

13

Power to Our Journeys¹

by ²

Brigitte, Sue, Mem, and Veronika

This piece was first published in the Summer 1996 edition of the American Family Therapy Association (*AFTA Newsletter*), and was republished as Chapter 13 in the book *Introducing Narrative Therapy: A collection of practice-based writings* (Edited by Cheryl White & David Denborough), Dulwich Centre Publications.

We would like to introduce ourselves as members of the Power to Our Journeys group based at Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia. We would like you to know that all of us have been recipients of mainstream psychiatric services for varying lengths of time, have had admissions to psychiatric hospitals, have been subject to various treatments, and have all been assigned various diagnoses over this time. The people who have treated us have mostly settled on the diagnosis of schizophrenia.

How did we get together? It was our experiences of narrative therapy that provided the basis for our connection with each other. Through this therapy we had the opportunity to change our relationship with the voices and with the visions that were troubling to us and traumatising of us. This opened space for us to break from the prison house of isolation and to join in new connections with others who are engaged in similar projects to reclaim their lives.

We get together as a group once per month and invite Michael White to

join us to keep a special record of our conversation and to ask questions that assist us to express our thoughts on various issues. After each of these meetings he puts together our ideas in a document which serves as a record of our evolving knowledges and of the development in our skills of living. These documents are a powerful resource to us in our work to recover our lives and in assisting us to deal with crises. We have included three examples of these documents here in the hope they will be of assistance to others.

Our reason for joining in the writing of this piece is to share with you the extent to which our lives have changed through our involvement in the Power to Our Journeys group. This group has played a very significant part in rekindling our love for life, and in assisting us to achieve a quality of life we could never have predicted. It is our hope that others who are struggling with troublesome voices and visions will find hope in what we have to say here, and join us in spirit by searching for others they might connect with in similar ways.

Acknowledgement of our experience

The Power to Our Journeys meetings provide a forum for us to talk about many of our experiences of life. This includes our experiences of what others refer to as auditory or visual hallucinations, or, if you like, the psychoses. It is our preference to refer to these experiences as ones of 'voices' and 'visions'.

Over the many years of our different connections with psychiatric services, we have found little opportunity to speak openly of our day-to-day experiences of the voices and visions that have been so troublesome to us, or, for that matter, the voices and visions that have been helpful to our lives. We have been silenced time and again by many psychiatric professionals who have consistently refused to acknowledge our experiences of these voices and visions. At times we have been bewildered by this, at a loss to understand it. At times we have linked this silencing to the fear we see in the eyes of others. Perhaps they experience this fear because we put them in touch with how vulnerable they might be in their own struggles in life, and with a realisation of how thin the line is between where they stand in life and where we stand in life. At other times we understand others believe that to make space for us to talk more openly about our experiences of troublesome voices and visions is

counterproductive. We know that still others are caught up in weird theories about our experiences, and talk about our lives in ways that subtract from our sense of self-respect and make it impossible for them to hear what we have to say about our experiences of voices and visions. And we meet others who are so caught up in professional career and institutional considerations of a hierarchical nature that it is impossible for them to be with us in healing ways.

Needless to say, this silencing has profoundly negative consequences for all of our lives. All of us have felt abandoned because of this. We have not felt joined with by others at those times in our lives when this was what we have longed for most. At times this very silencing has contributed to a sense that we might be going mad. And it has made it virtually impossible for us to change our relationship with the troublesome voices and visions that have been so dominating of our lives, and, as well, with the voices and visions that have been more supportive of us.

Changing our relationship with the voices

We cannot here emphasise strongly enough how important it is to have the opportunity to speak of the troublesome voices and visions in a forum that contributes to a powerful exposé of their purposes and their operations. These troublesome voices and visions can be quite vicious, and from time to time give us an incredibly hard time. They have at their disposal many well-established tactics for tyrannising our lives: to frighten us, to get us into a panic, and to drive us to desperation. In developing an exposé of the purposes and operations of these voices and visions, we become clearer about the extent to which what they want for our lives is not in our interests, and we become increasingly knowledgeable about the strategies they utilise to achieve their purposes. This exposé disempowers them, and opens up possibilities for us to become much more aware of the knowledges and skills we have that we can put to work to frustrate the attempts of the voices and visions to capture our lives. By meeting together to extend this exposé and to further pool our knowledges and skills, we have all been able to further change our relationships with the troublesome voices and visions so they become less dominant in our lives.

This has not been achieved without work. As we have extended these exposés, we have put more effort into monitoring the activities of the

troublesome voices and visions, and, as well, into the monitoring of our general sense of well-being. Doing this is a commitment we have made to ourselves and to each other, and it has opened new possibilities in our lives. For example, we know that we are more vulnerable to the more troublesome voices and visions when we are stressed out or stretched, and we can make predictions about those occasions and conditions upon which these voices and visions might attempt to get the upper hand in our lives. We can also make predictions about the sort of tactics they might resort to in these attempts. Then, as we prepare to take new steps in our lives, or to venture into unfamiliar territory, we can refer to this knowledge. This provides us with the opportunity to put things in place that will support us through these changes, and to prepare countertactics to have at the ready should the voices and visions attempt to harass us. We are then more able to recognise such attempts for what they are, to step back and say to ourselves 'So, that is what you are up to', and then take the sort of action that will deprive them of these moments as an opportunity to strengthen their influence in our lives. The knowledge that we have options at these times provides an antidote to the insecurity that the troublesome voices and visions feed on.

The negative voices and visions are wreckers

So that you might understand more fully how important it has been for us to find a space in which we can talk of our experiences of the troublesome voices and visions and to put together these exposés, you should know what 'wreckers' these voices and visions can be. Jobs, friends, interests, hopes, status - these voices and visions took so much, and tried to ruin what they couldn't take. We grieved for the losses. Our families grieved for themselves and for us over the loss of the potential that we would never fulfil. It is not that others didn't support us. They tried to help. But there was a limit to what they could do. Many of our relatives became frightened and despairing. We lost friends to exhaustion and to terror. Some of us became homeless for years, just going from place to place.

There were friends and relatives who managed to hang in, but we didn't know how to help them understand or to know what to do. And, even if we had, we would not have been able to act on this knowledge as we had our hands full just trying to stay alive. As we began to realise what a burden we were

becoming, we retreated. We just went away. We 'went bush', or were even alone in the company of others. This was all we could do to protect our relatives and friends from the trauma. And, in the end, this isolation served the interests of the troublesome voices and visions, not our interests.

Lightness of being

But we grieve no longer. We have found that a lot of the grief was about the loss of a status we no longer have a desire for, and that, in fact, we are glad to be free of. And now we are finding the opportunity to talk openly with friends and relatives about the pain they experienced in relation to what we went through during the hard times. Although it is true that some friendships died, those that didn't have been renewed and enriched by these conversations.

Our experiences of our own lives have changed significantly, and this is accompanied by a different happiness, a happiness that has to do with how we approach the smaller things of life. We are more able to appreciate our own thoughts, and find that we have a sense of living well when we are able to get out of bed in the morning and when we are able to catch a bus or a tram. We are experiencing more just about being in the flow of life. We know more about what makes some places healing places to be in.

It is not that we still don't have hard times. We do. But, in revising our relationships with the troublesome voices and visions, and through our work together in the Power to Our Journeys group, we have also stepped into an experience of life we could never have predicted. We know it probably sounds strange, but we have achieved a quality of life, a richness, when living with the voices that would be difficult for many to understand. This has to do with many things, including a shift in what we value. For example, we have all experienced a change in our position on traditional materialistic values. It is not that we have dispensed with all materialistic values, it is just that they no longer mean what they meant to us previously. These values are no longer the elevated values. They have a different place in our lives. This means that many of our old associations with happiness no longer mean much to us. Instead, it is the lightness of being that we experience from moment to moment that matters most to us. And it is the mischievousness that we find becoming more and more a part of our every-day sense of our lives, of our humour, that is important. We

even are able to embrace the fact that, in many ways, we stand outside of what is expected of people in our culture, and to poke fun at these expectations. At these times we feel like larrikins, and the feeling is just great. All this means that on those occasions when we feel at risk of again being caught up in a tempest, we don't quite lose sight of the sun.

Our membership of the Power to Our Journeys group has contributed very significantly to this lightness of being. We are together in solidarity. We are secure in each other's company, knowing we have coped with lots of changes in our lives, and that we have gained knowledge through successfully managing the difficulties we have experienced at these times. We confirm this with each other at those times when we are vulnerable to the troublesome voices and visions, and become firm in the understanding that this has to do with facing the next step in life. We have learned how to be there for each other outside of our formal meeting times, supporting each other through difficult challenges. We have learned how to help each other stay in touch with the powerful knowledges we have developed together. And we have found that the troublesome voices and visions are allergic to this sort of team work.

Justice

It has been important for us to experience our work to reclaim our lives from the troublesome voices and visions as a struggle against injustice. These voices and visions are oppressive, and since our work on revising our relationship with these voices and visions addresses issues of power and control, then this relationship is a political relationship. This political understanding provides us with strength, as it keeps us in touch with the fact that we are not just on a personal journey, but also on a political journey.

It would be true to say that our work together has rekindled not just a love for life, but a love for justice, and this sustains us in our lives. This commitment to justice reinforced our decision to put this piece together. It also reinforces our claim to friendship, to love, to security, and to understanding. As we explore together notions of justice, we develop greater clarity about the fact that we do not have to put up with our lives being spoken about in ways that reduce us, in pathologising and marginalising ways. And we become more effective in our challenges to these ways of speaking about our lives and the

lives of others who experience troublesome voices and visions.

Medication

We have all had a variety of experiences with medication, some of these satisfactory, some of them not. It is clear to us all that our experiences with medications become more satisfactory when we consider them to be tools for us, not ends in themselves. Drugs are tools that open space for us to work with others on the *exposé* of the troublesome voices and visions, on our friendships, and in the honouring of our knowledge of life. It is in this space that we can get our heads together. So, drugs can open up possibilities for us to take action to free ourselves from domination. However, it is of critical importance that we don't allow drugs to oppress us. We use drugs, but won't be used by them.

Logo

The Power to Our Journeys group has a logo. It is of Mount Kilimanjaro. Quite some years ago, Sue, one of the members of our group, climbed to the top of this mountain. In one of our meetings she remarked that getting her life back from the hostile voices was a journey that was not dissimilar to the climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro. 'It is hard work', she said, 'but with the right preparations and provisions, a good map of the terrain, access to forecasts that make it possible to predict the weather ahead, and the appropriate support systems, it can be done.' We all embrace this philosophy. We will continue to equip ourselves with these tools and to develop the sort of support systems that will make it possible for us to see this journey through.

Conclusion

It has been proposed elsewhere that the libraries of psychiatric hospitals be obliged to include the sort of alternative texts that might be created by collections of the sort of therapeutic documents that we provide examples of here, and that these be placed alongside the more formal psychiatric texts.

These alternative texts just might be more helpful to people who are struggling with troublesome voices and visions than the standard texts. We hope this is true, and that we have been able to contribute to such a possibility in some small way by putting this piece together. This piece doesn't say all we would like to share with you, but we think it will be enough for you to get some understanding of what the Power to Our Journeys group is all about, and for you to get a sense of the spirit in which we undertake our journeys. Because of considerations of space, we haven't here discussed the work we do to revise our relationship with the more supportive voices and visions so that we feel less alone or less abandoned, and more sustained, during hard times. Perhaps we could share this with you at another time.

As authors, we have chosen to identify ourselves by our first names only. This is mainly because stigma is still alive and well in our communities, and we already have enough of this to deal with in our daily lives.

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of those members of the Power to Our Journeys group who did not wish to join the collective that put this piece together. Their voices are echoed in what we have written here. We would like to thank family and friends for persisting in their support of us despite their discouragement, and the workers of the Community Mental Health Project for walking beside us in our steps to achieve what we want for our lives. If you have responses to this piece that you would like to share with us, please send them to us at the address below. However, because we are generally quite busy with the priorities we have shared with you here, we cannot undertake to answer all correspondence.

Notes

1. This piece was first published in the Summer 1996 edition of the American Family Therapy Association (*AFTA Newsletter*), and was republished with permission in the 1997 No.1 issue of the *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* (also republished here with permission).
2. Brigitte, Sue, Mem and Veronika collectively authored this article, incorporating in it the voices and spirits of the other members of the Power to Our Journeys group. With fellow Power to Our Journeys members, they composed the documentary statements accompanying this article.

Power to Our Journeys

a song by

Sue & David

(copyright 1995)

Verse 1

A journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step
We're coming together now, we're talking 'bout respect
It shouldn't be too much to ask to listen and to learn
To fill the libraries with strategies that work

Chorus: There is power to our journey
There is hope in this room
Voices to be heard
And stories to be told
(repeat chorus)

Verse 2

What could this be that we've planted here today?
What could this be that we are watering so carefully?
Could they be friendships, something so sacred, yet so simple?
Could they be friend 'ships' to sail?
(chorus and repeat chorus)

Verse 3

As we tell our stories, we remember friends on similar journeys
We take their hands, and join them in rage
And join them in sorrow, and join them in hopefulness
(chorus and repeat chorus)

Verse 4

Well, we're trying to get it together
But, together we have it all
Well, we're trying to get it together
But, together we have it all
We are silently boiling over, we are silently boiling over
We are silently boiling over, we are silently boiling over
(chorus and repeat chorus)

Last line

There is power to our journey.

Document 1**Solidarity**

1. We first talked about the techniques that the troublesome voices resort to in their attempts to get the upper hand in our lives. It was interesting that we all had similar observations to make about these techniques and all understood how important it was to expose them. The voices resort to these techniques as they engage in those undesirable activities that are against our interests.
2. The techniques that were exposed during the meeting fell into different categories, all of which relate to certain characteristics of the voices:
 - a. It was established that the voices are parasites. They feed off guilt, insecurity, and fear.
 - b. It was determined that the voices are opportunists. They take advantage of people when they are stressed-out and feeling vulnerable.
 - c. It was determined that the voices are sensationalists. They have the habit of blowing things way out of proportion and, in so doing, of provoking our anxiety.
 - d. It was established that the voices are dependent. They rely for their survival upon self-neglect and self-accusations.
3. It was generally understood that to expose the techniques of the voices in this way is of great importance because it makes visible the voices' Achilles' heel. For example, the voices' allergies become rather obvious:
 - a. They just cannot stand self-love and self-acceptance.
 - b. Self-care throws them into a real fit.
 - c. Self-respect is toxic to them.
 - d. They are simply terrified of the possibilities of people uniting together in solidarity against them.
 - e. Challenging the sensationalism with the facts totally undermines their foundations.
 - f. Reclaiming personal power repels their efforts to feed on guilt and fear.
4. Apart from all of this, the voices are also allergic to seeing things clearly.

We all agreed that the idea of 'love as a movement through life' is one that assists in establishing an immunity to the voices' techniques.

5. This document is a declaration of solidarity. It is a declaration of the fact that the members of the Power to Our Journeys group are uniting and standing together against the forces that have attempted to tyrannise our lives. This is a way of giving notice to the voices, which, try as they might, will not, in the end, succeed in their attempts to capture our lives. We will carry with us the spirit of this group as we walk through life, and at those times when we are stretched and most vulnerable to being hassled by the voices, we will recreate the experience of this solidarity. This will provide for us a great deal of security and comfort in the face of adversity.

Document 2**Our Determination****1. Mentioning the Unmentionable**

We are committed to mentioning the unmentionable, and acknowledge the courage and strength this requires of us. Our achievements in mentioning the unmentionable undermine our guilt, fear, panic and self-doubt. It is also a service to others in that it brings relief to them. It helps others break free from restricting stereotypes.

2. Doing Things at Our Own Pace

We are determined to proceed in life at a pace that suits us, and not at a pace that suits the voices. The voices can be counted upon to push us into doing things before we are ready, and if they succeed, then our minds get clogged up and we lose sight of how we want to be in life. The voices at times rely upon outside support in their attempts to push us into things, and at times this support is unwittingly given by people like rehabilitation officers.

3. Acknowledging Our Teamwork

We are determined to keep sight of the fact that we are members of a team that is the size and as strong as the ocean, and as intelligent as the dolphins. Regardless of the exertions that some others engage in over their attempts to elevate this authority over our lives, we will stay in touch with the strength, the intelligence, and the beauty of our teamwork. Staying in touch with this is effective in shutting the voices up.

4. Honouring the Little Steps

We are committed to the honouring of the so-called 'little steps' we take in life. These are the kinds of steps that so many people in this world overlook, and they include getting out of bed, having a shower, and caring for our lives in general. We will not allow this culture's overriding concern with control to take away our appreciation of these little sacraments of daily life. Instead, we will take pride in them, and in the process, take note of our specialness.

Document 3**Authors of Our Own Lives**

1. We are becoming more skilled at identifying our troublesome voices. The more we do this, the clearer it becomes that we are hearing certain voices of society that express some of the dominant attitudes around today.
2. We are developing the ability to stand back from the voices. This helps us to stop evaluating ourselves so much, and makes it possible for us to focus on and to analyse the harassing voices. When we do this, we get to understand just how much these voices have difficulty coping with our movements through our present and into our futures.
3. Knowing that these evaluative, and at times hostile, voices are insecurities is an important realisation. It puts us in touch with the fact that they do not like change, and that it is their wish that we restrict our lives to their home territory.
4. We understand why they try to make us panic when we take up the adventures of life. We also understand why they try to obscure the skills and knowledges we have to bring to our journeys in life. When we openly acknowledge these skills, the voices can get desperate.
5. We can see that the voices are now losing ground and we look forward to the time when they lose any hope of regaining it. They are aware of the fact that the ripples of our work are going out. They are aware of the extent to which the lives of people in other parts of the world are being touched by our lives, and being enriched by the knowledges we are sharing with each other.
6. It appears that the voices have no answer to the creation of these networks. This means a lot. As we journey together in this work, we are becoming better focused, more able to get our feet firmly on the ground in regaining control over our lives, and we are experiencing the personal dignity that is our entitlement.
7. These kinds of developments are freeing of us, and make it easier for us to put other peoples' authority over our lives to one side. It also makes it easier for us to consult ourselves about our own lives and about the kinds of steps that would be nurturing of ourselves. In this way, we are having more to say about our own identities. We are becoming more the authors of our own lives.