**TREE OF LIFE**

**The narrative therapy charter of story-telling rights**

By David Denborough

Article 1 Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.

Article 2 Everyone has the right for their life to be understood in the context of what they have been through and in the context of their relationships with others.

Article 3 Everyone has the right to invite others who are important to them to be involved in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of trauma/injustice.

Article 4 Everyone has the right to be free from having problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them, internally, as if there is some deficit in them and/or their identity. The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem, and the solution is not only personal.

Article 5 Everyone has the right for their responses to trauma to be acknowledged. No one is a passive recipient of trauma/social suffering. People always respond. People always protest injustice.

Article 6 Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledges of survival respected, honoured and acknowledged.

Article 7 Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learnt through hardship can make a contribution to others in similar situations.

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| Story of what has been / is being endured | Story of response / resistance / sustenance  (what has survived) |
| * Hardships * Losses * Injustices * Histories of these * Continuing obstacles * What effects these have had / are having on people’s lives | * Responses & implicit skills * What the person / community holds precious despite hardships – beliefs, values, hopes, dreams, commitments * Social history of these * To whom these are linked |

Article 8 Everyone has the right to remain in control of their story, who it is shared with and how. The safety of the storyteller must be the first priority. Added by Women of Burma (8 May 2013)

“Some time ago, when collaborating with human rights organizations, I created what I call the “Charter of Storytelling Rights,” which consists of seven key articles (I use the term article because that’s what is used in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)” – David Denborough

**Reference**

Dulwich Centre Foundation International, International Women’s Development Agency and Women's League of Burma (2013). Narrative responses to human rights abuses: sustaining women workers and honouring the survival skills of women from Burma/Myanmar Melbourne: International Women’s Development Agency.

**Exercise 1:** Let’s make our trees!

ROOTS -HERITAGE:

* Where do you come from - your family, community history, culture?
* Is there anything about your ancestors or elders that you would like to acknowledge here?
* Any favourite memories from childhood/youth- holidays, friendships, school, club, sports leagues?
* Any "deep rooted" knowledge from your culture, tradition or history that informs your work or what you stand for?

GROUND - PRESENT:

* What are some of the things you do in your daily life, steps that you take, that sustain you in the present?

TRUNK - VALUED SKILLS:

* What skills of living, values or abilities do you have that get you through difficult times?
* What would a particular friend (or someone who cares about you) say about these skills, values or abilities?
* Think about a step you took recently, what was the intention/purpose behind that step you took?
* Does it say something about what you valued or what was important for you?
* What are the hard-won knowledges from your life that might make a contribution to others’ lives?

BRANCHES - HORIZONS:

* What are some of the dreams and hopes you have for yourself that were made possible by your trunk?
* What is the history of these dreams and hopes?  How long have you had these hopes? Where did these hopes come from? How have you held onto them?
* Did anyone introduce you to these hopes or help you to hold onto them?
* What possibilities could there be for your future if you carry on in this direction?

LEAVES -PEOPLE:

* Who are the people who are important to you? (Alive or who have passed on)
* Who has inspired and sustained you in this work?
* What did they appreciate about you that the others might have missed?
* What would they say about how you have contributed in their life?
* Are there small rituals that you have created to remember your connection with them?

FLOWERS – LEGACIES PASSED ON TO US:

* What are some of the gifts that these people/beings have brought  to your life that sustain you and your work towards a preferred future?
* These gifts could be in the form of learnings from them, how they lived their life, or what they stood for?

FRUITS – LEGACIES WE WANT TO LEAVE FOR OTHERS

* What are the contributions that you have already made or hope to make in the future?
* Is it in continuation of the gifts you were offered (flowers) or something completely new?
* How do you think you would be able to make a difference if you made this offering to others?

**Exercise 2 – Storms of Life and Forest of Life**

* Step 1 - Give names to the storms that you have faced? Share as little and as much as you are comfortable sharing. Just naming the storm is enough for e.g., loss, worries, fears etc.
  + How have these storms tried to push you into isolating yourself?
  + How did they try to make you doubt your skills, knowledges, abilities, dreams and hopes?
  + How did it try to rob you of sense of agency or purpose in life?
* Step 2 - How did your wood-wide-web, your forest, support you through the worst storms? Choose 1 to 3 of the options below:
  1. An invisible act of care?
  2. A quiet message from somebody when you were in pain?
  3. An anonymous, quiet offering from a person or community far away or to whom you were not known?
  4. A nourished soil for you to grow within?
  5. A learning, remedy or protective warning from friends or networks?
  6. An invitation for you to join something that helped you to feel welcome and have a sense of belong?
  7. A spiritual connection that made you believe that you were not alone and everything was interconnected?
* Step 3 - How do you give back to this wood-wide-web, your forest, even in a small, trivial act? Choose 1 to 3 of the options below:
  1. Performing an invisible act of care?
  2. Sent a quiet message to somebody who was in pain?
  3. An anonymous, quiet offering to a person or community far away or to whom you are not known?
  4. Preparing the soil for others to grow within?
  5. Sharing a learning, remedy or protective warning with friends or networks?
  6. Inviting someone to join something that helped them feel welcome and that they belong?
  7. Keeping something quiet and underground because it could only grow there?
* *What made you decide to do this?*
* *What intention or purpose did you have?*
* *What’s precious or valuable to you that influenced you here?*
* *What were you hoping could happen from doing this?*
* *What general beliefs do you hold about how people should act in these situations?*
* *Do you do other things that reflect this principle?*
* Step 4 - Reflection – Outsider Witness Practice
* The expression
  + As you listened, what did you hear that stood out for you, or that
  + Struck a chord with you, or that you were drawn to?
* The image
  + What did the story suggest to you about what might be important to the other person or
  + What they stand for in life? What image did this evoke for you?
* Resonance
  + What is it about your own life /work that drew you to these expressions?
* Transport
  + What aspects of this story that you have heard, would you like to stay with you?

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wood-wide- web concept adapted from Nicholas, E (2020) Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work