



# From Tree of Life to the Sun of Life

by Katie Christensen



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## Abstract

Using the Tree of Life as an example, this paper presents folk psychology as a decolonising practice that elevates the experience, history and wisdom of individuals and collectives, rather than privileging the theories and standards of professional practice. It also demonstrates the possibilities that can emerge when we invite people's own folk psychology metaphors to guide our practice.

**Key words:** *Tree of Life; folk psychology; decolonising; Aboriginal; narrative practice*

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As Aboriginal people, our way values people's wisdom. This folk psychology is passed down as a way of relating to each other. Our stories are intentional-state understandings of our desire to thrive and to overcome. This is reflected in our holding dear the importance of culture, community and connection to land: a return to what we know is good for us, good for the Earth and good for all. Folk psychology is, by its very nature, decolonising because rather than elevating theories, standards and ideas of white men to judge us all, it elevates each of us, individually and collectively, and honours our experiences, our history and our wisdom. Through the practices of narrative therapy, these honoured stories can take shape and shine. Through the maps for externalising, re-authoring, re-remembering and the use of folk metaphors, we can deconstruct dominant discourse and the normalising gaze (see Dulwich Centre, 2020).

The problem with internal-state understandings is that they are totalising of our identity and encourage us to believe that our actions are a manifestation of unconscious motives. This strips us of agency, taking us out of the driver's seat and rendering us passengers in our own lives at the mercy of life's difficulties – while

at the same time judging us for not doing better at navigating its complexities (White, 2007). Attention to intentional-state understandings, on the other hand, supports curiosity and compassion and honours the people we work with. They require that we remain decentred and set the intention for all the practices and maps within narrative therapy. A beautiful and structured way to uncover new understandings is to work through a Tree of Life process with someone.

When completing a Tree of Life with 13-year-old Terri, about halfway through she reflected that a sun metaphor could also be used. Terri imagined that origins and 'roots' could be recorded on the core of the sun, daily life on the inner layer of the sun and skills and values on the outer layer. Hopes and dreams could be recorded on the sun's rays, inspirations on comets, legacies and contributions on planets, and gifts that have been received on stars. I was delighted! I invited Terri to complete a Sun of Life, but she chose to stick with the Tree of Life image she was working on (see Figure 1). I wrote a letter to Terri to witness her innovation and to extend the invitation to complete a Sun of Life.



Figure 1. Terri has given me permission to use and share this picture of her Tree of Life

Dear Terri

I really enjoyed completing the Tree of Life with you. I thought your idea of exchanging it with a sun was so creative! Perhaps you could do a version of your Tree of Life as a Sun of Life?

While we were working through your Tree of Life, I was struck by the things you value, especially silliness and craziness. I too value silliness and craziness, and like you I also learnt this value from my mum and my aunties. For me, this value is attached to love and times in my childhood that felt full of joy, safety and connection to the people I love. I think this has really helped me through my own tough times: realising the power of laughter and fun and how it can lift you even on the darkest days – if you let it. Hearing how you value silliness and craziness has reconnected me to this knowledge and skill, which is really helpful to be reminded of while we are practicing isolation!

I am looking forward to seeing your completed tree and perhaps even your own version – The Sun of Life – if you choose to complete it.

Yours in silliness,  
Katie

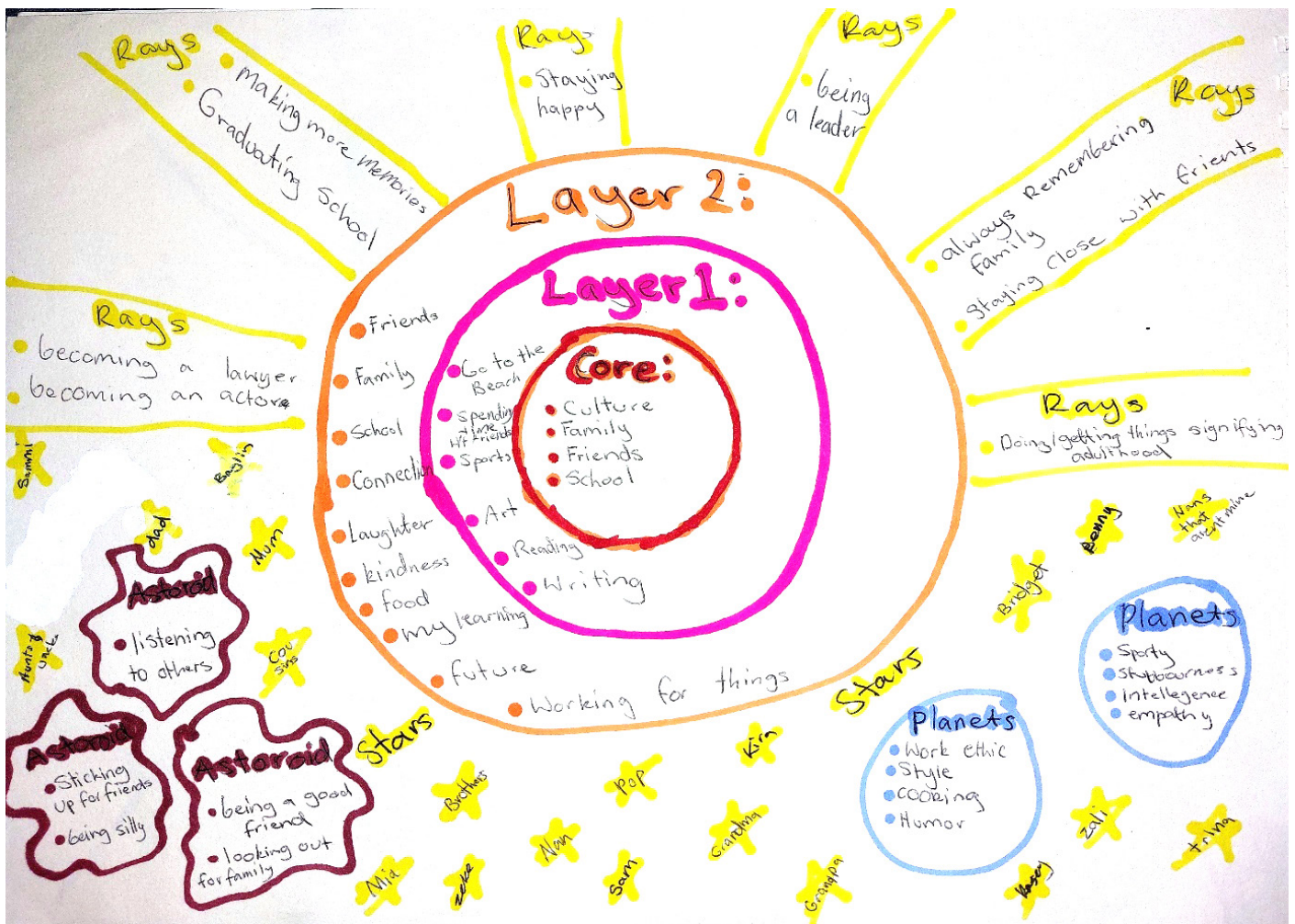


Figure 2. Terri has given me permission to use and share this picture of her Sun of Life

In response, Terri sent me a photo of her Sun of Life (see Figure 2).

This has prompted me to consult with people about what metaphor they would like to use and to offer the sun as an alternative example. In narrative practice, we stay behind the people we are working with, and always stay open to possibilities for creativity. This is often wonderfully illustrated when practicing documentation and definitional ceremonies: they invite collaboration, creativity and connection.

I was inspired by Ncazelo Ncube's (2006) paper and adapted her questions for a yarn with Terri about her concept of the Sun of Life. I wanted to honour Terri's metaphor by taking the conversation further and using the metaphor of the solar system to talk about problems or dangers in life. Terri had been through a lot in her short life so far. During our Tree of Life yarn, we had at times referred to certain incidents, but never spoke directly about them, only of Terri's responses to them. In taking the yarn out into the universe, my intention was to thicken the stories of Terri's responses to the tough times she had experienced, and to strengthen

her connection to her skills and wisdom. I wasn't sure what metaphors were waiting for us in space or where the conversation would go, but after Terri completed a Sun of Life picture for me, a doorway was opened that I couldn't ignore. I asked Terri if she would like to yarn in person or over text and she chose text. I was a bit nervous about using Messenger, and whether I would be able to keep a yarn flowing or whether I would just be left with the dot dot dot— silence! But I wanted to meet Terri on her territory. I opened the conversation much like Ncazelo by asking whether the universe is free from danger.

Terri identified that no, it wasn't, and listed a series of dangers: black holes, space junk, parallel universes. These were named under the banner of 'the unknown'. I asked Terri if we have to deal with the unknown in life too and whether she was ever afraid of the unknown. Terri replied, 'Yes, anxiety is a problem I have sometimes'. Instead of internalising and labelling Terri as anxious (and noting that Terri herself was externalising anxiety), I remained curious and honouring of Terri's language by asking, 'Does anxiety



visit when things are unknown?' This question made way for the skills and wisdoms of 'anxiety be gone!' to be identified and elevated, and for meaning (intentional-state understandings) to flourish.

Through this discussion, Terri identified that the unknown often made her anxious, and that her anxiety was the fear of the unknown. The unknown could sometimes be exciting, but for Terri it mostly wasn't. This opened up a new conversation in which skills and knowledges could be uncovered. Skills of determination, silliness and craziness were thickened, and now a conversation around the skills that were named 'anxiety be gone!' was emerging.

Katie: What do you do when anxiety is taking up space?

Terri: I usually try to think of positive things in life or I do something I enjoy.

Katie: Okay. How do you do that – can you give me an example step by step?

Terri: When I feel anxious, I will take a couple of breaths then think of a time I had fun or laughed. Or I take a breath and then draw or do a TikTok.

Katie: Okay, so when you feel anxiety in your body, you take some deep breaths and either think of a happy story or do an activity you enjoy? Does it work?

Terri: Yes, it does work.

Katie: That's so deadly! How did you learn to do that? What's your first memory of it?

Terri: I just picked it up along the way.

Katie: Did anyone tell you or show you how to do it?

Terri: My first memory of it was my first day of school in Year 3. It scared me quite a lot, so I took a couple of breaths and thought about prep through to Grade 2. I can't remember anyone showing me.

Katie: So you thought about when you had started new grades at other times, and they were good memories?

Terri: Yeah.

Katie: That's amazing that you knew what you needed so young. What would you call that skill?

Terri: I am not sure.

Katie: Breathe and distract? Anxiety buster? Anxiety be gone! Any of those fit or get close?

Terri: Anxiety be gone!

Katie: If you think about Grade 3 Terri whipping out 'anxiety be gone!' to get through the fear of the unknown, what do you think of her?

Terri: A smart child.

Katie: Does 'anxiety be gone!' work all the time?

Terri: Most times.

Katie: Thinking about space and the universe and stars, what else does it hold besides the unknown? And is the unknown always scary? Or can it be exciting?

Terri: I don't know, maybe aliens! Our creation stories like the Southern Cross<sup>1</sup> and it's beautiful and seems endless. It can be exciting but usually scary. What else is up there?

Katie: Is the unknown always there?

Terri: Yes.

Katie: Does knowing you have the skill of 'anxiety be gone!' help you deal with the unknown that is always there? Is there anything else that helps?

Terri: Sometimes. Writing helps too.

Katie: How long have you done that for? Since you could write or more recently?

Terri: More recently, like since Grade 5 or 6.

Katie: Does writing help you to deal with things other than the unknown?

Terri: Yes, it does help. Maybe it helps with my hopes for the future?

Katie: Does having hopes for the future help with the unknown too or is it separate?

Terri: It is separate.

Terri demonstrated that while there was an ever-present danger of the unknown, she was not passive in experiencing this danger and had intentional skills and knowledges to sustain her when the unknown was taking up space. Using Terri's own metaphor offered a way to extend a yarn that began with the Tree of Life. It became a person-led, experience-near exercise that allowed for further conversation and meaning-making.

It was a pleasure to honour Terri's experience of life in this way

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See Solomon-Dent (2016).

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