, I didn't know quite how to respond to these wishes. In time though, I have appreciated getting a more detailed picture of what 'normal' means to these men who I am talking with. Sometimes this involves hearing from them about the times when they know life isn't how they'd like it to be. I get to hear about the 'abnormal' parts of their lives that they'd like to be free from. Other times we research together experience-near descriptions of what they are describing as 'normal', and within this research we discover unique ways of being normal. Still other times, when we talk more about 'normality', we discover some of the hazards of the cultural imposition to be 'normal', and we explore ways of escaping from particular norms.

I'd now like to tell three stories about my conversations with Ben, Andrew and Jacob. This work occurred in a number of different settings and I only got to see the men whose stories I am describing for a relatively short number of times – four or five times at the most. This was because I was on short-term locums at these workplaces. Still, I believe these stories illustrate some of the unexpected directions that conversations with men can take. I will then reflect on some of what I learned from these consultations.

TALKING WITH BEN

Ben was about seventeen when he was referred to see me for 'anger management' by the Department of Juvenile Justice. Ben was facing charges of serious assault and property damage and was required to attend a counselling program prior to his next court appearance. Ben had had a number of previous convictions and with these current charges believed he might be locked up in a juvenile detention centre.

Over the five meetings that we had together, Ben's responses to my questions were always to the point. His answers didn't involve long travelling descriptions. Ben knew what he didn't like and what he did like, however, day-to-day struggles didn't always make it easy for Ben to put his values into practice. Ben spoke about what he wanted to be different in his life. He spoke about the hurdles that he had already stepped over and the hurdles that he still saw himself facing. He had hopes relating to housing, employment, relationships with family and friends, and future plans.

I learnt from Ben that at times in his life he had been without a place to live and had slept in cars out the front of friends' houses. On some days when I met with Ben he had not eaten. I only learnt this one day when he became sick while speaking with me. He would describe to me the trek across town by public transport, the search for work, appointments with job agencies, reporting to a police station and meetings with his corrections officer. These various responsibilities that Ben was required to meet contributed to a particular picture of Ben's life at this point in time. There seemed so many things that could have prevented Ben from making it to the office where I worked. Even with the mandate to attend counselling, I know from other instances that people still do not necessarily make it to appointments. Knowing that Ben was overcoming all sorts of obstacles to meet with me, told me something of the plans and direction Ben wanted to take for his life. It told me that Ben didn't want to pass

through the courts without caring about the outcome. In acknowledging this, I came to learn about what was important for Ben in his life.

Ben was well aware of easy invitations to make money through drug dealing or theft. He described to me that 'when you're hungry and have nowhere to sleep, it's not an easy decision'. But Ben had made a commitment to 'do good' as he described it. And so I asked him a lot of questions about this commitment, about its history and what it meant to him.

In these conversations Ben described to me the gang of which he was a member. Frequently, this gang was involved in fighting and I heard about this from Ben. I also heard other meanings of gang membership. These included 'sticking up for each other', 'not turning your back on your mates', 'staying together', and 'helping each other out when needed'. After generating rich description about the meaning of gang life, Ben spoke about how he was growing weary of some of what was going on in his relationships with gang members. He described 'the backstabbing' and being 'fed up' with having to always watch his back, not knowing who was 'for or against him'. It seemed to me this indicated that trust was something highly valued to Ben, and we spoke about his experiences of trust inside and outside of gang culture[1]. Over time, we also discussed what planning might be required if Ben began to contemplate ways of having less involvement in the gang, and whether there would be ways to maintain certain relationships with gang members if he was outside the gang.

I was interested to know from Ben if there were people that supported and believed in the steps he was taking to live his life differently; if there were people who trusted his judgements and trusted him[2]. Ben responded to this inquiry that his mother was the only person who really understood what he had lived through and knew him well enough to know he could make it through the current challenges.

I asked questions to more richly describe Ben's relationship with his mother and what she might know of Ben's valuing of trust and of his desire to live his life differently. Ben said he and his Mum had been through everything together. Even when others had given up on him staying out of trouble, his Mum still held a belief that Ben would get his life on track. Ben said his Mum had sacrificed so much for him – at times going without food so he could eat or giving him the little money she had. When Ben's Mum had needed to travel away from their hometown for a period of time, she had put her own job and reputation at risk by giving Ben her job so that he would have some work. Ben thought this must reflect a huge amount of trust and belief in him. So much so that Ben said he was very much on this project to 'do good' to prove to his mother what he could do and to keep the trust and belief she had provided. Ben said he doesn't talk about this much but he said his Mum knows how it has been for him. When I asked how she knows this, Ben said: 'She can see it on my face. I'm all quiet and just keep to myself.'

Ben believed that he and his mother would always stick together. He described that they have their own lives but are always watching out for each other. I wondered aloud if Ben's Mum knew that he was watching out for her.

Ben told me about the men who hadn't taken care of his mother, who had showed no respect and had hurt her in terrible ways. Ben made it clear to me that he wanted his Mum to experience knowing him very differently. Just as she continued to take care of him, Ben said he wanted to show similar care to her.

I also asked if Ben's Mum knew that this project and plan that he had to 'do good' shared a strong connection with the kind of son he wanted to be.

In response, Ben said he wasn't so sure if his Mum knew that the purpose of his efforts were in part to demonstrate to her what he could do. Speculating, however, Ben said his Mum might have started to notice some small changes, some small differences in him. The fact that he was coming along to counselling and keeping his appointments was pretty good proof of this he said.

When we first met, I would never have imagined that conversations about Ben's mother would play such a significant part of our time together.

TALKING WITH ANDREW

I met with Andrew on four occasions over two months. I had been asked to see Andrew by his case manager to address his 'anger management' problems. However, when I met with Andrew he said his problem actually wasn't really about anger. It was the drinking and drug use he wanted to talk about. Andrew described to me his character when drinking and drug use was around, and his character in the absence of these. Initially Andrew thought he would have to speak with two separate people – with one person regarding his 'anger' and another person about his drug use.

Andrew was in his late forties and lived with his elderly mother. He had been arrested following threats he made to a security guard in a supermarket. At that time he

was affected by substances and also had threatened to kill the security guard. Andrew was adamant that he had no plans to kill anyone but, having seen the recorded interview at the police station at the time, he understood he was 'off his face' from a cocktail of booze and amphetamines. These current charges were made all the more serious because of previous charges.

Andrew reported that he had a close relationship with the legal system. When he had been drinking, Andrew believed any person that looked his way would experience a torrent of abuse that could be both physical and verbal. As I was looking at Andrew he said to me: 'I know it's hard to imagine me being like that because of the way we are talking now, but I can be pretty scary'.

It wasn't uncommon for Andrew to drink a slab of beer each day: starting early in the morning and ending when he blacked out late in the day. For those readers not from Australia, that's 24 cans a day. During my first meeting with Andrew, I heard of his urgency to get the drinking under his control before he did something he again would regret. I also heard about his desperation to get his life back from drinking. He held grave fears about not knowing what to do when he felt overwhelmed by the awfulness of his life, the mess and hopelessness. Up to this point, he answered all of this with drinking.

Andrew said it was only now that he was putting an end to blaming his divorce for the mess of his life. Andrew believed his mother should no longer have to put up with his drunken outbursts or misery and rage. Andrew felt she deserved much better for having put up with his actions for so many years.

Andrew very quickly took up a position as an active agent in creating the change he desperately wanted. While drinking had built its grip on Andrew's life, various relationships had been neglected and had crumbled. With each conversation, these relationships were identified and accounts of their significance began to be richly described. One of these relationships was with Andrew's brother's family. Andrew described how he wanted to gain the respect of this family. Over many years, his brother's family had given up believing that Andrew would not be destructive at family gatherings. Andrew wanted to be sober to be able to retain the memory of spending time with his brother and his brother's children. He wanted his brother's children to experience Andrew as an uncle they could trust, have fun with, and know they were loved by.

The relationship between Andrew and his niece and nephew seemed significant to him and so this became a focus of our conversations. I asked about why they were significant to him and what this represented in his life. In turn, Andrew spoke about these children and how they gave him a purpose for living. He spoke about the games and laughter they shared and how they ran to hug him at the times when he visited them. I asked whether this might say something about how they saw him as a person. Andrew suggested it might have something to do with being someone who his niece and nephew would always know would be available to support them and look after them. Andrew laughed, adding that they also have a heap of fun together.

Andrew knew that the trust his brother's family held in him was currently at its lowest ebb. Andrew believed that the situation needed to be urgently addressed so that he might start to show he could be trusted and would not cause any embarrassment to his family.

When I asked some more about Andrew's relationship with his niece and nephew I then came to hear about Andrew's own daughter who was herself struggling with drug use. Andrew was desperately worried about her. He said that he felt helpless to do anything about this and it gave him incredible heartache. He blamed himself for not being able to help her. Andrew wondered that if he could prove he could get himself off the drinking, then his daughter might see this and know that it's possible for life to be different.

As this picture of Andrew's relationship with his daughter, his niece and his nephew became more richly described, and as what Andrew held dear became more acknowledged, it became very evident that Andrew began to experience a far greater sense of personal agency. He began to gain more control over his drinking and put into practice what earlier he had thought wasn't possible. By the end of our fourth meeting, Andrew had reconnected with hopes for his life and, to the great surprise of his family, had participated in a number of family events without the excessive consumption of alcohol or other drugs. After so many years, Andrew said he was enjoying receiving invitations to meet with family members and had even received an offer to work for his uncle.

TALKING WITH JACOB

The third story I would like to share concerns working in an adult inpatient psychiatric unit. I clearly remember standing in the staff area or nurses station which was encased in glass and overlooked the communal areas and the isolation unit where people were supervised around the clock. This enclosed staff area was supposedly designed for security purposes. The people we worked with were never invited into it.

Sometimes, however, there would be situations where staff would be conducting conversations, taking notes and making phone calls behind the glass workstation area, while immediately on the other side of the glass wall there would be people held in the unit looking in. They were watching us watching them.

A requirement of the work involved documenting conversations, events, phone calls, plans and incidents in patient files. From time to time the people I would be meeting and working with would stand looking in through the glass while I was writing or making phone calls. I recall one young man in particular who used to watch me. Jacob was in his early twenties and had arrived at the unit reporting that his family no longer wanted him. He was, however, brought in by concerned family members following a series of troubling events and his withdrawal from university studies.

It never worried me that Jacob would observe my working at the desk. He was being watched 24/7 – it seemed only fair. It also suggested to me that Jacob wanted to talk about something or to ask questions. I never had many opportunities for long discussions in the unit. That wasn't the nature of my role. Instead, conversations with people would often take place while walking to somewhere else in the building, or between meetings with families, or when I was organising for them to leave the unit. Even in these circumstances, there were openings to alternative stories.

On one occasion Jacob explained to me that he thought I had a lovely signature. This seemed like an invitation to have a different sort of conversation, one that didn't involve medication changes or efforts to convince Jacob that his family members did care for him and did not want to harm him. So, I started to ask Jacob how he had noticed this, and about other things that Jacob had noticed about me and others in the unit. It seemed that Jacob's noticing skills were highly attuned. So much so, that he held concerns for another young man in the unit and wondered what could be done to make this young man's days less troubling. I learnt that Jacob was looking out for a number of people and how within his culture people always extend a helping hand.

From Jacob, I learnt a lot about noticing. Despite his life being very constrained at that time by the effects of mental illness, medication and the structure of the unit, he was still noticing so many things that were linked to his values. While there were many obstacles placed in our way as staff members on this unit, Jacob reminded me of our responsibilities to notice the significance of seemingly small acts and comments, such as 'You've got a nice signature'.

At times I think I have assumed that helpful conversations need to be long conversations – where the stories told are full of descriptions and detail. I have learnt from Jacob and others, however, that detail does not have to include lots of words. Detail can also be conveyed in how words are spoken and the pauses and silences in between.

There is one other story of my work in this unit that I wish to tell. It was around Christmas time and I was fortunate to be able to take people out of the unit from time to time if permission had been granted from senior medical staff. I soon learnt that these trips held great significance to those I was accompanying. A trip to the shops to buy a gift for your family for Christmas took on a whole different meaning and significance than I was accustomed to. These folks were spending their last few dollars to buy a gift for their daughter or son. The degree of care that they were putting into these gifts was highly significant to me.

During the drive to the shopping centre, or after racing from shop to shop to make the most of the short amount of time available, I was able to ask about the importance of the people they were buying gifts for and the plans they were making for their lives once they were out of the unit. In the unit, I often overheard discussions that dismissed these plans, or ridiculed them. But these were plans that spoke to what was valued or treasured in life and I don't believe they should be available for ridicule. Even when plans are huge and complex, or difficult to comprehend, such plans sometimes have special abilities. I was taught how they can enable you to know yourself differently. They can provide comfort from hostile voices. They can protect you from the urge to hurt yourself. They can interrupt the sense of wanting life to be over.

The conversations I shared with people during our trips to the shops made me differently aware of the significance of plans and dreams in all of our lives.

LEARNING FROM BEN, ANDREW AND JACOB

When I think about my conversations with Ben, Andrew and Jacob there are a number of learnings that stand out to me.

More than one conversation

First of all, I have learnt more about the obstacles that can stand in the way between men and the sorts of

conversations that can elicit their preferences and hopes about life. So many things can get in the way that one of my key priorities has become trying to ensure that I have more than one conversation with them. In fact, I think I have a responsibility to create a context in which the man I am working with wants to return.

If this is my interest, then I need to begin and maintain a way of meeting and talking with men that involves them in actively reflecting and planning about their life and their future. For Ben, this involved conversations about his hopes in relation to his mother. For Andrew, we talked about his relationships with his niece and nephew. While for Jacob, we noticed and explored his noticing skills and what these might mean for the future.

Listening for what is important to them

From the very beginning I'm interested in getting to know what's important to the men who consult me: what they stand for, how they see themselves, and how others see them. I'm interested to know what they'd like to hold onto about the person they have been up til now, and what they'd like to be different. I want to give them a chance to talk about their hopes, their dreams and what is important to them.

A special focus on relationships

I particularly ask about the relationships that are significant to them – relationships with adults and children, at home and at work. I'm also aware that the men with whom I am speaking belong to others, to communities, to families; sometimes they have children, sometimes they have partners, and sometimes they belong to groups or gangs; they have mates or buddies. I wish to include these people and their perspectives in our conversations.

I ask questions about how the people they know might describe them and their relationships. Is there something that people they know most value about knowing them? What is it that they do that these people value? Can they tell me a story of a time when this was demonstrated? Questions like this open space for significant conversations about what these men value and treasure in their lives.

By deliberating asking questions about a man's relationship with others, the stories of these relationships become part of our conversations. I might get to hear about relationships they didn't like and want to be different, in which case we can explore the history of these hopes and commitments. Or I might get to hear about relationships past or present that are treasured. By talking about their significance we might find meaning and support for the steps these man are trying to take in their lives.

Seeking out shared concerns

Early on in our conversations I try to pay attention to all those who would share a concern about the reasons why the man is consulting with me. I am interested in asking about whether the particular issue they have come to talk about is only a concern for the man himself, or would it also be a concern to others in his family, his partner, friends, community, and, in some cases, other workers and even the police. I ask about the effects of this concern, what effect it is having on the man himself, on his family, etc. I ask about possible effects it is having for their lives; their relationships; and their thoughts about the future. We explore whether the man has any sense that others share any concern about his actions, and I ask why this might be the case. I might also ask: 'Have people known you at different times in your life when such concerns were not present?' I am also interested to know how we have come to meet at this point in the man's life. I inquire about what or who has contributed to our meeting.

It's not my place to shame or belittle

If I have a responsibility to ensure that the men I speak with wish to talk with me again, then I have a responsibility that the conversations we share are not shaming, belittling or patronising. If they are, I am unlikely to see them again. Many of the men I've worked with have already had those sorts of interactions. I want to have different sorts of conversations. I want to have conversations that inspire their interest and persistence to navigate their way through what can be life-threatening ways of living, life-threatening sometimes for themselves, and life-threatening sometimes to others who have been subject to their actions.

Taking special care around issues of violence

In working with Ben and Andrew, where issues of anger and violence were relevant, I was conscious of the complexity of these conversations. As I inquire into stories that provide links with their hopes, dreams, preferred intentions and actions, I wanted to take care that I was not colluding in any way in avoiding any trauma, hurt or even devastation that had been the outcome of their actions. Wherever issues of anger or violence are a concern, it is of

course vital that these become a focus of conversation, and issues of safety must always be a first priority. Consulting with family and friends in these circumstances is sometimes of vital importance[3]. Even in these contexts, however, I wish to seek out stories from the man about his preferred intentions, his hopes for his life, and what is important to him[4]. Because it is only in doing so that some space could be created for Ben and for Andrew to then be able to reflect back on their own actions and determine what steps they wanted to take in their lives.

Actions that may have hurt others obviously need to be the focus of questioning[5]. I ask questions about the effects of actions and where this had left them and also the people who witnessed or experienced their abusive rage. I am interested in the kinds of questions that invite the man to take a position in relation to such actions, rather than questions that are really me stating a position, with a question mark at the end. Providing the opportunity for men to identify their preferences for life and then the opportunity to reflect on which actions fit and do not fit with these intentions, seems more possible to create meaningful change. I would be interested to speak with others here about this as it seems a complex realm but a really important one.

Being open to the unexpected

In working with Jacob, the context and concerns were very different. Due to the structure of the unit, we had very few spaces in which to explore preferences, hopes and dreams. It was Jacob who showed me ways that we could. It was Jacob's positive comments about my signature that opened a pathway to significant conversations. Every conversation is, of course, very different. I hope I keep being on the look-out for the unexpected.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Prior to engaging with therapeutic conversations with men, I had some concern that I might not measure up. That I wouldn't have the 'attitude', that I wouldn't be 'cool' enough, that I'd be viewed as too quiet, too strange, too this or too that. These ideas, I think, are a reflection of men's culture[6] and they can easily discourage us as men from talking with other men about what is significant in our lives. When I check with young men about how our conversations are going, fortunately I do not hear them say 'you're so eighties'. Nor do I hear older men say 'you know nothing'. Instead, it seems to me that the men with whom I meet are very interested in having conversations about their hopes and what inspires their dreams. And as we talk together, I find myself strongly connecting to what I also value and treasure in life. I don't know if that's normal or not normal, but it means a lot to me. And it's been a little unexpected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to David Denborough for his very generous assistance in producing this paper.

NOTES

1. The ideas that Michael White (2000) has written about in relation to exploring what is 'absent but implicit' in people's statements have been very helpful to me in these conversations.
2. As Ben was thinking about altering his membership in the gang, it seemed an important time to be considering who else made up his 'club of life'. Re-membering conversations (see White 1997; Russell & Cary 2004; Hedtke & Winslade 2004) are influential in these considerations.
3. Considerations of accountability are of significance in these conversations. See Hall (1996), White (1995).
4. See Jenkins (1990), Scott (2003).
5. See Jenkins (1990).
6. For explorations of men's culture and men's ways of being, see McLean, Carey & White (1996).

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