



Thinking Queerly about Narrative-Informed Organisational Development

A Conversation with Janet Bystrom, founder of RECLAIM



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Abstract

Maintaining a narrative practice within conventional organisational structures that are informed by modernist and medicalised ideas of identity, professional expertise and ethics can present a variety of challenges. In some contexts, governmental regulations and market-based funding directly affect the practices of service providers by imposing regulations and limits that stand in opposition to the relational intentions of narrative practice. This is particularly true for narrative practitioners who work alongside marginalised communities with intentions of doing justice. One organisation, RECLAIM, in St Paul, Minnesota, USA, is striving to meet this challenge. RECLAIM is building a community organisation that serves queer and transgender young people. Julie Tilsen (co-editor of this issue) sat down with RECLAIM's founder, Janet Bystrom, to learn how, as an organisation, RECLAIM aspires to embody narrative practices and principles, not only in the therapy room, but also in its policies, procedures and everyday organisational practices.

Key words: *queer youth, trans youth, organisational structure, narrative principles, relational ethic, youth work*

Julie: Can you say a little about what RECLAIM is and does? What is its mission?

Janet: RECLAIM is a small non-profit organisation whose mission is to increase access to mental health support so that queer and trans youth might reclaim their lives from oppression in all its forms. We use narrative principles to guide us in providing individual, family and group therapy to young people who are being impacted by and are responding to multiple forms of marginalisation.

Julie: Would you provide a brief history – an origin story – of RECLAIM? What was your role in it? What or who inspired you to start it? What were your initial aspirations? What needs were you responding to? How would you describe your mission, passion and purpose?

Janet: RECLAIM was born of a grassroots effort to preserve and protect services for queer and trans youth amidst a severe economic recession. Many existing services had to close their doors. As a therapist for many young people who were losing critical services, I put out a call for help and people responded. One of the most remarkable responses came from a small collection of young people who had been receiving services that were about to be eliminated. They organised and held a silent auction and spaghetti dinner to raise funds. I remember very clearly the day a young person who was struggling with severe mental and physical health challenges looked in my eye, handed me a check from the event and said, 'We felt we had to do something. Even if this money doesn't help us, perhaps it will help others'.

This act did many things. It disrupted the typical story of 'getting better', which is often part of non-profit service culture. This is a linear story that says people come in with problems, the services fix them, they move out into life and then later, they give back to society. Yet, this client had never seemed more confident or stood taller than when I experienced him in that exchange. He helped me see that giving is a part of wellbeing, not something you do once you are 'better'.

This money, which did end up seeding the growth of RECLAIM, forged a real partnership between youth and adults that lives on in the core of the organisation today.

My passion was to ensure that queer and trans youth, and those who love them, had a place they could

count on to receive counselling that loved them, not in spite of their queerness, but because of it. I also wanted to make sure that the things they did for survival, such as harming themselves instead of harming others or numbing their internal discomfort with substances, were never pathologised and that they could talk with people who looked like and felt like them.

Julie: How do the principles and practices of narrative therapy and community work influence the work of RECLAIM?

Janet: When founding RECLAIM, I was particularly interested in what kind of story we would tell as an organisation if we were the primary authors. The mission statement of RECLAIM is informed by narrative thinking as we understand that in order to truly tell our own story, individually and collectively, we must first reclaim our lives from oppression in all its forms.

We seek reclamation of our storytelling rights at the organisational, individual and community level. Organisationally, we examine the influences of oppression on typical organisational structure. Examples include things such as top-down hierarchy; funding priorities that uphold the dominant systems of power and definitions of 'normal' behaviour; and organisational leadership and board representation that privileges white, male, cisgender, straight people who have access to resources. After this examination, we then decide how to strategically position ourselves in relation to these forces.

We encourage reclamation individually in the therapeutic relationship by asking questions that invite the individual narrative to be reclaimed. We might ask, 'When was the first time you remember receiving a correction for behaving in a way that broke a gender-based rule? What was the impact of this and how did you respond?'

At the community level, we invite preferred stories to be told and witnessed at our annual celebration and fundraiser. Many organisations have such an event, and typically, the bulk of the programming is led by staff and board members. At some point, a client will be given a short time to talk about how the services changed or saved their lives. This practice centres the organisation as the agent of change.

At our gatherings, we invite parents of youth we've worked with to reflect on how being in relationship

with their children has affected them. They tearfully and joyfully share that through loving them their hearts have grown, they have become less judgemental and they see the world in a completely different way.

The youth sit front and centre as outsider witnesses, along with a crowd of over 300 people. They hear how they have profoundly shaped the lives of their parents for the better, just by being themselves. This is an example of how narrative practice supports the telling of a really good story – a preferred story – with a whole lot of people listening. The work of RECLAIM is to facilitate the telling of these stories, not to be at the centre of them.

Julie: Narrative approaches are used in many different contexts, with people who occupy a range of social locations and represent a multitude of cultures, and in response to a variety of concerns. What are some unique or important ways that narrative practices resonate with queer and trans youth and their families?

Janet: Being queer or trans forces people to be more conscious about their identities and the stories that go with them. When your identity is not part of the dominant norm, you see identities being subject to creation and destruction, and you may have both a strong interest in and a healthy scepticism regarding the truth of it all. Narrative practice supports peeling back the layers so that people can glimpse who they are – or who they could be – in relationship to both dominating and alternative discourses. Narrative therapy is identity work. This is a liberatory experience.

Julie: When you were first conceptualising RECLAIM and thinking about how to structure, fund and operate an organisation, how did your experience and knowledges as a narrative therapist influence you as a program developer, manager and agency director? What other experiences, knowledges or ideas influenced you? How do you understand the relationship between your understanding of a narrative ethic and the ethic of these other influences?

Janet: I love these questions as they really get at what informs the essence of RECLAIM!

One of the influences is youth work. I began my career doing youth work in residential settings, drop-in centres and street outreach. In these settings,

I didn't have the benefit of a desk, time limit or door to hide behind. These experiences put me in direct relationship with young people: I was on their turf and I didn't have explicit consent to be engaging with them.

Youth workers are often characterised as somewhat anti-establishment and sceptical of professionalism. This critique of conventional structures helped me to understand that working within the non-profit industry and getting my degrees and licences didn't make me better at connecting with youth. Youth want a real person who genuinely respects them and who truly believes their interests and wellbeing are fundamentally connected.

Another influence is relational ethics. By centring youth, not the organisation, we aspire to put relationships before policy. We are concerned about the impact any act or decision has on clients. For example, we have a written framework for understanding how long a person must be out of care before being eligible to be employed at RECLAIM. However, we understand this not as a rule, but a guideline that enables us to really hear what might be unique about the needs or experience of each young person at the centre of a decision.

My understanding of the significance of historical trauma is another influential factor in the shaping of RECLAIM. During the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s in the United States, gay men were dying at an alarming rate. The US government responded by blaming them for their perversion. Those most closely affected by the disease were prevented from having an active role in finding a cure. For decades, people who are transgender have been subjected to extreme forms of gatekeeping and gender policing by both the medical and mental health communities. Because of this history of trauma and mistrust, I knew it would be important that RECLAIM belong to the queer and trans community, and that, especially when receiving services, people needed to know that this place was theirs. This understanding of historical trauma is why clients at RECLAIM also actively volunteer, why their feedback is immediately incorporated in sessions, why their ideas and preferences inform programming, and why their input is sought when RECLAIM is hiring.

As I step back and observe what connects all of these ethics, I notice that all of them squarely centre the experiences of the client. Also, the effectiveness of the worker or organisation is measured by their ability

to be relationally responsive to the local knowledges of those at the centre and to act on what they tell us is helpful and harmful.

Julie: What experiences with struggling to sustain your narrative therapy practice did you have in the past? How did these struggles help prepare you to address the challenges of cultivating an organisational culture that would support narrative practice?

Janet: I was in a practice setting that required clients complete detailed trauma inventories prior to our first meeting. This was a requirement for the agency to receive funding. I felt this was potentially re-traumatising and conflicted with my idea of ethical practice.

At RECLAIM, we understand that mandates from funding sources can put us at odds with what we believe offers the best chance for healing. When meeting with funders, we see this as an opportunity to educate them and reverse the discourse. For example, RECLAIM has taken a stance on using the words 'queer and trans' in our printed material and grant applications, because this is the language most young people are using to identify themselves at this time. We are aware that this may make some potential donors uncomfortable as they are more comfortable with the acronym GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender). We see these as opportunities to educate potential funders about the importance of self-identification and how this is linked to supporting improved mental health for the youth we serve.

It can be challenging to maintain the hope and trust that is the foundation of narrative practice when we have a professional culture that trains us to think about clients in terms of manipulation, resistance and failing appointments. RECLAIM not only takes an active stance against this kind of thinking, but also seeks to support all of its therapists to have a theoretical grounding and wide range of skills that do not produce these kinds of reactions in ourselves or in others.

Julie: What would you say are some organisational practices that directly support a narrative practice?

Janet: It is easy, as practitioners and as organisations, to begin to tell a story about our own helpfulness that does not align with the narrative of those most affected by our efforts. We value relational ethics (McNamee, 2009, 2015) which means we focus on

the effects of what we do and being accountable to the community we serve. When we centre ethics in this way (Reynolds, 2012, 2014) we are able to rapidly respond when client and organisational narratives diverge. As an organisation, our commitment to relational ethics means that our first responsibility is to the effects of our program, not the maintenance of the program.

For example, we became aware through client feedback that we were offering programming delivered by volunteers who were not adequately trained to understand clients' sensitivities about experiences of gender identity. We stopped the program immediately. We engaged a client who had been negatively affected by the program as a lead consultant in its redesign, and this person led the delivery of the new and improved volunteer training. This is one example of how we engage with relational ethics in an attempt to keep our programming close to the lived experiences of clients.

Julie: What have been some of the greatest challenges? What has helped you meet these challenges? How have you continued to centre the relational ethic that informs the organisation as well as the narrative practice at the heart of it?

Janet: About three years into RECLAIM's existence, a complaint was lodged against me with the State of Minnesota Board of Social Work. This is the governmental institution that regulates my practice as a licenced social worker in Minnesota. The complaint raised concerns that clients were involved as volunteers at RECLAIM, noting that this violated the prohibition against multiple relationships.

When we started RECLAIM, we knew that the practice of engaging clients as volunteers would put RECLAIM, and me personally, at risk. We took steps to mitigate this by consulting with a local ethics professional. Clients signed a volunteer consent form. We made it explicit to RECLAIM's board members that being open to engaging clients in multiple ways is an important and intentional element of our response to the needs of the community. We provided training for all staff in the process of navigating the complexity of these relationships.

Anticipating the Board of Social Work hearing produced a lot of fear in me, but it also forced me to articulate clearly what I am able to say now. It forced me to revisit the Minnesota Board of Social Work rules, core principles and values. One of these

values is challenging social injustice. At the hearing, I described the steps we had taken to engage clients who wished to volunteer in a process of consenting to volunteer. I explained why I believed that the core value of challenging social injustice required that we actively engage in multiple relationships with intention and care.

You may not believe it – it is still hard for even me to believe – but at the end of the meeting, many of us were in tears as we talked about the courage it takes to do work in the margins and live our shared values. I came away with some ideas for how to improve the process for clients and felt even more strongly affirmed in our work.

Julie: What is your greatest hope for practitioners who may wish to cultivate an organisational structure that supports narrative practice?

Janet: Sometimes our practices, response to problems or organisational structure may need to take a queer shape. Queering these processes means we take up ways that may not be traditionally validated or institutionally protected ways of working. I believe that these systemic approaches to queering organisations can be addressed with intention, transparency and showing your work by documenting

what you have done, why you have done it, and the impact it has had.

If an organisation is to truly reflect the narrative of the people it serves, it must be prepared to listen deeply and design its organisational structure and policies in response to the unique collective story of the people it serves. It is critical that the organisation itself does not become the story. I heartily encourage each of you to find a way to queer the way you work, drawing from the edges and outskirts of what is known as 'normal', and to claim your own unique way of healing, moving, organising, expressing, and loving. You don't need to work with queer people to queer your organisation.

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Reflection on 'Thinking queerly about narrative-informed organisational development'

By Lorraine Grieves

Lorraine Grieves, M.A. RCC, is the Provincial Program Director role for TransCare BC, which focuses on enhancing and co-ordinating services for trans and gender diverse people in British Columbia, Canada.

I am writing this reflection from Vancouver, BC, Canada, where I live and work on the unceded Coast Salish territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish peoples. As a white, queer, cis woman working within the public health care system to improve services for trans and gender non-binary people in imperfect allyship (Reynolds, 2010), I feel honoured to be invited to reflect on the conversation between Julie and Janet in which a few key themes resonate for me.

One theme that stood out is the radical centring of the communities being served throughout the organisational structure. While narrative approaches centre those we walk alongside in therapeutic practice, it is rare that this is overtly evident in organisational structures. The articulation of RECLAIM's commitment to questioning ways that oppressive practices and forces of dominance play out in what are considered normal organisational behaviours, structures and cultures, has given me much to reflect on as we move forward our work in British Columbia.

Another theme that emerged connects to some local writing and thinking I have come across recently. A local non-profit that serves queer and trans communities here in Vancouver recently circulated a community letter. The letter noted that, in times where there is a culture of fear due to the oppression of marginalised peoples, it can be harder to take risks, both personally and organisationally. It went on to thank some local 'risk takers' and their activism in this climate. I've been thinking a lot about the idea of risk-taking and found it present in Janet's words. The story of how RECLAIM came to be provides a counter-story to organisational marginalisation.

This story eloquently demonstrates the agency and authority of its clients, community members, staff, management, parents and caregivers in both creating and sustaining the work. It also shows how risk-taking is an inherent part of any organisation that is actively queering its structure and work to challenge cis and heteronormative ways of doing the work. This challenges what the prevailing culture sees as normal.

I also found compelling Janet's telling of the ongoing interrogation of taken-for-granted organisational practices typical of hierarchy and funding structures. These ways of queering the work had me wondering how I might take further steps in my own role working within a large government-funded health organisation to disrupt normalising pressures and discourses. Talking back to funders to educate them about RECLAIM's work and to disrupt the requirements of funders that can be harmful is just one of those examples that we can all take away.

The practices of actively ensuring that the organisation belongs to the community it was built in service of, is articulated poignantly as well. This was so clear as I read about Janet standing up in front of her licensing board.

There, rather than taking a position of obedience, she took the necessary risk to educate them about the importance of meaningful inclusion of community members in the work. This narrative flipped the story to make it one of affirmation rather than a disciplinary moment. This story of courageous practice will stick with me; it stands out as a giving back practice that extends far beyond the walls of the organisation and a courageous standing up to structural oppression.

RECLAIM's story inspires me to think BIG about these ideas and to consider the structural ways that I might be complicit in unwittingly participating in normalising organisational discourses that threaten the social justice of our work. Thanks to Janet and Julie for this invitation for us to strive to meet the challenge of doing justice differently outside the therapy room, and to consider the steps we can take at all levels of our workplaces and funding contexts.

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