



Bringing together women like you and me: Collective narrative practice with women and trauma

by Lesley Grant



My name is Lesley Grant, and I am a social worker in independent practice working with women and children who have experienced trauma through gendered violence. I have been engaged with narrative ideas for well over 20 years and am committed to social justice and feminism. I am inspired by and grateful for the constant generation of ideas by the narrative therapy community. lesley@replenishcounselling.com.au

Abstract

Collective narrative practice can be an effective antidote to the lingering effects of trauma and violence against women. These practices acknowledge and dignify the complexity, defiance, resistance and agency of women who live with the ongoing effects of violence. Sharing ideas and resources that women have about their own lived experience can address the isolation that too many women experience after violence, and these ideas can foster solidarity and rekindle a glimmer of hope.

Key words: solidarity; collective narrative practice; trauma; violence against women; feminism; social justice; survivance

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Women experiencing the ongoing effects of abuse and violence are often recruited into believing they are worthless and insignificant. They often live with and manage fear, isolation, shame, guilt, over-responsibility, despair and hopelessness. Their sense of themselves becomes thinned down or lost, eroded by experiences of abuse. This is reinforced through private and negative storying of their lives, and through interactions with systems that interpret the effects of violence in pathologising ways.

Using narrative therapy enquiries when working with women who have lived through violence allows me to turn the gaze back towards the operations of power to rescue forgotten stories, reinstate diminished abilities, acknowledge taken-for-granted skills, address the pathologising of suffering and restore hopes that have been worn thin. Narrative practices are generative of rich stories and restore a sense of who a person is and what they give value to. Narrative enquiries also allow me to separate the person from the problem and to highlight injustices and inequalities that produce problems in people's lives. Narrative conversations bring to light responses and resistances to oppression, and seek to uncover the intentions behind them. They also recognise the values, hopes and dreams behind these intentions. Such conversations can offer rich and meaningful experiences through which healing may occur, and dignity can be reclaimed.

Double listening

Trauma produces thin, single-storied accounts of people's lives with hopelessness and despair featuring predominantly. This results in the filtering out of preferred stories or ideas of oneself. White (2004, p. 59) described this as being 'trapped in a single dimension of living', often excluding what is important to the person and what they give value to. 'Ongoing day-to-day distress as an outcome of trauma can be understood as a tribute to the maintenance of an ongoing relationship with what a person holds precious, and as a refusal to surrender this' (2008, p. 60). Double listening – the seeking out of previously over-shadowed stories – starts with attending to what people give value to. It doesn't mean that other stories are not validated: indeed it provides space for multiple stories.

The practice of double listening makes visible significant stories of responding to trauma, and allows us to explore actions taken to modify the harm or effects caused by it. At the same time, things that have

been valued in life, that are precious to people and that they are preserving, become more visible. This line of enquiry can make room for a reclamation of a person's sense of who they are and their preferred story of living.

These stories may at first seem irrelevant or insignificant. However, attention to ordinary and everyday 'practices of living' can identify very precious steps through which people are responding to the problems in their lives.

The steps that people take during trauma, and in its aftermath, that are invariably disqualified or diminished, are founded on knowledges of life and on practices of living that have been developed in the history of the person's life, in the history of their relationships with others. In our work it is possible to create a context whereby these steps, and the practices and knowledges which they represent, can become known and richly acknowledged. (White, 2004, p. 47)

Inquiry about responses to trauma and skills of living can bring to light deeply personal and tender stories of how a person has responded to trauma, while at the same time of validating and understanding the more dominating story of trauma.

Katie's story

Katie, 35, was referred to me with depression, anxiety and some suicidal thoughts. These were the legacy of her experiences of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by her grandfather. Katie believed that she was hopeless, and that she and her life were meaningless. She disclosed the abuse to a high school teacher at the age of 14. Authorities were involved, and her grandfather was found guilty in court. However, he was excused from sentencing because of his old age. The guilty verdict lacked a sense of justice because of this leniency. The abuse was never spoken about again.

Silence and secrecy are significant instruments of power held over children who have been sexually abused. Katie's decision to disclose to her schoolteacher, Mrs Benson, was an extraordinary act of resistance. Deconstructing and externalising conversations about being recruited into silence and secrecy are crucial when a person has overcome significant pressure to remain silent, including through presenting to therapy.

Secrecy is intrinsic to the success of these techniques of power to which children are subjected. Through what he says and does, the abuser coerces the child into keeping the abuse a secret. He also tricks and manipulates others in the family to minimise the likelihood of them discovering the abuse. These tricks intentionally divide and isolate the child from others – especially non-offending mothers. (Cora & Linnell, 1997, p. 17)

Katie told me how her grandfather had used ‘trickery and manipulation’ to make the sexual abuse possible. Together, we exposed these practices of male power and patriarchy and their impact on her. Conversations about power and context are important in working with abuse because they help to separate the person from the problem. These externalising practices assist in understanding the politics of experiences and offer a different perspective on shame, blame and responsibility. Katie shared how her grandfather would use trickery to make her vulnerable. For example, he encouraged her to sneak down to the river, a place that was normally out of bounds. He then reported her to police as a missing person. The police reprimanded her for breaking the rules and being unruly. Misleading stories developed about her being defiant and disobedient. Such tactics disconnect a child from their supporters, leaving them open to predatory behaviour.

Katie would often get sad about her childhood experiences. We explored what this sadness was in honour of, what it was speaking on behalf of, and how she managed this sadness. Katie said that the loss of her childhood saddened her, and I learnt how the care of children was something precious to her. She recalled a very fond memory that reflected this value of care of children. From her bedroom window, Katie could see the home of her favourite teacher, Mrs Benson. Katie told me how she admired the love and care she saw in this home. Mrs Benson had four sons, and Katie would imagine being in a family just like this one. Mrs Benson’s home, and the care in it, became a shining light for Katie in times of darkness. We spoke about what was important to her and what she held dear in these moments. Katie described developing ideas about how family members could interact with each other, how she wanted to parent, and the love she wanted to put into her own home. Integrity was also an ideal that she aspired to, and this was a quality she noticed in Mrs Benson. These images became a source of inspiration and hope for Katie to hold on to.

In continuing to talk about her memories of her teacher’s home on the hill, Katie began to rescue some forgotten stories of how Mrs Benson had shaped her life in many ways. Mrs Benson had coached and mentored Katie through school and eventually into university. When Katie left school, Mrs Benson gave her a card that she cherishes to this day. The card contained a quote attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘What lies behind you and what lies in front of you are tiny matters compared to what lies inside of you’. This opened conversations about what Mrs Benson had seen in Katie: an alternative identity outside of the abuse. Katie’s memory expanded with stories of how clever she was at school – she was the first student in her school to do advanced-level English. A new sense of identity started to take shape through these stories.

If we can play some part in assisting these people to break their lives from those very negative personal stories that they have such a profound effect on shaping the expression of their experience, and if we can help them to step into some other more positive account of who they might be as a person, then it will become possible for them to actively engage in the reinterpretation of the abuse that they were subject to. And this reinterpretation will change the shape of the expression of people’s experiences of abuse, and therefore the shape of their lives. (White, as quoted in McLean, 1998, p. 84)

With fear falling away and rekindled memories becoming more significant in Katie’s life, Katie initiated an email exchange with Mrs Benson. This exchange allowed previously forgotten stories of responding to abuse and extraordinary acts of living to shine even more. Katie and Mrs Benson generally contacted each other at Christmastime with a brief catchup on each other’s lives. This time, Katie took the very courageous step of letting Mrs Benson know how important she had been in her life. To Katie’s delight, Mrs Benson replied with a beautiful account of what Katie was like as a young person and what she noticed in her. Stories of care, integrity and admiration were resurrected from the shadows of abuse. This is a small extract from Mrs Benson’s response:

It was a pleasure to be there for you when you were going through such a shocking time at the end of your school time. Thank you for your kind words, but I’m sure they were too exaggerated!! You taught me a lot as well because you were so strong and determined. You responded to support in a positive way, and I was very proud

of you. I am glad you still have the Emerson quote – and I still have your Extension 2 major work. It is beautiful poetry – a great talent of yours! Thank you so much for taking the time to let me know how you are and about your life experiences. I really appreciate that. I often think about you and wonder how you are.

This exchange amplified what Katie was starting to discover about herself, and was a wonderful opportunity for Katie to break free from the single-storied account of herself and experience the multiplicity of who she was growing up and how this has influenced and shaped who she is today.

Solidarity documents

Documentation can be very helpful in consolidating double-storied accounts of people's lives. A solidarity project was formed by bringing together documents recording initiatives, skills and knowledges of women who had lived through violence and abuse. Individually, these documents privileged the voices of the women and reclaimed their authority over their own lives. Brought together, they addressed experiences of isolation and marginalisation and created encouragement and solidarity. 'Stories from the insiders are incomparable to the stories written about them by outsiders' (Epston, 1999, p. 149). They can therefore be profoundly honouring of their shared experiences.

I asked Katie if she would like to contribute to this initiative. She responded very quickly, and this is a small extract of the document she wrote:

I encourage you to take a minute to think about what you really want for the present and future. What connections, friendships, jobs, study or relationships would you choose if you had the self-belief and confidence to say to yourself, 'I don't care what anyone thinks. This is my life now and I am grabbing it with everything I have'?

I remember being a young girl. My parents were fighting inside. Mum had been drinking. I was isolated, scared, depressed. I already had years of sexual grooming and violence and felt that it would be easier to die and disappear. There was a tiny bit of strength inside me that would go outside into the clean, quiet air. I would walk just far enough away from the house that the fighting and banging would become a blur of background noise. The stress and shame of home would eventually be silenced by my hopes and dreams

as I saw them within the brightest, most beautiful, innocent shining star in the night sky. As I looked at it, contemplating, scared, cold and crying, it would twinkle as though giving me a little friendly wink to say, 'keep on this path, keep dreaming and planning your future and one day these experiences will just be the invisible scaffolding of a kind, beautiful and smart woman'.

This was a very powerful account of survival and resistance against the tyranny of abuse Katie experienced. It became a powerful resource to encourage, inspire and support other women, and also an opportunity for Katie to see herself for who she hopes to be. It became an identity document.

Collective narrative practices

The gathering and documentation of stories of resistance and survival, and the honouring of stories and practices of living, provide a means to join in solidarity and overcome isolation. I am increasingly interested in collective narrative practices that allow me to extend my work with trauma to provide more opportunities to the women and children I work with. This allows me to pay attention to the influence of individualistic notions of therapy that may creep into my practice, and the notions expertise that go along with it.

David Denborough (2008, p. 7) has provided a helpful framework for thinking more purposefully about collective narrative practice and in its application to working with trauma in a therapeutic setting. Let me illustrate how this framework supported my work with a few women who have come to talk to me about their past and current experiences of trauma.

Sophie was a 23-year-old Aboriginal woman who had lived in and out of home care for most of her childhood. She had been separated from her siblings and exposed to various forms of abuse. The many failed placements she experienced were internalised as something wrong with her. This was when anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thinking found a way into her life.

Sophie became pregnant after a brief relationship and became a single mother at the age of 19. A few months prior to us meeting, Sophie's four-year-old son was taken in the middle of the night by the father's family who said that she was not taking care of her son. Sophie's attempts through police and the court system to have her son returned had so far failed, and she had fallen into deep despair. She was drinking heavily to

manage her grief and had lost hope. She had frequent suicidal thoughts. Many of our meetings were taken over by hopelessness, isolation and despair as every day of not seeing her son became harder. Sophie would often convey a sense of insignificance and invisibility: 'Nobody seems to understand. They don't know what this is like. Nobody cares'.

Sophie was very familiar with sitting with sadness, and I decided to acknowledge and explore her ability to endure sadness, rather than allowing it to take over. Together we explored her ability to endure this type of pain and the practices of living she had developed despite it.

Seeking double-storied accounts

Acknowledging and externalising Sophie's sadness made visible the injustices she was experiencing and opened space to honour her ability to endure. Sophie had survived many experiences of adversity and trauma in the past, so we explored what had supported her in bearing these experiences. Sophie recalled a time when she was in an adolescent mental health unit after an attempt on her life. She remembered the kindness of a nurse. The nurse presented Sophie with a slip of hope telling her to 'hold on, things will get better'. This idea resonated with Sophie, and she had chosen to act on this as a part of her story of living. This was an entry point to understanding Sophie's ability to 'hold on', and suggested a second story that coexisted with countless disappointments and ongoing despair.

Finding ways to richly describe the experience

I asked more about holding on and the history behind this. Sophie told me she had been holding on since she was a child. She was holding on for something to be different. She told me that she held on to the hope she would get to see her family again one day. This conversation illuminated memories of a paramedic who had told her, 'hang in there, things will get better'. These were significant memories for Sophie of a skill that she was enacting.

After further exploring these knowledges and skills of holding on, I wanted to document Sophie's recollections in a meaningful way that made her efforts more visible and recognisable and acknowledged and honoured her survival and continuing resistance to despair, anxiety and hopelessness. Sophie's words were sparse but powerful and formed a very rich insight into her experience. We collaboratively constructed her words into a poem.

Holding on

*I was young
I learned to hold on
Holding on is...
Having hope for the future
Holding on is....
Being strong
Holding on...
Is my voice*

*Holding on....
Speaks softly to me
Holding on....
Tells me to keep going
Holding on....
Says you will be okay*

*So
I keep going
I keep holding on
Others see me holding on
They see my potential
They know
I know
That holding on
It will take me to a better place
A peaceful place
A place of happiness*

*I know
That in holding on
Something great will happen
Eventually
That's what I'm holding on for
I'm holding on.
For you*

When I read this poem back to Sophie, she became teary and was quite taken by hearing her own words read back to her. It became apparent to Sophie that she had found some threads of agency in her ability to survive. This poem made these practices of living visible and perhaps further actions in her life possible.

Recording suffering at the same time as acknowledging skills of survival can be dignifying of experience, reflecting 'a range of hard-won skills and knowledges, in parallel with a rich acknowledgement of the circumstances in which they have been hard won' (Denborough, 2008, p. 36). Reading the poem back to Sophie provided an opportunity for her suffering to be stated, accounted for, witnessed and therefore for her resistance to it to be acknowledged.

Linking experiences

I wanted to respond to Sophie's claim that nobody knew what she was going through and that her experiences were invisible. I asked Sophie if I could share her poem with someone I knew would deeply relate to her experiences. Sophie agreed.

I approached Lilly, who I have worked with for many years. Lilly was a 45-year-old Aboriginal woman who also grew up in and out of home care. She was removed from her family as a part of the Stolen Generation. She lived in multiple placements and experienced many traumas.

Later in life, Lilly experienced domestic violence, and to numb the effects of her trauma, she engaged in drugs and alcohol. Under the gaze of the child protection system, Lilly's children were placed into out of home care while she participated in rehab. She had not had her children returned.

Lilly was committed to gaining contact with her children, but she continued to come up against oppressive and colonising practices with various systems that prevented this. Through paying attention to Lilly's practices of living as well as her experiences of injustice, we made visible her 'survivance' (Tuck, 2009). The word survivance really appeals to me because it acknowledges both everyday suffering and the ability to survive it: 'Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry' (Vizenor, 1998, p. 93).

I asked Lilly if she would be willing to participate in sharing skills and resources that had supported women through dark times. She agreed. I gave her some brief background on Sophie and shared the poem. A few days later I received this response.

Hello Sophie,

Thank you for sharing your poem 'Holding On' with me. Hearing a little about your life experiences and what you're holding on to in your poem was a gift for me to receive.

I related so much to your experiences, your struggles and what you are facing.

Your strength and enduring mother's love for your son meant very much to me. It felt like holding on to him means everything to you, your existence. As holding on for my four children does to me. Holding on to that little hope that

one day I'll get to hold them and exchange love keeps me believing in my sovereign birthright to know and love my own children. Your holding on words gave me inspiration. They showed me your strength, insight and what you value. I think you have to be strong and resilient to face these oppressions that keep you and your son apart.

It's a shame we can't take the loss, the sadness, the indescribable grief, and put them into the hearts, minds and bodies of those who make such heartless decisions which affect women like you and me. We breathe this on a daily basis. Our worlds are seen through different eyes to others'. It's like walking around as a ghost with a massive hole inside that yearns to be filled.

I too have been holding on all my life through multiple losses: my mother, my family, my siblings, my community and culture. I think it's in our DNA to be able to hold on and resist the pain and suffering that's put upon us as Indigenous mothers. We have come from a long history of colonising trauma. No-one bothered to ask us what we needed to do to be able to stay with our children or how we can be helped to stay together. We have to hold on against the persecution, against the racism, the system and lies.

The blood of our people, the love of our land: this is what has us holding on so strongly. We have no choice but to hold on to our children. They need us. Regardless of what others may think and do, we know deep in our being that our children need us, and we need them.

I take it a day at a time. I honour my culture, my survival and staying strong for what's right and just.

I realised that drugs, alcohol and bad relationships kept my strength hidden and wanted to make me to be weak, so I stood up strongly and told drugs, alcohol and violence to 'FUCK OFF'. To get out of my life for good. I beat it, and I will beat the system. I just know I will. How do I know? I know because I'm holding on for the right reasons and it's the right thing to do.

Never stop holding on, even if it hurts. Keep holding on, hold on tighter. You can do it. I know you can. I believe in your strength. And I believe in you.

All my love to you, Lilly

For people who have been subject to recurrent trauma, there is a sense of non-responsiveness and insignificance from the world they live in: a feeling that their experiences do not matter. In addition, their sense of agency and ability to influence the world around them can also become lost. Defeat often takes over. This letter was a very powerful response. Lilly's voice carried expert insider knowledge and was incredibly validating and supportive of Sophie's experience. Lilly's validation of Sophie would trump any therapeutic practice I am aware of. I was also struck by the generosity in Lilly's guidance, care and tenderness.

I read Lilly's letter to Sophie over the phone. She was extremely touched and enormously surprised: 'Wow! I didn't think anyone cared. I didn't think anyone else would understand'. The significance of this moment gave Sophie a sense of care for her struggles and re-affirmed her skills of living and survival. It also offered her a sense of togetherness and shared experiences with someone else in this world.

These ceremonial re-tellings of collective documents, in which 'breath' is put into the text, can be significant occasions. When a collective participates in a spoken performance of their words, their skills, and knowledges of dealing with hard times, can generate a significant sense of 'communitas'. (Denborough, 2008, p. 41)

Enabling contribution

I asked Sophie if she would like to respond to Lilly, and she said, 'I would love to'. So we collaboratively documented another poem. Sophie had some trouble on deciding on a title. I remembered Lilly's words in the letter, 'women like you and me', and asked Sophie if she felt they would fit. They did.

Women Like you and me

*She stayed strong
She held on
She didn't give up
She waited all those years
She didn't give into pain*

*She bettered herself
She fought for her kids
She had love in her heart
She did this
and
She is here today because of it*

*She had hope
She imagined happiness, joy and contentment
She held on for all those years
She should be proud
She had impact*

I thought I was the only one

*She made me feel strong
She made me feel like I could make it
She makes me feel like this will not last forever
She Inspires me*

*She makes me want to keep fighting
She makes me want to be positive
She makes me want to enjoy every moment
She makes me want to notice the love I share with him*

*I give you my hope
That you regain everything you have lost
I send you wishes
All the best for you
and your children*

All my love

Sophie's words were beautiful and powerful. To return the gift of shared understanding and solidarity back to Lilly was uplifting for both Sophie and Lilly. At our next meeting, I read the poem to Lilly. She was heartened by this, and she said, 'can you please tell Sophie that she inspires me as well'.

This conversation between Sophie and Lilly was enabling of admiration and inspiration for each other even though they had never met. This contribution to each other's lives was a wonderful antidote to individual suffering and provided a community of solidarity in lives that were often forced into isolation because of the effects of abuse and violence.

A few weeks after this exchange, I was providing supervision for a team who were focusing on child protection issues and the removal of children into care. Hearing how important an ethic of care was to them, I asked if they would like to hear a poem written by someone who had lived in out of home care and had been affected enormously by some of the very issues we were reflecting on. They were very open to hearing Sophie's insights and wisdom. I shared Sophie's poem with them, and they were touched. Sophie was delighted to know that she had been able to touch people working in the field.

Sophie then offered additional insights for me to share with this group of professionals at our next supervision meeting. 'When staff were kind, caring and nurturing, it made me feel like someone cared and made me feel safe'. She said at times 'you can feel very sad and confused and often things are not explained to you. So, kindness and warmth are everything'. I then asked what it was like to provide this information to this group, and she responded, 'sharing this with them and with other people gives me hope'.

Collective practices can offer dignity and healing. Stories of survival are reclaimed, shared and honoured, and a sense of community can be restored. Through enabling people to speak 'through us not to us' (Denborough, 2008, p. 55), we can enable contribution. Both Sophie and Lilly became animated and almost emancipated in their giving.

Reflections

Collective narrative practices provide a very effective antidote to many of the common effects of violence and abuse. They acknowledge and dignify the complexity, defiance, resistance and agency of the women I work with. Sharing ideas and resources that women have about their own experiences can in turn address the isolation that too many women experience

after violence, and foster a sense of solidarity and hope. Taking a decentred position in therapeutic conversations I aim to privilege the voice of women and support a process of co-research where they become the expert of their own narratives.

How do you sustain hope when oppression and injustice keep knocking on the door? Welch (in Unitarian Universalist Association, 2012) suggested that 'one must take responsible action within the limits of power... and name the resources that evoke persistent defiance and resistance in the face of the repeated defeats'. If we can identify oppression and how it is produced, then we can also name and value acts that sustain the struggle. In working with women and naming the practices of oppression and exploring the small but courageous steps women take to persist and resist, is significant and healing work.

The collection of these documents and the process of sharing them with others have been far reaching and liberating, more than I could have expected. I have collected many documents that I can use in therapeutic practice to unite women through their shared experiences to inspire and to offer a sense of community and solidarity.

When I asked Sophie's and Lilly's permission to publish their stories, not only did they say yes, they also said 'thank you for letting our stories be heard' and 'thank you for doing this work with women like us'.

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