



## The chasing of tales:

Poetic licence with the written word in narrative practice

by Carmen Ostrander



*Carmen Ostrander is an Australian narrative and expressive arts therapist currently based in Vancouver, Canada. Her practice has been enormously energised by the incorporation of narrative ideas, which provide a progressive and respectful framework for creative therapeutic engagement in diverse contexts. These currently include community based arts organisations, a non-profit queer and trans resource service, and an independent practice that caters primarily to artists. Drop her a line anytime! Email: [squarepegtherapy@gmail.com](mailto:squarepegtherapy@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

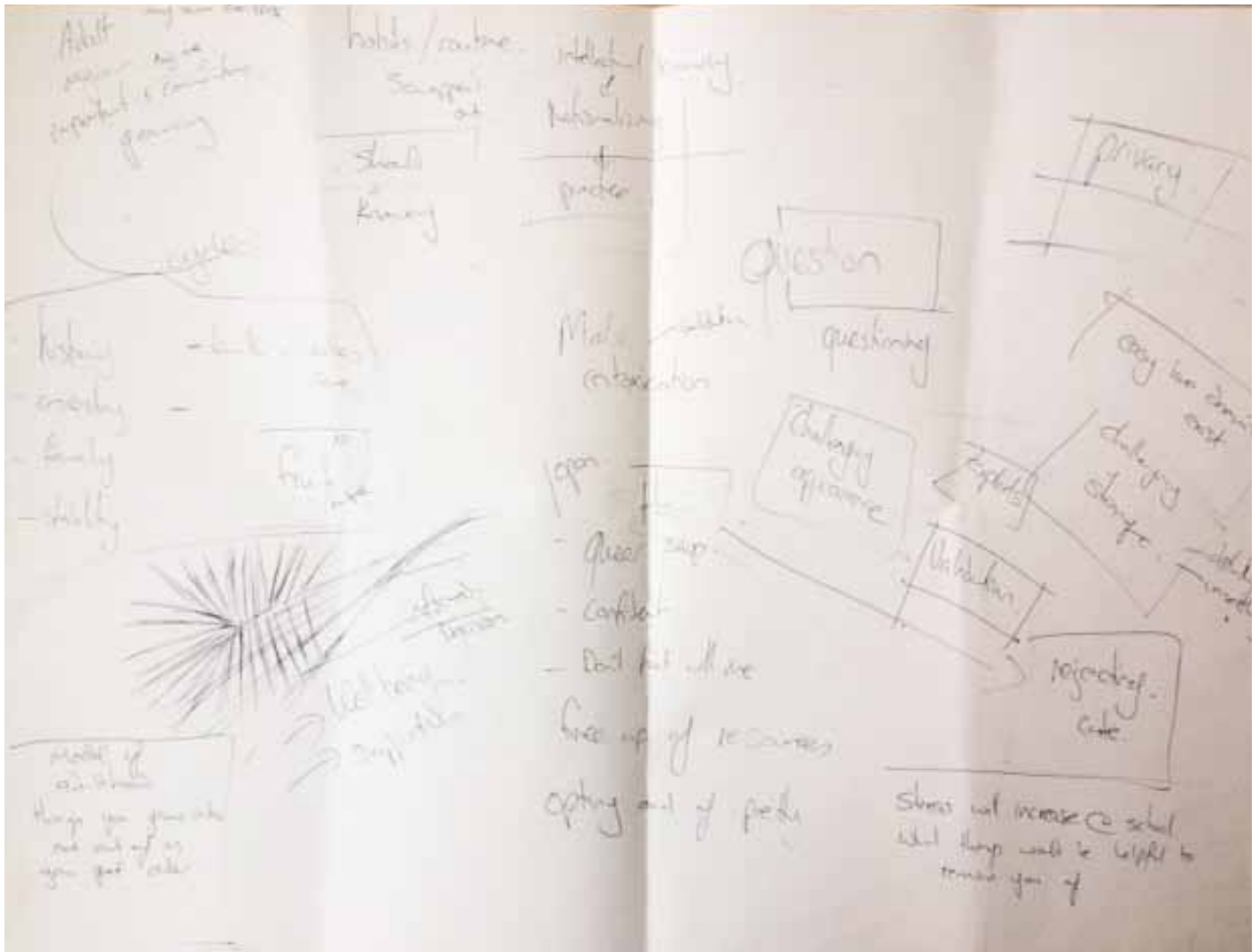
This paper explores narrative applications of the written word in practice, including recreations of innovations I have been drawn to in my reading and through conversations with people who have supported my development as a therapist. It also describes applications that extend the therapeutic use of the written word in the spirit of playfulness and creativity I believe to be at the heart of narrative innovation. Narrative influences on the written word in administrative contexts, letter writing, note taking and other creative forms are described, communicating the influence of a year immersed in narrative ways of working.

**Key words:** *narrative therapy, text-based practice, bibliotherapy, therapeutic letters, rescued word poems, de-centred practice, letter writing, therapeutic writing*

## Introduction

The table is covered with large pads of paper, pens, pencils, and a few art supplies. The pads of paper are used as workspace and worksheet. I make notes as we converse: key words, phrases, themes and questions, making no secret of the things that catch my attention and why they might be of interest. The sheets invariably wind up with all manner of lines of emphasis and connection, diagrams, mind maps, lists and doodles. The visibility of this style of note taking challenges the privacy of therapists' notes, in response

to Michael White's (1995) call to reveal the ideas behind therapy. At the end of session, we look over what has been recorded and make sense of it together: 'What do you think is the most important thing to take away from this today?' Sometimes we have different answers to this question. We share our responses before taking a moment to transcribe our thoughts into our personal notebooks. Clipboards and files are noticeably absent, as I hope are many assumptions about what counselling is supposed to look like.



**Figure 1:** Session notes

This article explores applications of the written word in therapy, including their use in case notes, poems, letters, bibliotherapy, and expressive arts practices.

I am not the first or the last therapist to be inspired to join in the shared vision of a 'therapy of literary merit' (White, 1998), and to be inspired by the range of poetic possibilities present in the work. Narrative practices provide enormous scope for and encouragement of play, which releases language from the confines of common usage and the limits of assumptions

that underpin familiar turns of phrase. In embracing the idea that 'No problem or predicament is perceived or received in identical ways by different people' (White, 2007, p. 52), we are tasked with teasing out and rendering descriptions that reject thin accounts of predicaments and predictable outcomes, and provide engaging departure points for alternative accounts of lived experience with outcomes that are unique to the individual. The written word can contribute to this in multiple ways, beginning from our first engagement with the people who consult us.

## Documentation

The documents we create and collect about those we work with note the first iteration of a single story, the problem's story. For some, these documents become a paper trail of deficits and biomedical discourses. The first words at the head of this trail are generally captured through an intake form. Forms set a tone: their language and format provide clues about the nature of the institution. Even the friendliest intake forms are problem-centric (Hamkins, 2014), designed to invite thin descriptions of problems in pathologising language. When practising independently, I substitute intrusive questions with expansive ones such as, 'What do you feel might be important for me to know about you at this time?'

Narrative counter documents (Bjoroy, Madigan, & Nylund, 2015) can be used to creatively challenge what constitutes a file. Letters, poems and drawings disrupt the dominance of the problem story by facilitating 'experience-near' (White, 2007, p. 40) descriptions of the problem in the person's own words, weeding out the therapist's assumptions, diagnostic or otherwise. Therapists have found ways to use such creative documentation 'within even the most conservative and scientific psychology supporting institutions and hospitals' (Bjoroy, Madigan & Nylund, 2015).

The authority of the institutions we represent is reinforced throughout the consultation process. Through the creation of files and the collection of sensitive information, we can inadvertently reproduce 'culture and its institutions' in ways that 'solidify traditions and techniques of psychology's power' (Madigan, 1999, p. 10). This raises questions about how I situate myself in relation to operations of power. Small counter-gestures, which I exercise as micro-expressions of decentred practice, help me to articulate my position. These are embodied in the way space is configured, how therapy is conducted and notes are taken.

## Invitation

In offering creative approaches to using the written word in therapy, I am interested in the art of the invitation, which Benjamin & Zook-Stanley (2012) describes as 'an intentional act' bringing 'the opportunity for gentle spaciousness' (p. 63). Here, the emphasis is not solely on the extension of the invitation, but also on the graceful acceptance of its rejection. Although the focus of this paper is on the written word and my passion for it, I am cognisant that others may not share my enthusiasm. It is my aim to create an environment where acceptance of an invitation to a novel approach is deeply appreciated, and rejection is equally

welcome as an act of agency and collaboration. I hope these practices go some way towards addressing the imbalance inherent in the client/therapist/institution relationship.

## Collaborative note taking

Though therapists commonly communicate to clients that session notes are open to them, it would seem this invitation is rarely taken up; information about the person is often 'withheld' by the professional, with implications for trust and power in the therapeutic relationship (Bjoroy, Madigan & Nylund, 2015). I seek to adopt a decentred approach that fosters a sense of joint ownership over the documents and files that constitute the organisation's account of those I work with. I encourage persons to exercise the power of veto over any documents produced during our work together (Epston & White, 1992).

Working in a limited session context, I've found it beneficial to incorporate the physical file in discussion in the weeks leading up to the final visit. The file, with all its significance, is placed in the hands of the person it pertains to, along with an invitation to amend it as they see fit. This may include corrections, changes, additions, discussion, reflection and verification of the contents. In the queer community, there may be additional significance when the file supports emergent identities through consistent use of the person's preferred name and pronouns and the use of non-binary or gender-neutral language. Taking steps towards the telling of an emerging story.

Joint examination of documents allows us to consider the story the documents tell. Their contents may serve as a reflection of developments that have taken place; a record of the skills and subjugated knowledges that have been liberated (Epston, 1999). This can provide and support 'alternative frames for meaning-making' (Dolman, 2015). The practice of joint examination situates the person as having authorship of their life, ownership of what is said about them, and an opportunity to draw their own conclusions about future implications. In the absence of a specific turning point or act of catharsis, a review of this nature can also be helpful in tracing incremental shifts that may have taken place. This was described by SH:

It's like you have a closet full of shirts, all the colours of the rainbow. You start at one end and put a different shirt on every day. You don't really notice them changing colour until you get to the end and realise you have a completely different shirt on to when you started.

## Rescued word poems

Poetic language is well-suited to poststructuralist approaches that encourage the deconstruction of fixed ideas and identities, revealing the voice that hides behind the 'familiar dominant routine voice' (Simchon, 2013, p. 3). Rescued word poems (Pentecost, 2008) allow practitioners to creatively engage with the fabric of stories, exercising creative subjectivities in place of pathologising ones. They use 'transformative language which is capable of producing change' (Simchon, 2013). The introduction of rescued word poems has generally been received with enthusiasm by my clients. I believe this response is in part due to the sense of delight and possibility that comes when the performance of therapy shifts from a predictable to a poetic practice.

I let AB know that I would be taking more notes than usual, of a different style. I said this out of self-consciousness that I may seem less engaged in what were usually free-flowing conversations between us. I also let them know it was my intention to share these notes with them at the end of our session. Their curiosity was piqued. Occasionally they would pause or slow down to let me catch up, or throw me a quizzical look if I scribbled something enthusiastically. At the end of the session my page was filled with direct quotes from AB in response to my questions. As I read their words back to them in sequence, the flicker of light in their smile turned to beaming.

**AB:** It doesn't sound like me. I mean I know it is me, what I said, but ...

**Carmen:** Who did it sound like?

*They shift in their seat, one hand purposely obscuring  
their face the other arm wrapped around like half a hug.  
Their eyes glisten.*

**AB:** If I heard someone saying those things, I'd think ... Hey, I like you, you sound pretty cool. I like the sound of that person! Can I have a copy?

Rescued word poems go some way towards capturing my experience of conversations as I hear them. My hearing is tuned to accounts of experiences and ideas that challenge the dominance of the problem-story. Rescued word poems capture points of resonance, evocative images, words that zing and sparkle. These words are then assembled into poetry, which provides a platform to honour and elevate lived experience out of the realm of the ordinary.

I'd like to acknowledge that this methodology has not been universally well-received. Establishing an environment that invites critique has provided significant learnings, for which

I'm eternally grateful. All subjectivities, including creative ones, can have unexpected outcomes. The experience of not 'sounding like me' may not always be welcome. I'm grateful for the feedback I received after one attempt to extend this practice into a form of editorialising. Drawing from notes and tapes across several sessions with WH, I constructed a poem around the theme of resilience, using their own words. In polishing the final poem, I had disrupted the sequence of the phrases considerably for what I had hoped was better poetic effect. In doing so, I strayed too far from the voice of the person, clouding the sense and context through the reordering. The poem was received as a 'distorted' account of our conversation. WH raised extremely valid criticisms of the way in which I had exercised my subjectivity. The overwhelmingly positive tone of the poem I presented failed to honour the place of more sombre themes that featured regularly in our discussions and deserved to be equally represented.

Rescued word poems have produced the most positive results when I have preserved the sequence of quotes to reflect the flow and intent of the conversation, without excessive creative licence. There is a responsibility that comes when you insert yourself into another person's narrative to handle their words with care.

## Letter writing

Letters and therapeutic documents are a key aspect of narrative practice. They provide opportunities to develop the meaning of stories and contribute to their longevity (Bjoroy, Madigan & Nylund 2015). The potency of letter writing has long been apparent to me. Letters have gotten me into and out of trouble more times than I can count. Ambiguous urges buried in flowery language and righteous letters of formal complaint are my specialties. Discovering narrative therapy's long history of letter writing and the possibility of incorporating this into my practice for therapeutic purposes filled me with the particular excitement that comes with the promise of channelling a passion into your work. I intended to use letters to summarise key points in sessions. I was keen to explore their potential as a way of recording progress (Stevens, 2010) without co-opting the language of clinical outcomes. I was interested in providing respectful alternative file notes and a shared editorialised account of conversations, perhaps with the addition of a question or two I hadn't been able to adequately articulate on the fly.

Unexpectedly, what followed was a great deal of trepidation. The idea of my words being 'immortalized' in letters (Epston, 1994) was an uncomfortable one. The more I read about the significance of letters, the harder it became to write one.

Trepidation turned to paralysis as I struggled to locate a tone that wasn't too ambiguous, too formal or too casual, and was supportive without sounding saccharine. This stumbling block remained in place for several weeks, until I realised that my hesitation was less about tone and more about accountability. With accountability at the centre of the process, I approached letters from a new perspective, more concerned with what I was trying to say and why I was trying to say it, rather than how these thoughts could be expressed. I developed some guiding questions:

- What did I feel was important to communicate to this person at this time?
- What could I offer in support of alternatives to the dominance of problem-saturated stories?
- Could I write letters that validated new identity claims as they surfaced, and encouraged the exploration of possibility, agency and authorship?
- Which metaphors and images (of theirs) had stayed with me?

Now, when stuckness pays a visit, I make it a short one by describing what it is I hope the letter will achieve, and as much as I can about what that intention might look like if I could write it. In some cases, when stuckness and time pressure collude, I've preserved these aspirations in raw form as part of the letter.

#### **Example: Unstuck letter**

Dear W,

I wish I had more time to craft the letter I'd like you to have right now.

In my mind it's on actual paper and handwritten. It arrives in the mail just after you start feeling settled on your break. The letters have long elegant loops and slope uniformly to the right. I don't have handwriting like that, but I have often wished I did.

... The letter would talk about how I'm noticing the influence of anxiety on the lives of many people I'm working with at the moment. It would ask if you had any more thoughts about why its presence is being felt so widely; if you've noticed any factors that support its presence. My letter would also go to some lengths to communicate to you that you are not alone in feeling alone when panic has your full attention. This seems to be an important strategy of anxiety's – a variation on 'divide and conquer'.

My letter would also find a way to segue smoothly to a question we were going to come back to from a couple of weeks ago, where you mentioned that writing (of

the journaling kind) can sometimes feel like 'evidence', and I asked if there were other things about your life that you might like to have evidence of ...

I experience a vastly different quality in written exchanges. There's something about the deliberate nature of it; its capacity to hold intention. There's also freedom and an intimacy that comes with sharing your thoughts this way. Though letter exchanges are referenced in person (in session), I've noticed they are rarely discussed in detail. Letters occupy their own space, a co-created space that calls for its own protocols.

### *Waitlist letters*

I have extended the practice of letter writing with current clients to explore the use of letters with people who are waiting to receive counselling services. With lengthy waitlists common to most low-barrier services, I became curious about the challenges clients may face in order to be present at their first appointment. In many cases, months elapse between the point of initial contact and the first meeting. In talking about what it took for a person to make it to counselling, a number of folks have mentioned the significance of booking the appointment, describing it as a step towards a new preferred outcome, an act of self-care. These conversations indicate that seeking counselling is not borne of helplessness, but requires enormous strength and courage, which is then tested through a long period of radio silence. I wondered whether a letter acknowledging the agency and resilience required to come to counselling might go some way towards supporting people on waiting lists. What might be possible if I wrote to them and invited them to correspond? Might this help them feel valued, 'connected and less alone in the world' (Bjoroy, Madigan & Nylund, 2015, p. 11).

My intentions for writing letters to people on our waitlists were:

- to welcome people in to our community,
- to provide a point of connection with our organisation,
- to get to know the person,
- to invite discussion of their preferences, assumptions and knowledges about counselling,
- to enquire about their hopes and aspirations for the 12 sessions they would be offered,
- to centre the person has having choice and agency over the kind of support they feel is best for them from the range of counsellors, group initiatives and services available,
- to invite the co-creation of a letter of introduction to their counsellor, introducing the person, not the problem,

prior to their first session. There were a number of organisational hurdles to overcome before the first letter was sent. There were concerns about becoming 'too involved' in the problem, how to handle requests for advice during the process, and general unease around the lack of structure and precedent for an exchange of this nature.

### Waitlist letter

Dear Person,

I understand you are currently waiting for a suitable appointment to see a counsellor at Qmunity. I'm part of the counselling team and on behalf of the team and the staff at Qmunity, let me say, Hello! And welcome. That's not the only reason I'm writing to you by the way.

My name is Carmen. I'm currently undertaking a Master's program in narrative therapy (which you may or may not have heard of, it's relatively new). One of the things that distinguishes narrative therapists is our fondness for letter writing; it's right up there with our love of stories and language. We love diverse stories from communities like this one, which illustrate the challenges and triumphs of our daily lives. It's the knowledge and the stories that have been shared in conversation with people like yourself that I value the most in my training so far.

I hope you don't mind me contacting you and sharing something I hope to investigate further with your kind assistance. I have heard on a few occasions that the act of making an appointment has been pretty significant for some people. I'm wondering if this has also been your experience? What did the decision and action to seek support mean to you? What did it take for you to follow through on this idea?

If you feel it could be helpful, or any kind of useful distraction to make the time pass between now and your first appointment, I'd be very happy to write to you while you're waiting. Some people find the pace and deliberate nature of writing a helpful way to organise their thoughts. Others find they can express themselves differently. Some aren't into it at all. That's okay too. You are welcome to respond in any way that works for you right now.

This invitation extends into somewhat uncharted territory. The idea makes some people nervous, which I think comes from a concern that we may

get entangled in 'the problem' before you get here. Narrative therapy is also known for the following catchphrase, which might give you an idea of our approach: 'You're not the problem, the problem is the problem'. I'm wondering if this might be an opportunity to get to know a bit about you, before we get to know the problem? You are more than the sum of your problems.

I have a few ideas about things we could talk about, and questions I could raise for your consideration, which may inform your approach to counselling, and ideally help you get the most out of the experience. I'm keen to explore the possibilities if you are! And any feedback you are able to provide along the way would be very gratefully received.

Anyway, I don't want to get ahead of myself, or you, so please think it over and drop me a line if you're in any way inspired to do so. I'll, say goodbye with another warm hello and welcome to our Qmunity.

Yours in support, with sincerity and anticipation,  
Carmen

This invitation was well-received by the recipients generally, including by those who didn't feel letter writing was a good approach for them:

Thanks for the follow-up – I apologise for not replying sooner. I'm not the right kind of candidate for this kind of therapy. Part of my anxiety is obsessive thinking, and having a written record of sensitive processing kind of things that I would be able to re-read over and over would be a bad idea for me.

So thank you for reaching out, I really appreciate it. I'm actually in the process of setting up private counselling, so I can be taken off the wait list!

Thank you again for your time and care.

In a few cases, the correspondence ceased when the person received notice of an appointment (neither of us knows when this will happen) or when they had found alternative support. There have also been instances in which I have had no clue as to why they've stopped responding. In these cases, I send an email or two of just a couple lines, checking in and seeing if they're okay. Quite often it's busyness, but if don't receive a response to the follow-up, I can only respect their wishes and desist and wonder.

I'm going back to the drawing board on the initial letter,

as issues of confidentiality have not been appropriately addressed: my supervisor was keen to look over the correspondence; I realised I didn't have consent to share it. I'm yet to find a way to preserve the trust and intimacy built into the one-to-one communication, while meeting the organisation's need to monitor the process. My feeling is that a separate channel or form of correspondence should accompany the letter as a mechanism for consent and feedback directly to the organisation, providing an alternative opportunity for evaluation, and criticism or complaint in addition to a level of accountability for me as the writer.

One of the challenges of this endeavour has been time management. The length of time between responses can vary widely, with flurries of correspondence followed by none. There are variations in the length and seriousness of the content. It's been difficult to work out how many invitations to extend at once. Letters take time, which can be hard for both parties to navigate with busy schedules. It is my hope that even if the exchanges are sparse, having interim support may help ease some of the strain of the waitlist waiting game. I am uncertain whether I'll be able to fashion this process into a simplified, replicable format that can be implemented on an ongoing basis. I'm determined to persist, in acknowledgement of the duty of care that rests with us from the moment a member of our community asks for help.

## Bibliotherapy

Originating in library sciences, bibliotherapy refers to the administration of books to soothe the soul. My interest was sparked by a recognition of the regularity with which people make reference to reading as a strategy in times of difficulty. Taking time out to engage with stories outside of our own experience serves a multitude of purposes including distraction, comfort, solace, self-soothing, inspiration, validation, and connection.

What does inhabiting the world of another offer us? When problem-saturated stories dominate our thoughts, it can be difficult to imagine life could be any other way. Can books help us entertain new possibilities? Or show us the influence of context, as the world of each story shapes its characters? Can this stir awareness of the relationship we have to our own contexts and surroundings? A 'bookworm', social worker and narrative practitioner, Polkinghorne (2001) described how counsellors 'have drawn inspiration for their work from characters, storylines and the rich descriptions of life offered by authors' (2001, p. 36). The opinions of characters provide openings for discussion on personal values and discourses that may be at work influencing our attitudes (Polkinghorne, 2001). They are perhaps a helpful scaffold to articulating

core values.

I wondered what kinds of stories people gravitated to in times of difficulty. You can take your imagination for a walk around the block, any block, anywhere in space and time you choose. Where do you choose to take it in hard times and why? Is there value in making conscious choices about what to read? I took this question to the nearest group of book lovers I could find, the patrons of the Word Festival milling around the Vancouver Public Library. I set up a small station in a thoroughfare with the following question on display: 'If stories were medicine, what would you prescribe for hard times?'

Responses were collected on 'community prescription pads' which called for a story and a condition it might help ease. This station provided an opportunity for members of the public to share stories they held dear to their hearts and to consider how others might also benefit from reading them. Titles were recommended for inspiration, community connection, surviving post-colonialism, grief, and opening your mind. I am continuing to collect prescriptions and will feed the information back to the festival, in a yet-to-be-determined format, when it returns next year.

What struck me from the conversations that day was how much those I spoke to valued the act of giving and receiving books from friends in times of crisis. Even those who were unable to recall specific titles were keen to communicate this to me. When I enquired a little further about how stories work to help us feel better, the book lovers suggested that the prescriptions didn't act directly as simple antidotes: if you're feeling sad, read a tale of joy. Rather, the right book 'met you at the place you were at', matching your tone and holding your hand awhile, before transporting you elsewhere and engaging you in some form of transformation. I look forward to continuing this line of enquiry and further exploring the therapeutic potential of fiction.

## Medicinal words

A simple exercise that I have developed has come to symbolise much of what has resonated for me about narrative ideas. It incorporates my love of words, and respect for their power, in combination with my love of play and ritual. It encapsulates my commitment to centring those I work with as holding authority and expertise on appropriate responses to the challenges they face, and subverts the pathologising of people with problems. It is a synthesis of influences distilled into symbolic form. It begins, as most narrative endeavours have for me, with a question: 'What could you use a good dose of right now?' The premise comes from the touting of pills as the epitome of modern medicine and all that they imply about convenient and effective approaches to health and wellbeing. Can the power of

a pill be leveraged narratively?

The person is asked for a one-word response to the question, 'What could you use a good dose of right now?', and to make their word a potent one. When they have found the right word, they write it on a slip of rice paper with the pen provided (vegetable ink). The slip is rolled into a small scroll with the word visible on the outside. The person opens a clear, gelatine capsule, inserts the scroll and reseals. This is their medicine. They are invited to administer (self-medicate) as they see fit. It's a large pill, but hopefully not too hard to swallow and should contain no traces of bitterness.

All the participants so far have chosen to take their pills with them, to be used in case of emergency in the future, as opposed to consuming them right away. As a result, I am yet to receive feedback on their efficacy or potential side effects.



**Figure 2:** Narrative pill

## The written word in narrative practice

Some things are hard to say out loud. A number of clients have established a practice of making notes between sessions about thoughts or questions that come up during the week, as do I. It is not uncommon for us both to arrive with possible topics for conversation or questions arising from our previous visit.

**AH:** I wrote some stuff down during the week I wanted to talk about.

**CO:** Okay, great.

*AH takes some time looking over the pages and stares down at one page for a long time in silence.*

**AH:** I'm sorry. I don't think I can read this out. These words just aren't going to come out of my mouth. It's too fucked up. Here [hands me the journal], you read it.

Writing provides an alternative means of expression, and a different way to hear what is being said, refreshing our understanding of a given situation and influencing the direction of future discussion.

Speech is fleeting, and reliant on readily available memory. The memories and words closest to hand may not always be the best examples for a rich description. There can be value in taking the time to find just the right word, in crafting a metaphor to illustrate your perspective. In spoken interactions, the telling may be influenced by the reaction of the audience. The written narrative, however, provides opportunity for dialogue with the self through externalisation of the story onto the page. When stories are translated into writing, this can create space for consideration of questions that are not always easy to answer on the spot.

Organising life events through writing provides a framework to externalise our stories, shifting perspective, increasing opportunities to consider the influence of context (social and political), and inviting relational awareness to facilitate the making of meaning. Therapeutic letters and poems differ from other forms of writing, such as journaling, in that they are written with an audience (the receiver) in mind. Narrative approaches to writing are not solely focused on the expressive aspects of the process, though the development of metaphors and descriptions are fruitful. Writing is also used as an act of construction, of 'fixation of meaning' (Newman, 2008).

Writing can be an opportunity 'to reconstruct the past in light of the present' (Pavides, 2015) and, further, to recognise the skills and knowledges that have brought the person to this point. These skills can act as valuable contributions to the collective understanding of shared problems, and hold the potential to extend into larger conversations connecting us to our communities. These skills can form the basis of valuable local resources and relevant bodies of knowledge to create new collective wisdoms, which can help us withstand the pressures of contemporary living.



In partnership we render the unknown known, articulating it into understanding. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of those I have worked with, in recognition that two stories are being shaped by this process, 'The other side of the counselling relationship is also a story of becoming'

(Pentecost, 2008 p. 18). Stories are living creations, named into being. They flourish when they are written, spoken, shared and witnessed, extending beyond ourselves, connecting to others, in chorus, in community.

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