

Re-Membering Conversations

Re-membering conversations are shaped by the conception that identity is founded upon an "association of life" rather than on a core self. This association of life has a membership composed of the significant figures and identities of a person's past, present, and projected future, whose voices are influential with regard to the construction of the person's identity. Re-membering conversations provide an opportunity for people to revise the memberships of their association of life: to upgrade some memberships and to downgrade others; to honour some memberships and to revoke others; to grant authority to some voices in regard to matters of one's personal identity, and to disqualify other voices with regard to this.

Re-membering conversations are not about passive recollection but about purposive reengagements with the history of one's relationships with significant figures and with the identities of one's present life and projected future. There are many options with regard to the identification of figures and identities that might be re-membered in people's lives. These figures and identities do not have to be directly known in order to be significant in re-membering conversations. For example, they may be the authors of books that have been important or characters from movies or comics. Nor do these figures and identities have to be people; they could be the stuffed toys of a person's childhood or a favorite pet.

Jessica

Jessica, a woman in her forties, consulted me about the consequences of the abuse that she was subjected to by her parents during her childhood and adolescence. She had been isolated in her experience of the abuse, and her struggle to deal with its consequences had been a major theme of her life. These consequences included highly negative conclusions about her identity: that she was worthless as a person and that her life was hopeless. Because of the despair that had been constantly with her, Jessica had come very close to abandoning her life on a number of occasions. However, she had survived, and as an outcome of my effort to understand what had at least minimally sustained her through these times of crisis, I learned that Jessica had managed to hold onto a faint hope that her life might be different at some future time.

In response to learning this, I began to interview Jessica about this hope. I was keen to understand how she had managed to maintain a relationship with this hope despite everything she'd been through. I was also keen to learn of any experiences that might have verified, for Jessica, that these hopes were valid for her life. In response to my questions, she began to tell me a story about a neighbor whom she thought might have played a part in verifying and sustaining this hope. For a period of about 2 years, until Jessica's family relocated when she was age 9, this neighbor had taken Jessica in when she was hurting. Among other things, this neighbor had physically comforted Jessica, had fed her when she was hungry, and had introduced her to sewing and knitting, which were this neighbour's favorite hobbies. After encouraging Jessica to more fully draw out this neighbour's contribution to her life, I encouraged her to reflect on what this contribution might say about who she was in the eyes of this neighbor—about what this might say with regard to what this neighbor appreciated about her identity.

- "Do you have any understanding of why this neighbor took you in like this?"
- "What is your guess about why she contributed to your life in this way?"

- "What could it be that she appreciated about you that your parents seemed oblivious to?"
- "What do you think she was recognizing about you that wasn't visible to your parents?"
- "Do you know what she valued in you that was overlooked by others?"

In response to these questions, Jessica began to voice some very different understandings about herself that included positive conclusions about her own worth. At first these positive conclusions were tentatively stated, and it was quite clear that she was surprised to hear herself speaking about her own identity in this way. As our conversation unfolded these conclusions about her own worth became much firmer. This marked the first step in a reconstruction of Jessica's identity.

After reviewing this neighbor's contribution to Jessica's life, our conversation turned to an account of the inverse—that is, to Jessica's contribution to the neighbor's life. The very idea that she, as a young girl who had been so traumatized, may have made a contribution to the life of this neighbor was startling to Jessica. She had always assumed that she had simply been the passive recipient of what the neighbor had to give her, that she was simply a passenger in this connection. Because of this entrenched one-way account of her connection with this neighbor, it was necessary for me to provide, through my questions, a scaffold that would make it possible for Jessica to become knowledgeable about her contribution to the life of the neighbor. This scaffold was provided by questions including:

- "Did you accept this neighbor's invitation for you to join her in what was clearly precious to her—that is, her knitting and sewing? Or did you reject this invitation?"
- "In response to this invitation, did you join her in this precious interest, or were you closed to this?"
- "In joining with her in this way, were you honoring what she could give to you that was precious to her, or did your response dishonor this?"

- "What is your guess about what it was like for this neighbor to experience your joining her in this interest in knitting and sewing?"
- "Do you have any thoughts about what this honoring might have brought to her life?"
- "How might her life have been different on account of your responsiveness?"

In response to questions like these, Jessica began to develop an account of her contribution to the life of this neighbor. There was some delight for Jessica in this, but she also experienced many other strong emotions. At times during this part of our conversation she was in tears and quite lost for words.

The development of this account of Jessica's contribution to the life of this neighbor provided a foundation for questions that encouraged further reflection, this time on how Jessica's responses might have touched the neighbor's sense of identity. This reflection was aided by questions about how Jessica's contribution might have affected the neighbor's sense of who she was and of her sense of purpose, about how this might have validated and reinforced the purposes and values that this neighbor treasured, and about how this might have enriched the neighbor's understanding of what her life was about.

- "What is your guess about how this shaped your neighbor's sense of what her life was about?"
- "How do you think this might have affected her sense of purpose?"
- "Could this have reinforced any values that might have been precious to her?"
- "If so, what's your speculation about which values were reinforced?"
- "How might this have affected what your neighbor believed to be important about life?"
- "Do you have any thoughts about how her sense of her own life might have been different for knowing you in the way that she did?"

Jessica was powerfully moved by these and other similar questions, and she was tearful for much of this part of our conversation. The idea that she could have made such a contribution to the neighbor's life and sense of identity was quite overwhelming for Jessica. Because she had assumed that her connection with this neighbor was an entirely one-way phenomenon, the understanding that it might have been two-way in its consequences was, to Jessica, quite awesome: "I thought I was just a burden to everyone. Who would have thought that as a 7 year-old girl I could have given anything back? There is something strange that's been happening to me as we have been talking. I am not sure what this is about, but I think that it is because for the first time I am feeling respect for the little girl that I was."

Months later, when reviewing the course of our meetings, Jessica remarked that she considered this first therapeutic conversation to be a turning point in her life. The conversation had made it possible for her to give meaning to aspects of her life that she had previously neglected: She was now able to understand many aspects of the way that she lived to be a testimony to this neighbor's sentiment of living, and to conclude that many of her initiatives of living were in honor of this neighbor's contribution to her life. This included some recent initiatives Jessica had taken in searching out and assisting other women who had been subject to abuse in childhood. This conversation had been a turning point around which the highly negative conclusions that she had held about her own identity were eroded and displaced by more positive conclusions. From this point on Jessica gradually became less vulnerable to the critical understandings that she had held about her own life and that had been overwhelming her.

Saying Hullo Again

No matter how often I witness these dramatic turning points in therapeutic conversations, the difference that can be made by the appropriate question at the appropriate time never fails to surprise me. What was it that shaped my questions in this conversation with Jessica? To a significant extent, these questions were shaped by a map

that I refer to as a "re-membering conversations map." The development of this map has its genesis in my consultations with people experiencing loss and grief, and I will say a little about this history here.

In 1988 I published an article titled "Saying Hullo Again: The Incorporation of the Lost Relationship in the Resolution of Grief." This article gave an account of the work that I had developed through my consultations with people who were experiencing what at the time was frequently referred to as a "delayed grief reaction" or "pathological mourning." Most of these people had already received intensive and lengthy treatments that had been oriented by normative ideas about grieving. Many of these normative ideas sponsored the "saying goodbye" metaphor, which was associated with the goal of achieving acceptance of the loss of the loved one and the development of a desire to get on with a new life that is detached from the loved one.

In my first meetings with these people, it was clear to me that they had already lost too much. It was apparent that they had not only lost a loved one, but that they had also lost a substantial part of their own sense of self, of their own identity. Without prompting, these people put me in touch with the consequences of these losses, freely relating details of their subsequent sense of emptiness and desolation, of their feelings of worthlessness and of despair.

It was also clear to me that, under these circumstances, any further grief counseling shaped by a normative model—that is, one that specifies the stages of the grief process according to the saying goodbye metaphor—would only complicate the situation further, that this would only serve to exacerbate their sense of emptiness and desolation and their feelings of worthlessness and despair. The incorporation of the lost relationship seemed a far more appropriate goal than further encouraging these people to forfeit this relationship. My therapeutic explorations of the "saying hullo" metaphor were prompted by this consideration.

Guided by the saying hullo metaphor, I formed and introduced questions that I hoped would open up the possibility for people in these circumstances to reclaim their relationship with the lost loved one. Surprised by the effect of these questions in the resolution of the sense of emptiness and desolation, and in the resolution of the feel-

ings of worthlessness and despair, I decided to explore the metaphor further. I expected that a fuller understanding of the processes involved would enable me to more effectively assist people to reposition themselves in relation to the death of a loved one, a repositioning that would bring the relief so strongly sought after.

In the "Saying Hullo Again" article I outlined some of the categories of questions that seemed particularly effective in contributing to this reincorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief. These were the sort of questions that I asked Jessica when inviting her to witness her identity through the eyes of her neighbor—when I invited her to speculate about what this neighbor's contribution to Jessica's life might say about what she appreciated and valued about Jessica.

Also included in the article were categories of questions I had developed that were effective in encouraging people to:

- Explore the real and potential effects of these preferred understandings about their identity on their daily life
- Contemplate ways in which these understandings might be resurrected and circulated within the context of their social networks, which could include exploring possibilities for recruiting an audience to these understandings about their identity
- Speculate about how this might provide a foundation for them to proceed with their lives

Additionally, the article touched on the contribution that the person had made to the life of their lost loved one and on how this contribution might have shaped the sense of identity of the person who had died. After writing this article I more fully developed this aspect of the therapeutic inquiry. This development is evident in the questions I asked Jessica when inviting her to speculate about how this connection with her neighbor might have affected the neighbor's sense of who she was and her sense of purpose, about how this connection might have validated and reinforced the values that this neighbor treasured, and about how this connection might have enriched the neighbor's understanding of what life was about.

The Benefits and Purpose of Re-Membering Conversations

Through further explorations of the saying hullo metaphor, and upon reading the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986), a cultural anthropologist, I began to refer to therapeutic conversations that focused on the resolution of grief as "re-membering conversations." In Chapter 4 I give a short description of Myerhoff's field-work with an elderly Jewish community in Venice, Los Angeles, in which she introduces the re-membering metaphor. Here, I will briefly touch on the significance that Myerhoff (1982) attributes to the re-membering of lives in the identity projects of the members of this community:

To signify this special type of recollection, the term *remembering* may be used, calling attention to the reaggrega-tion of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's own prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story. Re-membering, then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness, (p. 111)

This definition of re-membering evokes the image of a person's life and identity as an association or a club. The membership of this association of life is made up of the significant figures of a person's history, as well as the identities of the person's present circumstances, whose voices are influential with regard to how the person constructs his or her own identity. Re-membering conversations provide an opportunity for people to engage in a revision of the membership of their associations of life, affording an opening for the reconstruction of their identity. Myerhoff (1982) draws out some of the social mechanisms that contribute to re-membered lives:

Private and collective lives, properly re-membered, are interpretive. Full or "thick description" is such an analysis. This involves finding linkages between the group's shared, valued beliefs and symbols, and the specific historical events. Particularities are subsumed and equated with grander themes, seen as exemplifying ultimate concerns. (p. 111)

Re-membering, as defined by Myerhoff, contributes to the development of a "multivoiced" sense of identity and facilitates activity in making sense of one's existence and achieving a sense of coherence through the "ordering" of life. It is through re-membering that "life is given a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future" (p. 111).

This concept of re-membering gave me another perspective on "saying hullo again" conversations and a fuller understanding of some of the mechanisms of these conversations that were contributing to the very positive outcomes that I was consistently encountering in consultations with people. The concept of re-membering also inspired me to extend these conversations, and they have since become more prevalent in my work generally, not just in consultations over experiences of grief and loss.

I believe that these re-membering practices are generally relevant to therapeutic conversations because they open opportunities for people to challenge what has been so isolating of them—that is, opportunities for people to challenge the dominant notions of identity in Western culture that are associated with the construction of an encapsulated self, one that emphasizes norms about self-possession, self-containment, self-reliance, self-actualization, and self-motivation. These contemporary Western social and cultural forces that promote isolated, single-voiced identities actually provide the context that generates many of the problems for which people seek therapy. Re-membering conversations provide an antidote to these forces. They also provide alternative ways for people to understand their identities and alternative avenues of identity formation.

In the therapeutic context, re-membering conversations:

- Evoke "life" as a "membered" club and "identity" as an "association" of life, in contrast to notions of identity that construct an encapsulated self. These re-membering conversations encourage the development of notions of identity that emphasize the contributions that others make to our lives and to our understandings of self.
- Contribute to the development of a multivoiced sense of identity, rather than the single-voiced sense of identity that is a feature of the encapsulated self. In this multivoiced sense of identity people find that their lives are joined to the lives of others around shared and precious themes. This is a sense of identity that features positive but non-heroic conclusions about one's actions in life and about who one is.
- Open possibilities for the revision of one's membership of life, which is mostly achieved by the upgrading and honoring of some memberships. In this upgrading, certain voices are granted more authority with regard to matters of one's personal identity, and this has the effect of disqualifying other voices. It can also have the effect of revoking some memberships.
- Richly describe the preferred versions of identity and the knowledges of life and skills of living that have been cogenerated in the significant relationships of people's lives. In reviewing these memberships, these accounts of identity and these knowledges and skills can be explored in their particularities. This contributes significantly to people's sense of being knowledgeable about their life, which provides a basis for them to develop specific proposals about how they might proceed with their lives.
- Provide for a two-way understanding of a person's relationship with the significant figures of their lives. This two-way understanding displaces "passive recipient" conceptions of one's identity, and emphasizes a mutuality of con-

tribution in which the sense of one's personal agency is resurrected.

- Encourage not passive recollection of one's past, but deliberate reengagements with the significant figures of one's history and with the identities of one's present life that are significant or potentially significant. These figures and identities do not have to be directly known in order to be considered significant.
- Are often initiated through two sets of inquiry. The first part of this inquiry invites:
 - A recounting of what the significant figure contributed to the person's life
 - The person to witness his or her identity through the eyes of this figure, initiating a rich description of the ways in which this connection shaped or has the potential to shape the person's sense of who he or she is and what his or her life is about

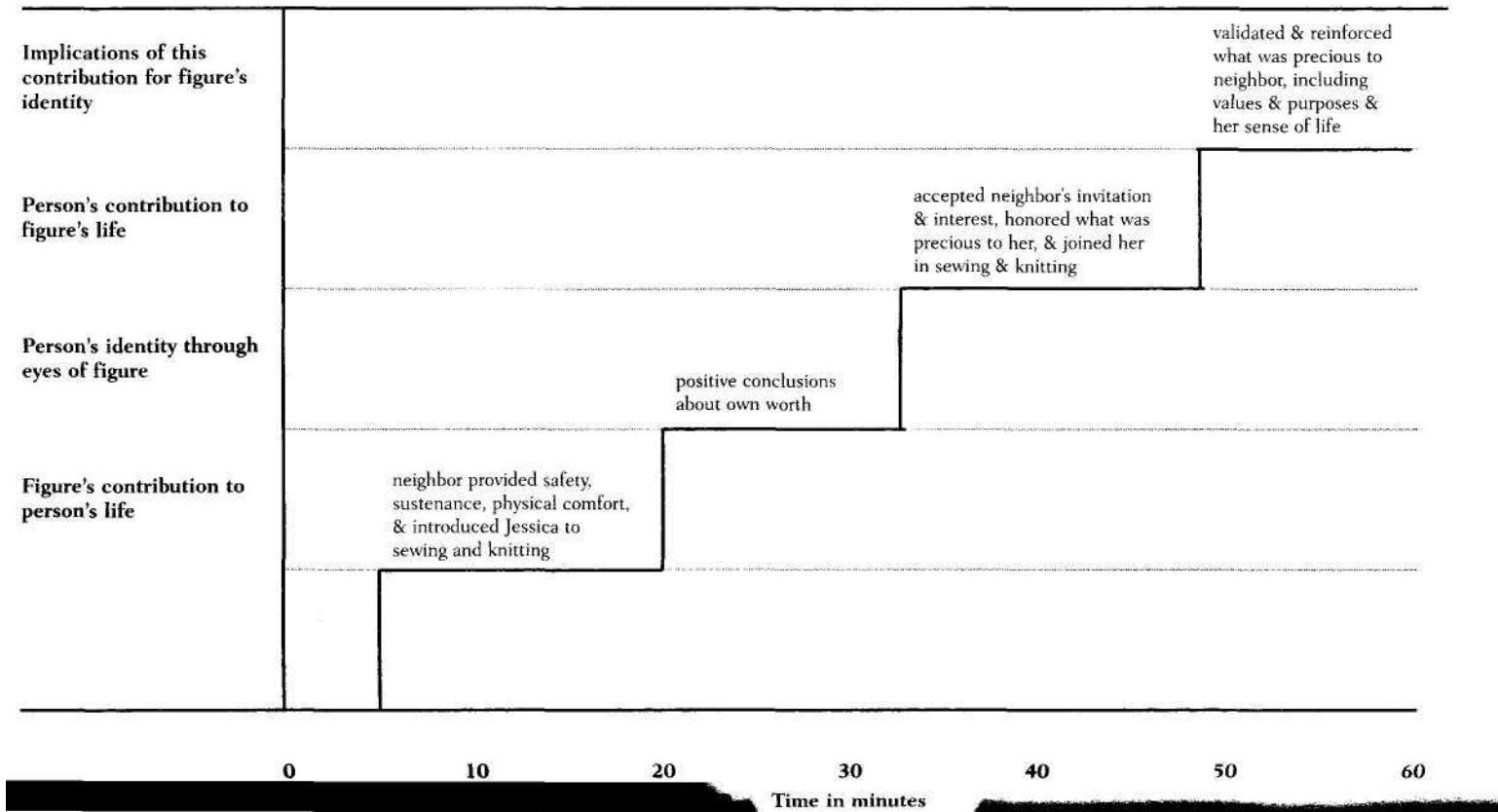
The second part of this inquiry invites:

- A recounting of what the person contributed to the life of this figure
- The person to richly describe the ways in which this connection shaped or has the potential to shape this figure's sense of who he or she was and what his or her life was about

Figure 3.1 shows charting of the re-membering conversation with Jessica onto a map that is informed by these categories of inquiry.

I will now introduce another story about a re-membering conversation. In doing this I hope to illustrate some of the considerations relevant to developing a context that is favorable to introducing re-membering conversations. In Jessica's story there was an opportunity to introduce a re-membering conversation in the first interview. However, circumstances are not always as straightforward, and on these occasions careful attention to the appropriate preparation is required before initiating these conversations.

Figure 3.1 Charting Re-Membering Conversations (Jessica)



Thomas

Thomas had been meeting with Cheryl, a counselor, over a period of 5 months. He had initially agreed to consult Cheryl at the insistence of an accommodation service. This was part of a contract that had been worked out with Thomas—the accommodation service would take him off the street and provide him with the accommodation that he was seeking if he agreed to counseling. Thomas had no interest in meeting with a counselor but acquiesced to this with the knowledge that he could be quite skilled in "stonewalling" and in discouraging other people's interest in his life, especially the interest of counselors. He had assumed that he would be able to use these skills to win a quick discharge from therapy while at the same time appear to be acceding to the requirements of the accommodation service.

Thomas arrived at his first meeting with Cheryl 35 minutes late but was surprised to see that she was entirely unruffled by this. He told her that she was "quite frankly wasting her time" with him, that he was "a lost cause," that he lived "in an emotional wilderness," that there were "no possibilities for his future," that he predicted he would not be in this world for very much longer, and that she wouldn't find him very responsive. Despite things getting off to a familiar start in his conversation with Cheryl, over the 25 minutes of their meeting something went profoundly wrong with the plans laid by Thomas. His tactics of discouraging Cheryl's interest didn't appear to be working well at all in the first part of the meeting, and he had a vague sense that she was "somehow getting at him." By the end of this first brief meeting, Thomas was quite disconcerted. He felt off balance and at a loss as to how to proceed with his original plan. After leaving Cheryl's office, he found himself standing motionless for a while on the sidewalk, not knowing which way to turn.

Before long he managed to put this experience out of his mind and began to recognize his own life again. Then, suddenly, a week later, he again found himself disconcerted. He had arrived early for the second meeting with Cheryl and hadn't called in sick as had been his intention. He was now perplexed. He had no understanding of how he had gotten to this place, and he began to worry about his mental status.

Then things seemed to deteriorate even further. He found himself wanting to linger in his conversation with Cheryl. At the end of this second meeting, Thomas was "quite puzzled," felt on "unsteady ground," and was "dizzy" and "at a loss" as to how to understand his experience.

This time it was more difficult for him to put this experience out of his mind, and he found himself looking forward in anticipation to his next meeting with Cheryl. He continued to keep his appointments with her. Then, suddenly, Cheryl learned that she would have to relocate for family reasons. Thomas was devastated upon hearing this. He couldn't understand this devastation and thought that he was going mad. He felt that he now had no choice but to tell Cheryl about the strange experiences he'd been having in the context of their meetings, hoping that she would make sense of them. They talked for a while about this, and, as Cheryl had planned to refer Thomas to me before her move, she suggested that they meet together with me for a consultation about this. Thomas agreed.

This was the story I heard upon meeting with Thomas and Cheryl. In an effort to assist Thomas to make sense of what was happening to him in these meetings with Cheryl, I interviewed them both about their experiences of their conversations with each other. About 20 minutes into this exploration, Thomas had a significant realization: "It's acknowledgment, that's what it is! This is the first time that I've put my finger on it. It's acknowledgment! It is Cheryl's acknowledgment of me that's been so bewildering! I've never had anything like this before, and I don't know how to take it. I really don't know how to take it."

I asked Thomas why he thought he was drawn to this acknowledgment. "Surely you would know! Surely it's something that is only human. Don't you know that it is only human to long for acknowledgment?" replied Thomas. I said that I wasn't sure that I did know this, and I asked if he would care to expand on this understanding. This he did, evoking human nature as an explanation for what he was relating to in his meetings with Cheryl. I then interviewed Thomas about Cheryl's responses to the stories of his life, and before long I had an account of some of her special skills of acknowledgment.

Thomas had evoked human nature as an explanation of his response to Cheryl's acknowledgment of him. In these contemporary times, it is not at all uncommon for people to evoke "human nature" in this way (see Chapter 2). On account of this habit of thought, it is only to be expected that people will go "naturalistic" in their effort to understand the developments of their lives. Although many of these naturalistic understandings are quite beautiful, and although they can be powerfully honored in the therapeutic context, they obscure the social and relational history of the significant developments of people's lives. It is because of this that these naturalistic understandings are quite thin and take us into conversational culdesacs.

In order to make way for re-membering conversations, it is important that these culdesacs be circumvented and that thoroughfares be opened to the social and relational history of the significant developments of people's lives. For example, a person might invoke hope as an explanation of her survival of historical trauma and give this a "naturalistic" status—that is, to propose that it is human nature to have hope in the face of what is personally devastating. This is a very beautiful notion, but it does not promote rich story development. In the context of therapy, it is possible to honor such understandings and at the same time circumvent them through the introduction of questions like:

- How were you able to hold onto hope in the way that you have despite everything you have been through?
- Do you have any ideas about how you have been able to maintain your relationship with hope through these difficult times?
- Of all of the people who have known you, who would be least surprised to learn that you have held onto hope in the way that you have?
- And what is your guess about what these people witnessed that made it possible for them to predict that you could do this?
- Can you recall any experiences that might have been validating of these hopes?

- Experiences that might have verified that it was reasonable for you to hold these hopes for your life?

Questions like these create openings for an appreciation of the developments of people's lives that go beyond naturalistic understandings and that provide the foundation for rich story development. They also provide the foundation for the introduction of re-membering conversations. When Thomas went naturalistic in his understanding of his response to Cheryl's expressions of acknowledgment, I introduced the following reflections and questions:

- "At some level you recognized this acknowledgment when it was offered to you."
- "What experiences of life can you tell me about that would help me to understand how you recognized this acknowledgment when it came your way?"
- "Do you have any sense of why this acknowledgment was familiar to you? About what made it possible for you to recognize it for what it was?"
- "This acknowledgment didn't just bounce off you. Rather, you responded to it. You let this acknowledgement touch you, and you took it in. I am very curious about how you knew how to relate to this acknowledgment."
- "Is there anything that you can tell me about your life that would help me to understand how you knew what to do with this acknowledgment?"
- "Are there any stories of your history that would make it possible for me to comprehend your ability to take this acknowledgment in and to let it touch you in this way?"

It was in response to these and other reflections and questions that Thomas for the first time mentioned his mother:

Thomas: You will probably want to know about my mother. Other counselors do. She committed suicide when I was 7 years old. I don't remember much about it. All I know is

that I was home at the time. I can remember looking around the house for her. I found her in the bath. She was still. Everything went fuzzy then. The next thing that I can remember is that I was running somewhere and kept falling down. I never saw her again. And no one ever said much about her after that. I wasn't told very much, except that she killed herself, which I couldn't understand. Much later I found out that she'd done this by cutting her wrists. I also found out that she'd asked my uncle to take me out, but this didn't happen because he was passed out on the front lawn from drinking too much booze. For a while after that I lived with an aunt and uncle. This aunt was my mother's cousin, but it was terrible there. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, and I ran away to the streets when I was 14. Then I was in a couple of foster homes that didn't work out. Anyway, I don't want to talk about this, and I am just telling you because counselors always want to know this stuff.

M: You don't want to talk about this?

Thomas: I am tired of talking about it. I am tired of all this.

M: Okay, but what are you tired of?

Thomas: About how this caused my problems. You know.

M: I'm not sure that I do.

Thomas: You know. About how all my problems and my drug abuse is about my anger. You know, about my anger turned against myself.

M: Anger?

Thomas: You know. Over what my mother did. The anger that I had toward my mother for rejecting me like this. For what she did to my life. Anyway, I have done all of this and I just want to drop it. I just want to let the past be.

M: Are these understandings about what has happened to your life honoring of or dishonoring of your mother?

Thomas: What?

M: Would you say that these understandings are honoring or dishonoring of your mother's life, and of her relationship with you?

Thomas: What? I don't think I have . . . Uh!

M: Take your time.

Thomas: Well, I haven't thought much about this. **But** I suppose they put her in a pretty bad light. Yeah.

M: So, would you say dishonoring or honoring?

Thomas: Well, putting it like that, I'd have to say dishonoring.

M: I wouldn't want to have any conversations that were dishonoring of your mother, or dishonoring of her connection with you. And I wouldn't want to encourage you to rage against her for any reason.

Thomas: You wouldn't! Okay. Okay.

M: But I would like permission to ask you some more questions about her, and about you when you were a child. I would like to do this because when I was asking about the history of your familiarity with acknowledgment, your mother's name came up, and I have a sense that there is more to the story of her connection with you.

Thomas: (*seeming surprised*) Okay.

M: I would be more interested in any memories of your connection with her that are presuicide memories.

Thomas: Presuicide memories? Look, I'd really like to

answer your question, but I honestly don't **have any clear** memories of that time of my life.

M: Okay. What about vague memories then?

Thomas: Nope. I'm afraid not. Not even vague memories.

We talked for a while longer, but I was unsuccessful in my effort to evoke earlier memories of Thomas' relationship with his mother that would explain his reference to her in response to my questions about the history of his familiarity with acknowledgment. But I did have some thoughts about the building of a context that might be favorable to the recovery of some of these memories.

About 8 months before meeting with Thomas I had been consulted by Juliet, a mother of three children. Juliet had been referred to me following a suicide attempt that nearly claimed her life and had necessitated admission to the hospital. A single parent, Juliet had been experiencing hard times of the sort that Thomas' mother, also a single parent, probably would have encountered. It was in the context of these hard times, and due to how they had influenced her actions, that Juliet had reached a conclusion that she was hindering her children's development and that she might destroy their lives. She was anguished about this. She wanted so much for them to have a better life than she had experienced as a child, and she decided that they would be better off without her—that if she wasn't around they would be better off being raised by her older sister.

In my first meeting with Juliet it became apparent that her decision to take her own life was born of her love for her children; this attempted suicide was an act of love. Following this, I had some highly memorable meetings with Juliet and her three children, for whom this understanding of their mother's desperate action had made a world of difference. At the end of my meetings with Juliet and her children she had volunteered to enter her name into one of my outsider-witness registers, to be available to join me in my work at some future point should this seem appropriate.

At the end of my first meeting with Thomas, I shared some thoughts about options for how we might proceed in our conversa-

tions. I said that I knew a woman named Juliet who had nearly succeeded in doing what his mother had succeeded in doing—taking her own life. I said that I was sure that Juliet would be interested in joining us for a meeting or two if Thomas thought this option might be helpful.

M: Of course, Juliet couldn't stand in for your mother—I doubt that anyone could do this. But it would be my idea to interview you about what we have been talking about today with Juliet present as an audience. I'd then ask you to sit back while I interviewed her about what she had heard in your story. It is my guess that she will hear things in your story that I haven't heard, and perhaps even things that you haven't heard. Following this, it would be my plan to interview you about what you heard in Juliet's reflections. Now, it isn't necessary for us to do this in order to proceed with our work together, but what do you think of the idea?

Thomas: Well . . . I don't know . . . It's not anything that I would have thought of. But, hey! Why not? You know, I'm really at a point in my life where I have nothing to lose.

I called Juliet that afternoon and informed her that I had been meeting with a young man who'd been through some very hard times in his life and who had tragically lost his mother at an early age. When I asked Juliet if she would be willing to join us, there was no hesitation in her response—this was something that she wanted to do and we could count her in. Juliet then called back 3 days later. I have reconstructed our telephone conversation:

Juliet: I have been talking to my kids about coming to your next meeting with Thomas. When I told them this, they said that they wanted to be there too. In fact, Craig said that he *should* come with me. So would it be okay if they came along as well?

M: It is fine with me, but it is a pretty heavy topic of conversation, and I'm not sure if it's going to be good for them to . . .

Juliet: My kids know a lot about this from my own crisis. And we've become good at talking about things that are hard to talk about, and this has been important to all of us. Besides, when I told them what you told me, they were all sad for Thomas, and they'd like to help.

M: Okay. I'll call Thomas about this and get back to you as soon as I can.

I called Thomas about this proposal to include these children. His response was: 'Well, it isn't anything I would have thought of doing. Sounds a bit wild. But then hey! I'm in this far already! I've got nothing to lose, have I!'

Soon I was meeting with Thomas, Juliet, and her three children, Craig, 13, Robert, 9, and Corinda, 6. We talked over the proposal for how the meeting might be structured. My plan was to first interview Thomas about the story of his life. At this time Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda would be present as an audience to this conversation. Second, I would interview Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda about what they had heard in Thomas's story. Thomas would be strictly an audience to this retelling. Third, I would interview Thomas about what he had heard in the retellings of Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda. At this time, Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda would be back in the audience position, listening to Thomas's account of their retellings. This plan for our meeting was acceptable to everyone.

In the first part of this meeting Thomas and I reproduced the conversation of our initial meeting. It was then time for Thomas to sit back and for me to interview Juliet and her three children about what they had heard. This turned out to be a very powerful retelling for everyone:

M: (*addressing everybody but looking toward Juliet out of concern over the possibility of burdening the children*) Let's

start with what it was that caught your attention. Was there something that Thomas said that particularly stood out for you? Or was there something that you noticed about him that you would like to talk about?

Craig: One thing that he said was that his uncle was supposed to take him out, so she (Thomas's mother) didn't want him to be the one to discover this.

Robert: Yeah.

Corinda: I think that too.

M: What did this . . .

Craig: And another thing was that Thomas didn't show us that he was sad about this.

Robert: Yeah, that's right. Maybe he's already cried a lot about it and doesn't have anything left.

Corinda: I think that too.

M: Craig, you said that Thomas's mother didn't want him to discover this. What did this say to you about his mum? What did this say to you about her relationship with him?

Craig: Let's see . . . Maybe that she really did care about him. Yeah. Maybe that she really cared about him. What do you think Rob?

Robert: Yeah, I agree with that. She would've have cared about him. For sure.

M: What do you think Corinda?

Corinda: My mom loves me, and, and . . . Thomas's mum loves him. Yes, she does too. It made me sad, and . . . and it made Thomas sad too.

Craig: I think Corinda could be right about that.

M: Juliet?

Juliet: (*in tears*) Right now I think that I'd just like to sit here and keep listening to what my kids have to say if that's okay.

M: Sure, sure. Craig do you know why you understood things in the way that you did?

Craig: What do you mean?

M: What you heard from Thomas gave you the idea that his mother really cared for him, and you agreed with Corinda that she could have loved him. Did you hear anything that touched on what you've been through? Did this strike a chord with anything that has happened to you?

Craig: Yeah, yeah, (*tears welling in his eyes*) You could say that.

M: Would you say something about this or would you prefer not to?

Craig: No, I want to. I think I know a bit about what Thomas went through. I mean it is not really the same, it really isn't. But it might have been the same. We nearly lost our mum too. And we thought that she didn't really care about us any more. But it wasn't true, it really wasn't true, was it, Mum?

Juliet: No, Craig, it wasn't true, because . . .

Craig: We found out that she thought that she was just making things hard for us, just messing everything up. We found out that she thought that we would be better off without her. Didn't we? (*turning to Jerry and Corinda*)

Corinda: Yeah.

Robert: Yeah. It was real hard at the beginning. Everybody was real upset. I mean real upset. We couldn't stop Corinda from crying all the time, and she wouldn't let go of me and Craig, and in the end, even when we knew Mum

was going to be okay, and when I went back to school, the teachers had to let Corinda stay with me in the classroom. That was fine though, wasn't it Corinda?

Corinda: (*with tears*) Yeah. Robert looked after me.

Juliet: I want to say something. I was having a really difficult time, and I was making a mess of the things that were most important to me. I was so low, and I thought that I was ruining everything that was precious to me. I thought that I was a pathetic excuse for a mother, I really did. Like Craig said, I thought the kids would all be better off without me. I now know that this was crazy thinking, but that was the space that I was in back then.

M: Are you saying in some way that your suicide attempt was an act of love?

Juliet: Yeah. I know it seems a bit weird to say this, but it really was. It really was.

M: I am going to ask you all to sit back in a minute and listen to me talking with Thomas about what he heard as he listened to you. Before I do that, though, I would like to ask you all about what it has been like for you to be here helping us out in this way.

Juliet: It has been lots of things for me. I don't know anything about Thomas's mother, but I have been feeling a connection with her. I have been thinking about the turmoil that she was probably going through. I am sure that she wasn't perfect. I know that I haven't been perfect with my kids. But I think that, as a mother, I might have some understanding about what it would have been like for her to give up her son. My heart goes out to her. My heart really goes out to Thomas for his loss. But it also goes out to his mother for her loss.

M: Where does this leave you right now?

Juliet: (*tearful*) Feeling sad. But I am also feeling the power of mothers' love for their children. I am feeling the power of my love for these three. And I am also feeling proud of these three for speaking up in the way that they have today. I just hope that Thomas gets something from this.

M: What's it been like for the three of you to play this part today?

Robert: I am glad we came.

Corinda: Me too. Aren't you Craig?

Craig: We've been through a lot, and if talking about what we have been through is going to help anyone else, that's great. Mum and us kids have been talking about how sad lots of people are, and about how they don't have to be so sad. So us kids feel good about doing this, don't we?

Robert: Yeah.

Corinda: Yeah.

M: Okay, thanks for all that you have done in our meeting today. I am now going to talk with Thomas about what he heard as he listened to us talking.

Tears had been streaming down Thomas's face for a good part of the retellings of Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda. I invited him to put words to these tears, and to say what had been happening for him as he was listening. Thomas was so choked up with emotions that he was unable to respond. I wondered if a time-out might be helpful, and he nodded. He headed to the courtyard for a smoke, and Juliet and her children headed for the kitchen for refreshments. We reconvened our meeting about 15 minutes later, at which time Thomas was still under the sway of powerful emotions. But he was able to speak.

Thomas: I was . . . I was just so unprepared for this.

M: Would you say a little about what you were unprepared for?

Thomas: It was the way that Craig and Robert and Corinda and Juliet related to what I'd said. I'd thought partly, you know, that maybe this was simply one of those things to go through. And to be honest, I'd also been humoring you a bit in going along with this idea in the first place. But this turned out to be totally something else. Yeah, totally something else.

M: What was it about how Craig and Robert and Corinda and Juliet related to your story that made this so totally something else?

Thomas: Everything. Everything. Right from the start with Craig picking up on my mother caring about me. And with what Robert and Corinda said. Corinda really got me going when she said my mom loves me. Right now I am trying not to think about what Corinda said, because if I do I won't be able to speak again. And what Juliet said, including that part about her heart going out to my mother over her loss. Look, I don't understand why this had such an enormous impact on me, but it did. It sure was powerful. Phew! Here I go again, (*more tears*)

M: As you were listening to this did anything in particular come to mind? Any mental pictures? Any realizations? Whatever? Perhaps about your mother? Perhaps about her relationship with you? Perhaps about what you meant to her?

Thomas: Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. I will have to sit with this for a while though. There were lots of thoughts rushing at me, and they all got into a jumble. It would be hard for me to tease out anything in particular. But there were some flashes among all of this.

M: Flashes?

Thomas: That's the best word I can think of. Like short flashes of light being thrown onto my history. I can't say much more about this, and I can't get them back right now.

M: Do you have any sense of why these retellings of Juliet, Craig, Robert, and Corinda touched you in the way that they did? Do you have any sense of what they might have struck a chord with?

Thomas: I can't think of anything in particular right now. I don't know if what Juliet and her children said about my mother is right. But I am thinking there must be some truth in this because of the impact this had on me. Wow! I really have never had an experience like this before, and that's no exaggeration. It's really no exaggeration.

M: We are coming to the end of our time together. Where has this exercise taken you to? Where are you right now?

Thomas: In what way do you mean?

M: Sometimes these events are like journeys, and people arrive at a place in their life that wasn't visible to them at the outset of the event. Do you have any sense of standing in a place right now that . . .

Thomas: Okay, I know what you mean. This has turned some parts of my life upside down. It's been quite unsettling. And I don't know for sure, but I think that this might be important.

Juliet and her children joined us again for the next meeting. It was in the context of this meeting that Thomas recalled some faint memories of his mother that hadn't previously been available to his consciousness. One of these memories was of walking home with her from a shopping center, and Thomas guessed that this was in the year leading up to her suicide. He had some recollection that she had been away and a vague sense that she had been in the hospital for reasons that he couldn't understand. On this walk they happened across a

dead dog—he thought it was a terrier—that had been hit by a car. He thought he could recall his mother saying something like: "Kids around here have to see enough bad things already." She then cradled the dog in her arms, carried it onto a derelict building allotment, and had Thomas help her scrape a hole in the ground. She lowered the terrier into this shallow grave, and then she and Thomas covered it with building rubble. Although he couldn't remember her words, he could recall his mother "giving the terrier last rites' and bidding farewell to its spirit. They then walked back to the street together, she holding his hand. But they didn't immediately recommence their homeward journey. Instead, they sat on the gutter, his mother looking at him and crying. This seemed to go on for a long while, with Thomas asking his mother time and again what was wrong, and with her unable to respond.

This memory provided the foundation for a rich re-membering conversation that was structured by the two categories of inquiry that I have described in this chapter. Before introducing this inquiry, I asked some general questions that I hoped would prepare the way for the initiation of this re-membering conversation:

M: Thomas, you've recalled your mother saying something like: "We have to do something. Kids around here already have to see enough bad things."

Thomas: Yeah. That's about it.

M: And then the two of you buried the terrier. Does this suggest anything to you about the value that she put on children's lives?

Thomas: Yeah. I suppose she must have known of lots of kids who were having a hard time. And she must have been worried about this. So she must have believed that kids were important. Yeah, she must have valued kids.

M: And you also recall her giving the dog last rites and bidding farewell to its spirit.

Thomas: Yeah. That's right.

M: Does this gesture suggest anything to you about her attitude toward life?

Thomas: I guess so. Well, it must. But I'm not sure how to say what it meant. Maybe, maybe something about respecting there's something unique about every life. Something that's to be valued. I'll have to think more about this to find the right words.

I then proceeded with the re-membering conversation by asking questions that helped Thomas to recount what his mother contributed to his life:

M: She included you in every step of this ritual in ways that children often don't get included.

Thomas: Yeah. That's my memory of it.

M: Do you have any sense of what being included in this way might have brought to the life of that little boy?

Thomas: Ask me that again.

M: Do you have any sense of what being included by your mother in this way could have contributed to your life?

Thomas: Well, I can only guess that it must have made me feel a bit warm inside, and maybe a little bit important, like I was grown up enough to handle this. Like I was worthwhile.

M: You also said that your mother held your hand at times during this ritual.

Thomas: Yeah. I'm sure she did.

M: What's your guess about how this touched the life of that little boy?

Thomas: (*tearful*) The only thing that I can think of right now is that this must have made me feel alive on the inside. That's the only thing I can think of right now. Maybe later I'll find some other ways of saying it.

My next set of questions encouraged Thomas to witness his identity through the eyes of his mother:

M: How do you explain this inclusion of you in something in which children are often not included?

Thomas: I don't know if I have an answer for this.

M: Well, what does this inclusion suggest about what she was respecting in you?

Thomas: That I was a kid who could be counted upon? Maybe that's what it was. You know, that I was the sort of kid who could be trusted to handle this. That there was something a bit solid about me.

M: A bit solid?

Thomas: Yeah. That I was a kid who didn't need to be shielded from these things, I guess. But hey, all this is taking me right out of the square, and I need to think more about this.

M: Okay then. Can I ask a different question?

Thomas: Sure, sure. As long as it's okay that I don't have many answers.

M: What understanding do you have of your mother's physical touch at this time? What does this suggest about what she valued in you and appreciated about you?

Thomas: That it was good to be with me at this time? Yeah. That I was good to be with, that I was good company even when I was little, and that because . . . perhaps

because even though I was little, I could understand what she was doing?

M: And afterwards, you were sitting on the gutter together, and she was in tears just looking at you. What's your guess about what she was seeing in you at this time?

Thomas: (*tearful*) I dunno. Maybe something about the spirit in me? (*now quite choked up, indicating that talking was not possible and that he needed some time out*)

M: (*later, after a break*) You have been bringing me up to speed on what it is that your mother might have appreciated about you. Would it be okay if we went back a step or two, and I asked some more questions about what she contributed to your life? Getting clearer about this could give us an even better foundation for figuring out what she valued in you.

Thomas: Sure, sure. Go for it.

Following this I asked questions that would help Thomas to recount what he had contributed to the life of his mother:

M: You responded to her inclusion of you, and you joined her every step in the ritual of burying the dog.

Thomas: Yeah, you could say that I did that. Yeah.

M: What's your guess about what it was like for your mother to have your company in this way?

Thomas: Boy, these are big questions! Well, maybe it gave her a sense of security. Like a sense of being joined, like . . . I'm trying to find the right word. There's a word for this.

M: We've got lots of time.

Thomas: Dammit! It's frustrating. It's a word like . . . solidarity! That's it! Maybe it gave her a sense of solidarity.

M: Solidarity?

Thomas: Yeah, maybe it gave her a sense of solidarity in caring about what lots of people don't care about.

M: And what's your speculation about what it was like for her to have this little boy's hand to hold at this time? What is your guess about how this might have touched her?

Thomas: (*tearful*) A warm feeling?

M: A warm feeling. You brought warmth to her life?

Thomas: I think so . . . maybe . . . yeah.

M: Are there any other guesses that you could make about how your mother's experience of this event was different on account of your presence?

Thomas: Yeah. But I have to leave this question for now if that's okay, and just sit for a while with what's already going on for me.

M: Fine, fine.

These last questions were intended to help Thomas, richly describe the ways in which this connection with his mother had shaped his mother's sense of who she was and what her life was about:

M: To have you joining her in this burial ritual in this way, what's your guess about how this might have affected her sense of what was important in life? Could this have been validating of what she believed, of what she held precious? Or do you think that it might have been irrelevant to her sense of what life was all about?

Thomas: No, no. I can only think that it must have supported what was precious to her.

M: That it would have supported what was precious to her?

Thomas: Yeah. I'm only just getting to figure out what she stood for, you know. Or even . . .

M: I know . . .

Thomas: Look, I would never have known this, but maybe there were some things that my mum was passionate about, that are really important.

M: And your response supported this. Or what would you say? Validated this? Confirmed this? Verified this? Or . . .

Thomas: Yeah, maybe it would have to be all of these.

M: Your mother had her little son's hand to hold after bidding farewell to the spirit of the dog. What's your guess about how this might have affected her sense of being a mother?

Thomas: I don't know for sure. I want to say the word "proud," but I'm not sure . . .

Over several meetings we came back to these and other similar questions. In the course of this, Thomas became more convinced that the source of this familiarity with acknowledgment was to be found in his relationship with his mother, and he began to develop a much stronger sense of their mutual contributions to each other's lives and to each other's sense of identity. This had a profoundly positive effect on Thomas's conclusions about his own worth. And the development of some appreciation of his contribution to his mother's life as a 6-year-old boy significantly resurrected his sense of personal agency and eroded his conception of himself as a passive subject of life's forces.

These re-remembering conversations also had the effect of reconnecting Thomas to the sort of values and purposes that he came to believe linked him with his mother's life. As this link became more richly known through some archaeological work on his family of origin, he developed the ability to evoke his mother's presence in his life, and this he found highly sustaining. This was an antidote to the sense of emptiness and desolation and the feelings of worthlessness and

despair that had been so overwhelmingly present for such a significant period of his life. It was in the context of these conversations that Thomas suddenly became aware of some new possibilities on the horizons of his life, and over a period of time he began to step into these possibilities. He also discovered an aunt (his mother's second cousin) who had been fond of his mother when they were young women. Thomas found delight in building a connection with this aunt, whose family came to adopt him.

Figure 3.2 shows my charting of the initial re-membering conversation with Thomas.

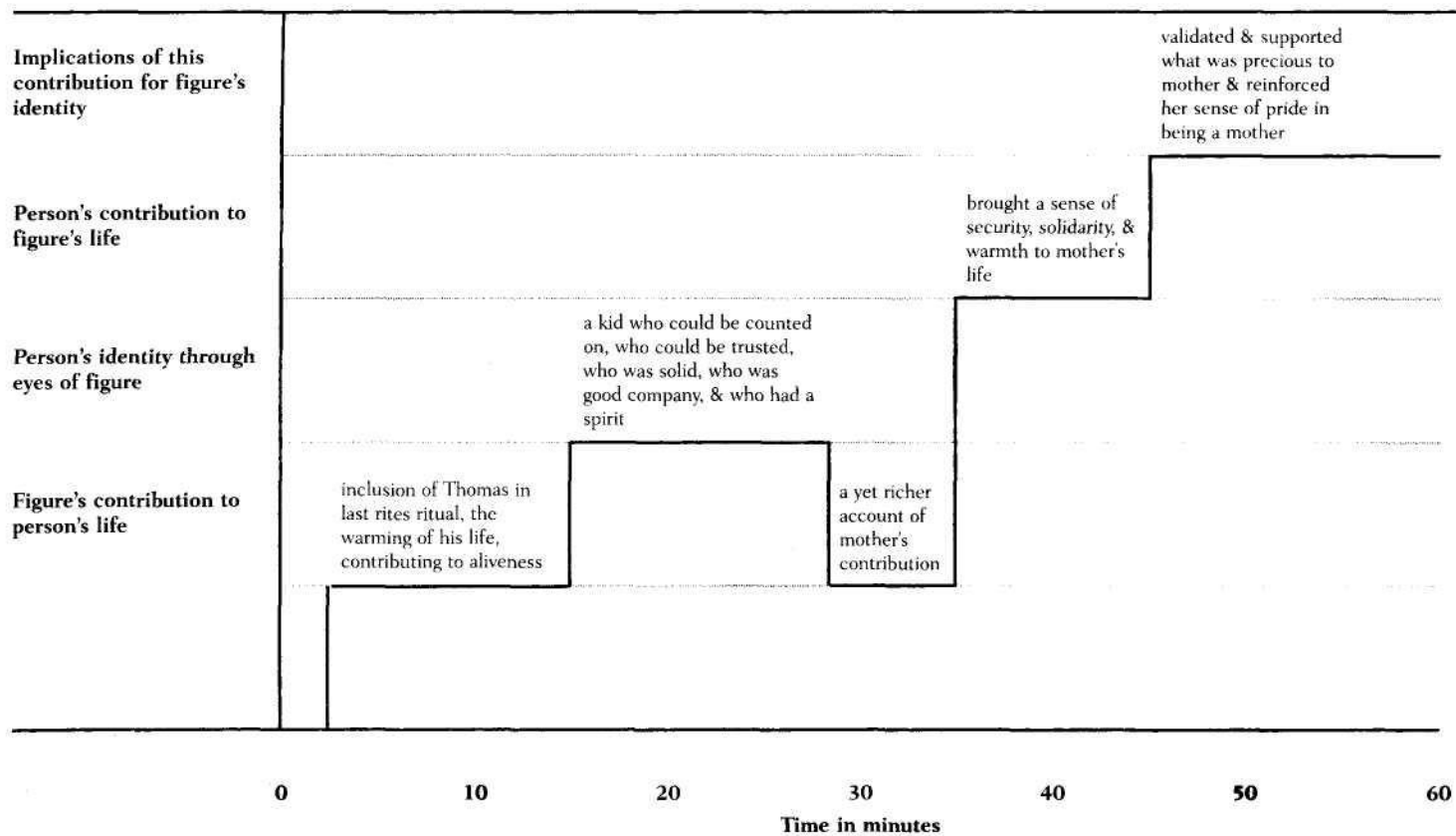
Conclusion

This chapter described some of the ideas that shape re-membering conversations. These conversations can act as an antidote to the powerfully isolating understandings of identity that are so pervasive in contemporary Western culture. Considering life as an association with a membership, and introducing practices specifically shaped by the acknowledgment that identity is wrought by important figures of a person's past and present, opens diverse possibilities for the reconstruction of identity in the context of therapeutic conversations.

In retelling the stories of my conversations with Jessica and with Thomas, Juliet, and her family, I have endeavored to provide a comprehensive account of the form of therapeutic inquiry associated with the re-membering conversations map. I have also described some of the groundwork that must at times be undertaken before the initiation of these re-membering conversations. On many occasions, it is only after significant preparation that it becomes possible for people to reincorporate their relationship with the significant figures of their past and their present.

Over many years of meeting with people about the predicaments of their lives, this re-membering metaphor has touched my own life in a multiplicity of ways. For example, these consultations have encouraged me to reflect more fully on my connections with the significant figures of my own history and on their contribution to the shaping of

Figure 3.2 Charting Re-Membering Conversations (Thomas)



my own life and work. This has also prompted rich conversations with my family and friends that have opened possibilities for the revision of the membership of my own association of life. And routinely engaging with this re-membering metaphor has also contributed to a greater consciousness of the part that the people who have consulted me have played in the development of my work and to a stronger sense of what my work is about in terms of what is precious to me. Needless to say, this has been very sustaining.