

Establishing non-criminal records

by Eileen Hurley

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This paper highlights the use of therapeutic letters and documents in working with young men in a US jail. Examples of documents generated for and with young men include those designed to summarise conversations, request an audience, bear witness, invite support, link lives, archive solution knowledges, share skills and knowledges, and perform ceremony and song.

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The young men with whom I work in a local jail here in Rochester, New York, have encouraged my writing of therapeutic letters and our creation of therapeutic documents for a number of reasons. First, as records, these documents stand in contrast to, and are positively different from, their criminal records or their pre-trial and pre-sentencing investigation reports. Second, in a context where an unexpected transfer to another facility may abruptly end therapeutic relationships, the young men can carry these written representations of our conversations with them for future reference. Third, amidst the monotony of 'doing time', receiving mail is an exciting event in and of itself. Letters are highly valued for their capacity to sustain connections with the 'outside world', as well as for their capacity to transport the young men from their current 'inside' circumstances to another (more desirable) place and time.

Finally, the young men appreciate the collaboration and the transparency involved in producing these documents, which they know are the only record kept of our conversations. I am conscious that the young men with whom I speak have prior experience, usually multiple experiences, with being interrogated in relation to their alleged crimes. I check-in frequently with the young men about whether or not it's okay for me to ask them more questions and to verify that we are talking about what they consider to be important to be talking about at this particular time. Often at initial interviews, I 'take notes' only in my mind and wait until our second meeting to ask permission to take notes of their words on paper.

I try to avoid reproducing any practices that might suggest to the young men that their physical imprisonment in the custody of the County would entitle me to the possession of their thoughts or words. Participation in both group and individual meetings is voluntary. Inviting the young men to have a say in setting the time of our meetings is another modest, but significant, act of collaboration in a context where time is not their own, where someone else sets the schedule for when they eat, sleep, shower, toilet, study, play, and so on. I am greatly relieved – thrilled, actually – by comments from the young men such as, 'No-one has ever asked me the kind of questions that you are asking me before ... I *like* these questions!' I understand

this to be an expression of the interest in their own lives that has been sparked by narrative lines of inquiry.

The therapeutic documents included in this paper demonstrate a number of different ways these documents can be employed. For example, they can be used to summarise conversations, request an audience, bear witness, invite support, link lives, archive solution knowledges, share skills and knowledges, and perform ceremony and song.

SUMMARISING CONVERSATIONS

The first example I will provide here is of a therapeutic letter designed to summarise a conversation I shared with a young man named Tyson.

April 19

Dear Tyson,

I appreciate your willingness to meet with me yesterday without any notice. I am writing this letter to check out my understanding of our conversation and to make note of some of the questions that we did not have a chance to address. I hope this is okay with you.

Not long ago, your life *came to a point where the only way out was to get locked up*. GREED had recruited you into *troublesome, illegal, reckless living*. When you think of *reckless living* now, it brings to mind *darkness and nighttime*. You found out that GREED is never satisfied: it demands more and more – your life becomes about *protecting your reputation and staying at the top of your game*.

You had lots of money when GREED was around; but, you *always had to do something that [you] didn't like* in order to get or keep it. You explained that this is not okay with you: because it's immoral, not because it's illegal. You spoke of a conversation that you and your friend, Steve, had about the robbing and stealing and other things [you] did to people. You're not happy about having added to other people's problems by the things you did under the influence of GREED.

You said, *instead of possessions that I can have, I want different things. I want to have fun. I want things that I can't touch or see, but that I can feel – and that feel good.* You spoke of looking for laidback, safe, fun-living. When you imagine fun living, this brings to mind sunniness and daytime.

Although it's hard to say why exactly, you figure that Julie and your mother would not be surprised at your hopes for a life of fun-living. In fact, they – along with Carolyn, Steve, Lisa, your case manager and your probation officer – will join you in your project of laidback, safe, fun-living. Maybe we can think up a way of finding out what they see in you that tells them that you might be able to 'pull off' this plan for fun-living. Is there something they may have seen you doing that would tell them that fun living would be important to you? What do you think it might mean to them to be able to join with you in fun-living? What would it mean to them that you have made this decision that, in spite of GREED'S pull to get you to do things that you do not want to do, you are looking for ways to hold onto the hope of fun-living and good feeling?

Tyson, I will close with just one more question: I understand that GREED played a large part in reckless living; what will have the lead role in fun-living?

Next time we meet, you can let me know if this summary represents what we talked about and if there are any changes or clarifications to make.

Kind regards,
Eileen.

One of the advantages of these 'summarising conversation letters' is that in writing them I become more aware of possibilities for future conversations. In writing this letter to Tyson, for example, various points of entry into the rich development of his 'laidback, safe, fun-living' storyline became more visible to me. At our next meeting, I asked Tyson landscape of identity questions (White 1995, Freedman & Combs 1996)

such as: 'What do you think Steve would tell me about what your unhappiness about adding to other people's problems says about you as a person, and about what you stand for?' And: 'Why is it important to you to have feelings that are good ... instead of having possessions that you can see and touch?'

While writing to Tyson, I also noticed points of entry in the landscape of action (White 1995, Freedman & Combs 1996) that could be explored. Tyson's very early statement: 'It came to a point where the only way out was to get locked up', got me curious about the specific actions that he took to get locked up and about what his intentions or purposes were in finding a way out. I followed up on another point of interest when I asked him, 'Can you tell me about when you first realised you want different things?' These questions only became available to me after I had written the 'summarising conversation letter' that I included above.

REQUESTING AN AUDIENCE

The second example I will share consists of a letter I wrote to Tyson's mother, requesting her participation as an audience to the evolving storyline of 'laidback, safe, fun-living' that Tyson was stepping into.

April 26

Dear Ms. Daniels,

My name is Eileen Hurley. I am a volunteer counsellor at the Monroe County Correctional Facility. I meet with some of the young men to talk about what they think is important to talk about at this time in their lives. Sometimes we talk about the troubles that brought them into jail, other times we talk of current concerns, and very often we speak about what they want for their lives after their release from jail.

Tyson and I have been talking about his hopes for FUN-LIVING after his release: Instead of having possessions that [he] can touch or see, [he] wants different things – things [he] can feel ... that feel good. He is looking for

laidback, safe, fun-living. Tyson named you, his mom, when I asked him, 'Who would not be surprised by your hopes for FUN-LIVING?'

I then asked him questions such as, 'Is there something your mom may have seen you doing that would tell her that FUN-LIVING is important to you? Is there something she sees in you that tells her that you could pull off your plans for FUN-LIVING? What do you think it might mean to her to be able to join with you in FUN-LIVING? What would it mean to your mom that you have made the decision that, in spite of greed's pull to get you to do things that you do not want to do, you are looking for ways to hold onto the hope of fun-living and good feelings.'

Rather than guess about why you would not be surprised by Tyson's desire for FUN-LIVING, we decided to send you this letter to ask you if you would tell us a story about him that fits with this idea of FUN-LIVING. What have you seen in Tyson that tells you something about his desire to have different things for his life? Or his ability to carry out this plan for FUN-LIVING?

You can mail your response to Tyson or to me (at the letterhead address). Thank you for your help with this.

Kind regards,
Eileen Hurley.

When I talked with Tyson about this letter, it led him to a further realisation about his life. He described to me that he had remembered the first time that he had realised he wanted different things for his life: 'It was right after being locked up ... and I got separated from so many things ... I realised that no jails or walls can keep me from the love of my mother. It means the world to me when my mom tells me that she loves me ... and that she's proud of me.' In this way, Tyson was describing that his wish for different things for his life was intricately connected to his relationship with his mother. With release from jail only days away, Tyson determined that these sentiments and his mother's response to the letter would best be expressed face-to-face.

BEARING WITNESS

Sometimes letters can serve a different purpose. They can provide a lasting record of someone bearing witness to an important concept or realisation that a young man has made. This was the case in the following letter I wrote to Nathan on his nineteenth birthday.

July 15
Happy 19th birthday!

Dear Nathan,

You may very well be doing your last day by the time you get this letter.

When we spoke a few weeks ago, you talked about your intention to FALL BACK after your release from jail. You mentioned that FALLING BACK would be 'a new way of cooling' for you, and that this might have you seeking employment, counselling, and other help. You said that you would know you are FALLING BACK when you are spending more time with your daughter, your baby's mother and other family members, and less time hanging on the block and hustling.

The idea of FALLING BACK first came to you during a conversation with your friend, Stack, in the jail downtown. I understand that you and Stack are 'like brothers' and his words meant a lot to you. 'Stack got three? years upstate ... God gave me one more chance', you realised. Wasn't it Stack who emphasised to you that 'seed is more important than other things'? Do you know why Stack would consider FALLING BACK and caring for your daughter important? How would you like to use 'the chance' God gave you?

I was really interested in how you thought that FALLING BACK would be a 'positive' that could make a 'big difference' in your life and the lives of the ones you love: 'People want me to do well ... and I want a different life for my little brother, my daughter, and my niece'. Later, I found myself thinking about what your 'hope of making a better life for your family' reflects about who you want to be as a person and about

the ways of being in the world that are important to you. I wanted to know more about the connections you have sustained by phone while you have been locked up, such as with your little brother on his birthday. I wondered what your loved ones would say about what a difference FALLING BACK might make in their lives and your's.

Nathan, I appreciated having the chance to interview you about FALLING BACK. I think the image of you remembering your little brother, your niece, and your daughter – the tenderness in your expression – is a picture of you that I will take with me into my conversations with other young men who are trying to sustain connections with the ones they love while they're locked up and after their release.

Kind regards,
Eileen.

INVITING SUPPORT

While people are incarcerated, they are separated from loved ones, family and friends. Finding ways to invite support for preferred developments in a young man's life becomes an important part of my work. Sometimes this is achieved through a group letter.

September 18

Dear Karen, Andrew, Mrs. Thames,
Mrs. Mc Elroy, Jasmine, and Ariel,

My name is Eileen Hurley and I have been meeting with Arthur since June. We have had some really interesting conversations during the past few months. Arthur has introduced me to each of you and has spoken about the important place you have in his life and what a significant part you will play in his future. Arthur said it would be all right with him if I wrote this letter to tell you about the hopes and dreams he has for his life, because he figures you will be the

people to support him every step of the way, as you so often have in the past.

The first time I met Arthur, he told me that he 'wasn't made for jail'. Later, when I asked him what he was made for, he said he didn't exactly know yet – but, he knew he wasn't made to be locked up: 'Nobody was made to be locked up; everybody wants to go home'. (Then, he smiled his bright smile!)

According to Arthur, FOOLISHNESS is what led up to his charge. 'Acting beastly, doing stupid stuff (stuff that was unnecessary), living hot, and walking down the street looking for trouble', these are all signs that FOOLISHNESS is around. We also talked about how racism often supports FOOLISHNESS' strategies to bring a person back to jail, or worse! – But this is not what Arthur wants.

Arthur plans on LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE. Arthur describes LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE as 'doing the right thing': 'going to school, getting a PT job, only smoking behind closed doors, living cold, and not starting trouble that doesn't need to be started'. Arthur hopes that LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE may make it possible for him to 'set more goals and do more things'. He believes, 'If you're doing the right thing, then righteousness should come upon you'.

LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE is important to Arthur because this may 'stop a lot of things too, like getting arrested or being locked up'. He intends 'to set a good example' for his younger family members and he dreams of going to college, or working with cars, like his dad. So, if you notice FOOLISHNESS sneaking its way back into Arthur's life and messing with his hopes and dreams, he has already thought of some ways for you to join him in escaping its pull: 'go to the movies, go roller skating, go bowling, or go to my home-girl's'. Do you have any other ideas?

Arthur brings the abilities of 'showing respect to others and doing what I'm expected to do' to his LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE project. Plus, he has the knowledge that his aunt changed her life to leave the streets. I wish I had the chance to ask each of you, 'What do

you know about Arthur, what have you seen him do, that tells you he is capable of LIVING A POSITIVE LIFE?’

Kind regards,
Eileen.

Arthur laughed out loud when he read this letter. This was laughter of approval, ‘This is really me!’ he exclaimed. He then acted in haste to gather the mailing addresses of those to whom he had chosen to send it.

ARCHIVING SOLUTION KNOWLEDGES – WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT FIGHTING

Documents can also be made in order to archive the special knowledges that people have come to in the course of their lives about particular issues they are facing. Finding ways for these documents to occur in collective ways can be particularly significant. For the young men with whom I work, ‘fighting’ is an issue that has permeated their lives. I was interested to ask what they had learned about fighting in the hope that these conversations might diminish some of the harm associated with violence in their lives. The following document was created after our first conversation.

October 30

Dear Erick, Raul, Fred, Byron, Tyshawn, Xavier, Arsenio and Thomas,

Thanks for speaking with me last week in our group meeting and sharing your knowledge about fighting. I am writing this letter to summarise some of your ideas and to ask some more questions. I hope this is okay. I am interested in hearing more about what you think on the matter of fighting.

You started by telling me that fighting can be verbal, physical, mental, or spiritual. There are also different kinds of fighting: life-saving fighting, stupid fighting, and standup guy

fighting. You described certain situations that might bring about certain kinds of fighting. How can you tell the difference between fighting that’s necessary to survive and fighting that’s not? Do you think different kinds of fighting have different effects/results? What does fighting do to people? for people? What makes it easy for fighting to get started? What might keep it from getting started? Who else ‘feels’ fighting, who else is affected by fighting, besides the ones who are throwing the punches?

You pointed out that there is a kind of fighting that does not harm other people, such as the way some characters in movies fight for their children’s lives. How do you know whether or not you have harmed another person? What are your ways of noticing if you have hurt someone you care about?

It is never okay for fighting to get into your relationships with your mothers, your grandmothers, your babies’ moms, or your sisters. Why is this important? How important is this? ... just slightly? ... or a lot? ... or what would you say? Is it important to keep fighting out of any other relationships?

You spoke of fighting as having to do with being a man. You learned about fighting from uncles, brothers, and fathers. You emphasised the importance of protecting your people, your family – all the ones you love. Were you also taught other ways of standing up for your family? Are there instances where not fighting is better for your family? Have you ever taken steps to prevent fighting? Or to help another person avoid fighting? What was your advice?

It’s hard to imagine, but you thought that if you could live the rest of your life without fighting, you would be happy to do that. Is there anyone else you know who would relate to this idea of a life free of fighting? Who would be least surprised to know that you would be happy to live the rest of your life without fighting? What do you picture a life without fighting to look like? What sort of happiness might this bring?

I have a colleague who meets with other young men who are in the middle of trying to

make some decisions about the fighting in their lives, and he is interested in sharing your ideas with them. Maybe we will have the chance for you to let me know what you think about this on Wednesday ...

Kind regards,
Eileen.

Unfortunately, we were unable to continue this process because many of the young men who had been involved in our initial conversation were released from custody. The young men did receive copies of this first letter, however, and they all agreed that they would be interested to hear how other young men would answer these questions. They guessed that 'fighting' is a relatively 'familiar' experience for many young men. I hope that the process of talking about fighting and considering the questions in the above letter will continue with other groups of young men in the future.

I'd also be interested to hear from any readers who might ask these questions to the young men with whom they work! I am increasingly interested in ways that letters from the young men I am working with can be sent to young men in different contexts who are also dealing with similar issues and experiences. Through David Denborough at the Dulwich Centre Institute of Community Practice, there have already been opportunities for the young men I work with to exchange messages with young men in an East Timorese prison, and also with young men in a detention centre in Ireland¹.

LINKING LIVES, CEREMONY AND SONG

On the occasion of a colleague (Mike Boucher) being absent from our weekly group meeting with older men at the jail, I had the opportunity to write a document as a letter to Mike from the group:

September 4

Dear Mike,

Last week, some of us were having a hard time dealing with the stress that comes from

living in one room with fifty other guys and having so much of our lives controlled by the decisions that Deputies make. We got to talking about what we do when others, especially those in positions of authority, act unfairly or disrespectfully towards us.

Eileen asked if it would be okay to write down some of our ideas, which we could add to later if we wanted, and John suggested that what we were talking about might have to do with 'exercising freedom while incarcerated'. Here's what we do:

- some of us come to group
- some of us remember that we have choices
- many of us walk away from the problem
- some of us remember the ones who love us and what it will mean to them if we lose our good time, or get sent upstate, or get put in the box
- we've learned to approach others with caution
- sometimes we've got to hold other people's shit. Instead of reacting to their shit and getting into trouble, we can ask ourselves, 'what's wrong with that guy?'
- a lot of us think ahead to the potential outcomes of certain responses
- some of us older men get together to talk and to share our experiences of living with the young guys
- we try to treat other people with respect
- some of us own up to our part
- some of us humble ourselves
- some of us focus on simply doing our time
- others of us stay busy
- we realise that our current circumstances are temporary; we are not planning to have to live under these conditions forever.

It is good to have you back this week, Mike. We missed you last week ... and, as you may have noticed, you missed an interesting conversation.

From the men in the Monday afternoon St. Joe's transition group

Rather than mail this letter to Mike, I read it aloud to him at our next group meeting and he then offered an outsider-witness reflection. With everyone's consent, I then sent a copy to David Denborough, who responded by putting the men's words into song, a common practice in narratively-based community work (Denborough 2002). While we did not have access in the jail to the equipment necessary to play David's recording of the song, it was recited instead.

**Exercising freedom
St Joe's transition group**

*When you're living in a room with 50 guys
there ain't much control over your own life
so what is it that we do?
Well, we talked about this one Monday
afternoon*

*We've learned to walk away from the problem
Or to hold onto the thoughts of our loved ones
We've learned to approach others with caution
And to exercise freedom when we can*

*We try to think ahead to the outcome
We try to talk together with the younger ones
We focus on simply doing our time
And we exercise freedom when we can*

*Some of us have learnt to stay busy
We realise that our circumstances here are
temporary
We try to own up to our part
'Coz that's exercising freedom in our own
hearts*

*When you're living in a room with 50 guys
there ain't much control over your own life
so what is it that we do?
Well, let's talk about that next Monday
afternoon*

REFLECTIONS

In this paper, I have shared some examples of my use of therapeutic letters and documents from my work with young men incarcerated at a County Jail. The examples offered here describe knowledges about 'laidback, safe, fun-living', about 'falling back', about 'living a positive life', about 'fighting and its effects', and about 'ways of living in a room with 50 guys'. These are all knowledge of life and skills of living that have been identified by the young men as being relevant to bring to reality their dreams of 'lasting freedom'.

Providing opportunities for young men to speak about what is important to them while incarcerated has its challenges. Producing therapeutic and collective documents together, however, is providing momentum and a sense of hopefulness in this work.

NOTE

¹ This correspondence may at a later date be available via the Dulwich Centre Institute of Community Practice website (<http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/InstituteofCommunityPractice.htm>)

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