

# THE TREE OF LIFE NARRATIVE APPROACH

Originally developed by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo & David Denborough

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Informed by

## The narrative therapy charter of story-telling rights

- 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.

Story of what has been / is being endured	Story of response / resistance / sustenance (what has survived)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hardships</li><li>• Losses</li><li>• Injustices</li><li>• Histories of these</li><li>• Continuing obstacles</li><li>• What effects these have had / are having on people's lives</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Responses &amp; implicit skills</li><li>• What the person / community holds precious despite hardships – beliefs, values, hopes, dreams, commitments</li><li>• Social history of these</li><li>• To whom these are linked</li></ul>

- 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

**Exercise:** Let's make our trees!

**ROOTS -HERITAGE:**

- Where do you come from - your family, community, cultural history?
- 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, religious traditions, 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 (in case they have passed)?

**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 name(s) to the storms that your community or a community you work in have faced? Share as little and as much as you are comfortable sharing. Just naming the storm is enough for e.g., loss, poverty, stigma etc.
- How have these storms disconnected people from each other and isolated them?
- How did these storms make people doubt their skills, knowledges, abilities, dreams and hopes?
- How have these storms ended up pushing people to make negative conclusions about themselves/their identity?
- How did these storms rob people's sense of agency or purpose in life?

*As you started reflecting on this, what did this get you thinking more about? Did it make you think about injustices that rob people of their sense of agency, connections, richer stories of themselves? Do you have any ideas on how we can stand up to these injustices?*

Step 2 - How did your wood-wide-web, your forest, support you through the storms of your life? *You do not have to give details of the storm – just name it – for e.g. loss, stigma etc.* Choose one or more of the options below and if possible, tell a little story around it:

- An act of care from someone known or unknown in your community?
- An unexpected invitation that made you feel welcome and have a sense of belonging?
- A spiritual connection that made you believe that you were not alone?
- A presence of someone in this world, known/unknown, living/dead, that made a difference in your life? (a human, pet, author, historical figure etc. etc.)
- Ancestry, heritage (your roots) that gives you sense of connection and legacy that you carry on.  
*As you started reflecting on this, what important things did this help you get clearer about? How did this influence what you thought or believed about yourself? How did it support your connections and sense of being part of a collective (forest)?*

Step 3 - How do you give back to this wood-wide-web, your forest, even in smallest of ways? Choose one or more of the options below:

- An act of care towards someone known or unknown in your community?
- An unexpected invitation to someone which made them feel welcome and have a sense of belonging?
- Offer a spiritual/religious connection that made someone believe that they were not alone?
- A knowledge that your presence in this world made a difference to someone/many in this world in direct or indirect ways.
- What are small or big things that you do that might be seen as legacy for the coming generations in small or big ways?

*As you started reflecting on this, how did it make you aware of the small or big ways that you contribute to the world? How have these steps you have taken nourish the collective (forest)? How do these reflections make you stronger in your commitments?*

### Exercise 3 - 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 on 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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### References and more information

To learn more about the work of Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo see: [www.phola.org](http://www.phola.org) / [ncazelo@phola.org](mailto:ncazelo@phola.org)

Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 3–16.

Narrative Therapy Charter of Storytelling Rights See: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/charter-of-story-telling-rights/> or <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/narrative-therapy-charter-of-story-telling-rights-by-david-denborough/>

Concept of wood-wide- web adapted from Nicholas, E. (2021). Seeing the forest for the trees: Exploring the forest aspect of the Tree of Life process to sustain and nourish socioecological activism, *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, # 1.

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

For more information about Tree of Life Narrative Approach see [www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life)

For examples of First Nations practitioners using Tree of Life:

<https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/aboriginal-narrative-practice-course/lessons/06-supporting-families-and-communities/>