Narrative tools in social work supervision:

The supervisor life certificate and supervisee's journey tools

by Mohamed Fareez

Fareez is a senior assistant director at AMKFSC Community Services, a social service agency in Singapore. He is a registered social worker with more than 10 years' experience. He has a Master of Social Sciences (Social Work) from the National University of Singapore, and a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work from The University of Melbourne. Fareez has taught and written about narrative therapy in social work practice. He is passionate about incorporating narrative, collaborative and strength-based perspectives into social work practices with individuals, groups, organisations and communities. He can be contacted at mdfareez@gmail.com or through his blog at www.fareez.sg

Abstract

This paper discusses the use of two tools in the supervision of social workers: the supervisor life certificate and the supervisee's journey template. These have been used to help thicken the preferred stories of social workers in a social service organisation in Singapore. Social workers are often expected to acquire a robust repertoire of skills and theories to help them manage and support the people who consult them, and social work supervisors might adopt an 'expert' position from which to impart these skills through Socratic questioning and coaching. A narrative perspective acknowledges that social workers who enter the profession already have skills and knowledges that they can access to support their work. The supervisee's journey template allows for these skills to be documented and thickened through scaffolding questions. The supervisor life certificate is a tool to help social workers reflect on the values that they bring to their supervisory roles.

Key words: social work; clinical supervision; narrative documents; narrative practice

Since developing the life certificate (Fareez, 2015), a narrative therapy document used to honour the lives of the people we have lost, I have appreciated the utility of such documents for thickening the preferred stories of the people who consult us. In social work supervision in Singapore, the dominant focus is on ensuring that the supervisee is aligned to the expected standards of practice. This is exemplified in a proliferation of programs to support newly graduated social workers. Although the expectation that social workers maintain a standard of practice may be justified, my colleagues and I have also been keen to build on the skills and knowledges that social workers (some of whom might be working for the first time) and social work students bring with them as they embark on their careers.

Narrative tools may be useful for thickening these preferred narratives within a collaborative supervisor–supervisee process. This paper shares the use of two such tools: the supervisor life certificate and the supervisee's journey tool. These can be used in tandem. The supervisor life certificate can be used by the supervisor to thicken their own preferred identity as a supervisor, informed by the influences of key leaders who have inspired them. The supervisor's journey is a reflection tool for the supervisee to make sense of their own journey as a social worker (or in any helping profession). Through a process of enquiry, both supervisor and supervisee can engage in conversations about how best to journey together in the work they do. These practices invite the supervisor to make sense of their own preferred identities as a supervisor, which can interface with the supervisee's reflections on their own social work journey and their hopes for their practice. These tools can contribute to a collaborative meaning-making process in the supervision relationship.

The supervisor life certificate

> Fronto helped me to see how privilege and power breed malice, deceit, and hypocrisy and how often those whom we call 'Patricians' lack natural human feeling. (Aurelius, 2002/c170, p. 21)

Marcus Aurelius' oft read *Meditations* (c170/2002) starts with the Roman emperor identifying various individuals in his life who have contributed to his current disposition. Aurelius describes how these individuals passed on specific values and teachings that he practiced. This is akin to the process of legacy-building. In my own experience of being a supervisor of supervisors, I have found this concept useful when conducting training and in consultations with new supervisors.

Starting the journey into clinical supervision can be a daunting process. The supervisor life certificate is a tool that invites supervisors to revisit their own rich histories to define the values and beliefs that they have been practicing. A re-membering process (White, 2007) invites rich storying of these values and continuation of these histories in the present. Supervisors also reflect on what others (including past mentors and influential people) might appreciate about how the supervisor is enacting these values.

The use of this document allows for insider knowledges (White & Epston, 1990) to be elicited, and for participants to play an active part in making sense of their identities as supervisors. These documents can serve as alternative stories of identities that could also be used in human resource processes of appraisal; for example, these documents can be stored in the person's supervision records. In this instance they may serve as counter stories, in contrast with dominant practices that often involve the documentation of key deficiencies that need to be addressed.

The supervisor life certificate consists of the following components:

- values and beliefs that I hold as a supervisor
- images that represent my role as a supervisor
- people or ideas that have contributed to my vision of what a supervisor should be
- what others might appreciate about my supervision/what resources I might be able to bring into my supervision
- quotes or self-talk that support me as a supervisor
- things I do to support myself when being a supervisor.

Journey metaphors

Michael White discussed the use of journey metaphors in the context of narrative therapy, teaching and community work (2004) and drew on the concept of 'karthasis':

SUPERVISOR LIFE CERTIFICATE

Name: _____

The values and beliefs I hold as a supervisor			Images that represent my role as a supervisor
People/ideas that have contributed to me being the supervisor that I am today			What others might appreciate about my supervision/ what resources I can bring into supervision
Quotes or self-talk that support me as a supervisor			Things I do to support myself in being a supervisor

Figure 1: The supervisor life certificate.
Think about yourself as a supervisor and fill up the following sections accordingly.
Feel free to use pictures or key words to describe yourself.

> I am not referring to a contemporary version of 'catharsis' … This is a katharsis that was had in response to witnessing powerful expressions of life's dramas … an appropriate metaphor through which to attribute meaning to our own responses to the everyday dramas of life that we witness … An experience is kathartic if one is moved by it – moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another place. (White, 2004, p. 49)

A journey framework can potentially support a new perspective on history and identity for the person or community, through which individuals and groups are able to re-engage with hidden and neglected aspects of their history. New meanings can be made of past experiences, and new steps into preferred directions can be taken. White (2004) discussed the 'rites of passage' metaphor in which people experience three phases when negotiating life transitions: the 'separation' phase, in which one is faced with a new experience or transits from a previous state; the 'liminal' phase, which is characterised by 'periods of confusion' and disorientation; and finally the 'reincorporation' phase, in which a new stabilised state and new understanding of self is identified, supporting further directions in life. These processes can be thickened through a process of enquiry, or with rituals and ceremonies.

The use of the journey metaphor as a tool was also inspired by a colleague's (Shantasaravanan, 2019) use of a journey map to support young children who were responding to the effects of trauma in the context of child protection work. The journey tool was used to engage children in identifying their hopes, dreams, skills and resources, while identifying barriers that might hinder them in their journeys towards these hopes. The tool was helpful in making known identities beyond the trauma experiences of these young people and allowed a safe space for children to have a voice in the process of casework and therapy.

The supervisee's journey

In a famous lecture, Kurt Vonnegut (2004/2018), acclaimed author of novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), talked about the different shapes that stories could have. His thesis was that a story's character may experience good and ill fortune that can be graphed to reveal the shape of the story. Vonnegut draws attention to a shape akin to a 'man [person] in a hole', a shape he suggests aspiring authors should emulate should they want their stories to be well received. This person-in-a-hole emotional arch typically begins with the protagonist in a position of good fortune from which they experience challenges and difficulties, contributing into a fall into bad fortune. The protagonist then undergoes a transformative shift, both eudemonic (internal) and hedonic (external), that allows them to move back into a position of good fortune. He likens this to a supervisor's journey, as depicted in Figure 2.

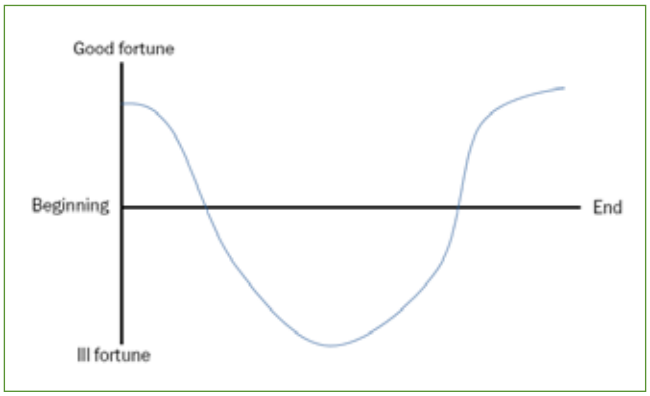

Figure 2: The person in a hole

Wallman (2019) echoed this narrative perspective when he identified the supervisor's journey as a nourishing pattern of storytelling that could be used in stories that we tell ourselves, and stories that we tell others, about who we are.

People mired in problematic storylines might be influenced by a different story shape, evident in Wallman's depiction of a 'contamination pattern', or a problem story (Figure 3).

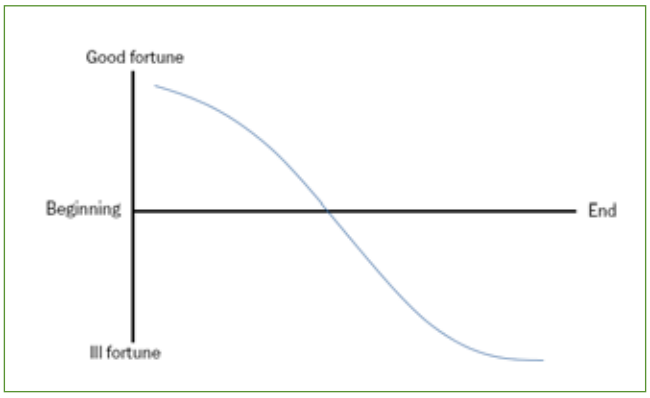

Figure 3: A contamination pattern of storytelling

In narrative therapy, we may see our role in collaboratively identifying alternative storylines that run counter to the problem stories that people come to consult us about. The supervisee's journey can be a useful frame of reference from which we can engage in a productive process of enquiry when faced with

the limiting effects of problem stories. The following questions can be considered in the context of social work supervision:

- What name(s) do you have for the challenge(s) that you are experiencing?
- What are your thoughts about the effects these challenges have on you?
- How have you been responding to the challenges at work?
- What do these challenges say about what you value as a person?
- How have you been able to hold on to your values despite the challenges that have affected you?
- What are some important events or turning points that reflect how you can better respond to these challenges?
- What are some key skills or knowledge that you have gained from this process? How are you practicing them?
- What has helped you in your journey?
- Who are the people who have been by your side in this journey? What lessons would they have appreciated in your experience?
- What hopes do you have about how you will continue in this journey?

These questions have been helpful in the creation of the supervisee's journey tool, which can be used in yearly discussions and reviews with our supervisees. The toolkit borrows ideas from Vonnegut (2004/2018) and acknowledges that our supervisees bring their own suite of knowledges, skills and values into helping professions. Hence, the tool begins by asking about the values and resources the person is already using. As supervisors, it is only ethical that we find means to make these hidden stories explicit and thicken them as part of the supervisory process.

The supervisor's journey tool includes the following segments:

1. Starting the journey: what drew me to social work?
2. Supervisor's backpack: what are the values, skills and resources that I have applied?
3. Supervisor's motivation: what are the quotes, songs, poems or resources that help me through hard times?
4. Challenges: what challenges have I faced or am I still facing in my work? What might these challenges reveal about what I value as a person?
5. Hopes and dreams: what are my hopes for my relationship with work? How are some of these hopes already being achieved?

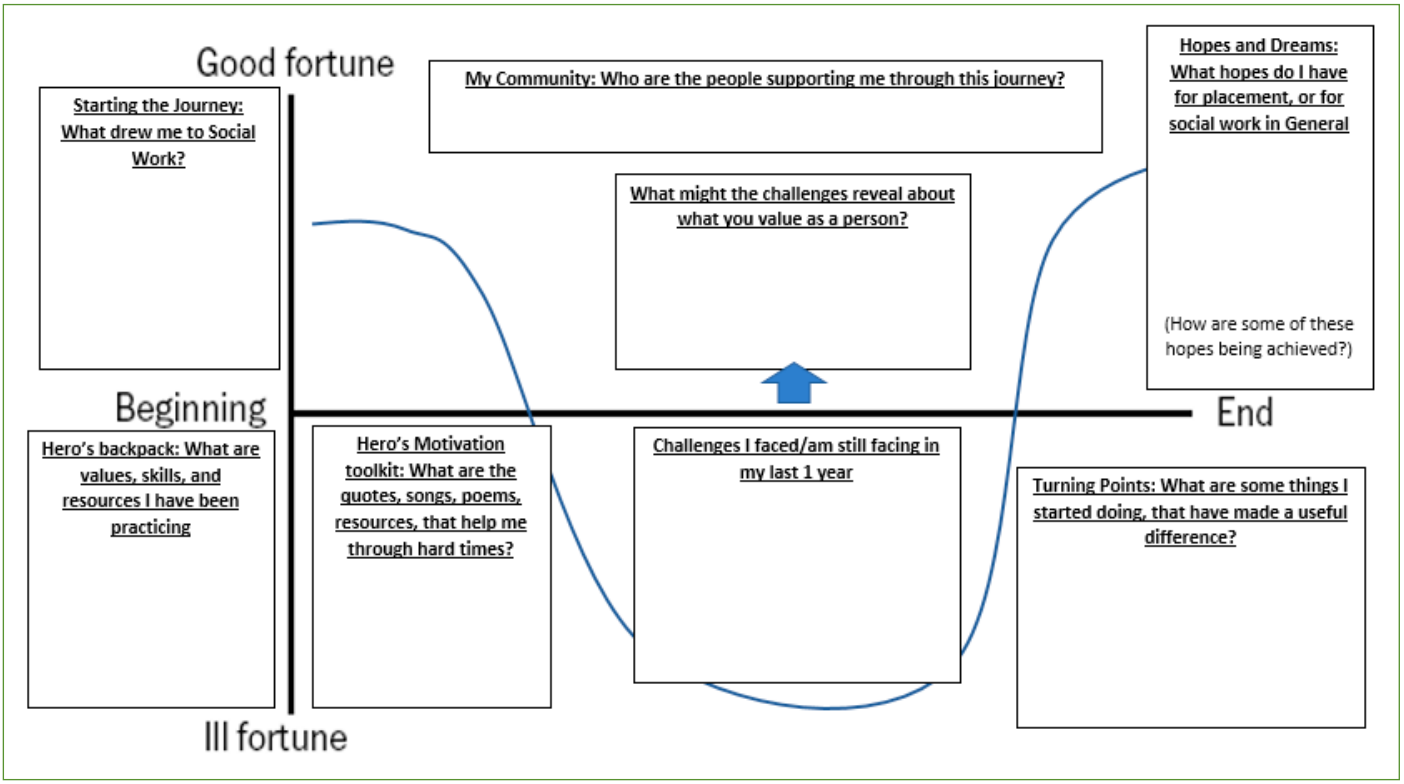

Figure 4: The supervisee's journey tool for social work supervision

Enquiring about sparkling moments and turning points

When using the supervisee's journey tool, there may be instances where turning points and sparkling moments are identified. These can be experiences or events in which the supervisee felt a positive shift in their state of being. I find the following map helpful when encountering these moments.

- Identifying the context
  - When did the situation happen? (Go into detail)
  - What did you do? Where were you?
  - How did you decide to do what you did? Was it intentional?
  - Who else was with you?
- Thickening the moment
  - How was the experience of taking these actions?
  - Were you surprised that you were able to do it? Why?
  - What made it possible for you to take these actions?
  - What were you hoping for when you decided to take these steps?What new understandings about yourself do you have after taking these actions?
- Identifying skills
  - What does it mean for you to be able to carry out this action?
  - Is there a name for this set of skills you were able to use?
  - What is the history of this skill? How did you pick it up?
  - Was this the first time you used this skill? Where else have you used it?
  - What does this skill say about the things you value as a person?
  - How was the demonstration of this skill today different from the other times you had used it?
- Re-membering
  - How did your client appreciate the skill you showed?
  - What did they say or do to show that they appreciated this?
  - Who else noticed that you were able to do this?
  - What might they say or appreciate about you?
- Moving forward
  - What new understandings has this conversation brought you?
  - Did this conversation make you realise anything about yourself? Are there things you would continue doing, or new things that you would be doing?
  - How might you start using these skills for future situations?
  - What support do you need from me to further develop these skills?
  - What steps will you be taking? When will you be taking these steps?
  - How does this development support the hopes you have about the work you are doing?
  - Are there any upcoming situations where the skills that you have shown would be useful?

Key considerations for practice

When using this tool, it may be helpful to share the context and story of Vonnegut's person-in-a-hole thesis, and how we may define ourselves through the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories we tell others. It may be beneficial to be alert to the implications of using the term 'hero', and its effects on the people we are working with, especially if the term 'hero' denotes a cis-male position in the context. Conversations with colleagues suggest that in Singapore, the term 'hero' is relevant across gender locations, but we should not take for granted the effects of language on the people who consult us. Appropriate substitutions for 'hero' (e.g. protagonist) or even dropping the term altogether might be considered, where in this context, we can simply use the term 'supervisee', or 'person'.

Rigid adherence to the person-in-a-hole narrative (where one starts in a state of positivity, experiences a challenge, and then experiences a resolution of some sort) may be a thin description of the realities that people face. Although I find the person-in-a-hole perspective to be a good starting point to zoom in and focus on a specific turning point in a supervisee's experience, people's experiences are rich and complex. There may not be clear resolutions and multiple ups and downs may be experienced. Hence, strict adherence to this framework may not be useful if the intention is to draw out a 'thick' and rich narrative.

The supervisor life certificate in practice

The supervisor life certificate has been used in training new supervisors in our organisation, and participants have stated that this process had been helpful in helping them 'go back to their roots' and be clear about their hopes and intentions for the supervision process. An outsider witness process (White, 2007) was conducted in groups of three, in which supervisors shared their respective life certificate in an interview. The third person in the group took the position of witness and respond to the following questions:

- What parts of the conversation stood out for you?
- What thoughts do you have about what the interviewee values as a supervisor?
- Did this conversation make you think about supervision in ways that you might not have been so aware of?
- What might be some ideas or future steps that you would be inspired to take for your own supervision?

Some reflections shared by participants included:

> It was a very good self-reflection piece that broke down the different essential components, thus making it holistic … I feed on value-based connections, and higher purpose … I was conscious that I was seeing my work as a form of higher purpose.
>
> The life certificate was helpful to reflect the various experiences of how one becomes a supervisor … and what I appreciate about all my supervisors which I want to bring into my own supervisory relationship but yet appreciate the uniqueness as a supervisor.
>
> Hearing the others put into words what was important helped me to name what is important to me. I connected to quite a few thoughts shared.

In Jane's supervisor life certificate (Figure 5), re-membering conversations (White, 2007) about the people she identified were not only useful in identifying her values and beliefs in relation to supervision, but also in identifying ways her supervision style may influence the people she supervised. She was able to establish clarity about her supervision style and discuss possible connections and conflicts openly with her supervisee.

Within the context of organisational management, Jane's supervisor was then able to support her in supervision of supervision, and was able to support and build her capacities through the values that she practices.

SUPERVISOR LIFE CERTIFICATE Jane			
The values and beliefs I hold as a supervisor.	Supervision is for the supervisee. It is a relationship that helps facilitate growth and learning for supervisee (and supervisor).	Farming/Farmer. A lot of sweat, aches and effort put into the sowing and ploughing but brings immense joy at harvest. All farmers plough the land and sow seeds with the hope of a good harvest, but also understand that the success of the farming is influenced by a lot of external factor such as weather, pests, seedling (societal context, agency climate, fit of seed and soil + fertiliser etc).	Images (can be emotional states) that support me as a supervisor.

Figure 5: Jane's supervisor life certificate

People/ideas that have contributed to me being the supervisor that I am today.	I have been blessed to have a few nurturing supervisors and supportive bosses who provided great climate for growth. I appreciated how much effort they have put into supervision for me by watering, adding fertiliser, putting me out in the sun, bringing me into shelter during the storm and just allowing me to grow as much as I was willing to.	Spontaneity. Readiness to support supervisee. Saying things for what they are to lend some objectivity to a matter/situation.	What others might appreciate about my supervision. Resources I can bring into supervision.
Quotes or self-talk that support me as a supervisor.	Supervision is for supervisees.	Seeking my supervisor for SOS (my scratching post and litter box). Seeking peer support for ideas.	Things I do to support myself in being a supervisor.

The supervisee's journey in practice

The supervisee's journey has been used by social workers in their first year of practice and students on social work placement. These are typically stressful periods in a social work career (Fareez, 2009). Participants felt that it was helpful to be reminded of their rich histories and the values that had drawn them to social work. At the same time, participants shared their appreciation for being able to uncover hidden stories of how they are already responding to challenges at work.

I typically use the supervisee's journey tool in the first session with a supervisee. In social work practice, the dominant discourse surrounding new social workers in an organisation is that they need very close support in order to build 'expertise'. A narrative perspective assumes that practitioners come with unique skills that they are already using, and that can support their work, and that they have the capacity to contribute.

Figure 6 illustrates Alan's supervisee's journey. It shows the stories that drew him to the work and that he was already practicing the skills of 'empathy' and 'restorative' practices based on his past experiences.

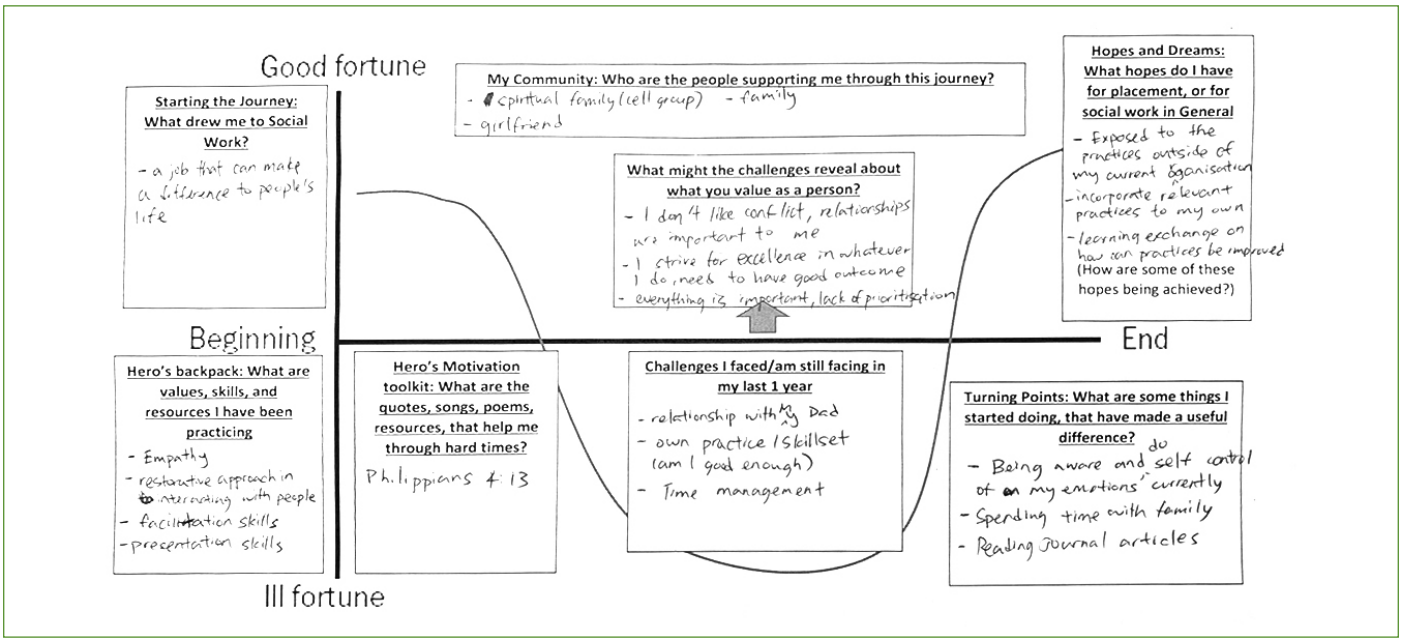

Figure 6: Alan's supervisee's journey

It would be expected that as a social work student, Alan would have to go through a 'normative' suite of training and exposure. Through the supervisee's journey process, Alan's interests and passion in restorative practices were identified, and further discussions could be had about how he could develop this skill. We were thus able to explore how Alan could share his passion for restorative practices with the organisation's student care services, and he was able to develop a set of protocols in collaboration with the student care teachers. Alan was able to identify challenges that he might face in practice and explore alternative stories behind these challenges.

The supervisee's journey tool encourages supervisees to consider 'absent but implicit' (White, 2000) values that may be hidden in the face of challenges. Values such as 'striving for excellence' and 'relationships are important to me' can then be unpacked further in the context of supervision. These values can then be thickened through a reauthoring process (White, 2007) in which further resources could be identified to either overcome the challenges identified, or to contribute to the person's hopes and dreams for the practicum experience.

This process had also facilitated the unpacking of dominant discourses (Freedman & Combs, 2009) that Alan might have been influenced by. For example, although 'excellence' was an important value for Alan, we were able to discuss the standards that might define 'excellence'. The following questions, adapted from Michael White's failure conversations map (2004), may be useful:

- Would you be able to share a story about how 'excellence' came to be important in your life?
- What standards does 'excellence' follow? How did 'excellence' come to be determined by this standard?
- Are there situations in which following this standard has been helpful?
- Are there situations in which following this standard has not been helpful?
- How do you feel about the relationship you have with this set of standards that define 'excellence'? Is it fair for these standards to inform your ideas of excellence?
- Are there different standards of 'excellence' that might sit better with you?
- Who might be the people, if any, who would support you in this different set of standards?
- How does this conversation influence how you might want to continue in your work, and hold on to the values that you identified?

As we acknowledge that people are not passive recipients to trauma, we can also identify ways that people are already responding to the challenges in their journeys. The turning points section allows for further thickening (White, 2007) of the skills that are already being used in the landscape of action (going into details of the events where Alan was able to use the skill of 'being aware' and practicing 'self-control') and in the landscape of identity (identifying values and understandings of the self that may arise from the retelling of these events).

Conclusion

This paper discusses two tools that we have been using in our supervisory practices: the supervisor life certificate and the supervisee's journey tool. It is important to note that these tools can only be useful in a context of openness and in the spirit of narrative therapy, in which practitioners use double listening (White, 2006; Yuen, 2007) and take up a decentred but influential position (White & Morgan, 2006) when being curious about the rich stories of people's responses to the struggles they face in their career. These tools were designed to complement, rather than replace, existing supervision frameworks and practices. We hope that these tools can be shared and practiced with a spirit of supporting the co-creation of meaning between supervisor and supervisee.

References

Aurelius, M. (2002). *The emperor's handbook* (C. S Hicks & D. V. Hicks, Trans.). New York, NY: Scribner. (Original work published c. 170CE)

Fareez, M. (2009). *Into the unknown: Transition experiences of new social workers in Singapore.* Riga, Latvia: VDM Verlag.

Fareez, M. (2015). The 'life certificate': A tool for grief work in Singapore. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 1–11.

Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (2009). Narrative ideas for consulting with communities and organizations: Ripples from the gatherings. *Family Process, 48*, 347–362.

Shantasaravanan, K. (2019, April). *Recovering a sense of safety in the world using the journey metaphor.* Paper presented at KKH Child Trauma Conference: From prevention to recovery, Singapore.

Vonnegut, K. (1969). *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York, NY: Delacorte.

Vonnegut, K. (2018, 14 July). *Kurt Vonnegut: Shape of stories* [Video file]. Lecture to the Case College Scholars Program on February 4, 2004. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOGru_4z1Vc

Wallman, J. (2019). *Time and how to spend it: The 7 rules for richer, happier days*. London, England: Penguin.

White, M. (2000). Re-engaging with history: The absent but implicit. In M. White (Ed.), *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays and interviews* (pp. 35–58). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2004). Narrative practice and exotic lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2006). Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma: A narrative perspective. In D. Denborough (Ed.), *Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience* (pp. 25–85). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: Norton.

White, M., & Morgan, A. (2006). *Narrative therapy with children and their families*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Yuen, A. (2007). Discovering children's responses to trauma: A response-based narrative practice. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community work*, (4), 3–18.

Dear Reader

This paper was originally published by Dulwich Centre Publications, a small independent publishing house based in Adelaide Australia.

You can do us a big favour by respecting the copyright of this article and any article or publication of ours.

The article you have read is copyright © Dulwich Centre Publications Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968, no part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission.

All enquiries should be made to the copyright owner at:
Dulwich Centre Publications, Hutt St PO Box 7192, Adelaide, SA, Australia, 5000
Email: dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au

Thank you! We really appreciate it.

You can find out more about us at:
www.dulwichcentre.com

You can find a range of on-line resources at:
www.narrativetherapyonline.com

You can find more of our publications at:
www.narrativetherapylibrary.com