

# Reflections on Narrative Practice

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Essays & Interviews

by

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## **Re-engaging with history: The absent but implicit\***

Many of the practices of narrative therapy provide people with options for a re-engagement with their own histories. This is not a re-engagement with history that is predominantly a reframing of people's experiences of living – a reframing that substitutes 'the glass is half empty' orientation to the events and experiences of one's life with one that proposes that 'the glass is half full'. This is also not a re-engagement with history that constitutes a revisioning of history – that is, a rewriting of history that constructs another total account of history that displaces and cancels out the original account. At times the practice of reframing can contribute to the construction of new totalisations of the historical record that are substituted for already established totalisations – a 'bad' totalisations is traded for a 'good' totalisation. And this is invariably the outcome of the practice of the revisioning of history. In this way, the practice of reframing and the practice of revisioning history both run the risk of contributing to the development of single-storied experiences of life and of identity.

Rather than reproducing a practice that has the effect of substituting one frame for another, and rather than engaging with a practice that is revisioning of

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the familiar historical records of people's lives, the practices of narrative therapy that contribute to options for a re-engagement with history bring forth multi-storied experiences of life and of identity. These practices not only contribute to an expansion of people's narrative resources, but also make it possible for them to alter their relationship with their own histories. This is not to reframe or to change history by revisioning it, but to re-engage with personal history on new terms.

There are many options that can be taken up by therapists in joining with people in significant re-engagements with their histories. One of the routes to these re-engagements with history is through the identification and rich description of that which is absent but implicit in all expressions of life; that is, through the identification and the rich description of whatever it is that makes it possible for people to give meaning to, and to put into circulation, aspects of their lived experience. The notion of the 'absent but implicit' is informed by the understanding that all expression, and the meaning that expression conveys, is not derived directly from the experience of the 'thing' that expression refers to – the accounts of life that shape expression do not represent a one-to-one correspondence with the properties that exist in whatever it is that is being described in these accounts. People's expressions of life do not apprehend the world out there as it is, whatever that world might be.

Rather, expressions of living are understood to be a phenomenon made possible by 'making things out', or by distinguishing things and giving them meaning, in relation to, or in contrast to, the meanings or descriptions of other things. By this account, there is a duality to all descriptions. Descriptions are relational, not representational – they do not directly represent the things of the world, whatever those things might be. According to this relational understanding of all description, a singular description can be considered to be the visible side of a double description. It is that which is on the other side of singular descriptions of experiences of living – that which is on the other side of what is being discerned, and upon what this discernment depends – that I am here referring to as the 'absent but implicit'. I find support for this understanding of the nature of description in the ideas of Gregory Bateson (1980) and Jaques Derrida (1978), who sought to challenge the myth of 'presence' – that is, the ideal of an unmediated knowledge of the world, of an original presence that is manifested in our expressions of life, and that is

represented in the descriptions of our speech and our writing.

For example, Derrida developed a deconstructive method of reading texts that brought forth the absent signs or descriptions that are relied upon for a text to establish its meanings. An assumption of this textual analysis is that every term of description contains both itself and its opposite or its other, and that the relationship between these terms can be identified through a close reading of the text. In making reference to Derrida in this way I am not proposing that life is just a text, but suggesting that by a close listening to people's expressions we might have the opportunity to engage with them in conversations that are identifying of the relationship between what they discern in these expressions, and the absent but implicit descriptions without which these discernments could not be arrived at.

It can be helpful to assume that many of the discernments that people make about the state of their own lives and that they share with therapists are discernments that implicate or that are dependent upon the unstated – upon that which is absent but implicit. With this assumption, therapists can engage in an inquiry that contributes to the identification of the absent but implicit, and to its rich description. Let me offer an example: Let's say a person consults me about 'despair'. I will first want to understand as best I can their experience of this despair, and how it manifests itself in their lives. I will also want to understand as best I can the contexts of this despair, which can include socioeconomic conditions and the power relations of local culture. These contexts can be subsequently foregrounded and addressed in a variety of ways.

But I will also be interested in what it is that this despair speaks to, or what it is a testimony to, in terms of the absent but implicit – in how the person came to identify and to represent their experience in this way, in the circumstances or conditions that made it possible for them to discern despair. This interest in what despair speaks to in terms of the absent but implicit does not constitute a departure from the conversation at hand – this does not introduce conversations that are discontinuous with those conversations that open space for people's expressions of despair. Rather, this interest is taken up in these conversations in response to the particularities of the person's expressions of despair – in these expressions are to be found the traces of a multiplicity of unstated signs or descriptions that have contributed to the possibility of the discernment of despair.

How is this interest in the absent but implicit taken up in response to a person's expressions of despair? In speaking of their despair, a person might say: 'I don't think that I can carry on any more', or 'I have reached a point at which I have given up', or 'I can no longer see a future for myself'. That which is absent but implicit in the discernment of despair might be identified through the introduction of questions like: 'You said that you could no longer continue on. Would it be okay with you if I asked some questions about your sense of what you had been continuing on with up to this point? Or perhaps about what it was that you had been depending on to see you through up to now?'; 'You said that you have given up. Could I ask some questions about what it is you are giving up on? Or perhaps about what it is that you are getting separated from, or losing touch with, that had been important to you?'; or 'You said that you can't see a future for yourself any more? Would it be okay for me to ask you about what possibilities you had seen for your future? And how, at least to a point, this has been sustaining of your life up to this time? Or perhaps about what it was that had made it possible for you, until recently, to keep this future in sight?'

That which is absent but implicit that these inquiries bring forth can include 'hopes' that things would be different in one's life, 'promises' of better things to come, 'dreams' of a life lived more fully, 'anticipations' of arriving at a particular destination in life, 'visions' of new possibilities, 'wishes' to be elsewhere, to be in other territories of life, and so on. Once identified, these accounts can be richly described. This rich description is achieved in conversations that trace the trajectory of that which had been absent but implicit in people's expressions of despair, in explorations of the history of people's relationship with the previously absent but implicit. These conversations can be shaped by questions like: 'How did you manage to hold onto this hope for as long as you did, despite everything that you went through that was discouraging of it?', 'What possibilities did this hope bring to your life that you would not have otherwise conceived of?'

Questions can also be introduced that encourage people to identify the skills and the knowledges that they engaged with in maintaining their relationship with hope, or with whatever else it was that was unstated: 'From what you have told me, I understand that there have been times when you were nearly dispossessed of this hope?', 'Can you recall the steps that you took to reclaim it?', 'Do you have any idea about the know-how that might have

sustained you in taking these steps?'.

Rather than developing a naturalistic account of whatever it is that was absent but implicit in people's expressions, narrative conversations contribute to the rich description of this through an inquiry that is identifying of the significant historical conditions – of those historical conditions that provided a context for the discernments of people's expressions. For example, in the case of a previously unstated account of hope that contributed to the discernment of despair, an inquiry of this sort can be introduced through questions like: 'It is my understanding that you were not simply resigned to your lot in life. Could I ask you some questions about how you were introduced to the hope that things would one day be different for you?', 'Or perhaps some questions about what put you in touch with the fact that the lot that you had been served up with in life was not all that there was to life?'

The historical conditions that provide the contexts for such a discernment are many and varied. A person may have had some direct personal experience of life lived differently, or may have experienced some acknowledgement from a significant figure that they deserved a better life (from a peer, a sibling, a parent or some other relative, or perhaps a teacher or a shopkeeper). Or the experiences that provided the person with a basis for this discernment may have been more vicariously had – for example, through an intimate engagement with a novel, or perhaps in witnessing the circumstances of life in a friend's family. Once identified, these historical conditions can be reproduced. For example, significant figures from a person's history who provided a basis for this discernment can be re-engaged with – this can be a material re-engagement, in the case of inviting these figures to join the therapeutic conversations in one way or another, or it can be non-material, in the case of evoking the presences and voices of these figures. Or, the therapist can join with people in the shared reading of and reflection on those novels that have provided the basis for this discernment. And so on.

## **A challenge to naturalistic accounts of identity**

In these conversations, whatever it is that was unstated in people's expressions is not routinely taken into naturalistic accounts of life and of

identity in the way that it would be in conversations that are shaped by the humanist discourses – for example, that which was absent but implicit is not construed as the manifestation of an irrepressible and resilient human nature, or as an expression of an essential self that is considered to exist at the centre of personhood. To put this another way, it is not only the discernments that people give expression to at the outset of therapeutic conversations that are not given the status of a presence, but, as well, that which is absent by implicit in these discernments is not assigned such a status. It is my understanding that these humanist renderings of life and identity have the potential to dead end therapeutic inquiry as they can be obscuring of significant knowledges and skills of living that have been generated in the histories of people's lives, and of the important historical conditions that have provided a context for these people to arrive at a whole range of discernments. On account of this, evoking presences like specific personal properties or attributes to explain the previously absent but implicit often constructs relatively thin conclusions about people's lives, and shuts the door on options for extra-ordinary inquiry in therapeutic conversations.

To engage, in this way, in conversations that do not contribute to the development of a naturalistic account of what is absent but implicit in people's descriptions of their experience, that do not contribute to interpreting the absent but implicit as the manifestation of a presence like a personal property or attribute, is not to take a position that is dishonouring of people's preferred identity conclusions – 'I guess that this hope is an expression of my resilience'. In the context of these therapeutic conversations, these identity conclusions are celebrated. But they are also unpacked in ways that render them substantially more significant. These identity conclusions are understood to be the emblems of particular modes of life and thought that are associated with a range of knowledges and skills of living that have been generated in the histories of people's lives, with certain purposes that also have a historical trajectory, and with specific themes and commitments around which people's lives are linked to the lives of others. Conversations that unpack these conclusions about presence contribute to the rich description of life and of identity, and to new options for action in the world that would not otherwise be available to people.

## **Double listening and multi-storied conversations**

The engagement with this interest in the absent but implicit requires, and is reinforcing of, a double listening on behalf of the therapist. It is in the context of this double listening that people experience being doubly or multiply heard. This is a context in which people find that there is space for them to express their experience of whatever it is that troubles them. And, as well, it is in this context that they have the opportunity to explore the unstated; that is, whatever it is that this discernment speaks to. In this way, the engagement with this interest in the absent but implicit contributes to therapeutic conversations as double- or multi-storied conversations.

It is in the space provided in the context of double- or multi-storied conversations that people often find new opportunity to speak of the effects of whatever it is that they have found troublesome – whether this be disqualification, trauma, subjugation, marginalisation and so on – and to express the distress that is associated with these experiences. It is also in the space that is provided by double- or multi-storied conversations that people have an opportunity to step into alternative identity conclusions that challenge those negative accounts of identity that have been constructed in the context of disqualification, trauma, subjugation and marginalisation, and to explore some of the knowledges and skills of living that are associated with these alternative identity conclusions. This is an important consideration, for it is in single-storied conversations that are informed by modern notions of catharsis that there is always the risk of contributing to re-traumatisation and to renewed distress, and to the reinforcement of those negative identity conclusions that are so often the outcome of being in a subject position in relation to experiences that are traumatic or disqualifying. I do not believe that it is acceptable for therapeutic conversations to contribute to re-traumatisation or renewed distress, or to the reinforcement of people's negative identity conclusions.

## **Categories of re-engagement**

The exploration of the sort of options that I have outlined here for re-engagements with history can contribute to the construction of 'categories of re-



engagement'. The construction of these categories can be helpful in that this provides a guide to practice. But more than this – in constructing these categories we are drawing out certain distinctions that provide a foundation for establishing yet further distinctions that would not have otherwise been generated. In multiplying these 'categories of re-engagement' we can increase the range of available options for therapeutic conversations. In the following discussion I will provide some examples of just a few categories of re-engagement.

### ***Beyond burden***

Julie sought consultation over a pervasive feeling of incompleteness and a general dissatisfaction with her life. As part of this she experienced a vague but compelling sense that things were 'just not fair', and that they never would be. She had struggled with this sense for as long as she could remember, and was finding this increasingly preoccupying and frustrating. She didn't think that she had any excuse for feeling this way – by any measure, according to Julie, the present circumstances of her life were good.

After encouraging Julie to more fully describe these feelings of incompleteness and dissatisfaction, and after gathering some account of the effects of these feelings on her life, I asked her to share with me any understandings that she had of this experience. Julie said that she really only had one understanding of this, and that she thought this had been attended to already – some difficulties that Julie had experienced as a young woman had been diagnosed as a neurosis that was considered to be the outcome of having been a 'parentified child'. She had, according to this account, carried a burden in her childhood and adolescence that had not only constituted a substantial deprivation, but had arrested her development in significant ways. Julie said that she had, in the context of psychotherapy, worked through what had been determined to be her issues on several occasions – including her unconscious lament for and her grief over her lost childhood, and her anger over the injustice of the deprivation and over the burdening of her life – and although she knew there still might be more to be resolved, she 'had to confess' that she was 'sick of it all'.

I asked Julie if she would fill me in on some details that could help me become familiar with what these understandings related to, and before long she was describing her life as a child. From the outset of their union, things didn't go very well for her parents. They'd had their hopes and dreams, but their marriage was rejected by both of their families, and Julie didn't think that her parents had been at all prepared for the isolation that they fell into as an outcome of this. From rural Victoria, (one of the Australian states) they moved to Melbourne, hoping for a lucky break. But none came. They were now poor. And from this shaky beginning, things just got worse. Soon after the birth of Julie's younger sister, her father became ill, and could no longer do the seasonal work that the family had relied upon for income. Eventually he was diagnosed with a congenital condition and was, to use Julie's description, 'invalided out'.

Then things got worse still. Julie's mother began to have difficulties coping with everyday tasks and gradually became depressed. Before long she could hardly function at all. In response to things falling apart in this way, Julie took on more parenting responsibilities in relation to her younger sister, Jane. She also became responsible for many of the general household tasks that had always been managed by her mother. Over the next year or two Julie's school attendance became irregular, and the family lived constantly under the threat of welfare action – this was the threat of taking Julie and her sister into what was referred to as 'care'. As Julie was recounting this episode of her life, she recalled that on one occasion the school authorities didn't notice, for a period of five months, that she hadn't been attending school. Over this time there were no incursions into the family by 'the welfare', and it turned out to be one of the happiest times of her childhood that Julie could remember. In recalling this, Julie said that to this very day she didn't know from where her mother had managed to summon up the where-with-all to avoid this welfare action.

Julie's father died in a nursing home in her fifteenth year. His death barely caused a ripple. In the last years of his life he wasn't even a shadow of his former self – this was so to the point that he was barely recognisable even to family members. Julie 'soldiered on through all of this', getting the odd job here and there to supplement the family's pension. Somehow she managed to get through most of her schooling and supported her sister in doing likewise.

Gradually her mother got her life together a little – after a fashion at least. She wasn't well, but was starting to do some things for herself. Now a

young woman, Julie 'struck out on her own', and for a time her relationship with her mother was quite strained for this. Although things were getting better between the two of them by the time Julie was in her mid-twenties, some of the strain in their relationship remained until her mother's death, at which time Julie was thirty-seven years of age.

Julie was now talking about the predicament that she was finding herself in on account of all of this. And she had lots of questions: How was she going to ever deal with this burden that she carried? Would she ever be able to get back what she had lost? What she had been deprived of? All of that which had been taken from her? Was she condemned to this sense of incompleteness, and to the restlessness that was associated with this, that was an outcome of this burden? Would she always feel that things were so unfair? Could this possibly be resolved? She was despairing that her future would take the form of one long paralysing lament.

In this expression of her predicament, Julie had discerned deprivation, loss, dispossession, incompleteness, burden and unfairness. Any of these discernments could be taken into explorations that would be potentially identifying of that which is absent but implicit. My curiosity was most drawn to Julie's expressions of unfairness, perhaps because at the outset of our conversation she had strongly emphasised her sense that things were 'just not fair'. I asked Julie to talk more about this unfairness, and, in response, she said that she had a sense that, no matter what she did, she would never feel recognised and valued. I reflected on what I had heard, and asked Julie if I was correct in concluding that she had a wish for some acknowledgement. Julie instantaneously confirmed this, stating that it was a 'longing' for acknowledgement. That which was absent but implicit in Julie's discernment about things being 'just not fair' was now identified as a longing for acknowledgement.

Rather than engaging with a naturalistic account of this longing that would interpret it as a manifestation of human nature, I asked some questions that encouraged Julie to richly describe it, and to trace its history in her life. I was curious about the fact that she had never abandoned this quest for acknowledgement, despite the fact that it contributed to very considerable dissatisfaction and frustration. How had she preserved her relationship with this longing for acknowledgement? I also wished to understand how it was that, in

the circumstances of her history, she was able to identify acknowledgement as a valued experience. I asked Julie if she could recount any experiences of her life that might have provided her with some familiarity with acknowledgement, that might have been confirming of this as a desirable experience. Before long Julie was sharing with me some slim stories about her sister and her mother's acknowledgement of what she had contributed to their lives.

After exploring these stories, I asked Julie if it would be okay to ask some questions about her parenting skills, about her skills in nurturing others, that were evident in these stories – about her skills in caring, in loving, in acknowledgement, in attending, in soothing, in going the extra mile, in building environments of understanding in the face of invalidation, in contributing to contexts of acceptance that provide an antidote to experiences of marginalisation and rejection, and so on. 'After all', I said, 'You have a long history of parenting, and it seems like this got your sister and your mother through what they might not have otherwise got through'.

Julie seemed taken aback by my comments. 'Are you for real!', she exclaimed. To this I replied: 'Now, that is something that I have never been very sure about. Others haven't been sure about that either. I know this because I've been asked that question before, but not quite as graciously as you have asked it. Now perhaps this graciousness is just another one of those parenting skills that I was referring to, and I am grateful for this right now.' Julie grinned widely. Before long I was collecting wonderful stories that reflected a rich tradition of knowledges and skills of parenting that Julie had very significantly contributed to the development of. Not only were these knowledges and skills richly-described in this conversation, but some of the questions I had the opportunity to ask precipitated a powerful acknowledgement of the essential contribution that these knowledges and skills made to Julie's mother, her sister and her father in getting through what they got through, and to what was beyond this – for example, the steps that Julie's mother was able to take in at last getting her own life back on the track that she wanted it to be on.

Julie seemed electrified in this conversation. I had the sense that, in this re-engagement with history, she had already entered a different territory of her life. Where was she? What was she experiencing? Julie said that she was feeling joy of the sort that one could only hope for in attending a celebration of something really important. 'Now, that's an interesting idea', I said, 'Because it

fits with a thought that I was having about the possibility of getting together with some folks who also have insider knowledge of the sort of experiences of life that you have had. These folks also happen to be older parentified children, just as you are. And these folks also just happen to like celebrations.' I shared my thoughts about the shape of a proposed get-together with some other people who had been considered 'parentified children', and Julie was enthusiastic to give it a go.

I called Ted, Joanne and Shirley (33 years, 42 years, and 67 years respectively), who'd all had considerable parenting experience when they were children, and who had consulted me in times past. These were among a number of people who had been willing to have their names entered into my register of parentified children so that they might play a part in my work with others who were to consult me over the issues associated with this status. I filled them in on the details that Julie had granted me permission to pass on, and talked about the proposed meeting. Joanne, Ted and Shirley unhesitatingly accepted the invitation to be part of such an event, and after some negotiations we arrived at a mutually suitable time to meet. This meeting duly took place and was structured around the definitional ceremony metaphor (see White, 1999). In Joanne, Ted and Shirley's presence, I interviewed Julie about her parenting career, about the specifics of her parenting knowledges and skills, and about what possibilities these had brought to her world. I then asked Julie to sit back, and invited Ted and Joanne and Shirley to retell what they had heard. This retelling, was, in part, structured by my questions: 'As you listened to Julie's story, what most captured your imagination?', 'What did you hear that engaged your attention?', 'What struck a chord for you?', 'What images have Julie's words evoked for you?', 'How was it that you could relate to what you were relating to as you listened to Julie?', 'What did you come to understand about the knowledges and skills that were developed by Julie?', 'In what ways do you feel touched by Julie's expressions, and in what ways are these rippling into your own lives?', 'What was it about your own histories that was resonating with these expressions?', 'How are Julie's expressions effecting you?', and so on. In Shirley, Ted and Joanne's retelling, the stories of Julie's life were linked to the stories of their lives around shared themes, purposes and commitments.

I also asked this trio other questions: 'What difference do you think it would have made if the welfare had powerfully acknowledged Julie's skills and

knowledges of parenting and had found ways of supporting her in these?', 'What difference do you think it would have made if the authorities had not only acknowledged and supported Julie in her parenting of her sister, her mother, and her father, but had also arranged for her to have time out on occasions?', 'For circumstances to be arranged that would have allowed her to go off duty every now and then?'

Julie was then invited to talk about what she had heard in these retellings of Joanne, Ted and Shirley. During this time, I had the opportunity to ask some questions: 'Would you talk about what you heard in the responses of Shirley, Ted and Joanne?', 'Of all this, what most caught your attention?', 'What is your understanding about why it was that you most strongly related to these aspects of the retellings?', 'Were there particular realisations that came to you, that were connected to these aspects?', 'Did these retellings evoke any images of your life, of your identity, or of your place in the world?', 'If so, would you be prepared to describe these images?', 'What do these images touch on in terms of the history of your life?', 'Do they light up certain memories?', 'Is there anything about your life that you more highly value, that you might be more acknowledging of, as an outcome of these retellings?', 'What was it like for you to hear something from Shirley, Ted and Joanne about how your expressions had touched their lives?', and so on.

As an outcome of these tellings and retellings something highly significant happened for Julie. Something had 'clicked'. Something had 'come together for the first time'. That pervasive sense of being incomplete had 'gone up in smoke'. Julie no longer felt the burden that had been so pressing for so long. She experienced relief and joy in a newfound sense that her life 'would not be lived out as one long paralysing lament'. A void had 'gone'. Over three more meetings Julie had the opportunity to more fully embrace the knowledges of life and the skills of living that she had developed as a child in the context of her family, and, as well, some of the possibilities that this had brought to her life, and could bring to her future. She experienced the realness of these knowledges and skills, and no longer conceived of and dismissed her parentified child status as just a role that she had played. For Julie there were now pros and cons to her parentified child status, and, in the balance, she had decided that she wouldn't want to forsake what it was that this status had brought to her life.

When Julie felt ready, she invited her sister to join us to catch her up on these conversations, and to contribute to further retellings – but that is another story.

### ***Beyond rejection***

Lyndon consulted me about what he termed his ‘inadequacy’. He said that this personal inadequacy had ‘dogged’ him for a considerable part of his life, despite numerous efforts to deal with it. He had thought long and hard about it, and had even ventured to talk with others about it from time to time. It was his understanding that this sense of personal inadequacy was the outcome of his father’s rejection of him as a child and young man. This rejection was principally expressed in what Lyndon read as disinterest. Lyndon’s father was rarely present in his life, and, try as he might – and he certainly tried hard (in fact, from the stories that Lyndon told me about this, I gained a sense that his persistence had been quite remarkable) – Lyndon was never able to please his father. In the early part of our conversation we explored what Lyndon understood to be the effects of this rejection on his life. It was during this time that I asked Lyndon to reflect back on what he had said about his inadequacy – what sort of light did our conversation throw on this? In response to this question he reinterpreted this inadequacy as an experience of absence – this was the outcome of a prevailing sense of something being absent from his life.

Lyndon had discerned inadequacy, rejection, disinterest and absence. Any of these discernments could be taken into explorations that would be potentially identifying of that which is absent but implicit in them. I was curious. How was it that Lyndon had so clearly discerned rejection, and why hadn’t he been resigned to his father’s apparent rejection of him? Why hadn’t he come to take for granted his father’s non-presence in his life? Why had he continued to experience this absence so keenly? Such questions are informed by a refusal of naturalistic accounts of this sort of phenomenon. In this circumstance, this refusal made it possible for me to turn away from the reading of this sense of rejection and of something being absent from his life as an experience that could only be expected, as an expression of the fact that Lyndon’s needs hadn’t been met, or of the fact that it would only be human for

him to be feeling this way. Too much is obscured by explanations that defer to the rules of human nature. In refusing such naturalistic accounts, I was able to engage Lyndon in explorations of that which was absent but implicit – the unstated that made it possible for him to draw distinctions in his experience, and that had made it possible for him to conclude that something was missing from his life.

I began to ask Lyndon questions about what might have sensitised him to his father's rejection of him, and to his father's absence from his life. For a while our conversation meandered through Lyndon's history. He had grown up in a small country town. His parents were relatively poor, and both worked hard in manual jobs. He spent a lot of time alone – some of this time fishing in the local dam that was some distance from his family home. In this account of Lyndon's history, there were a number of potential points of entry to conversations that might address some of the questions that I had been asking. Of all of these possibilities, I chose fishing. Fishing isn't something that children just come to. Fishing is not an expression of human nature. It is something that children, and more often boys, are introduced to in one way or another – through stories, by parents and other caretakers, by other children, and so on. 'How were you introduced to fishing?', I wanted to know. After reflecting on this for a while, Lyndon told me a story about the town's post-master – an old but energetic man who had a love for fishing, and who had, through happenstance, introduced Lyndon to this love. Lyndon remembered that the post-master was a gruff and matter-of-fact sort of man who didn't say a lot. He didn't even like big fishing stories. In the first place, Lyndon had been a little afraid of him. He always gave Lyndon the impression that in allowing Lyndon to accompany him he was actually being granted a very significant privilege – that in this act, something of great value was being bestowed on Lyndon that he should take care to properly respect.

As we reflected on this some, Lyndon said, 'You know, it's kind of strange, but as we talk about this I find myself thinking that this was acknowledging of me. I think I must have realised even at the time, at some level at least, that the postmaster wouldn't have let just anybody join him. But now I have a fuller realisation of this'. I asked Lyndon how this present fuller realisation of a historical but slim realisation was effecting him in our conversation – what was his immediate experience of this? In response to this



question Lyndon choked up with emotion, and for a while he couldn't speak. We sat there in silence for a period of time – it must have been more than ten minutes, but I doubt that either of us could have gauged this at the time. I had the sense that we were together in some sort of liminal space.

When Lyndon did begin to speak, he told me that he had felt something shift for him. He said that it was difficult for him to find the words to speak of this, but knew that the sense of absence that we had talked about at the beginning of the interview wasn't as intense as it had been. 'Could I ask some more questions about your connection with the post-master?' (who, by the way, had retired and moved to Sydney when Lyndon was still a young boy). Lyndon said that this would be okay, so I began to ask what I now refer to as remembering questions (White, 1997). At an earlier time I termed these experience of experience questions (White, 1988).

- *What is your sense of what this inclusion brought to your life?*
- *What is your understanding of what it was that the post-master was acknowledging or recognising about you?*
- *What did this put you in touch with that you might have learned to appreciate about yourself?*
- *Do you know why it was that the postmaster included you in his life in this way?*
- *What do you think it was that he saw in you that might not have been so visible to your father?*
- *How do you think this inclusion could be explained. What do you think your presence might have brought to the postmasters life?*
- *What's your guess about what you contributed to this man's life that your father missed out on?*
- *In what way might your father's life have been different had he been available to what the postmaster was available to?*

These were questions that addressed the postmaster's contribution to Lyndon's life by way of his recognition of Lyndon, and Lyndon's contribution to the life of the postmaster. These questions also addressed and contributed to

the acknowledgement of what was an ever-present potential for Lyndon to contribute to his father's life, if only this man had taken the steps to open the door to him. In the conversation that was shaped by these questions, that which was absent but implicit in Lyndon's discernment of rejection and absence was richly described; that is, experiences of life that are read as examples of inclusion and acceptance.

At the risk of labouring the point, here I will again emphasise the significance, for therapeutic conversations, of the refusal of naturalistic accounts of the events of life. I do this because these accounts have come to be so taken-for-granted in contemporary understandings of people's actions and identities that it can be difficult to think outside of them. While I believe that these naturalistic accounts have the potential to dead-end our work with the people who consult us, the refusal of these accounts opens the door to virtually endless possibilities for what I have at times referred to as 're-authoring conversations'. For example, to routinely engage in naturalistic accounts of developments in life invariably renders invisible the contribution of the 'other' to the conditions of possibility for developments in a person's life, to a person's stock of knowledges of life and skills of living, and quells curiosity about how things came to be the way they are.

In not stepping into a naturalistic account of these historical developments on Lyndon's life, rather than making an assumption that Lyndon's connection with the postmaster was simply a testimony to his needs and to the good grace of the postmaster, I wondered what else this might have been a testimony to in terms of the contribution of the 'other'. In this circumstance I was thinking about Lyndon's father as this other, and I became curious about whatever else might be absent but implicit in this development of the connection between Lyndon and the postmaster.

This curiosity about this absent but implicit contributed to new questions: 'Why hadn't your father obstructed this association with the postmaster?', 'Why hadn't he denied this to you?', 'Fathers who have little to do with their sons do at times act out of a position of righteous indignation when it comes to their sons' connections to other men. They can act from a sense of defensiveness and from a sentiment of control, in ways that are characterised as jealousy', 'How come your father did not insist on mediating your relationship with the outside world in this way?'. These questions aroused

Lyndon's interest, but, as they invited him to think outside of what he routinely thought in relation to matters of his personal history, he did not have any ready-made answers. Our time together was coming to an end, so I wrote down these questions and Lyndon took them away with him to ponder over.

I met with Lyndon again two weeks later. Something significant had taken place in his life – I knew this instantly from his composure in the waiting room. I learned that soon after our first meeting, Lyndon sought out his uncle James – his father's youngest brother – who was aged and infirm and living in a nursing home. Lyndon took a chance and shared with his uncle the story of the conversation we'd had. He then raised with his uncle the question: 'My father could have felt put out by my connection with the postmaster. Do you have any idea of why my father didn't disrupt this?' Nothing could have prepared Lyndon for Uncle James's response.

In addressing this question, Uncle James informed Lyndon that his father had, on several occasions, when in the local hotel while drinking together, confided his sense of inadequacy about fatherhood. He just didn't know what to do in his relationship with Lyndon. He had told Uncle James that he knew he had 'hurt the boy', but had no idea how to make things better. He felt at sea in the presence of his son – 'all thumbs and no artistry'. He thought it was the war's fault (Second World War). That it had wrecked him in ways that he could hardly fathom. He had reached the conclusion that it was better for him to stay out of his son's life as best he could. It would be better for Lyndon this way. Although he had never said so, Uncle James thought that Lyndon's father had felt secretly relieved by the postmaster's connection with Lyndon.

Some gifts are tragic gifts, but they are gifts none the less. Staying out of his son's life, and not interfering in Lyndon's connection with the postmaster, could be recognised by Lyndon as the one gift that his father believed he had to give to his son. Following our second meeting, Lyndon went back to the town of his childhood, and visited his father's grave site for the first time in many years. And on the very next ANZAC day (the occasion upon which the veterans of World War's One and Two, and the Vietnam War, march in the streets of the capital cities around Australia and New Zealand) he marched in the parade. He found joining the ANZAC march to be an overwhelmingly emotional experience, and later identified this as marking a significant turning point in his life. As a result of this, he very substantially broke free of that sense of

inadequacy that had ‘dogged his life’ for so long.

Later in our conversations there were options for Lyndon to re-engage with personal history in ways that made it possible for him to also revise the terms of his relationship with his mother. This too had significantly positive effects in his life. But that is another story.

### ***Beyond survival***

Jane came to see me at the insistence of her cousin, Sue. Sue was a mental health nurse who experienced a shock recognition of Jane when she was admitted to hospital following a suicide attempt that very nearly claimed her life. Sue and Jane hadn’t seen each other for three decades. As young children they’d had infrequent but enjoyable contact – between them there seemed to be a mutual but unspoken understanding of many things.

Over many years, Sue had heard snippets of information about the predicaments of Jane’s life – about the extended episodes of depression, about the cutting, about the attempts on her own life, and about the frequent admissions to hospital. But Sue had been frightened of the spectre drawn by these snippets, and was herself hard pressed in her efforts to get her own life together under circumstances that were far from easy. Nonetheless, Jane had ‘been on her conscience’, and when she had recognised her on the ward, newly admitted and in a very sorry state, Sue had immediately decided that she would make it her business to lend Jane whatever assistance she could muster.

In response to Sue’s recognition of her, Jane had initially fled into withdrawal, overwhelmed by shame. But Sue had persisted in her efforts to make contact, and after several days Jane had reciprocated Sue’s recognition of her, and subsequently began to participate in Sue’s reminiscing about the times they’d been together in their childhood – Sue even had Jane laughing on an occasion or two. Before long, Sue was insisting that Jane come to meet with me. Jane was quite reluctant about the idea and did her best to discourage Sue’s enthusiasm for it. But Sue wouldn’t be discouraged. In the end Jane agreed ‘to go along for the ride’.

Here they were. Jane curled up in a foetal position on the chair, silently rocking. Sue filling me in on things as best she could, catching me up on her

hopes for our conversation and on her feelings of apprehension on Jane's behalf. Jane had requested that Sue speak for her, and wanted me to know that she was sceptical about this new initiative – she had predicted that nothing good would come of it, that we would simply be a raking over of lots of bad things that had been raked over many times before, and that by the end of it she would only feel worse. Sue was also personally concerned about the possibility that Jane might feel worse at the end of our meeting, and knew from her history that it was at times like this that Jane was most likely to cut herself.

In response to these predictions and concerns, I said that this raking over of things may not be at all necessary, and that I would like for us to work out a way that I could be kept in touch with how things were going for Jane at all times during the course of our conversation. This way, should Jane begin to feel worse at any point, I would have the opportunity to take responsibility for the shape of the conversation, and to introduce some explorations that would get us onto a track that might have a more desirable outcome for her.

Sue then began to share some details of Jane's experiences of life, those that Jane had wanted me informed of: the abuse that she had been subject to by her father and grandfather; the isolation she had experienced through all of this; the disqualification and pain that she had been subject to in the two or three efforts she had made to form a relationship in the adult years of her life; her diagnoses and the history of her 'psychiatric illness', and so on. Soon Jane began to join Sue in her rendition of this account, and as she did so, her rocking became more vigorous.

In this conversation I became aware of the fact that Jane had two understandings of what she had been through. There was a dominant understanding that 'she deserved the abuse' – indeed, that she was culpable for the abuse that she had been subject to. But there was a secondary and relatively slim understanding that was also present in her expressions of the trauma that had provided the context of her life as a child and as a young woman – an understanding that what was being done to her was wrong. It was this secondary understanding that particularly caught my attention, and I asked about its history, and about what it was that this understanding spoke to. After some discussion, Jane and Sue concluded that this understanding was shaped by a degree of awareness of the nature of injustice, but that this awareness was insignificant in relation to Jane's sense of personal culpability and shame.

I was curious about that which was absent but implicit in this discernment of injustice, and in response to this I began to ask some questions: ‘Although you mostly blamed yourself for what you were being put through, and believed that you deserved this, I understand that you never totally lost sight of the fact that it was also an injustice. Would it be okay for me to ask you some questions about how you came to realise that this was an injustice?’, ‘And about how you managed to hold onto this understanding despite everything that was denying of it?’. To pursue this line was acceptable to Jane, and before long we were in a conversation about what this said about what she had stood for over all the years of her life, and about what she had done that reflected her position on ‘justice’. This stand for justice was identified as what had been absent but implicit in Jane’s discernment of injustice.

The conversation turned towards a fuller tracing of the trajectory of this stand for justice through the history of Jane’s life. In response to some further questions, Jane and Sue began to identify many more manifestations of this stand for justice, and linked this not just to Jane’s survival, but also to her ability to perceive the injustices being done to others, her sense of outrage at this, and her wish to do something that would make a difference in the world. In this conversation there were opportunities to engage in a re-reading of what had been interpreted by others as passive/aggressive and hostile/dependent behaviour on Jane’s behalf. I openly wondered how these acts might be understood in the light of her position on matters of justice. In response to this inquiry, Sue initially, soon to be joined by Jane, began to represent these as acts of subversion inspired by Jane’s position on justice; acts of subversion in a range of contexts where there was a substantial inequality in power and in which a direct and open challenge to any action that was unjust or unfair would, in all likelihood, be responded to with acts of retribution. Over the course of our meeting, Jane’s stand for justice was more richly described – it was, for the first time, acknowledged by her as a ‘commitment’ and a ‘passion’, and, by Sue, as ‘perhaps even a calling’ in Jane’s life. As our meeting came to a close I asked Jane about how she was feeling. She said that she was surprised not to be feeling badly. And yes, she would be interested in meeting again.

At the outset of the following meeting we had a conversation about the historical circumstances that had contributed to Jane’s appreciation of justice, which had provided the conditions of possibility for her discernment of

injustice. In reflecting on this, Jane suddenly had a realisation, one that implicated Sue – there had been an unstated knowing between them about matters of fairness and unfairness. As well, there had been some acknowledgement about, and disapproval of, what each other had been subject to by others. This also hadn't been directly spoken of in the history of their connection with each other, but had been expressed in much of their play together. Sue confirmed this by talking about some of the particularities of this play, and about the themes featured in this. This appeared to be a sparkling discovery for both Jane and Sue. In further explorations of the history of their shared commitment to justice, Sue also implicated a novel that she and Jane had shared when they were children. The central character in this novel was a heroine who had a strong consciousness of what was fair and what wasn't, and whose actions were a powerful expression of this consciousness. They decided to obtain a copy of this novel and to read it together.

I had presented Jane and Sue with the option of organising the third meeting around a definitional ceremony structure, one that would incorporate the participation of an outsider-witness group (White, 1999). I described this option, and responded to Jane and Sue's questions about it. Although they initially felt a degree of apprehension about the proposal, they both thought that it would be worth giving a try. Before proceeding, I suggested that it might be a good idea for them to speak with some people who had experienced being at the centre of such a ceremony. I arranged for this, and in response Sue called to confirm their decision to proceed with the idea. The outsider-witness group that was present for this third meeting was made up of workers from the health/welfare/counselling fields who were attending a week-long intensive course on narrative therapy at Dulwich Centre. In the first part of this meeting Jane and Sue engaged in a telling of what they deemed to be the most significant aspects of the story of Jane's life, with considerable emphasis on the alternative version of Jane's identity that had featured strongly in our therapeutic conversations, and in the telling of an account of the history of their camaraderie, of the experiences that had contributed to their discernment of injustice, and of the recent developments in their lives and in their connection with each other. In response to this, the outsider-witness group's retelling was powerfully authenticating of the many identity claims that were expressed by Jane and Sue. In addition to this, upon hearing a couple of the members of the

outsider-witness group speak of some of the new considerations and learnings that they might take from this meeting into their work with others who had gone through experiences that were similar to Jane's, and of some of the possibilities that this might open up for these people, Jane exclaimed: 'For the first time in my life I feel that all that I have gone through hasn't been for nothing!' One of these group members followed this up, and jointly constructed, with a person who had subsequently consulted them, a letter to Jane providing specific details of the ways that her expressions had positively influenced the course of their therapeutic conversations, and, as well, had presented new options for this person to break from self-abuse.

Over several more meetings, two of which were also organised around the definitional ceremony structure, Jane steered her life onto a course that was much more in line with what she valued and with what she had determined to be her preferred purposes in life. Self-abuse was not a feature of this course.

## **Conclusion**

I have taken this space to discuss some of the implications of the notion that expressions of life are associated with discernments that depend upon the absent but implicit – that is, unstated signs or descriptions that provide the conditions of possibility for these discernments. And yet, at the end of this article I am left with the sense that, in terms of these implications, what I have described is just a fraction of the possibilities that are associated with this notion. I believe that therapeutic conversations that are informed by this notion have no bounds. Imagine, for example, further inquiries into the conditions that made it possible for Julie's mother and sister to discern acknowledgement and to attribute it at least some value (this was subsequently taken up in my meetings with Julie and her sister), for the postmaster to discern inclusion and to bring the sort of significance to this that represented it as a special privilege, and for the discernment of injustice expressed by the author of Jane and Sue's book.

I expect that you, the reader, could, at this point, contribute further ideas for therapeutic conversations that are informed by this notion that people's expressions of life are associated with discernments that depend on the absent but implicit. So, it is time for me to now step back.



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