

The Economics of Narrative

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How many sessions is a letter worth?

ONE MORNING A COUPLE OF YEARS ago, I was looking over the 10 charts of clients that I was to see that day and feeling discouraged about the previous day's staff meeting, in which no one had an easy solution for our long waiting list. The realities of managed care seeing more clients for fewer sessions were hitting home. As a narrative therapist, I prefer to take my time with clients so they find their own solutions, but now my ethical and professional values were coming into conflict with the agency's pressure to do short-term, cost-effective therapy. I wondered what additional therapeutic tools I could use that would be consistent with a narrative practice. Being familiar with Michael White and David Epston's work with narrative letters, I contemplated adopting this practice. With at least a two-week wait between sessions, perhaps the letters could strengthen the development of a new story, what Michael White calls "thickening the counterplot," while the client is waiting for his/her next interview. Nice idea, but how would I find the time to write the letters when I had at most 15 minutes to do my charting notes?

I was still thinking about this when, Susan, a somber 14-year-old African American, came into my office with her mother, Phyllis, an elegantly dressed bank executive. Phyllis had become increasingly concerned with Susan's "out of character" behavior, which included lying, truancy and angry outbursts. As Phyllis described her worries that Susan's recent choice in friends was leading to possible gang involvement, Susan stared gloomily at the floor.

After several minutes, I asked Susan if her mother's description was accurate, anticipating a grunt or some other minimal response. To my amazement, Susan acknowledged the lying and truancy. I was impressed with how dearly Susan articulated the effects of the problem, which we decided to call "Trouble," and her agreement that skipping school was "ruining her future before she had a future." Then, to her mother's surprise, Susan shared that recently she had been thinking more about her future and had decided to attend school on a regular basis. In fact, she had attended school consistently for the last two weeks! She felt confident that she was going to leave Trouble behind her and take on more responsibility.

Her energy and desire to escape the "influence of Trouble" inspired me to rethink what I could do to match her commitment. Afterward, I decided to write Susan the following letter that summarized the session and highlighted Susan's change of attitude, reinforcing these new developments"

Dear Susan,

As I said in our meeting on the 8th, I am providing you with a summary of our meeting. It was nice meeting up with you and hearing your struggle with trouble. I was impressed with your honesty and straightforwardness. You were one of the few 14-year-olds I have ever met who did not say "I don't know" once!

Susan, you shared with me how you have been recruited into a trouble-making lifestyle. In relation to trouble, you have found yourself developing a lying habit, cutting school and also being influenced by your temper. You have found yourself being pressured and influenced by certain friends (or so-called friends), who encouraged you to skip school. In regard to lying, you found yourself finding it easier to lie to your parents than to tell the truth. After some time, the lying became a habit. You agreed that the lying habit has had a negative effect on your life. You feel that you have let your parents down. You also realize that it takes a great deal of energy to continue the lying. In addition, your lying invites your parents' mistrust. Your parents feel compelled to supervise your life and worry for you rather than you supervising your own life.

I asked you if you were satisfied with what trouble was doing to your life. You clearly said "No." I asked you if you were ready to take on more responsibility or were you more attracted to a trouble-making lifestyle. Your answer was quite clear: you wanted to escape the lying habit and make a commitment to honesty. Also, you wanted to continue to protest the skipping-school habit. You said, "I realize that skipping school was keeping me from my future goals." This realization occurred to you two weeks ago and since then, you haven't skipped school! I asked you if attending school consistently over the past two weeks was a positive step and you said, "Yes." Then I asked you what the recent step said about what you want for your life and you said, "I want a better future." In your plans for the future is a college degree from Spelman College. You want to follow in your mother's footsteps of being a "strong, successful African-American woman." I have to tell you I was struck by how much thought you put into this. Do you appreciate your forward thinkingness?

I then asked you if you had brought your mother up to date with these recent steps (attending school every day for the past two weeks and thinking of your future), and you said that you had but you weren't sure if she believed or trusted you. Well, you were right there! Your mom said these recent developments are positive but it may be a trick; she's not sure if she can trust you yet. Are you willing to be patient in earning your parents' trust back or will you fall victim to the dictates of trouble and be impatient? Are you interested in practicing patience and responsibility leading to Spelman College? Or is impatience and irresponsibility your preference leading to a life that's Spell-bound by trouble? See you and your mother next meeting.

Yours against trouble,

David Nylund

IN OUR SECOND MEETING TWO weeks later, Phyllis told me that Susan had been attending school regularly, doing her homework and was starting to regain her trust.

When I asked Susan what enabled her to protest Trouble and embrace Responsibility, she told me that the letter I had sent had affected her so strongly that she had framed it on her wall. She could not believe that I took the time to write her. I then asked Susan a question David Epston asks his clients-. If you could put a numerical value on the letter, how many face-to-face sessions was it worth? She replied "four or five!"

I sent Susan a letter after the second session that highlighted and amplified her new story. We met one more time face-to-face, so that altogether, according to Susan's calculations, we had the equivalent of 11 sessions!

Encouraged by this experience, I decided to write a letter after each interview, if my client so desired. In the beginning, it was an arduous and time-consuming task. I would dictate the letter when I had a cancellation or a no-show. Eventually, with practice, I found I could write the letters in about 10 minutes. During the first session, I take notes of key points that the client or I may want to include in the letter. At the end of the initial meeting, I ask the client/family if they would like a letter summarizing our discussion. To this date, no client has refused my offer to send a letter. After the session, I dictate a letter from my notes. The next day, I make a copy of the typed letter and send the original to the client/ family. With some exceptions, I send a letter after each meeting until we end therapy. Even after termination, letter writing may continue; several of my clients still write to me with updates of their progress. As letter writing became an integral component of my therapeutic practice, my colleagues became curious. Their questions about the letter format encouraged me to devise a conceptual framework for narrative letters. My letters have a certain structure, language and style. They rarely make a direct statement; instead the letters are usually couched in the form of a question or in tentative language such as: "I wonder if...." This way, the client is free to accept or reject my comments. Typically, the only direct statements are what the client said verbatim in the interview. My letters usually comprise some or all of the following components (although not always in this sequence):

An introductory paragraph reconnecting the client(s) to the previous therapy session. This could be seen as rejoining with the client. Typically, this paragraph highlights some novel aspect of the client's personhood that was endearing for me. For instance, with Susan: 'you were one of the few 14-year-olds J have ever met who did not say 'I don't know once!'

Statements describing the influence of the problem on the client(s). This section usually includes a variety of comments that reinforce the externalization of the problem. I always try to use phrases or words that are congruent with the client's experience. In addition, I like to use ordinary language in an unusual way to capture the client's attention and imagination. For instance, writing to Susan: "Are you

interested in practicing patience and responsibility leading to Spelman College? Or is impatience and irresponsibility your preference leading to a life that's Spell-bound by trouble?"

Questions to ask the client that I thought of after the meeting. Instead of waiting for the next session, I may inquire further in regard to the effects of the problem. Other times, my questions are oriented toward the alternative story that is developing. These questions are intended to open up space for new possibilities and meaning. For instance, "I wished I would have asked you this question: Of all the people who you know, who will be supportive of the new developing changes in your life? Just curious."

« Document and highlight unique outcomes or exceptions to the problem-saturated story that were discovered during the session, sometimes using direct quotes of the client. For example, I might write in a letter: "when I asked you about your recent escape from guilt and what it might reflect about you as a person, you said, I'm a strong person." My intention is to honor the client's own solution rather than imposing my own.

Although my intuition told me the letter-writing process was well worth it, I had no documented evidence of its usefulness, particularly in the context of managed care. I conducted a survey to determine the impact on my clients of narrative letters that asked them to indicate if the letters they received in therapy were: (1) Very Helpful (2) Helpful (3) Not Helpful or (4) Harmful The respondents were also requested to elaborate on their response to this question. There were two additional questions. Clients were asked to identify the "worth" of a narrative letter versus face-to-face interviews (e.g., one letter is equivalent to two interviews). Lastly, clients were invited to estimate the percentage of gains in therapy due to the letters alone (What percentage of the gains you made during counseling are due to the letters sent to you?).

After I had obtained 40 surveys, I tallied up the findings. Thirty-seven participants indicated that the letters were "very helpful" The remaining three considered them "helpful" The average worth of a letter was 3.2 face-to-face interviews, with the highest single rating as 10 and the lowest as .25. As a group, 52.8 percent of the gains made in therapy were due to the letters alone. The average length of therapy was 4.5 sessions.

The clients' comments on the survey forms also lend support to the therapeutic value of letter writing. The following comment by one of the participants is representative of many other responses:

"At first, I was a little awestruck over the fact that someone would take the time to write me. Your letters put the finishing touch on each session. They have given me support and encouragement. If I was feeling very down, and I knew that there were no appointments available, I referred to the letters and

had a counseling session between myself and the letters. The letters are stronger than the fear; they have documented my growth. In turn, I feel stronger. I really like your questions; they provoked deep thought. Because of your letters, I feel that therapy has been greatly enhanced for me."

NARRATIVE LETTERS APPEAR TO break down the distinction between therapy in the office and therapy outside of the office. They provide the message that being in the world is more important than being in the therapy office. When therapeutic activity continues even after the therapy visit, clients are more likely to rely on their own knowledge and less on the expert knowledge of the therapist. This view is in stark contrast to traditional therapy assumptions.

My passion for narrative therapy has stimulated my colleagues' interest, in letter writing. Many of them were pleasantly surprised with the outcome of my survey and have incorporated letter writing into their practices. Still others will draft an occasional letter with certain clients to expand on themes discussed. Additional narrative practices in our clinic, including reflecting teams and consulting-your-consultant interviews, in which former clients are asked to offer consultation, have been instituted with management support. While pathologizing clients in traditional case notes and working without the benefit of colleague collaboration is a therapy of isolation, despair and ultimately, burn-out, constructing letters that attend to clients' solutions and working collaboratively with my peers in reflecting teams generates a therapy of hope and energy.

The demands of managed care and my desire to provide clients the best possible therapeutic experience continue to coexist. Narrative letters enable me to have maximum impact in the least number of sessions. As a result, I rarely need to inform my clients of my clinic's benefit limitations.

Recently, I ran into a client, Jane, whom I had not seen in therapy for over seven months. When I asked her how she was doing, Jane replied: "Well, I wasn't doing too well about a month ago ... almost made an appointment with you. But I always carry your letters in my purse. I read them and realized how far I had come and didn't need to see you!"

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