

Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma:

A narrative perspective

by
Michael White

Dulwich Centre
345 Carrington Street
Adelaide SA 5000
Australia

The paper places an emphasis on the priority given to the redevelopment and reinvigoration of a 'sense of myself' in working with people who have been subject to trauma. It describes how this can be achieved through the use of definitional ceremony structures, outsider-witness practices and re-authoring conversations. The last section of the paper discusses the work of memory theorists and its relevance to work with people who have experienced trauma. More particularly it proposes that, in order to re-associate dissociated memory, we must first enable a revitalisation of the 'sense of myself'.

Keywords: *trauma, narrative therapy, definitional ceremony, re-authoring conversations, memory theory, sense of myself*

Introduction

There are many different practices of narrative therapy that are relevant to work with people who have experienced trauma. These various narrative practices are employed to re-develop rich stories of people's lives and identities. Today, due to time restraints, I am only going to focus on a small number of narrative practices – particularly those relating to 'definitional ceremony' structures, 'outsider-witness retellings', and 're-authoring conversations'. I hope that at a later date there will be opportunities for further meetings between us in which we can explore these practices in more detail, as well as the relevance of other practices in work with people who have been subject to trauma.

Contents

	Pages
<i>Introduction</i>	
Part 1 Value, resonance, and definitional ceremony	47
The effects of multiple trauma on a person's identity	
Doubly listening – seeking two stories	
Julie's story	
Finding an audience to what people value	
Definitional ceremony structure – tellings and re-tellings	
Outsider-witness sources	
The extended performance of catharsis	
The value of definitional ceremony structure	
Part 2 Re-authoring conversations	60
From a single-storied existence to a multi-storied existence	
Re-authoring conversations	
Part 3 Memory systems and the consequences of trauma	67
Memory systems	
Effects of trauma on memory systems	
Therapeutic implications	
Re-associating dissociated memory	

Thanks

PART ONE

Value, resonance, and definitional ceremony

The effects of multiple trauma on a person's identity

In my work as a therapist, many of the people who are referred to me have experienced significant and recurrent trauma. Most of these people consult me about feelings of emptiness, desolation, and despair. They are often overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and paralysis, and believe that there's nothing whatsoever they can do to affect the shape of their life or the shape of events around them. Many of them have lost touch with a sense of personhood. They have lost touch with a particular and valued sense of who they are – a 'sense of myself'.¹

I'm sure that you are familiar with this 'sense of myself'. How many of you, when you have looked back at a stressful event and to how you responded in the context of this, found yourself thinking, 'Sure it was me, but I just wasn't myself'? One outcome of the experience of trauma is that people often lose touch with this familiar sense of their identity.

We can think of identity as a territory of life. When people experience trauma, and particularly when this is recurrent, there is a very significant shrinking of this territory of identity. When their territory of identity is so reduced, it becomes very difficult for people to know how to proceed in life, to know how to go forward with any personal project or with any plans for living. What's more, all of the things in life that they would usually give value to are diminished or reduced.

When a person has been through recurrent trauma, their 'sense of myself' can be so diminished it can be very

hard to discover what it is that they give value to. This is because recurrent trauma is corrosive of what people treasure in life. It's a violation of their purposes in life and of their sentiments of living. Because of the effects of this corrosion and violation, when people have been through significant and recurrent trauma, it can be very difficult even in therapeutic contexts to actually elicit what it is that they give value to in their lives.

In my work with people who have been subject to multiple and recurrent trauma, one of the primary considerations is to restore that valued sense of who they are, that preferred sense of identity or personhood that in this presentation I will refer to as the 'sense of myself'. There are a number of key aspects to this work. One key aspect involves discovering what it is that a person gives value to in life. Once this has been discovered, the next task is to find ways of responding that are highly validating of what the person gives value to. This provides the foundation for the rich story development of the person's life.

This approach to reinvigorating the 'sense of myself' is particularly relevant in circumstances when being consulted by people who have experienced recurrent trauma that they have little or no memory of. There are other occasions in which it is possible quite early in therapeutic conversations for an account to develop of how the person responded to trauma. Developing such an account contributes significantly to clarifying what the person has continued to accord value to, and in turn to rich story development.

Both these approaches contribute to the re-invigoration of the 'sense of myself'. Both will be considered in this presentation.

Doubly listening – seeking two stories

When working with people who've been through recurrent trauma, it's very important that I hear whatever it is that people want to share with me about their experience of trauma. To make this possible, I provide therapy as a context in which people can speak about what may not have been previously spoken². But at the same time, it's vitally important that I listen for signs of what the person has continued to give value to in life despite all that they have been through, and for any expressions that might provide some hint of the person's *response* to trauma. No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps to try to prevent the trauma, and, even if preventing the trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some small way or to modify its effects on their lives, or they take steps in efforts to preserve what is precious to them. Even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to try to protect and to preserve what they give value to.

The ways in which people respond to trauma, the steps that they take in response to trauma, are based on what they give value to, on what they hold precious in life. However, in the context of trauma, and in its aftermath, these responses to trauma, and what these responses are founded upon, are usually diminished – these responses and what is given value to in life are regularly demeaned and ridiculed – or entirely disqualified. Even when these responses to trauma are not disqualified in this way, they are usually considered insignificant and are overlooked. This contributes to a sense of personal desolation, to the development of shame which is strongly experienced by so many people who have been subject to trauma, and to the erosion of the 'sense of myself'. To reiterate, in circumstances when people's very responses to the trauma they're going through, including the very actions that they take to prevent it, to modify it, to resist its effects, are disqualified or rendered irrelevant, the outcome is usually a sense of personal desolation and a strong sense of shame. In some circumstances this can develop into feelings of wretchedness and self-loathing.

So, in my work with people who've been through trauma, it's very important that I not only hear whatever it is that is important for them to share about the story of trauma, but that I also provide a foundation through my questions that gives people an opportunity to resurrect and to further develop a preferred 'sense of myself' and to identify how they responded to the trauma they were being put through. It's

important that these responses become richly known, be honoured, and be highly acknowledged by us in our work with these people. Apart from other things, this provides for the re-association of dissociated memory, which I will discuss towards the end of this presentation.

These responses, these steps which people take to try to prevent or to modify the trauma and its effects, these steps which have to do with efforts to hold onto and preserve what is precious to people despite trauma, are shaped by certain knowledges about life and skills of living. I often refer to these skills of living, which include problem-solving skills, as 'practices of living'. The steps that people take in the midst of trauma, and in its aftermath, that are invariably disqualified or diminished, are founded on knowledges of life and on practices of living that have been developed in the history of the person's life, in the history of their relationships with others. In our work it is possible to create a context whereby these steps, and the practices and knowledges which they represent, can become known and richly acknowledged.

The knowledges that we develop about our lives have much to do with what we give value to. Whatever it is that we accord value to in life provides for us a purpose in living, with a meaning for our lives, and with a sense of how to proceed in life. What we accord value to in life is shaped by our relationships with others who have been significant to us – this can include family members, relatives, and friends – by our communities, by the institutions of these communities, and by our culture. And what we accord value to in life is often linked to notions about one's sentiment of living, one's ethics of existence, one's aesthetics of living and, at times, to specific spiritual notions. Once we can understand what a person gives value to we will have a foundation for the development of rich conversations that take us back into personal history, and that provide us with an account of how these important knowledges of life and practices of living were generated. This establishes a fertile ground for the recovery and reinvigoration of the person's 'sense of myself', and for the development of an understanding of how the person responded to the trauma, and to its aftermath.

I use the term 'doubly listening' to describe my posture in these conversations. When I'm meeting with people who are consulting me about trauma and its aftermath, I hear the story about the trauma, but I also hear expressions of what people have continued to accord value to in their lives despite what they have been through. As well, I find signs of the person's response to the trauma they went through. And I

try to establish a context so that the multi-layered nature of those responses become richly known, powerfully acknowledged and honoured. When people first consult us about trauma and its consequences, they generally have very thin understandings of their responses to the trauma they have been subject to. In our therapeutic conversations with these people, their understanding of their own responses to trauma becomes much thicker.

In my work, all of the therapeutic conversations that I have with people who have been through trauma are *double-storied* conversations, not single-storied. There's always the story about the trauma – people have the opportunity to speak of their experiences of trauma, and they are actively supported in the telling of their stories about trauma in ways that make it possible for them to speak about what hasn't been spoken of before. And, there's also the story about the person's response to trauma which is often very thinly known – this story is often only present as a very thin trace, one that can be highly difficult to identify. It is vitally important that we do get onto this trace, and that we assist people to thicken this up. The first step to achieving this is often through identifying what it is that people have continued to give value to despite everything they have been through. I will now share a story of a therapeutic conversation that reflects this principle.

Julie's story

This is a story about a woman called Julie who has experienced a lot of abuse. This has been a recurrent trauma in her life. A lot of this abuse was perpetrated by her father, and by a neighbour, and she's been living with a man who has reproduced this abuse. On numerous occasions Julie has tried to get free of the abusive context but has always returned to an unchanged violent situation to be subject to yet more trauma. Julie has a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, reports that she has a pervasive sense of emptiness, and from time to time is overwhelmed by shame and despair. She has a history of cutting herself at these times.

Julie's usual escape route from the violence of the man she lives with is via a women's refuge. On the occasion of her most recent admission to this refuge, the workers there talked with Julie about her cycles of admissions to the refuge and about her cutting, and predicted that she would once again return to an unchanged violent situation unless something

different was tried. They then asked Julie if she would agree to a meeting with me. She agreed to this, and an appointment was made for me to meet with Julie and with two of the refuge workers, Sally and Dianne, who had come to know her quite well over several years.

When I sat down and talked with Julie she told me that she had a borderline personality disorder, and that she mostly felt empty and desolate. She represented her life as a chronicle of tragic and demoralising events that just occurred one after the other, events that seemed totally unrelated. Julie described herself as a passive recipient of these events. She had a sense that she could do nothing to shape their course; that there was no action that she could take to modify her circumstances in any way at all. In Julie's recounting of these events of her life, I detected no sense of personal agency, and no unifying 'sense of myself' that could be traced through these events.

After about forty minutes of listening to this chronicle of tragic and demoralising events, I checked with Julie if it would be okay for me to ask a question. She said that this would be okay. By this time I had some appreciation of the many tragic and traumatic experiences that she'd been through. One of her more recent painful experiences had occurred about eight months before our meeting. This was an experience of witnessing a child being run down by a motor car in the city. The child was seriously injured. There were other people at the scene who went to help the child, and soon an ambulance arrived. Julie talked about how she had felt paralysed at this time. She found that she could not act, and was unable to move to assist at the accident scene. This experience of paralysis had clearly been significant to Julie, and although Julie did not say this, when she spoke of this paralysis I thought I detected a sense of shame. In all of the stories that I had heard from Julie, this was the only one in which I thought I detected an expression of feeling, or affective tone.

So I asked her about this: 'Did I detect a note of shame in your voice when you were talking about your inability to act, about your inability to assist the child?' Julie said that she had never thought about it before, but that she supposed that it must have been shame – 'shame over letting the child down'. I wanted to know whether this was a mild shame or a moderate shame or a strong shame, hoping that it was strong or at least moderate shame. After some reflection, Julie said that she thought it must have been strong shame, although she hadn't realised this at the time. I recall feeling quite

enthusiastic about her conclusion that this was strong shame, because this indicated an opening for further conversation about what Julie gives value to in life.

I then wanted to know from Julie why she would feel ashamed in this way. She said, 'Surely you would know?' I replied, 'Well, I live my life, not your life. I know about how and why I respond to situations, but I don't know how or why you respond to situations. So, I don't have a sense of what this event meant to you and why you would feel ashamed about this.' Julie then said, 'Well, I saw a child run down by a motor car. I should have done something to help this poor child, but I did not act, and I think that I have lived with this shame ever since'. 'But why did your lack of action in this particular situation give rise to shame?' I asked. 'Can't you see' said Julie, 'there isn't anything in life that's worth much, but children's lives, that's different'. We discussed this further, and gradually Julie began to talk more openly about what she attributed value to. In the context of rendering her sense of shame more sensible to me, we both learned that she treasured children's lives.

Julie was actually quite surprised to hear herself speaking in this way about what she treasured. At this point I began to think about what sort of therapeutic inquiry would assist Julie to place this valuing of children's lives into a story-line of her life.

Finding an audience to what people value

The first step in this work with Julie was to discover what she gives value to. In my meetings with people who have been through very significant trauma in their lives it is not always easy to get onto this. In the context of trauma, what people give value to is usually diminished by being demeaned and ridiculed, or totally disqualified. On account of this, people take measures to keep safe what is precious to them, and these measures usually involve secreting this away from others.

The second step in my work with Julie was to arrange for what was precious to her to be responded to in the outside world in ways that are highly acknowledging. The most powerful practice of acknowledgement that I know of involves the active participation of an audience. When I specifically recruit an audience to participate in therapeutic conversations, I refer to the members of this audience as 'outsider-witnesses' (see White 1995, 1997, 2000a; Russell & Carey 2003). This term 'outsider-witness' is borrowed from

the field work of a North American cultural anthropologist called Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986). In the instance of my meeting with Julie, the two workers from the women's refuge, Sally and Dianne, were also in the room, listening to the interview as it progressed. These two women were to be the outsider witnesses. When my conversation with Julie had arrived at a place where she had spoken about what she significantly valued, I asked her to sit back. I then began to interview Sally and Dianne about what they'd heard from Julie.

Before I did this, I made clear what sort of response I was seeking from the refuge workers. What is crucial in this work is that the responses from outsider witnesses are 'resonant'. It is not the role of the outsider witnesses to give an empathic response, to give advice, to express opinions, to make judgements, to point out strengths and resources, to praise, or to formulate interventions. Julie had been talking about what she gives value to – children's lives – and, in the outsider witness retelling, it was the task of the two refuge workers to respond resonantly to this; for Sally and Dianne to re-present what Julie gives value to in life.

In order to ensure that a 'resonant' response is generated in the retellings of the outsider witnesses, I leave very little to chance. Rather, I interviewed Sally and Dianne, in Julie's presence. This interview was shaped by four primary categories of inquiry.

i) Particularities of expressions

I began by asking Sally and Dianne what it was that they'd heard from Julie that had really caught their attention; that captured their imagination; that they were particularly drawn to; that struck a chord for them; that provided them with a sense of what it is that Julie accords value to.

The refuge workers began to speak about the story that Julie had told about not acting in relation to the child being injured, about the shame that she had experienced in relation to this. And they spoke in strong terms about what they had heard Julie giving value to – children's lives.

Julie was an audience to this conversation between me and the two refuge workers. It was very important that she was not in the conversation. The power of 'outsider-witness' responses is much greater when the person concerned is not in the conversation itself. In the position as an audience to the conversation between me and the refuge workers, Julie could hear what she would not have otherwise heard had she been in dialogue with Sally and Dianne.

ii) Images of identity

I then asked Sally and Dianne to tell me what Julie's story had suggested to them about her; how it had affected their picture of her as a person; how it shaped their view of her; what it said to them about what might be important to Julie; and what it perhaps said about what she stood for in life, about what she believed in. Through questions like this, I was inviting the refuge workers to describe the images of Julie's identity that were evoked for them by the expressions they had been drawn to as they had listened to her story.

Sally and Dianne had been particularly drawn to the account of what Julie gave value to in life, about what was precious to her, and, in response to my questions, began to speak about the sorts of images of Julie's life and identity that this evoked for them. As they spoke about these images, I encouraged them to speculate about what these implied about Julie's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments. Amongst other things, Sally and Dianne presented images of a caring and protective adult, of a person who had a strong desire to go the extra mile in supporting someone more vulnerable than herself.

Throughout this time, Sally and Dianne were talking to me about Julie. They were not talking directly to Julie. They did not turn to Julie and say, 'Julie, when you said this, this is what came to me'. Instead they said, 'When I heard this from Julie, this is what it evoked for me ...' This process of retelling in which Julie was strictly in the audience position was very powerfully authenticating of what Julie accorded value to. Had the refuge workers turned to Julie and said directly to her: 'Look, it's really important that you treasure this value and that you hold onto this', this would make little, if any, difference to Julie. This could too easily be discounted, and would not provide, for Julie, that experience of resonance in the outside world.

iii) Embodying their interest

It is not possible to listen to the significant stories of other people's lives without it touching us, without it affecting us personally in some way. And it is not by chance that we become engaged by particular aspects of people's stories. Julie's story about shame and about what she accorded value to in life struck a chord for the two refuge workers. And the images of Julie's identity which were evoked by my conversation with her, and which they'd had the opportunity to speak of, had set off reverberations down into the history of their lives. These reverberations touched on specific

experiences of their personal histories, which had come into memory, and had lit up for them.

I asked Sally and Dianne about why they were drawn to particular expressions of Julie's story, and about what these images of Julie's identity had struck a chord with in their own personal histories. In response, Sally spoke about how she had two children, and of how Julie's statements about the value of a child's life had her thinking even more about what her own children's lives mean to her, and about some of the ways in which her own life was different for having these children. Dianne spoke about some of her experiences as a child. She had known some adults who had not treasured children's lives in any way, and she had known one or two who had. She spoke poignantly about what a difference it had made to her to know these adults who cared for children, and what a difference it had specifically made for her.

As the refuge workers spoke of these personal resonances, it became clear to Julie that their interest in her life was not simply academic or professional interest, but personal interest. As the refuge workers situated their interest in Julie's expressions in the history of their own experiences of life, this interest became embodied interest, not disembodied interest. And to embody one's interest in this way is powerfully authenticating of it.

iv) Acknowledging catharsis

When the stories of people's lives touch on the history of our own experiences in ways that trigger resonances, we are inevitably moved by this. Here I am not just referring to being moved emotionally, but about being moved in the broad sense of this word – about where this experience has taken us to in our own thoughts; in terms of our reflections on our own existence; in terms of our understandings of our own lives; in terms of speculation about conversations that we might have with others in our lives; or in terms of options for action in the world – for example, in regard to repossessing what we find precious in our own histories, or in regard to addressing current predicaments in our own lives and relationships.

I began to interview Sally and Dianne about their experience of movement in this broader sense of the word. Dianne responded with: 'Well, on account of what I've heard from Julie, I have a new understanding of how I got through some of the things I had to deal with as a child and as a young woman. Right now I am much more in touch with the ways in which I was helped through some really bad times by a couple of adults who cared about me. One of these people

was a neighbour, and another was our local grocer. And this has given me an idea about reconnecting with these people, to talk to them about what they meant to me. I think that this will be an important step for me to take, because I am sure that it will give me a sense of having a fuller life'. Sally spoke about her relationships with her children: 'As Julie was speaking, I thought more and more about the lives of my two children. I have felt more honouring of my wish for my children to have contact with adults who treasure children's lives. I feel that I have been putting up with some circumstances that have had me breaking my promise to myself on this. I don't want my children to have to spend time with adults who don't value them properly. So, because of Julie's story I am going to make some decisions about my children's contact with some members of my family, decisions that I have been putting off'.

In the context of this acknowledgement of movement, Julie was in touch with the fact that the ripples of her story were touching the lives of these other two women, taking them to another place in their lives that was important to them. In this context, Julie experienced making a significant contribution to the lives of others. I do not know of any therapeutic practice that is more powerfully acknowledging than this. I could have met with Julie every day of her life in an effort to help her to appreciate that she is a worthwhile person. But this would make little, if any, difference to her sense of self. In fact, this could even have the effect of alienating me from her. But to experience outsider witnesses acknowledging movement in their own lives in this way on account of one's story is invariably extraordinarily validating and potentially restorative. It is potentially restorative of the sort of 'sense of myself' that Julie has found to be so fleeting in the history of her own life.

Another way of thinking about this fourth part of the outsider-witness retelling is to link it to the idea of 'catharsis'. In contemporary times, catharsis is often associated with the idea that, on account of historical trauma or whatever, there are substances like pain held under pressure in the emotional system, in much the same way that a head of steam is held under pressure in a steam engine. This is associated with the notion that healing is the outcome of the discharge or release of these substances. I am not very fond of this modern version of catharsis. I'm much more interested in the central classical understanding of catharsis. For the ancient Greeks catharsis meant many things, but its central meaning was linked to the performance of Greek Tragedy. The performance of Greek

Tragedy was cathartic of the audience if it moved them to another place in their lives; if it provided the impetus for the members of the audience to become other than who they were at the outset of the performance. If, on account of witnessing this powerful drama, the people in the audience could think differently about their life, or if they had a new perspective on their own personal history, or if they became newly engaged with certain precious values and beliefs, or if they had new ideas about how they might proceed in life, ways that were more in harmony with these values and beliefs, this was understood to be a cathartic experience.

Extending this metaphor to the therapy realm, when I interviewed Sally and Dianne about movement in their own lives, they acknowledged catharsis. They spoke about what it was about Julie's story that had touched their own lives in ways that would make a difference. I have already talked of the potential significance, to Julie, of witnessing this acknowledgement of catharsis, and I will again refer to this. Can you imagine how powerful this was for Julie, who had so totally believed that the world would never respond to the fact of her existence? Can you imagine how this might affect a woman who thoroughly believed that she could never be influential in any positive way in the lives of others? Can you imagine what witnessing this acknowledgement of catharsis might do for a woman who had no sense of personal agency? And can you imagine the part that this might play in restoring and further developing that 'sense of myself' that had been so elusive in the history of Julie's life?

When I had finished interviewing Sally and Diane I turned to Julie and asked her a series of questions about what she had heard. In this interview, I did not encourage Julie to reproduce the entire content of what the outsider witnesses had said. Rather, the interview was shaped by the same four categories of inquiry that structured my interview of Sally and Dianne, who were the outsider witnesses for our meeting. First, I wanted to know what Julie had heard that had struck a chord for her; about what she had been specifically drawn to; about the particularities of what had caught her attention or captured her imagination: 'What did you hear that you were drawn to? Were there particular words that struck a chord for you?' etc.

Second, I interviewed Julie about the metaphors or the mental pictures of her own life that were evoked by the retelling of the outsider witnesses: 'As you listened, what images of life came to mind? Did you have any realisations about your own life? How did this affect your picture of who

you are as a person?’ etc. At this time I also interviewed Julie about what these images might reflect about her identity: ‘What did this say to you about what is important to you, about what you treasure? What does this suggest about your purposes in life? Do you have a sense of what this reflects about what you stand for, or about your hopes in life?’ etc.

Third, I interviewed Julie about her sense of why it was that she could relate to what she’d heard in the outsider-witness retellings. This encouraged her to identify those aspects of her personal experience that resonated with what she had been drawn to in the responses of Sally and Dianne: ‘You have spoken about what you heard that struck a chord for you. What did this strike a chord with in terms of your own experiences of life? What did it touch on in regard to your own history? Did particular memories light up at this time? Did anything else become more visible to you about your own personal experiences, that would explain why you were so drawn to what you heard?’ etc.

Finally I asked Julie questions that provided her with an opportunity to identify and to express catharsis; that provided her with a frame for speaking about where the responses of the outsider witnesses, and her reflections upon these responses, had moved her to: ‘What is your sense of where these conversations have taken you? What is the place that you are in right now that you were not in at the beginning of these conversations? You have talked of some important realisations about your life that have come from listening to Sally and Diane, and I would be interested in your predictions about the possible effects of these realisations. You have also given voice to some significant conclusions regarding what your life is about, and I would be interested to know if this has contributed to any new understandings about your own history ...’ etc.

Definitional ceremony structure – tellings and re-tellings

This therapeutic process that I have outlined, I define as ‘definitional ceremony’. It is a significant feature of narrative practice that includes structured levels of tellings and retellings, and that reproduces a specific tradition of acknowledgement. I believe that definitional ceremony is an apt metaphor to describe this feature of narrative practice, for it creates what I consider to be a ceremony for the re-definition of people’s identity. I believe that this fits with the original sentiment associated with this metaphor, which

I drew from the work of Barbara Myerhoff, a North American cultural anthropologist (1982, 1986).

As illustrated in my account of my conversations with Julie and the two refuge workers, the definitional ceremonies of narrative practice always consist of at least three parts.

i) The telling

In the example that I have given, I first interviewed Julie in ways that facilitated a double-storied telling. This was a telling of stories of tragedy and trauma, and also of Julie’s response to tragedy and trauma in ways that made visible what she gave value to in life. In these interviews, the therapist always provides, through appropriate questions, a context for a double-storied telling. At this time the two refuge workers were strictly in the audience position. I believe that ‘outsider witness’ is an appropriate term with which to define the members of the audience, for, at this time, they are not active participants in the conversation, but are witnessing this conversation from the outside.

ii) The re-telling of the telling

When Julie’s double-storied telling had developed sufficiently to the point that there was some clarity about what she accorded value to in life, I arranged for an external response. This was an external response that, amongst other things, was powerfully resonant with what Julie accorded value to in life. This resonant response was the outcome of my interview of the two refuge workers who were present as outsider witnesses. In this response, these outsider witnesses engaged in a vivid re-presentation of what it was that Julie accorded value to. At this time Julie was strictly in the audience position, listening to the responses of the outsider witnesses as I interviewed them about what they had been drawn to (the expression), about the metaphors and mental pictures that this had evoked (the image), about what this had resonated with in terms of their own personal experience (embodiment), and about the ways in which this had moved them (catharsis).

I was active in the structuring of the outsider-witness retelling. I didn’t simply say to the two refuge workers: ‘Well, what do you think of what Julie said?’ Instead, I carefully interviewed them according to the four categories of enquiry I have already described. I will again emphasise the important responsibility that the therapist has in scaffolding this interview through asking appropriate questions. Common expressions of empathy, like ‘I feel deeply for Julie on account of the fact that ...’ will rarely achieve a powerfully

resonant re-presentation of what the person gives value to. And as I have previously mentioned in this presentation, practices associated with giving advice, opinions, affirmations or pointing out positives are unlikely to be successful in establishing this resonance, and can be hazardous in these contexts.

It is important that this responsibility for the scaffolding of the outsider-witness retelling is exercised from the outset of these definitional ceremonies. For example, if an outsider witness commences their retelling in the superlative (for example, 'Well, I think Julie is just amazing because ...') it is up to the therapist to quickly respond with a question that encourages this outsider witness to provide some account of the particular aspects of Julie's telling that s/he was drawn to (for example: 'Julie's story was obviously very engaging of you. What was it exactly that you heard or witnessed that caught your attention, and that might be really significant to Julie?').

iii) The re-telling of the re-telling

Following part one (the tellings) and part two (the re-telling of telling), I interviewed Julie again, this time about her response to what the outsider witnesses had said. This third part of the definitional ceremony is referred to as the retelling of the retelling, and, as I have described earlier, it is shaped by the same four categories of inquiry that shape the outsider-witness retelling by focusing on the particularities of expressions; images of identity; embodying interest; and acknowledging catharsis. At this time the outsider witnesses return to the audience position. Within definitional ceremonies all the shifts between the three different stages are distinct and relatively formal movements. If these distinct movements were to degenerate, and the conversations become simple dialogue between the various parties rather than structured tellings and retellings, it would be highly unlikely that this would enable the redevelopment and reinvigoration of the 'sense of myself' that is vital to redress the effect of multiple trauma.

Summary

At the outset of the definitional ceremony, Julie had very thin conclusions about her life and identity, and there was virtually no trace of that 'sense of myself' that is critical to the development of personal agency, to the development of an experience of the continuity of precious themes through

the history, present and future of one's life, and to the development of intimate relationships with others. On account of this, Julie's predominant feelings were of desolation, emptiness, incompetence, and worthlessness. Getting on to what Julie accorded value to in life and establishing a context for a strongly resonant response to this through outsider-witness retellings were the first steps in the redevelopment and reinvigoration of Julie's 'sense of myself'. The significance of these opening steps were attested to by the richness of Julie's retelling of the outsider-witness responses, and also by her description of some of the bodily sensations that these gave rise to: 'As I was listening I was having these unusual feelings. I don't really know how to describe these feelings. I am bit stuck for words right now. But it's like something ... well perhaps it is like starting to come out of some sort of deep freeze. Yes, that's it ... maybe it's like coming out of a hibernation.'

Outsider-witness sources

These definitional ceremonies of narrative practice always engage outsider witnesses. In the example given here, these outsider witnesses were known to Julie. Often this is the case – the person has a pre-existing connection with the people who are invited to participate as outsider witnesses (for example, these people might be relatives, friends, acquaintances, or, as in Julie's case, members of the professional disciplines who the person has come to know). However, it is not always the case that the person will have this already established connection with the people who are invited to participate as outsider witnesses. At times the outsider witnesses to my work with people who consult me about the consequences of trauma are drawn from a pool of volunteers who have insider knowledge of trauma and its effects. Often these volunteers come from a list of names of people who have consulted me about the consequences of trauma in their own lives, and who have been enthusiastic about joining me in my work with others who are following in their footsteps³. At other times these outsider witness are drawn from my own personal and social network, or from people of the professional disciplines who are colleagues or who are visiting Dulwich Centre for training and consultation.

Regardless of the source of outsider witnesses, I always do my best to observe my responsibility for the shape of the outsider-witness retelling. In the observance of this responsibility, I actively interview the outsider witnesses,

and this interview is shaped by the four categories of inquiry that I have outlined in this presentation. When the outsider witnesses are drawn from the professional disciplines, it is usually important to have conversations about the nature of the tradition of acknowledgement to be reproduced in the outsider-witness retellings. This assists these workers to step back from traditions of theorising and hypothesising about people's lives and relationships; from evaluating people's expressions according to the expert knowledges of the professional disciplines; and from formulating interventions and treatments for the problems of people's lives. These conversations about the tradition of outsider-witness retellings open space for members of the professional disciplines to maintain:

- a) an awareness of what it is that they are drawn to in people's expressions,
- b) a consciousness of the images that are evoked for them by these expressions,
- c) an attentiveness to what it is in their own experience that resonates with these expressions and images, and
- d) a reflective stance on the ways that they are moved on account of being an audience to these tellings, and on account of participating in these retellings.

The extended performance of catharsis

In this presentation I have placed considerable emphasis on the significance of the acknowledgement of catharsis on behalf of outsider witnesses. In doing this, I have provided an account of how outsider witnesses might acknowledge catharsis in the second stage of the definitional ceremony. I would now like to describe options for the extended performance of catharsis.

People who have been through significant and recurrent trauma usually have a strong sense that the world is totally unresponsive to the fact of their existence. Further, their sense of personal agency is often diminished to the point that they do not believe that it is possible for them to influence the world around them in any way. The outcome of this is a sense of the irrelevance of one's life, of emptiness, and of personal paralysis – a sense of one's life being frozen in time. On account of this, it is particularly important for people who have been subject to trauma to experience a world that is in some way responsive to the fact of their existence,

and to experience making at least a small difference in this world. The extended performance of catharsis has the potential to contribute significantly to this achievement.

I will now share a story that illustrates this potential:

Marianne had a history of significant and recurrent trauma. As an outcome of this, amongst other things, she'd had a long struggle with the consequences of what is usually referred to as dissociated memory: under stressful circumstances she was prone to re-living the trauma of her history without having any awareness at the time that these were memories that she was re-experiencing. In our second meeting I had interviewed Marianne in the presence of three outsider witnesses. Two of these were people who'd previously consulted me about the effects of trauma in their lives, and at the end of our work together had been delighted about their names being entered into one of my outsider-witness registers. The other outsider witness was a woman called Hazel, who was a counsellor. Hazel had a special interest in working with people who had been subject to trauma.

At the outset of our meeting I had interviewed Marianne about some of her experience of trauma, and the consequences of this to her life. Through careful listening during this stage of our meeting, I had also found a gateway to explore some of her responses to trauma, and the foundation of these responses – what it was that she gave value to in her life. I then interviewed the outsider witnesses according to the manner that I have been describing in this presentation, and noted that Marianne seemed particularly drawn to Hazel's acknowledgement of catharsis. In this acknowledgement, Hazel had spoken of some new realisations that she'd had about what might be helpful in her work with two of her clients. These clients were both women who were consulting Hazel about the effects on trauma on their lives. Hazel said that until this moment she had felt somehow constrained in her work with these two women, and frustrated that she couldn't find a way of proceeding that was to her satisfaction. She also said that over the last month or so she had become concerned that she was failing these two women.

In the context of the outsider-witness retelling, Hazel spoke of these new realisations, of the possibilities that she thought these might bring to her therapeutic conversations with these two women who were consulting her. She rounded off this acknowledgement of catharsis with: 'Because of what I've heard from Marianne, I now have some clear ideas about

how to proceed in my work with my clients'. When I interviewed Marianne about her response to the retellings of the outsider witnesses, she dwelt for some time on this account of her contribution to Hazel's work. She seemed a little awestruck: 'I always think of myself as something that is useless, and just a burden to others. Who would have ever thought that I could do anything that might help someone else. This is a big thing to get my head around, it really is. It is going to take a while!'

At the end of this meeting Hazel was acutely aware of the significance, to Marianne, of her acknowledgement of catharsis. Three weeks later I received two letters, addressed to Marianne via my office, along with a covering note from Hazel. In this covering note Hazel explained that these two letters had been co-written by her and her two clients, and that these letters provided an account of the ways in which Marianne's story had opened new avenues for these women to address the consequences of trauma in their lives. In the covering note, Hazel suggested that I read these letters to Marianne on the occasion of my next meeting with her.

This I subsequently did, and Marianne was so moved by this that, on two occasions, she had to take time out over a cigarette in our courtyard in order to, in her words, 'Get herself together again'. She was also powerfully touched by the gifts that we had discovered in the two envelopes. One of these letters was accompanied by a beautiful hand-crafted card with an inscription that was honouring of Marianne's contribution. The other letter was accompanied by five coupons for espresso and cake at a city café. This card and these coupons were a gift from these two women, who had in writing acknowledged Marianne's contribution to their efforts to heal from the traumas of their lives.

These letters, card and coupons represent an example of the extended performance of catharsis. The extended performance of catharsis is about post-session initiatives that are taken by outsider witnesses in following up acknowledgements of catharsis made in the second stage of a definitional ceremony. It is this extended performance of catharsis that provided for Julie an unmistakable sense of personal agency, and a sense of the world being responsive to the fact of her existence. In this way, the extended performance of catharsis has the potential to very significantly contribute to the redevelopment and reinvigoration of the 'sense of myself' that I have referred to in this presentation. Amongst other things, in response to

reading these letters and receiving these gifts, Marianne spoke of bodily sensations very similar to those reported by Julie.

As I have mentioned, Marianne was quite overwhelmed by these acknowledgements. Some time later she told me that she had never experienced anything even close to this sort of acknowledgement her entire life; that this was 'light years' away from anything that she'd ever known. At this time she also said that it had been important that this acknowledgment wasn't in a form that she could refute or deny. She hadn't experienced this acknowledgement as an attempt to point out positives in the hope of making her feel better, but as a factual account of the ripples which had their genesis in her own expressions, and which had touched the life of others in significant ways. This provided her with a platform for new initiatives in her own life to recover from the trauma of her own history.

I later learned that this extended performance of catharsis had established a profoundly healing resonance for Marianne. The realisation that she had contributed to possibilities for others in addressing injustice had resonated with a long held but faintly known secret hope – that all she had been through would not be for nothing. This news did not surprise me, for I have found that it is common for people who have been subject to significant trauma to hold onto a longing for the world to be different on account of what they have been through; or a secret hope that all they have been through, all they have endured, wasn't for nothing; or a hidden desire to contribute to the lives of others who have had similar experiences; or a fantasy about playing some part in relieving the suffering of others; or perhaps a passion to play some part in acts of redress in relation to the injustices of the world.

The value of definitional ceremony structures

In this presentation I have been focusing on the place of the definitional ceremony structure in work with people who have been subject to trauma. I cannot emphasise strongly enough the effectiveness of this structure. It has the potential to very significantly contribute to the reinvigoration of that 'sense of myself' that is so often diminished and even erased by experiences of trauma. In my experience, there is no therapeutic process more powerful. Perhaps the easiest way for me to convey this is to share another story.

Paul

Paul, a twelve-year old boy, was brought to see me by his mother and father, who were highly concerned about him. According to them, he was persistently sad, apprehensive and lonely, and, in a variety of ways, had been expressing highly negative thoughts about his identity and about his life. As these parents described their concerns to me, Paul was silently crying.

According to these parents, Paul had always been a sensitive boy who had a habit of taking things to heart. It hadn't been uncommon for him to be distressed about many of the trials and tribulations of his childhood, but over the past eighteen months his parents had noticed the development of a more general apprehensiveness and sadness that was now touching virtually every aspect of his existence.

Paul was still crying, so I asked his parents some questions about what they understood to be the context of this development. Amongst other things, Paul's mother spoke of the incessant teasing and bullying that he had been subject to at school in recent times. At this juncture Paul began to sob, and I took this to be confirmation of his mother's observation about the significance of this teasing and bullying.

I turned to consult Paul about this, but he made it clear that he wasn't yet ready to join our conversation. I asked him if it would be okay for me to interview his parents about their further understanding of this teasing, and the effects of this on his life, and he signalled that this would be okay. I then initiated a conversation with these parents about what they knew about the specific tactics of this teasing, about the attitudes that were expressed in this, and about what they understood to be the consequences of this to Paul's life. For example, I inquired about their understanding of how these tactics and attitudes were affecting Paul's image of himself as a person, and about what they were talking him into about his life. I also inquired about their understanding of how these tactics were interfering with his social and emotional worlds. It seemed quite clear that these were isolating Paul, and highly disturbing his emotional life. It was at this point that, for the first time, his mother declared that it was 'abuse' that Paul was being subjected to.

Paul now seemed more ready to enter the conversation. In response to my inquiry, he confirmed his parents' speculation about his sadness and loneliness, and about the negative conclusions that he held about his identity and his life; that he was 'weak', 'pathetic', 'inadequate' and

'incompetent'. He also confirmed their understandings about the principle context of these experiences – incessant teasing and frequent bullying at school. I was openly curious about how Paul had been able to enter our conversation. I wondered aloud whether it was his parents' naming of the tactics of peer abuse, the attitudes expressed in these tactics, and/or their understandings of the consequences of these to his life might have something to do with this. Paul confirmed that it was all of this, and as our conversation developed I learned that this was the first occasion upon which these tactics, attitudes, and their consequences had been named in their particularities. It was clear that this had provided him with some relief.

In response to initiating a conversation about the action that this family had taken in their efforts to address these circumstances, I learned that Paul's mother had endeavoured to take this up with school authorities on several occasions, but to no avail. Each time her concerns had been dismissed with versions of: 'We have looked into this, and believe that the problem resides principally with Paul. He clearly needs some assistance with his self-esteem' and 'Don't you think it is about time that Paul looked at himself. It is a big world out there, and he is just going to have to learn to be more assertive'.

After further conversation about the actions taken by the parents based on this understanding of the circumstances of Paul's predicament, I initiated an inquiry into Paul's responses to what he was being subjected to. It is my understanding that no-one is a passive recipient of the abuses that are perpetrated on their lives. All people respond to what they are being put through and continue to respond, although it is usually the case that they are mostly unfamiliar with these responses. This is because, in the context of abuse, these responses are mostly discouraged, diminished, ridiculed and demeaned, and invariably go unrecognised and unacknowledged. It is my understanding that people's responses to abuse are founded upon what it is that they give value to in their lives, and upon ways of relating that can be understood as practices of counter-power.

In any conversation with people who have been subject to abuse, I believe it to be of critical importance to render visible and to unpack their responses to what they have been put through. It is in this unpacking of their responses that what it is that people give value to can become richly known. It is in this unpacking that the practices of counter-power can be appreciated in their particularities, and further elaborated. And it is this unpacking that provides a foundation

for the further development of these practices of counter-power. In the usual run of life, it is very rare for the development and performance of these practices of counter-power to be significantly acknowledged, despite the fact that this achievement reflects the attainment of quite extraordinary social skills⁴.

As an outcome of this inquiry into Paul's responses to what he was being put through, we discovered that, amongst other things, he had taken steps to befriend the school librarian so that he could spend lunch times in the school library, away from the culture of the schoolyard. This and other initiatives were unpacked in our conversation. As an upshot of this, Paul and his parents became much more familiar with the particularities of the practices of counter-power that Paul had been developing, with the roots of these, and with what these initiatives reflected about what he accorded value to in life. It was readily apparent that Paul was finding further comfort in this evolving conversation in which the particularities of his responses to trauma were becoming more richly known.

With the approval of Paul and his parents, I called the school. It was my hope that some collaboration with the relevant school authorities might contribute to general initiatives in addressing those aspects of the culture of the schoolyard that were abusive, and to specific initiatives in response to Paul's experience of this abuse. I had also hoped that it might be possible for me to meet with the children who were perpetrating the peer abuse. The school's response to my overture confirmed the prediction of Paul's mother – it was not positive. Despite the care that I took, the school principal was clearly annoyed with my approach, and demanded to know: 'What are these allegations about the culture of the schoolyard?'

I called Paul's family and spoke to his mother about a substitute plan – to invite to our next meeting some other children, strangers to Paul, who had insider experience of peer abuse. I suggested that these children might appreciate aspects of Paul's story that might be lost to us as adults, and that their responses might provide Paul with the sort of validation that was beyond our ability to provide. Paul's mother was enthusiastic about this idea, as, apart from other things, Paul's acute loneliness had been such a source of concern to her. Paul's father's response was: 'Well, I guess we've got nothing to lose!' Paul felt positive about the idea, although he was somewhat apprehensive about it.

In the context of therapeutic practice, it is not uncommon for me to refer to my registers – these are lists of names and contact details of people who have consulted me in the past and who have volunteered to contribute to my work with people who follow in their footsteps. So, from my register of the names of children who had been referred to me in relation to the consequences of peer abuse in their lives, I called the families of the three most recent volunteers. I did not need to proceed up the list, as all of these children were enthusiastic about this summons, as were their parents. Before long I was meeting with Paul and his parents, and these three guests.

At the outset of this meeting, I interviewed Paul about his experiences of peer abuse, about what he had learned about the specific tactics of peer abuse that he had been subject to, about the consequences of this to his life, and about his responses to what he had been put through. I scaffolded this conversation in a way that provided Paul with an opportunity to thickly describe the counter-practices that he had engaged in, and what it was that he had continued to give value to in his life, and had refused to surrender. During this first part of our meeting, our three guests were strictly an audience to our conversation.

I then asked Paul and his parents to sit back, and began to interview these children about:

- a) what they had heard from Paul that had particularly captured their attention;
- b) the mental pictures and metaphors that this had evoked, and what this suggested to them about who Paul was as a person and about what was important to him;
- c) why they could relate to what they were hearing; about what this struck a chord with in their own experience; and about
- d) where they had personally journeyed to on account of being present as witnesses to Paul's story about abuse, and of his responses to this.

It was in the context of this retelling by these children that Paul's contribution to the development of the practices of counter-power became more visible, and what Paul stood for in life became more richly known: 'Paul didn't let himself get caught up in all of this. Nothing that these kids did could get him to join in with them in this teasing and bullying'; 'Paul stands for more caring and understanding ways'; 'Paul is one of those kids who won't pass the buck. He didn't find smaller kids to pass this bullying on to.'

As the retelling of these three children evolved, Paul began to cry, and then sob. It was my guess that this was significantly an outcome of the fact that the very ways of being in life that had been so demeaned and disqualified in the context of peer abuse were now being acknowledged and honoured. It was also my guess that, on account of this, Paul was separating from all of the negative conclusions that had been imposed on his identity in the context of peer abuse. When it came time for our three outsider witnesses to sit back, and for me to interview Paul about what he had heard in this retelling, and about where this had taken him to in regard to realisations about his own life, he confirmed my hunch. The experience of this retelling did turn out to be a turning-point in his life, and I gained a strong sense that he would never again be vulnerable to these negative conclusions about his identity and his life.

I should say that these three children did a great job in acknowledging the ways in which Paul's story, and the opportunity afforded in their retelling of his story, was transporting of them. In acknowledging the transporting aspects of these experiences, these children talked about, amongst other things, possible action that might be taken by them that might further contribute to some redress in relation to the injustices of peer abuse. This acknowledgement of the transporting aspects of these experiences is invariably highly resonant for people who have experienced abuse. This is resonant with a range of sentiments of life, including a longing for the world to be different on account of what they have been through.

There is more to the story of my conversations with Paul, his parents, and the three children who joined as outsider witnesses for three of these conversations. I will just say a little of one of the developments that unfolded during the course of our meetings, and that I considered to be outstanding. I learned in my fifth meeting that Paul had begun to make it his business to seek out other children who had insider knowledge of peer abuse. Most of these children were from his school. Upon identifying these children, he was engaging them in conversations about what being subject to peer abuse reflected about what was important to them, and about what they stood for in life; that is, more honourable ways of being boys in the culture of the schoolyard. As well, because the identification and appreciation of his own responses to peer abuse as practices of counter-power had been very significant to Paul, he was inviting stories from these other children about their own

responses to what they had been put through. This was contributing to the development of a shared stock of knowledge about the practices of counter-power, and to initiatives in the development of an alternative culture of the schoolyard. At a subsequent meeting I had the great pleasure of meeting with Paul and several of these children.

Later, at the end of our series of meetings, I asked Paul and his parents to reflect on our meetings, and to talk with me about what they had found most useful, and about their understandings of this. I also wanted to know about anything that they had found unhelpful. In response to these questions, they spoke a lot about our meetings when the three other boys were present as outsider witnesses. I asked what value they attributed to these meetings in our overall work together: 'Was their contribution worth an extra meeting? Like an extra therapy session? Or was it worth half a therapy session, or two therapy sessions? What is your sense of this?' In response to my question, Paul and his parents all gave me their individual estimations. These were all high. I divided these figures by three to get the average, which turned out to be 837.4 sessions. My contribution to the therapy was six; I'd had six meetings with this family. So of the 843.4 sessions of therapy that it had taken to address the trauma that Paul was being subject to, my contribution was less than 1%. This is not an exemplary example of the outcome of employing the definitional ceremony structure in our work with people who consult us about experiences of trauma. People routinely value the responses of outsider witnesses very highly when these responses are shaped according to the tradition of acknowledgement that I have been describing in this presentation.

I have offered here three examples of the employment of the definitional ceremony structure in work with people who have been subject to trauma. In all of these examples, with Julie, Marianne and Paul, the outsider witnesses achieved something that was beyond my ability to achieve. However, I was nonetheless influential in all of these examples – these outsider-witness responses would not have taken the shape that they took if I hadn't actively interviewed the outsider witnesses according to the four categories of inquiry that I have outlined in different places in this presentation. I believe that it was the act of interviewing the outsider witnesses according to these categories of inquiry that facilitated retellings that were so strongly resonant for Julie, Marianne, and for Paul.

PART TWO

Re-authoring conversations: From a single-storied to a multi-storied existence

I will now review a subject that I touched on earlier when I was describing the principle of listening doubly. This subject is the multi-storied nature of life. When people who've been subjected to considerable trauma consult me, they often represent their life as being single-storied. It is as if they feel totally trapped in a single dimension of life, one that predominantly features a sense of hopelessness, futility, emptiness, shame, despair and depression. Usually, upon my first contact with people who have been through trauma, they try to explain the sorry and painful predicaments that they find their lives to be in. In this explanation they endeavour to link some of the events of their lives in some sort of sequence unfolding through time according to specific themes that are usually of tragedy and loss. Although these explanations are usually quite thin and disjointed, and usually exclude any awareness of the sort of valued themes that are reflected in the preferred 'sense of myself' that I have referred to in this presentation, they nonetheless constitute stories.

When people represent their lives to be single-storied, and when they experience themselves to be trapped in single dimensions of living, I find it helpful to conceive of life as multi-storied. As a way of exploring the implications of this idea about life being multi-storied, let's consider the metaphor of a building. For instance, take this multi-storied building that we are meeting in here in Ramallah. Just imagine for a moment that this building has no elevators, no stairwells, no escalators, and no fire escapes, and that there is no way for people who are on the ground floor to get access to the other floors, and that there is no way out from the ground floor. Imagine how trapped these people on the

ground floor would feel in being denied access to the other floors of this multi-storied building, particularly when these other floors represent other territories of living; other territories of living in which there are to be found many things precious about these people's lives, including other knowledges of life and practices of living that could assist them to find a way out of their predicaments of life, that could assist in their efforts to heal from the trauma they have been subject to.

In the conversations of narrative therapy that are shaped by our questions and by structures like those associated with definitional ceremony, we build a scaffold much as construction workers do around the sides of the buildings they are working on. It is in the building of this scaffold through our therapeutic questions and structures that we make it possible for people to get access to the other stories or territories of their lives. Upon first identifying these other stories about life, or, if you like, these other territories of life, they seem small, in fact miniscule. These could be likened to atolls in the midst of stormy seas. However, as these alternative stories, or these previously neglected territories of life, are further explored in our therapeutic conversations, they become islands upon which safety and sustenance can be found, and then archipelagos, and eventually continents of security that open other worlds of life to the people who are consulting us. In the development of these alternative stories, in the explorations of these other territories of life, people's stories of trauma and pain are not invalidated or displaced. However, people find that, as an outcome of these conversations, they have another place in

which to stand that makes it possible to give expression to their experiences of trauma without being defined by these experiences.

In all of the stories that I have shared with you in this presentation, the first step in accessing these alternative territories of life was through the discovery of what it is that a person gives value to. People always accord value to something. I believe that the mere fact of their continued existence is evidence of this. Although what it is that people accord value to can be very difficult to identify, people's expressions of pain and distress usually provide some clue to this. I don't believe that a person would experience pain in relation to trauma if they didn't value something that was violated and dishonoured in the name of trauma. And I believe that the felt intensity of this pain is a testimony to the intensity to which they held dear or held precious what it was that was being violated and dishonoured. I don't believe that people would experience ongoing day-to-day distress as an outcome of trauma if they were not maintaining a relationship with what they give value to – instead, they would only be resigned to their experiences of life, to their situation, and to their circumstances (White 2000b, 2003). Ongoing day-to-day distress as an outcome of trauma can be understood as a tribute to the maintenance of an ongoing relationship with what a person holds precious, and as a refusal to surrender this.

Discovering what people give value to opens the door to further development of the other stories or to further explorations of the other territories of people's lives. In each

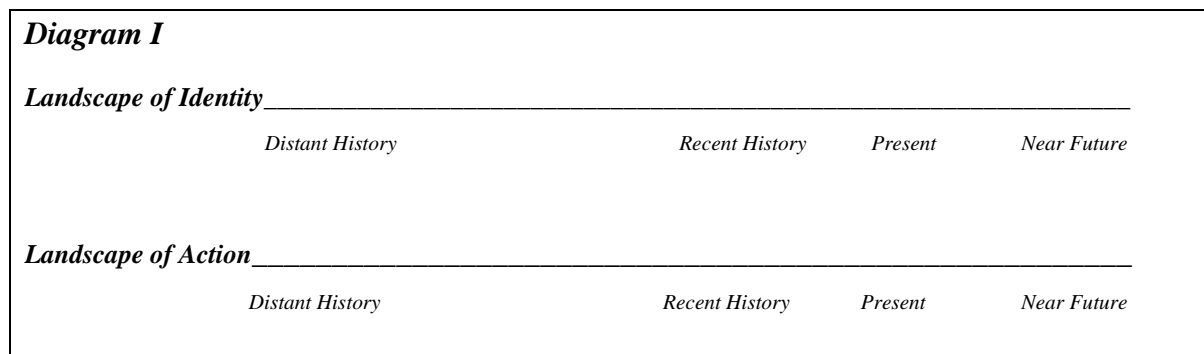
of the examples given in this presentation, the next step in the further development of these stories, in the further exploration of these territories, was to arrange resonant responses in the external world.

In the next part of this presentation, I am going to focus on the ways in which re-authoring conversations can assist people to get access to some of the alternative stories of their life that are, in the first place, only present in very thin traces.

Re-authoring conversations

No account of my work with people who have been subject to trauma would be very satisfactory without reference to the place of other narrative practices that are shaped by what I refer to as the 're-authoring conversations map'. While it is not my intention to fully review this re-authoring conversations map in the space of this presentation, I will provide a flavour of the practices associated with this map here, and leave it to you to follow this up in the abundant literature on this subject (White, 1991, 1995; Morgan 2000; Freedman & Combs 1996).

The re-authoring conversations map is associated with the notion, borrowed from the work of Jerome Bruner (1986), that stories are made up of two landscapes. They consist of a landscape of action, and a landscape of identity⁵. In the diagram below (Diagram 1) these two landscapes are represented by two parallel horizontal time-lines that run through the present, recent history, distant history and near future.



Landscape of action

The landscape of action is composed of events that are linked in sequences, through time, according to a theme or a plot. These four elements seem to represent the rudimentary structure of stories. For example, upon reading a novel one is engaged in an account of specific events that are linked in some sort of sequence, not necessarily lineal, through time and according to a theme or a plot. The plot might be romance, or tragedy, or comedy, or farce, or whatever.

Landscape of identity

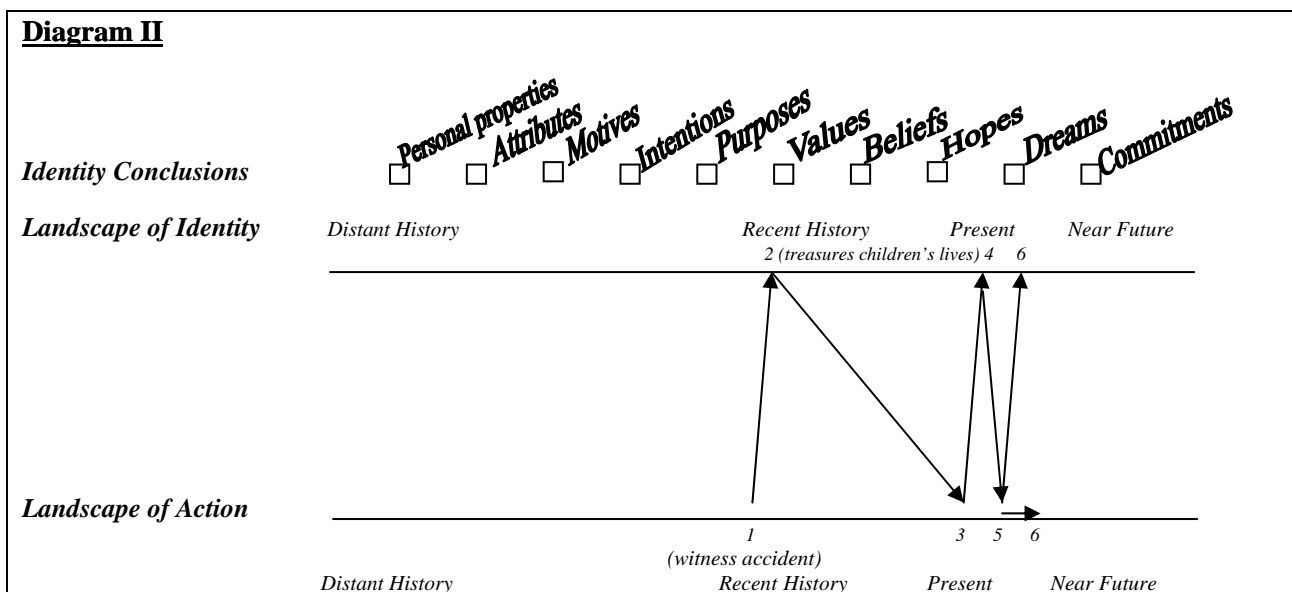
The landscape of identity is composed of categories of identity that are like filing cabinets of the mind. These categories of identity are culture specific, and might include motives, attributes, personality traits, strengths, resources, needs, drives, intentions, purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, commitments, etc.

It is into these filing cabinets of the mind that people file a range of identity conclusions. These identity conclusions are usually arrived at through reflection on the

events of life that are mapped into landscapes of action. According to the 'constitutive perspective' that shapes narrative practice, people's lives are not shaped by things with names like motives and personality traits, but by the conclusions about one's motives and personality traits that get filed into these filing cabinets of the mind.

In therapeutic conversations that are oriented by the re-authoring conversations map, it is the therapist's task to provide a scaffold through questions that makes it possible for people to draw together, into a storyline, many of the neglected but more sparkling events and actions of their lives. It is also the therapist's task to provide a scaffold that assists people to reflect on the events and the themes of this alternative storyline as it develops, and to derive conclusions about their identities that contradict many of the existing deficit-based identity conclusions that have been so limiting of their lives.

I wish to briefly illustrate the relevance of re-authoring conversations to working with people who have experienced trauma. To do this, I will return to the story of my work with Julie. As I proceed with this illustration, please refer to Diagram II which provides a pictorial account of the zigzagging nature of these re-authoring conversations.



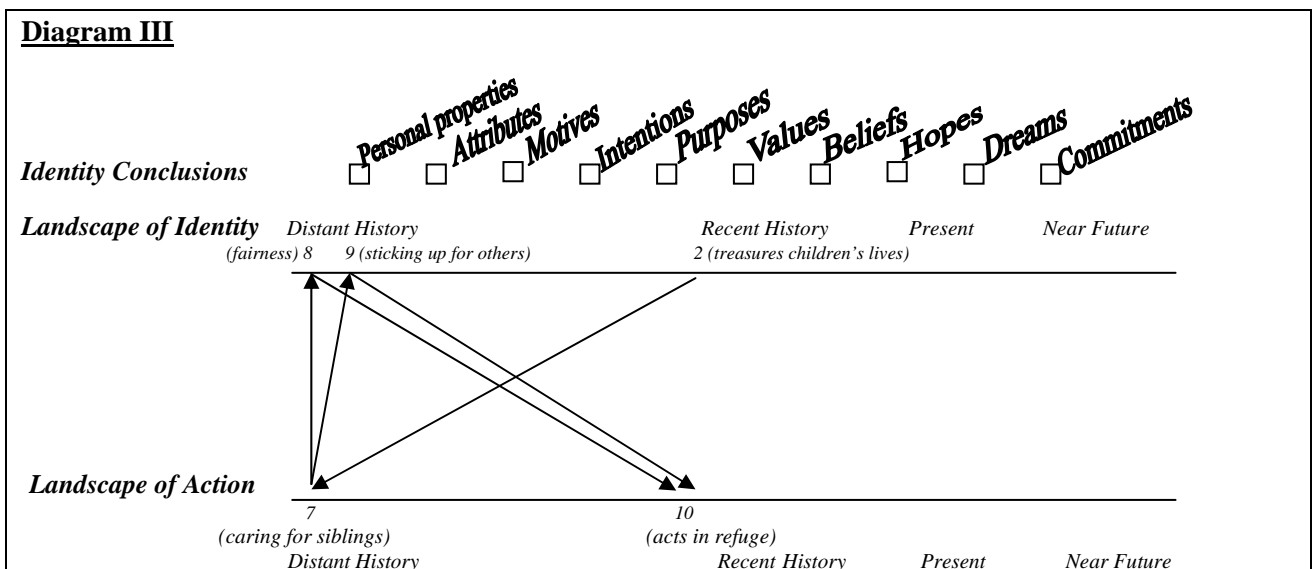
It is possible to review the definitional ceremony with Julie that I described earlier and to plot these tellings and retellings into the re-authoring conversations map. As you will recall, one of the experiences that Julie talked about was of her paralysis in response to witnessing a child being run down by a motor car (this is landscape of action material – see #1 on diagram II). In our conversations, it was the story about this event and Julie's response to it that provided an avenue for getting onto what it was that Julie accorded value to in life – she treasured children's lives (this is landscape of identity material – see #2).

I then arranged a context in which Julie experienced responses that were powerfully resonant with what she accorded value to. This was achieved in the outsider-witness retellings. These outsider witnesses spoke of what they were drawn to in Julie's story (landscape of action material – see #3), about the images of her identity that were evoked by this (landscape of identity material – see #4), about what resonances this set of in their own personal experience

(landscape of action material – see #5), and about the ways in which this had moved them (landscape of action and landscape of identity material – see #6).

In the third part of this meeting, I interviewed Julie about what she had heard in the retellings of the outsider witnesses. This interview was informed by the same four categories of inquiry that had shaped these retellings. In response to my questions, Julie spoke about the outsider-witness expressions that had captured her attention (landscape of action material), about the mental pictures of her life that had been evoked by these expressions (landscape of identity material), about what experiences had come to light for her on account of this (landscape of action material), and about how this might affect her perspective on life (landscape of identity material). This could also be charted onto Diagram II.

In my second meeting with Julie, I proceeded to interview her in ways that were shaped by the re-authoring conversations map of narrative therapy. I will now provide a sample of this conversation and plot this onto Diagram III.



Michael: *At the end of our first meeting, I asked you about what you'd heard from the outsider witnesses that had caught your attention, and about what this had set off for you. Amongst other things, you talked about how this had strengthened your realisation about how precious children's lives are to you, and about how this must have always been true for you. I became curious about the sort of stories you might be able to tell me about your life when you were younger that would reflect this high value you give to children's lives?*

This is a landscape of action question about the events of Julie's history. This landscape of action question was referenced to a landscape of identity development, which featured a stronger realisation about the value that Julie gives to children's lives.

Julie: *Well ... er ... Right now I can't think of anything to tell you. See, I have lots of problems with my memories. Lots of blank spaces ... so I just don't know.*

Julie's response of 'not knowing' suggested that it would be necessary for me to be more active in providing a scaffold for this re-authoring conversation. It was my assumption that in the context of the further scaffolding of this conversation, Julie would find herself to be more knowledgeable in response to this inquiry about her life.

Michael: *I understand that you have a younger brother and a younger sister. If your brother and sister could be here with us today, and they were listening to our conversation, could you guess at the sort of stories they might tell me about you that would reflect the high value that you place on children's lives?*

Julie: *If my brother and sister could be here, what they would say about me?*

Michael: *Yes. If I could ask your sister and your brother to tell me stories about you that would reflect how children's lives are precious to you, what sorts of stories do you think they would they tell me?*

Here I am attempting to evoke the presence of Julie's brother and sister⁶. Asking Julie to represent her brother and sister on matters of her own identity has the potential to provide her with distance from the immediacy of her own experience, and from what is so known and familiar to her (i.e. the many highly negative conclusions about her own identity). I hoped

that this distancing manoeuvre, one that encouraged Julie to step into the consciousness of her brother and sister on matters of her own identity, would provide a foundation for Julie to arrive at a different sort of knowing in relation to my question about her younger life.

Julie: *'Okay. Let's see ... I know! I can think of something that my sister might tell you about me when I was just a little girl'*

Michael: *'Okay. What story would she tell me?'*

Julie: *'She'd tell you a story of when I was a little girl ... maybe I was 9 or 10 years of age at the time. She would tell you that whenever I saw that my father was drinking too much alcohol, and I knew that there was a good chance that he would hurt us, I would gather up my brother and sister and rush them away to a hiding place in the woods near our home. It would be my job to protect them because I was the eldest, and there really was no one else to turn to. We would wait in this hiding place until I thought it was safe to go back home, when my father was laid out unconscious from drinking too much.*

Michael: *That's quite a story!*

Julie: *And I remember ... Yeah, now I remember I used to leave things to eat and drink in this hideaway, and things for my brother and sister to play with, so that they wouldn't be hungry or thirsty, and so that they would be entertained.*

This is landscape of action material (see #7) and isn't it an extraordinary story? It's a beautiful account of some of the actions of Julie's history that reflect what she treasured – the lives of her siblings as children. As therapists we will not hear such stories unless we take great care with the questions that we ask. And the people who consult us will not recall such stories unless we take responsibility for the scaffolding of these re-authoring conversations. I believe that tracing the history of what Julie accorded value to in this way contributed to a dawning, for Julie, of a consciousness of the fact that what she accorded value in the present was part of a theme that stretched through her history: a dawning of some explicit appreciation of a theme that was continuous in her life, one around which many of her actions were linked through time. It was my guess that the dawning of this consciousness would contribute to the redevelopment of that 'sense of myself' that I referred to earlier in this presentation.

Michael: *Julie, imagining that your brother and sister were present, if I asked them what it was these actions of yours told them about you, what's your guess about what they would say? Or if I was to ask them about how this shaped their picture of you as a person, what's your guess about how they might respond? Or if I asked them about what this said to them about what you stood for in life, what do you think they would tell me?*

These are landscape of identity questions. They are not about actions, but they are referenced to new accounts of Julie's actions. These questions invite reflections on actions to derive new conclusions about the person's identity. They invite reflections on actions to determine what these actions suggest about the character of the person, or about the person's purposes, values and beliefs, and so on.

Julie: *Let me think for a bit.. What would this have said to my sister? I guess it would have said something to her about what I stand for in regard to fairness. Yeah. I suppose about my position on injustice.*

Michael: *And your brother?*

Julie: *Well I think it would have told him something about ... let's see ... about, well, perhaps it would have said something to him about my belief in how important it is stick up for people who are going through hard times.*

These words contributed to the development of new identity conclusions (landscape of identity material – see #8 and #9), which are in stark contrast to the negative conclusions that Julie was giving voice to at the beginning of our first meeting. Just imagine these new conclusions being filed into those filing cabinets of the mind that I referred to earlier in this presentation. Just imagine them taking up the space that was once occupied by those previously filed negative conclusions.

Michael: *About where you stand on injustice! And about how important it is to stick up for people who are going through hard times!*

Julie: *Yeah. That's it.*

Michael: *Can you think of any more recent events of your life that might be examples of where you stand on injustice, and of your belief in sticking up for people who are going through hard times?*

This is a landscape of action question that is referenced to developments in landscape of identity conclusions. It is a

question about any actions/events that might reflect these principles and beliefs that Julie holds dear.

Julie: *Let me think for a bit ... I am not sure that I can come up with anything. I'm sorry, but I can't remember anything like this.*

Michael: *Try casting your mind back over the last few weeks or so. Perhaps over the time that you have been staying at the women's refuge. Anything, anything at all that you can think of in these weeks that could be an example of your position on injustice, or of your belief in sticking up for people who are going through hard times would be helpful.*

Julie: *Well maybe ... maybe I can think of an example. But I've not thought about this before, so I could be wrong.*

Michael: *What is it?*

Julie: *There's this other woman whose name is Bev. She is staying in the refuge, and she's had a really hard time. I think that she's been terrorised. She doesn't speak, and mostly she splits off from everybody. But I have been sitting with her at lunch times, just being with her. I make it clear to her that I don't expect her to speak, and that I am just there to sit with her (landscape of action material – see #10). I think that she knows that I know something about what she has been through, and that this is why she doesn't speak. I think that she knows that what she has been through is not okay with me, but that it is just fine for her not to speak.*

Michael: *Could this be an example of your position in injustice, and about how important it is to you to stick up for people who are going through hard times?*

Julie: *Well, it's like I said. I haven't ever thought about this before. But now I reckon that it could be an example of this. Yeah, it really could.*

This recent expression of solidarity with this other woman in the refuge provided options for further landscape of identity and landscape of action questions, and over the course of the next forty minutes, in the context of this zigzagging re-authoring conversation, the alternative story of Julie's life and identity was more richly developed. It is in actual conversations like these that the reconstruction of identity proceeds. It is in actual conversations like these that the 'sense of myself' is gradually redeveloped and reinvigorated.

It is through this redevelopment and reinvigoration that, in the place of a sense of discontinuity, Julie began to experience a continuity of a preferred sense of self through many of the episodes of her history. This was a preferred sense of self that was an expression of what she valued, and of acts of personal agency founded upon what she valued.

The focus of this re-authoring conversation with Julie was on story development. This conversation brought together numerous previously neglected events of Julie's life into a sequence that unfolded through time, according to specific themes. These were themes that contradicted the themes of 'life as tragedy', of 'life as futility'. The development of the alternative storyline is usually gradual and progressive. Returning to some of the metaphors of territory that I proposed earlier in this presentation, we can conceive of these conversations contributing to the gradual opening of neglected territories of life, beginning with atolls, then islands, then archipelagos, and then continents.

To summarise my meetings with Julie: At the outset I listened carefully to her stories of existence in an effort to identify what she accorded value to. Then, through my responses and through the retellings of the outsider witnesses, what Julie accorded value to was re-presented in powerfully resonant ways. I then interviewed Julie about her experience of the retellings of the outsider witnesses, and, amongst other things, this evoked yet other images of her life and identity that were harmonious with these resonant responses. These

images then provided the point of entry to an extended re-authoring conversation. This had the effect of regenerating, for Julie, a 'sense of myself' that provided her with an experience of continuity in existence through the episodes of her life. This is an achievement that is of critical importance in work with people who have been subject to trauma.

It's important to note that throughout the therapeutic conversations shaped by the definitional ceremony metaphor and by the re-authoring conversations map, the therapist does not have a role as a primary author of the alternative stories of people's lives. In my work with Julie, the account of what she gave value to represented a thin trace of an alternative story of her life, one that might be richly developed in our conversation. But I could never know any of the particularities of this alternative story ahead of Julie's responses to my landscape of action questions. And, ahead of my landscape of identity questions, I could not assume to know what some of the neglected events of Julie's history might reflect about her identity that would be resonant for her. I was not the author of any of these accounts of her actions or any of these new identity conclusions. However, I was influential by way of the therapeutic structures that I introduced, and by way of the questions that I asked. It is my understanding that these structures and questions provided a scaffold that made it possible for Julie to separate from the known and familiar, and to arrive at new conclusions about her life and her identity.

PART THREE

Memory systems and the consequences of trauma

The consequences of trauma impinge on people's lives in various ways. For many, this is via traumatic memories which invade their lives, and which intrude on their sense of self in a myriad of ways. Because of this, the study of the effects of trauma on people's lives has drawn very significantly on explorations of human memory systems. As considerations of memory are primary in the understanding of the consequences of trauma, and to the development of healing practices, I will now turn to the subject of memory theory. Although most of my understandings about what is relevant to working with people who have been subject to trauma are founded on explorations of narrative practice, I have found memory theory to be highly reinforcing of these understandings. Memory theory has also made it possible for me to fine tune some of my therapeutic practices, and to 'push the envelope' a little in this work.

My knowledge of memory theory, and of the effects of trauma on memory, is drawn principally, though not entirely, from the work of Russell Meares⁷. Much of what I am to share with you about these subjects is drawn from what I learned in participating with Russell Meares in a conference forum a few years ago, and in reading his book *Intimacy and Alienation* (2000).

Memory systems

As an outcome of explorations of human memory, it is now generally accepted by many memory theorists that there are several distinct memory systems, and that these develop sequentially from birth. Tulving (1993), in drawing together

various contributions to the understanding of memory, defined five memory systems that are considered to develop sequentially in the course of human development. These memory systems, in order of development, are: (a) perceptual representation, (b) procedural, (c) semantic, (d) episodic, and (e) short-term memory. I will briefly discuss each of these here, as well as a memory system that Nelson (1992) has referred to as autobiographical, and a memory system that Meares, following William James (1892), refers to as the 'stream of consciousness'.

i) Perceptual Representation System – 'recognition memory'

The perceptual representation system (PRS) is about recognition memory. In the first week after birth, infants begin to recognise a range of familiar stimuli, including voices, actions, shapes and scents. The PRS is a recognition memory in which distinct sensory experience is recorded. In that this recording does not involve explicit recollection of previous experience, this memory system is non-verbal and non-conscious. It is non-conscious as it is a memory system which functions without any awareness, on the infant's behalf, that, in recognising familiar stimuli, s/he is remembering.

ii) Procedural memory – 'recall memory'

Procedural memory is associated with the development of motor skills and repertoires, which are founded on the capacity of the infant to recall experiences of the world. This memory is seen in the capacity of an infant to bring to mind

stimuli that are not immediately present – for example, this memory is present when an infant recalls the existence of toys in a cupboard when the cupboard doors are closed, or when the cupboard is not in the infant’s immediate environment – and to co-ordinate specific motor skills and behavioural repertoires on the basis of this recall. On account of procedural memory, an infant is able to co-ordinate their actions to obtain a particular outcome based on recall (such as to obtain the toys that are in the cupboard). Procedural memory is non-conscious, and, in the first place, non-verbal. It is non-conscious because the child is not aware of the circumstances that gave rise to these learnings.

iii) *Semantic memory*

The second year of life sees the development of what is often called ‘semantic memory’. Semantic memory stores what are deemed to be ‘facts’ – that is, a knowledge of the ‘world as it is’ – and the child uses this to navigate their way around the world. Semantic memory can be considered a further development of procedural memory. This memory system, which is clearly evident at the end of the second year of life, is verbal – it can be put into words and vocalised.

The development of semantic memory is evident in young children’s ability to retain clear memory of the names and attributes of the objects of the world around them, and in their performance of specific routines for going about the world.

This is a memory system that stores a range of learnings about the world which can be vocalised, but which are implicit or non-conscious in the sense that these learnings are recalled without memory of the specific incidents that gave rise to them. The language associated with the semantic memory system is one of coping and adaptation.

iv) *Episodic memory*

Episodic memory develops during the third year of life. By the time children turn three years of age they have the ability to recount experiences of the recent past as specific episodes of their history. These personal memories of the episodic memory system are verbal – they can be vocalised – and are explicit or conscious memories. In the recounting of these recent episodes of personal experience, the child is aware that s/he is remembering specific incidents of his/her life, and does not confuse these with present experience.

v) *Short-term memory – ‘working memory’*

The short-term memory system is often referred to as ‘working memory’. This is a memory system that stores memories of experiences of the many recent incidents of people’s lives, and provides them with immediate orientation in their efforts to achieve specific and complex tasks. A person’s capacity to do half a dozen things at once is founded on working memory. Short-term memory is associated with episodic memory, although it is principally a temporary storage system for experiences of the recent incidents of people’s lives. This is a verbal and conscious memory system, which is also evident in children’s lives by the age of three.

vi) *Auto-biographical memory*

Nelson (1992) distinguishes between these short-lived memories of the recent episodes of one’s life that are part of the short-term memory system, and those episodic memories that are highly selected, enduring and often remote. She proposed that these highly selected, enduring and often remote episodic memories provide the foundation for the development of an autobiographical memory that develops in the fifth year of life. It is this autobiographical memory that provides the foundation for a sense of personal identity of the sort that makes it possible for people to assert ‘this is my life, and this is me’.

The relatively stable, formal and factual stories that we tell when accounting for our personal history are of auto-biographical memory. Autobiographical memory is both conscious and verbal. This memory system contributes to and is dependent upon the development of a reflexive capacity – a capacity that makes it possible for a person to say: ‘This is me’, ‘Let me tell you about me’, ‘Let me tell you about my life’, and to declare: ‘These are my thoughts’, ‘These are my memories’, ‘These are my reflections’, ‘This is my story’, ‘This is my life’.

vii) *Stream of consciousness*

There is another memory system that provides for the development of a particular sense of self that is not accounted for by autobiographical memory. It is this memory system that contributes to the development of a continuity of a familiar sense of who one is in the flow of one’s inner experiences of life. It is a memory system that accounts for people’s capacity to arrange aspects of their lived experiences

into the sort of sequences that provides them with a sense of their lives unfolding through time, and with a sense of personal coherence. It is a memory system that makes it possible for people to weave pieces of diverse experience and otherwise disconnected events into coherent themes. It is a memory system that is present to us as a language of inner life.

The stream of consciousness appears narrative in form (James 1892). In the stream of consciousness, many aspects of a person's experiences are organised according to the sort of progressive and associative non-linear sequencing that is a feature of narrative structure. Imagination and pretence feature strongly in this stream, as does analogy, metaphor and simile.

For most of us this stream of consciousness is ever-present as a background to our daily encounter with life, and, at times when we are occupied with the performance of important tasks, it is barely experienced. However, in states of reverie or meditation, when we have stepped back from tasks of living and from our immediate social and relational contexts, we often experience immersion in this stream of consciousness. At such times we become more aware of the roaming and wandering form of this inner language, of the ebbs and flows that characterise it, and of images and themes that are associated with it. And at times we are able to hold these images before us for an extended period of time⁸.

I, Me, and Myself

William James proposed that the development of this stream of consciousness is associated with a 'doubling of consciousness' (1892). He drew attention to the fact that when we are remembering we are not just recalling to mind specific episodes of our lives, but we are also conscious of the fact that this is an episode of our own past that we are recalling. We are conscious of the fact that we are reviving what we have experienced in our past, of the fact that we have had this thought or experience before. While remembering, we remain more or less aware of our personal existence – we are not only the 'known', but also the 'knower'.

This is what James referred to as the doubling of consciousness – the emergence of a knower that can be referred to as the 'I', and of the known that can be referred to as the 'me'. It is from the position of 'I' that our attention is

directed, from which our diverse experiences of life are unified to form a sense of personal existence, and from where personal reality is constructed.

Meares (2000) suggests that there is more than a doubling of consciousness associated with this phenomenon – he concludes that personal existence is not double, but 'tripartite' (in three inter-related parts). He bases this conclusion on the observation that it is possible for one to have experiences in which there exists a sense of 'me', in that one remains certain of one's identity ('Look, I know it is me ...'), but at the same time to be devoid of a familiar sense of 'myself' ('... but, I am just not myself'). That is, there are experiences in which autobiographical memory may be present, providing a person with a sense of me-ness, but in which the language of inner life that is narrative in form and that gives rise to personal reality and a sense of well-being is absent.

In his reading of James, Meares concludes that James was in fact talking about two relatively distinct experiences of the self, founded on two doublings of consciousness, one that provides for the experience of an 'I' in relation to 'me', and the other that provides for an 'I' in relation to 'myself'. According to this formulation, the 'I' in relation to 'me' is relatively invariant, while the 'I' in relation to 'myself' is variable, constantly in flux. This version of 'me' is founded on the sort of factual knowledge that is recorded in autobiographical memory, while this version of 'myself' is relatively plastic, consistently being visioned and re-visioned in response to one's encounters with life, continuously undergoing construction and reconstruction.

Effects of trauma on memory systems

Traumatic memory is invariably triggered by a general stress, by specific circumstances of duress, and/or by specific cues. These cues mirror some aspect of the original trauma, and they may be internal, as in a specific emotional and sensory experience, or external, as in specific circumstances or relational events. These external cues can be associated with circumstances in which there is a perceived absence of social validation, or with experiences of diminishment, perhaps associated with ridicule or criticism.

I will now briefly summarise the principle effects of trauma upon memory systems as described by Meares and by other investigator-theorists.

Dissociation

In our work in the trauma area, it is quite common to meet people who are experiencing the phenomenon of dissociated memories. These are traumatic memories that are not experienced as memories of past experiences, but are located and re-experienced in the present. These traumatic memories intrude on the memory system that is associated with the stream of consciousness, and upon which the sense of myself is founded. When these intrusions are severe, they can totally erase one's familiar sense of personal reality, and contribute to a sense of detachment, desolation, exhaustion, and to an acute sense of vulnerability. These dissociated traumatic memories are usually split off from ordinary consciousness – one is not aware of their origins.

Hierarchical dissolution

It is apparent that those memory systems which evolve later and which develop more slowly are more fragile and more vulnerable to the sort of assault associated with trauma. Jackson (1931) proposed that the more significant the assault the greater the regress in regard to the developmental pathway of memory. According to this proposal, memory systems fail in a hierarchical manner – the later forming and more sophisticated memory systems fail first. Moderate trauma can have the effect of inactivating the stream of consciousness, contributing to a loss of the sense of 'myself'. With the dissolution of the stream of consciousness, people will feel a loss of substance, an emptiness, a sense of personal weightlessness and desolation.

Moderate and recurring trauma can have the effect of erasing not just the flow of consciousness, but also the autobiographical and episodic memory systems. With the loss of autobiographical memory, people will experience difficulty in putting together an account of the trajectory of their life through time, and the sense of 'this is me' will become quite elusive. When short-term memory is affected, it becomes very difficult to cope with more than one task at a time, and people will report feeling chronically stressed over the simple tasks of daily life.

This theory of hierarchical dissolution also proposes that the more recurring the trauma the more likely it is to be stored in non-conscious memory systems. For example, experiences of more severe and recurring trauma may be stored in the semantic memory, or in procedural memory and

in the perceptual representation system. According to this theory, more severe trauma can contribute to the failing of semantic memory as well, so that only procedural memory and perceptual representation systems are operative.

Uncoupling

When traumatic memories intrude into everyday consciousness, very often the outcome is an uncoupling of consciousness – the doubling of consciousness is dissolved. One no longer has a vantage point in which to stand in the present that makes possible an awareness that what one is experiencing is from another time in one's life.

This uncoupling of consciousness contributes to a dismantling of a familiar sense of self that has continuity across time – the experience of an 'I' in relation to 'myself', and at times the experience of 'I' in relation to 'me' is significantly reduced, and on occasions lost. The capacity to evaluate and monitor one's experiences and actions is then very significantly reduced, and can be entirely erased when these intrusive memories are of severe and recurrent trauma.

Meaning

Even in the midst of traumatic experience, people endeavour to make sense of what is happening to them. For many, although not all, the experience of trauma is irreconcilable with any familiar themes and with any preferred account of one's identity. These are themes and accounts of identity that are associated with autobiographical memory and with a language of inner life that organises experience and that has a structure that is characteristic of narrative.

The irreconcilable nature of traumatic experience takes one into territories of meaning that are split off from these familiar themes and narrative of self. On account of this, the meanings that are manufactured in these territories are usually profoundly negative, and not open to revision in the way that those associated with the narrative of self are open to revision – other experiences of one's life that might contradict these meanings have little effect on them. These other experiences do not contribute to a revision of these meanings. These meanings that are manufactured in the context of trauma become virtually unassailable facts about one's identity⁹.

Devaluation

The experience of recurrent trauma can contribute to the establishment of highly negative conclusions about one's identity and life that achieve the status of invariant facts. Trauma also contributes to a diminishment of what it is that a person attributes value to, of what is held precious, of what is essential to one's sense of personal integrity; that is, to the devaluation of the images, memories, conclusions and sentiments about life and identity that provide people with a sense of personal intimacy and from which they draw a sense of personal warmth and positive feelings.

It is the devaluation of what is given value and held precious that leads very significantly to the development of a sense of being 'damaged', 'messed up', and 'disabled'.

Chronicle

When the stream of consciousness is impinged upon by traumatic memories, life is experienced as just one thing after another, and is invariably recounted to others as a problem-saturated and fragmentary catalogue of events. This is a recounting of life that lacks vitality and animation – it is flat, dead. The language employed in this recounting is linear and matter-of-fact, and it contains no evidence of any content of an inner personal reality – it is devoid of metaphor, association, and co-ordinating themes that provide for a sense of existence that is ongoing and unfolding; it is devoid of a sense of unity and continuity of self.

With this breakdown of the sense of continuity of existence and personal cohesion, one becomes captive to the present moment, trapped by particular stimuli. Gone is the option to roam about in time. Gone too is the option of playing a co-ordinating and synthesising role in one's own life; of self regulation, and of the sense of personal agency that is associated with this.

I will now turn to discussion of some of the therapeutic implications of these understandings of the effects of trauma on memory systems. Although I have often employed other terms to describe my work with people who have been subject to trauma, I share Russell Meares sentiments about the primary therapeutic task: that is the reinvigoration and redevelopment of the memory system called the stream of consciousness in the instatement/reinstatement of a 'sense of myself'. I also share Russell Meares' sentiments about the route to achieving this: that is, through the identification of

what it is that people accord value to, and by establishing responses that are resonant with this. In the translation of these sentiments into practice there are divergences in regard to our respective positions – my translations are very much the outcome of a tradition of narrative explorations of therapeutic practice.

Therapeutic implications

It is invariably the case that efforts to directly address people's experiences of trauma by encouraging them to revisit this are unproductive at best, and, in many circumstances, hazardous. Such efforts can contribute to experiences of re-traumatisation, and to a renewed sense of alienation. And to engage in efforts to directly contradict and to destabilise the negative conclusions about a person's identity that are generated in the context of trauma, conclusions that might be stored in the semantic memory system and that have the status of fact, can be experienced as disrespectful and patronising, and even mocking.

The primary therapeutic task in addressing the effects of trauma on people's lives is to provide a context for the development or redevelopment of the sort of personal reality that gives rise to the sense of self that is often referred to as 'myself'. This is the sense of self that is associated with the development of a language of inner life that is narrative in form and that characterises what William James called the 'stream of consciousness'.

From a narrative perspective, the development or redevelopment of this sense of an inner life can be achieved, in part, through a therapeutic inquiry that provides a scaffold for people to bring together diverse experiences of life into a storyline that is unifying of these experiences, and that provides for them a sense of personal continuity through the course of their history. The arrangement of experiences of life around specific themes and relevant metaphors contributes significantly to this unification and sense of continuity, and to the reinstatement of the doubling of consciousness referred to in this presentation as the 'I' in relation to 'myself'.

Re-valuation and resonance

In the examples that I have given in this presentation, therapeutic inquiry has first been directed to the identification of those aspects of life to which people have accorded value. This might be: specific purposes for one's life that are

cherished; prized values and beliefs with regard to acceptance, justice and fairness; treasured aspirations, hopes and dreams; personal pledges, vows and commitments to ways of being in life; special memories, images, and fantasies about life that are linked to significant themes; metaphors that represent special realms of existence; and so on. In the context of therapeutic conversations I have described, these aspects of people's lives were identified and re-valued through a range of resonant responses.

It is not always easy to identify those aspects of life to which people have accorded value – they have often been secreted away in places where they are safe from further ridicule and diminishment – and even when identified, it can be quite a task for people to name them. However, despite any initial difficulties in identifying those aspects of life to which people accord value, I believe that these are ever-present in people's expressions of life. I believe this to be so even when these people are regularly experiencing life through the thrall of dissociated traumatic memories – as Meares (2000) observes, even at this time there is some principle operating in the selection of memories. This fact is an extraordinary tribute to the person's refusal to relinquish or to be separated from what was so powerfully disrespected and demeaned in the context of trauma.

Once identified, whatever it is about life and identity to which the person has accorded value provides an orientation for the development of resonance within the therapeutic conversation. In this presentation I have presented examples of therapeutic practices that contribute a scaffold to develop this resonance. One of these examples was the story about my work with Julie who, over a number of meetings, and on occasions with the active participation of the refuge workers and other women living in the refuge, was able to redevelop a rich 'sense of myself', and, as an outcome of this, never returned to live with the man who had been abusive of her.

Re-associating dissociated memory

Because dissociated memories stand outside of and are independent of people's lives, they are timeless memories; these memories are apart from the storylines of people's lives which are constituted of experiences linked in sequences across time according to specific themes. Being located on the outside of the dimension of time, these traumatic memories have no beginning and no end. When traumatic memories are beyond time in this way, there is always the potential for

particular circumstances to trigger the re-living of these memories in real time. These traumatic memories are re-lived as present experience and the outcome is re-traumatisation.

Apart from being timeless memories, dissociated memories are half memories. What is excluded from dissociated memory is an account of the person's response to what they were being subject to. People are not passive recipients of the traumas they are subject to. Even if they are powerless to significantly influence what they are being put through, or have no options for escaping the traumatic context, they take what steps are available to them to modify what they are being subject to in some small way, or to modify the effects of this trauma on their lives and identities. Not only are the details of these responses excluded from dissociated memory, but the foundations of these responses are also erased; that is, what it was that the person continued to accord value to through this experience, including their sentiment of living, and the practices of life associated with this sentiment of living. Put in other words, traumatic memories are half memories as they exclude an account of personal agency that would be in harmony with the persons' familiar and preferred sense of myself.

There are many factors that contribute to the development of dissociated memory. These include the fact that the experience of trauma is:

- a) irreconcilable with what people accord value to;
- b) in many cases a direct assault on what people hold precious;
- c) irreconcilable with many of the culture's cherished notions of life;
- d) often associated with the active diminishment, disqualification, and punishment of people's responses to what they are being put through, and what it is that provides the foundations of these responses.

In order to re-associate dissociated memories, it is necessary to restore these half memories to full memories. In other words, the task is to resurrect that which is erased in dissociated memory – that is, people's responses to what they were being put through, and the foundations of these responses. This resurrection is restorative of a sense of personal agency, one that is in harmony with the person's preferred 'sense of myself'. This is the 'sense of myself' that I have referred to on many occasions in the course of this presentation, one that provides an experience of continuity of

personhood through the many episodes of one's history. The restoration of these memories to full memories provides the foundation for them to be taken into history in the storylines of people's lives – in being restored in these ways, these memories carry with them accounts of personhood that are no longer alien, and this provides conditions for these memories to be taken into the storylines of people's lives in ways that provides them with beginnings and endings in time. When traumatic memory is re-associated in this way, the potential for these memories to be re-traumatising is very significantly diminished.

These considerations relating to the re-association of dissociated memory further emphasise the importance of the priority given in this work to the reinvigoration and redevelopment of the 'sense of myself'. Dissociated memory cannot be re-associated if there is no receiving frame to take this into; if there is no storyline through which can be traced a preferred 'sense of myself' through the many episodes of personal history. Once there is progress in the reinvigoration and redevelopment of this 'sense of myself', people can be assisted to imaginatively speculate about how they may have responded to the traumas of their history, and about the foundation of these responses. In this imaginative speculation, people are encouraged to project back, into the history of their lives, what is becoming more richly known about their sentiment of life, and about the practices of living that are associated with this, including their practices of counter-power.

I would add here that, in my experience, this imaginative speculation is not always necessary in the re-association of dissociated memory. In many instances the reinvigoration and redevelopment of this 'sense of myself' in the way that I have described in this presentation provides conditions for the spontaneous re-association of dissociated memory; in the course of these therapeutic conversations, experiences of trauma often come into conscious memory and are allocated to history for the first time.

Returning to the story of Julie, once she'd had the opportunity to richly develop a personal narrative that featured a valued sense of personhood that could be traced through the history of significant events of her life, we were in a position to engage in the imaginative speculation about how she had responded to the trauma she had been subject to as a young girl. This was trauma that she mostly had no conscious recollection of, but sensed she had experienced. This sense was confirmed by information that she'd been given by her brother, sister and a maternal aunt.

This imaginative speculation was based on the many understandings about Julie's sentiment of living, and on the practices of living associated with this, that were generated in the context of our therapeutic conversations (i.e. her position on injustice, her belief in fairness, her commitment to stick up for people who are going through hard times, and the ways in which she treasures children's lives). It was in the context of this speculation that Julie began to recall aspects of her experiences of trauma. Whilst some distress was associated with this recall, this was not re-traumatising of Julie. As an outcome of these efforts to re-associate dissociated memory, she reported a very significant diminution in episodes of profoundly demoralising ideas about her identity, and of the frightening visual images that were often associated with these that just seemed to come out of nowhere.

This is the sort of re-association of dissociated memories that becomes possible when the 'sense of myself' is restored.

Thanks

Thank you for inviting me to come here and join with you today. We've covered a lot of territory in a brief time! In this presentation I have placed emphasis on the priority given to the redevelopment and reinvigoration of a 'sense of myself' in my work with people who have been subject to trauma.

I've shared with you some thoughts about how this can be achieved through the use of definitional ceremony structures, outsider-witness practices and re-authoring conversations. And in the last part of this presentation I have discussed the work of memory theorists and its relevance to our work with people who have experienced trauma. More particularly I have proposed that, in order to re-associate dissociated memory, we must first enable a revitalisation of the 'sense of myself'.

But this is not the whole story. It's just a small piece of the story. I hope that this has been interesting and relevant to you and I will look forward to the opportunity for our paths to cross again. Hopefully we might catch up in the near future to engage in further explorations of our shared interest in working with those who have been subject to trauma.

Thank you very much.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of Rose Nakad, Bassam Marshoud and Dr Mahmud Sehwal in making the links between the TRC and Dulwich Centre. We'd also like to acknowledge the hospitality and colleague-ship of the Barcai Institute, Tel Aviv, who hosted Michael White's recent trip to Israel during which this visit to Ramallah took place.

Notes

1. This sense of myself is a phenomenon of the language of inner life that William James (1892) named the 'stream of consciousness'.
2. Apart from other things, at this time I often find opportunity to assist people to name, often for the first time, the nature of the trauma that they have been put through, and to identify the strategies of power they have been subject to in the context of this trauma. I have discussed this aspect of a narrative approach to addressing trauma elsewhere (White, 1995), and will not focus on this here.
3. At the end of our meetings, Julie insisted that I insert her name and contact details into one of my outsider-witness registers.
4. In according due significance to this achievement, it is helpful for therapists to conceive of the development of these practices of counter-power as a contribution to a wider technology of counter-power.
5. Drawing on literary theory, Bruner (1986) employs the term landscape of consciousness, not identity. I see this as a more adequate description, but it tends to be confusing in the context of the culture of psychotherapy where the term 'consciousness' has different historical associations.
6. Unfortunately, Julie's brother and sister were not available to attend our meetings. Had they been available, I could have invited them to assume the outsider-witness position for some of my conversation with Julie.
7. Russell Meares is a Sydney psychiatrist who has specialised in working with people who have been subject to trauma. I had the good fortune to share a forum with Russell Meares in a psychiatric congress a few years ago, and discovered that we have many shared interests. Not only do we both devote considerable time and thought to the development of approaches to working with trauma, but we also have a common interest in the writings of many interesting thinkers, including William James (1892), Lev Vygotsky (1962), and Gaston Bachelard (1969). As well as this, we have a shared appreciation of the significance of key concepts in the shaping of healing practices, including the concept of 'resonance', and a shared appreciation of the importance of identifying what people 'give value to', which I have referred to many times in this presentation.

- In this forum, I was a newcomer to memory theory, and was fascinated by this and by Russell Meares thoughts about the implications of memory theory in working with people who had been subject to trauma. And I found it very interesting that there was a commonality to what we both give priority to in our work in the trauma area, and yet we had arrived at this by very different routes – for me it is the 'rich development of personal narratives' that is restorative of the language of inner life that James wrote so eloquently about, and for Russell Meares it is the redevelopment of the 'sense of myself' that is founded on the reinvigoration of this language of inner life. Upon leaving this forum I read Meares' book, *Intimacy and Alienation* (2000), and then followed this up by consulting some of the authors to whom he referred in the forum we shared. *Intimacy and Alienation* provides an excellent summary of what memory theorists have said about memory and trauma, and it is also a source of numerous original ideas that I believe to be highly relevant to this field of inquiry and practice. In this presentation in Ramallah, much of what I spoke about memory theory and the effects of trauma on memory was informed by Russell Meares' explorations of this subject, while the actual therapeutic practices that I discussed were drawn from my explorations of narrative ideas.
8. As the redevelopment and reinvigoration of this stream of consciousness is given priority in work with people who have been subject to trauma, in this endnote I will provide an extended account of this memory system, and of its development. Much of this account is drawn from the work of William James (1892), Lev Vygotsky (1962), and Gaston Bachelard (1969).

Stream of Consciousness

This is a memory system that provides for the development of a particular sense of self that is not accounted for by autobiographical memory. It is this memory system that contributes to the development of a continuity of a familiar sense of who one is in the flow of one's inner experiences of life.

This familiar sense of who one is in the flow of inner experience is the outcome of social collaboration. It arises through the internalisation of a special conversation that is significantly present in children's lives from around eighteen months of age. This is a conversation that features speech that is non-linear and associative, and that is not apparently in the service of any outward purpose – it is not of the speech that is characteristic in a child's efforts to relate to the objects of his/her world. This special conversation is often defined as egocentric speech because its purpose does not appear to be communicative – rather, it is associated with the development of symbolic play, and of play with symbols.

This symbolic play and this play with symbols is a social or relational achievement. As part of this achievement, caretakers engage in a range of activities that provide a 'scaffold' that makes it possible for the child to distance from the immediacy of their experience. For example, caretakers routinely mirror or imitate the infant's expressions and actions in ways that

contribute to the child's recognition of a 'me' – this is a me that arises from a re-presentation of the child's expressions and actions. Caretakers also introduce the young child to the sort of pretence and mimicry that encourages the child to imitate others, and that provides a foundation for the development of symbolic play which often features illusionary people, and through which an outside and alien world is rendered personal and familiar. Further, in the context of rudimentary games, caretakers introduce young children to practices of turn-taking and sequencing which are essential to the development of conversational ability. This is also essential to building the child's capacity to arrange aspects of their lived experiences into the sort of sequences that provides them with a sense of their lives unfolding through time, and with a sense of personal coherence. As well, these rudimentary games introduce to children a culture of problem solving.

These special conversations that are associated with symbolic play, and in which the child constructs a personal reality that gives rise to a sense of self, appear to be organised according to the structure of narrative. In the production of these conversations, caretakers build contexts that facilitate children's meaning-making. In these conversations, young children are provided with structure and with frames of meaning-making that make it possible for them to weave pieces of diverse experience and otherwise disconnected events into coherent themes. In this weaving, the child has the opportunity to organise many aspects of their experience according to the sort of progressive and associative non-linear sequencing that is a feature of narrative structure. Imagination and pretence feature strongly in these conversations, as does the development of analogy, metaphor and simile. In this special conversation, objects of the world that are alien are transformed into phenomena of a familiar world that is sensed as 'my world', into a world that is 'mine', as distinct from a world that is not.

In the fourth year of life this egocentric speech becomes increasingly broken, abbreviated, and condensed as it is progressively internalised (as Vygotsky proposes). It then begins to disappear. It is through the internalisation of this symbolic play, which is mostly achieved by around the age of five years, that the child develops an inner reality. This becomes the language of inner life, and is what William James referred to as the 'stream of consciousness'. For most of us this stream of consciousness is ever-present as a background to our daily encounter with life. It is in states of reverie, in which we have stepped back from tasks of living and from our immediate social and relational contexts, that we experience immersion in this stream of consciousness. At such times we become aware of the roaming and wandering form of this inner language, of the ebbs and flows that characterise it, and of images and themes that are associated with it.

At these times we also experience the phenomena of reverberation and resonance – the images and themes associated with this inner language have the potential to set off reverberations that reach into the history of our lived experience,

and, in response to these reverberations, we experience the resonance of specific memories of our past. These memories light up, are often powerfully visualised, and are taken into the personal storylines of our lives, resulting in a heightened sense of myself. All of this is experienced while at the same time one is aware that it is 'I' who is doing the remembering.

It is the development of this personal reality through the internalisation of this language of inner life that provides us with a sense of personal intimacy. It is also this development that provides a foundation for achieving a sense of personal intimacy with others. This is an intimacy that depends upon one's ability to express an inner experience that can be shared with others, and that will have a resonance with the inner experience of others. This contributes to a sense of interpersonal familiarity and to a sense of mutual understanding that is the hallmark of relating intimately to others. On this account, the sense of myself, that has its origins in social collaboration, continues to be very significantly a relational phenomenon – to 'feel myself' is very significantly an experience of resonant movements in our intimate relationships.

The internalisation of this language of inner life also makes possible an 'empathic' relationship with aspects of a familiar and understandable world, that would otherwise be alien and inchoate. This is the outcome of experiencing a resonance between the orienting themes, purposes and plans of one's inner life with the unfolding events of external reality – a continuity between inner experience and the outside world.

9. According to some versions of memory theory, these conclusions about identity that are assigned a factual status are stored in semantic memory, and are relatively invulnerable to direct efforts to modify or to disprove them. I have consistently found developments of externalising conversations to be corrosive of these negative conclusions (for example, see White 2001). These externalising conversations have the objective of unpacking these conclusions, and do not constitute efforts to disprove or to modify them.

References

- Bachelard, G 1969: *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bruner, J. 1986: *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freedman, J. & Combs, G. 1996: *Narrative Therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Jackson, H. 1931: *Selected Writings of John Hughlings Jackson, Vol 1 & 2*. J Taylor (Ed), London: Hodder.
- James, W 1892 : *Psychology: Briefer course*. London: Macmillan.
- Meares, R. 2000: *Intimacy and Alienation: Memory, trauma and personal being*. London: Routledge.

- Morgan, A. 2000: *What is Narrative Therapy? An easy-to-read introduction*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Myerhoff, B. 1982: 'Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility and re-membering.' In J Ruby (ed), *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.
- Myerhoff, B. 1986: 'Life not death in Venice: Its second life.' In Turner, V. & Bruner, E. (eds): *The Anthropology of Experience*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Nelson, K. 1992: 'Emergence of autobiographical memory at four.' *Human Development*, 35:172-177.
- Russell, S. & Carey, M. 2003: 'Outsider-witness practices: Some answers to commonly asked questions.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.1.
- Tulving, E. 1993: 'What is episodic memory?' *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2:67-70.
- Vygotsky, L.S. 1962: *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- White, M. 1991: 'Deconstruction and therapy.' *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, No.3. Reprinted in Gilligan, S. (ed) 1991: *Therapeutic Conversations*. New York: W.W.Norton.
- White, M. 1995a: 'Reflecting teamwork as definitional ceremony.' In White, M.: *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 1995b: 'The narrative perspective in therapy.' In White, M.: *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 1997: *Narratives of Therapists' Lives*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 2000a: 'Reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony revisited.' In White, M.: *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and interviews*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 2000b: 'Re-engaging with history: The absent but implicit.' In White, M.: *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and interviews*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 2001: 'Narrative practice and unpacking identity conclusions.' *Gecko: A journal of deconstruction and narrative practice*, No.1. Reprinted in Zeig, J. (ed) 2003: *The Evolution of Psychotherapy: A meeting of the minds*. Arizona: Milton Erickson Foundation Press.
- White, M. 2003: 'Community assignments and narrative practice.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.2.

For up-to-date information about publications, training courses and our up-coming International Narrative Therapy & Community Work Conference in Oaxaca, Mexico, in July 2004, please consult our webpage:

www.dulwichcentre.com.au