



Shifting 'c.m.i.' (cannot make it) to
'Can Make I.T.' (can make ideas together)
through letter writing and exchange

by Sharon Sng



Sharon works as a therapist in a counselling centre in Singapore. She finds that narrative ideas and practices provide helpful and respectful ways to invite people to rewrite their preferred stories. She likes to explore different ways to include collective contributions so that people can mutually support one another in their preferred stories. Sharon can be contacted by email: sharon@counsel.org.sg

Abstract

This article describes the use of writing and exchanging letters to invite and strengthen people's preferred stories of themselves, and to reduce the influence of a failure or 'c.m.i.' (cannot make it) identity. These double-storied letters articulate a person's insider knowledge about responding to unhelpful expectations about achieving 'success' in life. The letter exchanges offer people opportunities for collective healing as they link their stories about dealing with a problem, supporting a 'Can Make I.T.' (can make ideas together) identity and thickening preferred stories.

Key words: letter writing; therapeutic documents; insider knowledge; double-storied; collective healing; preferred stories; narrative practice

Introduction

As a counsellor, I talk with people in the privacy of a counselling room. Although this setting can help people feel safe to share their problems, it can also isolate and disconnect people from others who face similar problems. This article includes examples of letters I have used to invite people to elude isolation and join with others. These letters record double-storied accounts of people's lives, and contribute to a mutual and rich development of the correspondents' preferred stories of themselves. Writing down stories returns agency to people in ways that protect their privacy and allows them to share their knowledge and skills without the physical presence of an outsider witness. Many people take on the failure identity conclusions of 'c.m.i.' when they feel that they do not measure up to expectations. Letter writing and exchanges can strengthen joint efforts to deconstruct values and beliefs about problematic social expectations of normality, and can create openings for preferred narratives, keeping alive stories of 'Can Make I.T.' (can make ideas together).

Theoretical influences

Foucault's (1973, 1979, 1980) work on modern power and its effects on normalising judgment has helped me to see that a 'c.m.i.' identity reflects wider social discourses about perfectionism and collectivism (Russell, 2007; White, 2002). These dominant discourses and the accompanying normative expectations about behaviours are reproduced in all relational contexts. They develop into a truth against which people measure and judge themselves. This privileges a certain way of living while marginalising those who live their lives in different ways (Walther & Carey, 2009). Letter writing and exchange helps a therapist to collaborate with people to deconstruct the social discourses that judges them as 'c.m.i.' or failures. Through the letters, we reconstruct an identity that 'Can Make I.T.' by exchanging expectations of normality with acts of solidarity (Denborough, 2014, p. 69). The letters show people choosing not to go along with normative social expectations, and instead following their own wishes and preferences for their lives (White, 2002, 2003).

Stella's story: Double-story development

'Eating Disorder' (ED) had been present in Stella's² life for 10 years. It starved her and fed her a single story of herself

as 'c.m.i.'. Stella's sense of identity had been shaped by a series of social and relational events leading to a profound sense of moral failure in relation to her life (Russell, 2007, p. 22; also see White & Epston, 1990). In Stella's words, 'a series of broken relationships and misunderstandings seem to reiterate that I'm not good enough for my friends. ED seems to be a constant reminder that I've not made the right choice to live God's way and under his rule.' She believed that she was 'c.m.i.' even in God's eyes.

In our conversations, we externalised ED and identified a range of habits, tricks and constraints associated with it (Kronbichler, 2004; Russell, 2007; White, 2007). ED tricked Stella into thinking that 'maybe, as much as I long for recovery, I fear it just as intensely. I fear facing the pain of loneliness and rejection without the ED. I am terrified of gaining weight. And I fear not having the ED to blame for singlehood.' Another habit was comparing herself and competing with others according to a gendered discourse of attractiveness. We also explored what was absent but implicit in her feelings of loneliness and hurt in relationships, which was that she appreciated in people and relationships qualities such as genuineness, honesty and kindness. This double-storied conversation led to a rich story development that strengthened her steps towards countering 'c.m.i.' and creating 'Can Make I.T.' (see Freedman, 2012; White, 2003).



Figure 1. Lettering artwork by Stella

A turning point in our conversation was when Stella realised that 'everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it' (see Figure 1), and that she was part of God's promise that he will make everything beautiful in his time (see Figure 2 on following page). This represented a movement away from ideas about being judged as a failure to God.

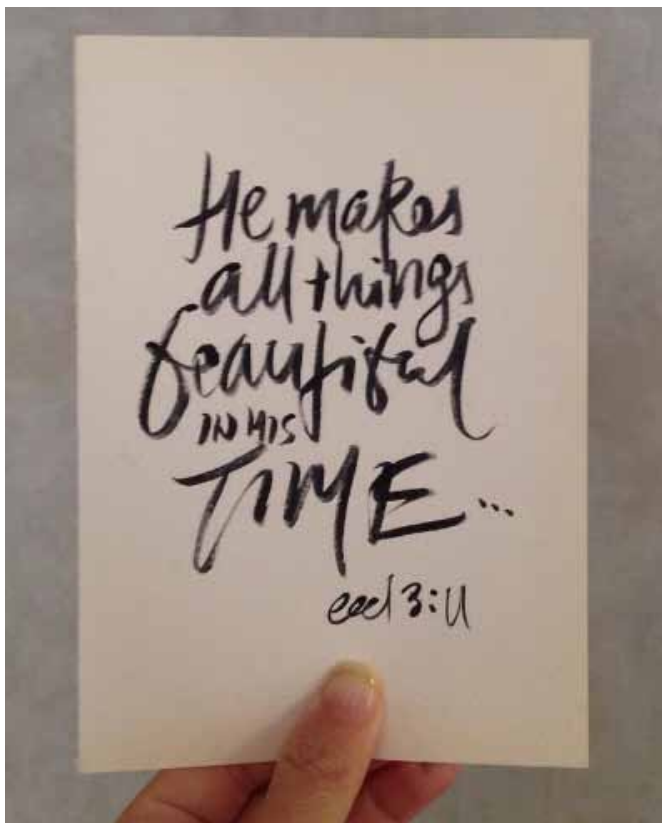


Figure 2. Lettering artwork by Stella

Stella expressed a wish to offer her story to others with similar struggles once she was 'fully recovered from ED'. However, I then invited her to write her story to another person to counter the discourse that one has to be 'perfectly recovered' before telling one's story.

Below is my letter of invitation to Stella.

Dear Stella,

At the last session, you talked about how you hope your story might contribute to others. I am wondering if you would be interested in writing to a person who also struggles with ED (eating disorder), depression and perfectionism in her life. Like you, she is taking small steps to disinvite Perfectionism, but there are also bad days when Perfectionism makes her feel incompetent by comparing and competing with others, so she feels that she is never good enough, that her body is not strong enough, that she is not thin enough or that she is the wrong kind of person and that's why her relationships do not work out.

I notice that ED/Depression/Perfectionism invite people to isolate themselves, and I hope to link people through letters so that they can connect through sharing similar issues, and, more importantly, stand together against the problem (like your idea of 'not walking alone').

If this interests you, can I invite you to reflect on and write in response to the questions below? The questions are just a guide and you may choose to respond beyond these questions. The focus is not so much on revealing the details of your situation but more on the actions that you have taken to stand up to the influence of problems in your life. You can choose not to reveal your name.

These are the questions:

1. What have been the effects of ED/Perfectionism/ any name for the problem that you feel comfortable to write about on, you and your relationships, etc.?
2. What are the commitments that keep you going on this journey to live the life you want for yourself and not the life ED/ Perfectionism wants for you?
3. What are some of the small actions that you have taken to disinvite ED/Perfectionism and invite Grace/Compassion/Peace (or any other words that represent your preferred values in life)?

Each person's story is unique, so I will share the words that will be most appropriate to the other person's context. This helps to ensure that there will be no comparison brought on by Perfectionism when the other person reads your letter. I will invite her to respond to you in a letter so that there can be a mutual sharing of stories and a stronger collective effort to resist the problem.

If you choose to take up this invitation, I hope your letter will not only be a resource to another person but that it might also serve as a testimony and resource for you. Please let me know if you would like to write and receive a letter.

Thank you.

Regards,
Sharon

Stella gladly took up the invitation and wrote this letter to Frances:

Dear Person,

Thank you for taking time to read this! I'm afraid I don't have an amazing story of recovery to offer you, but I hope some of what I have to say will echo with you and be a bearer of hope.

The scary thing about ED is that it presents itself as a friend, and promises security and companionship.

And before you know it, you're stuck in this really bad relationship that you can't seem to get out of. You dread facing another day with this possessive 'friend' raging in your life, and yet you fear facing life without it.

In short, I would say that ED has robbed me of the ability to love myself (not that I was very good at it before!). And it is from this that other problems surface – the constant stream of negative self-talk, the false sense of security and success that you derive from being thin, the striving for a goal that the logical part of you knows is unattainable, the life of darkness, loneliness and secrecy.

To be very honest, I have little confidence that I will recover. But someone once told me to just keep growing the other areas in your life so that ED eventually takes up less and less space. And this is what I'm committed to: learning to be thankful for even the smallest things, to appreciate beauty in unexpected places (including myself!), to take the focus off myself and to be a dispenser of grace and love.

Here are some of the things that have kept me going:

- I can count on you project: For a year, I took a picture of something I was thankful for each day. I challenged a friend to join in, but she said she didn't want to force herself to be thankful when she didn't feel it. But that was precisely my takeaway from this project – that being thankful doesn't always come easy, and it takes practice to turn your perspective on things around.
- Life is beautiful project: This was another year of photo taking in which I challenged myself to redefine my notions of beauty. I think ED plus my job as a designer caused me to focus on a very surface-level kind of aesthetics. This was me making a conscious effort to overcome that.
- Lettering: My current pet project! Every now and then, I'll just write out a few quotes for specific people who are on my mind and send them off as an encouragement. This is my way to counter ED's self-centred focus and embrace a more other-people-centred way of life. ED tends to demand all your attention, so this really helps me to grow my other relationships.

And so, I'm leaving you with this quote by Tyler Kent White



It's my wish for you to increasingly see your own beauty, to realise that there is strength in weakness, beauty in imperfection, and to learn to love the hardest person to love – yourself

Press on!!

Stella

Thickening the story of Can Make I.T.

I read the letter aloud to Frances and she was moved to know that another person was standing in solidarity with her against the problem. We talked about the links to her ideas, values and commitments. Frances wrote a letter to Stella in response:

Hey there,

First of all, I would like to thank you for reaching out to me with your letter and that beautiful piece of art. I know it takes a lot of courage to write down all these things and I really appreciate it. Knowing that this is not only my struggle but that there are also others who are trying to get through similar stuff makes me feel less isolated. I am trying to do my best to be present. My reply has been a bit delayed due to the flu and work issues but you can see this letter as my effort to stay on the track no matter what.

As I try to mend my soul, I realise the destructive effects of my ED and perfectionism on me. They have totally destroyed my identity, and damaged my sense of competence and my self-confidence. They

have left me a withered person who feels like she has no place among other humans because she is fat. Basically I attributed all the horrible things that have happened to me to being bigger than others. I let my friends and my lovers abuse me because I was feeling that I was a lesser person. I forgot, or may be never really learnt, the meaning of being loved and taken care of.

My ED always walked hand-in-hand with my depression, anxiety and some impulse control problems. However, I never let these take full control of me. I cannot recall how I managed to survive earlier, but in these last 2.5 years, I have tried to be present and this has kept me going.

I am a very competitive person by nature and it puts me off when I cannot deliver things the way I want to. But I have learnt to take things slowly. This was possible through minimising my goals and expectations of myself. I read a lot about other people's experiences, and I also try to talk about my situation openly, which has allowed me some unexpected exchanges with others about their own experiences. I picked up yoga, which helps me to focus on my own journey and body.

I printed out a list of 10 things to keep in mind. I found it online and pasted it on my desk. Every morning and every time I feel down, I read it. I find strength in these little things. I am attaching the list for you.

10 things to keep in mind

- 1. Do not lose sight of what truly matters.*
- 2. It is okay to be alone or pull back from the world.*
- 3. You are not always in control.*
- 4. What other people think is irrelevant.*
- 5. Don't give up.*
- 6. You don't have to know all the answers.*
- 7. You are enough.*
- 8. Stay present.*
- 9. Your feelings will not kill you.*
- 10. You are human.*

I really try to stop beating myself up. I do this one day at a time. I am not in a position to give any advice. I hope that sharing my struggle might help you to remember that you are not alone in suffering. Some days it feels like you are at the bottom of a dark well and this is okay. Just keep in mind that the sun is shining somewhere up there.

Cheers!

Frances

Although there were no guiding questions given to Frances, the first letter influenced her retelling of her story. This connection through letters contributed to a collective movement from an internalised identity of 'c.m.i.' to a relational identity of 'Can Make I.T.' (see Combs & Freedman, 2016).

Small actions for collaboration in letter writing and letter exchanges

In Asian cultures, people might acquiesce to a therapist's invitation to write to another person out of respect for the therapist-expert. The following are some ideas to shift power and privilege from the therapist to the person.

Warming the invitation

'Warming' the invitation helps people try something new and 'unusual' in therapy: writing about one's story to a stranger (Bateson, 1972; Burnham, 2005). First, listening to the story of the problem and its effects helps to reinforce that we are on the same team against the problem. Second, externalising the problem separates the person from the problem, thus preparing people to talk about possible gaps in their stories and their preferred wishes for their life.

Explaining the intent of the letter writing and exchange as a possible contribution to another person helps people to be an appreciative audience to another person. Other ways to warm the invitation are: offering a choice to participate, emphasising choice in describing the details of the problem, offering other alternatives such as writing an editorial if a person is not comfortable with writing a letter. With Frances, I documented her responses to Stella's letter so that she could include them in her letter to Stella (see White, 1988; White & Epston, 1990).

Decentred but influential

The guiding questions in the therapist's invitation letter, based on externalising and re-authoring maps, invite people to tell 'experience-near' stories that restore their preferences for their lives and do not focus only on the problem's effects (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990).

I do not offer the naming of the problem as 'c.m.i.' and the preferred identity as 'Can Make I.T.' if these do not fit people's context and language. It is more important to use people's own words when naming the problem and the preferred story. This protects people's agency and strengthens their influence over the problem.

The letters are shared via me so that I can share the words that apply most to the other person's context. This minimises any possible comparisons that could sneak in with ED and perfectionism (see Russell, 2007). The questions are adapted to a person's context to facilitate the process of retelling their story according to their particular wisdom and wishes for their lives (see Epston, 1999, 2011).

Strengthening the links

To encourage mutual accountability between the sender and the recipient, I read out the letters as a way of retelling the sender's story. I then ask for the recipient's responses using questions from the outsider-witnessing map (White, 2007). This two-way sharing and acknowledgment of a person's influence over their problems circulates and links people's richly described preferred stories.

Effects of letter writing and exchange

Keeping alive stories of 'Can Make I.T.'

Letters preserve people's words so they do not 'fade and disappear the way conversation does' (Epston, 1994, p. 31). They allow clients to reflect and write about their own emerging stories of their skills and knowledges about resisting the problems in their life (White, 1988). As Freedman and Combs (1996) pointed out, when people move from being in a conversation with the therapist, to writing their story for another audience, it helps people to create and perform preferred meanings in their lives. For Frances and Stella, writing helped them retell and recreate stories of 'Can Make I.T.'.

Their decision to write to another person was an exception to their problem stories. This was the first time Stella and Frances had retold their stories to a stranger. This allowed re-authoring conversations about their preferred identity that contrasted with the silencing effect of 'c.m.i.' and the

persistent 'failure conversations' in their minds. This helped to minimise the judgment that comes with self-assessment and being self-engrossed (Russell, 2007, p. 24) by contributing to a collective compassion and sense of journeying together, via letters, towards preferred goals in life. As Stella put it, the letters helped her to 'take the focus off myself and be a dispenser of grace and love'.

Returning agency to the client

Writing letters counters the 'c.m.i.' identity and minimises the voices of Shame or Guilt, which tell people they do not have a good story, that theirs is a 'shameful' story (see Madsen, 2007; White, 2002). The letters reduce isolation and disconnection, and instead privilege people's insider knowledge (Gerlitz, 2015; Madigan, 2007, 2012; Nylund, 2002; White & Epston, 1990). This is different from therapeutic letters written by a therapist to a client. The therapist is de-centred (Gerlitz, 2015; Stevens, 2010); agency is returned to the person who decides on the extent of disclosure and the words used in the letter.

Co-creating appreciative audiences

Letters normalise people's experiences and increase possibilities for change through real-life testimonial. They allow people to experience a willing and appreciative audience, albeit from a safe distance and with anonymity. The anonymity helps people to share openly and to co-create a 'community of care' that goes beyond the private and protected space of therapy.

The process of telling and retelling through letters allows us to be 'nourished by our stories being fed back to ourselves' (Myerhoff, 2007, p. 25), leading to further strengthening of a self-identity as someone who 'Can Make I.T.' and is bigger than the problem of 'c.m.i.'.

People's 'expert knowledge' report

Letters offer a useful progress report, documenting a person's development and their influence over the problem over time, hence offering a different perspective in their own words (Stevens, 2010). This returns the agency to the person, rather than it being left to the 'expert' therapist to chronicle the person's growth using psychological language (Handsaker, 2012; Madsen, 2007; White, 2007). Letters make visible people's attempts to act against the problem and allow the preferred story to be recorded in a lasting form (Fox, 2003; Mann, 2000). This offers professionals a different view of the people they work with, one that is centred on people's stories of abilities and connections, rather than deficits and struggles. For Stella and Frances, letter writing offered an experience of 'Can Make I.T.' as they contributed to each other's lives, not just through their lived experience of the problems but also through their wisdom in responding to the problems.

Responding to possible challenges with letter writing

In my context, the cultural discourse of privileging humility can make it difficult to talk about one's abilities as this might be seen as prideful. However, the focus of these letters is on articulating preferred purposes and actions in life, even the smallest actions of everyday living, so that people feel good enough by their own standards.

I try to engage a person's choice of an appreciative audience, but a person might be afraid that the audience will be dismissive. In these instances, we might invite people to consider other personally meaningful connections, for example a pet, a stuffed toy, a higher spiritual being or someone who is no longer present in the person's life (Madsen, 2007; White, 1997). Getting the person to write from the perspectives of these appreciative allies would be an interesting way to consider a person's influence over a problem and enactment of a new life.

Conclusion

Letter writing offers relationships with others, even if they do not know each other, to develop alternative stories through a process of mutual accountability, care and support. The exchange of letters helped Stella and Frances to deconstruct

the 'normal' practices and expectations of success in life, to challenge ideas of what is normal and to value small everyday actions that fit with their values. Stories shared back and forth contribute to a community of concern that can invite change in people's identities and lives. Letter writing also enables the community to stand up to practices that are taken-for-granted and assumed to be valued by society. Communal re-storying keeps alive people's preferences for their lives, and builds a community of mutual contributions. The therapeutic effect of letters can continue outside therapy and even after the therapy sessions are over (Epston, 2011; Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004; Stevens, 2010).

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Notes

1. This is an acronym for the Singlish term 'cannot make it', which means not good enough or a failure. This acronym is in small letters to distinguish it from the preferred word and identity of 'Can Make I.T.'
2. Names in the article have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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