DEAR READER

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My favourite questions

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This paper, which began as a part of a plenary address at the 10th International Narrative Therapy Conference in Salvador, Brazil, offers 3 sets of questions that the author names as 'favourites' in her work. The first 2 sets of questions are questions that therapists can ask clients in therapy conversations. The first set may help people link their lives with others. The second may help people organise their experience into narratives. The third is a question that therapists can ask themselves to help them come to questions that promote experiential involvement.

Keywords: narrative therapy, questions, linking lives through shared purposes, turning points, tracking and linking experiences, preferred directions in life, the importance of experiential re-telling

INTRODUCTION

I have had a lot of fun thinking about my favourite questions, and a hard time deciding which questions to highlight. As I thought about it, more and more questions came to mind and took me back to compelling conversations in which people were telling stories and making distinctions in ways they hadn't before. Often what makes a question a favourite for me is how it fits with the particular moment and, in partnership with another person, somehow creates something that wasn't there before. These questions either lead the way back into an experience that is rich with meaning or, even better, they help create an experience that has something to do with a time that occurred before, but is more than that – perhaps a new perspective about that or a link between that and something else or an unpacking that has new meaning. These questions are hard to talk about outside of the particular situations that evoke them, and considered outside of those moments – just by themselves – these questions seem quite ordinary. So after days of reliving conversations that I never could have predicted, and finding my way back to those questions that were fitting for a particular moment in a particular conversation, I decided to choose different kinds of questions to start with in describing my favourite questions. I decided that, rather than focus on questions in response to a particular moment in a particular conversation, I would start with questions that I often ask, old friends I rely on for helping us find our way.

I'll begin with a story. Last month in our year-long program we were doing a stop-start interview. I had invited one of the participants to 'be' someone he worked with. I interviewed Josh as his 27–year-old client, Zach, stopping frequently to hear candidate questions from the group. One of the questions was in response to a story that Josh, in his role as Zach, had just relayed. He had told us about 'the Firehouse', an after school program that he began going to when he was in the 6th grade, when he was making a transition from an alternative school for kids with learning disabilities to the public school. He described himself as having a weird sense of alienation and said that going to the Firehouse 'saved his life'. A person who figured prominently in these stories was a man named Don who ran the Firehouse. The stories described Don's support, acceptance and encouragement, and Zach's experience of belonging at a time when he felt like 'a weird outcast' in the rest of his life.

We asked Zach (played by Josh), the first set of questions I'd like to consider: 'Does Don know the impact he has had on your life?' Zach said he didn't know. We asked, 'What do you think it would mean to him to know?' Zach puzzled about that.

Josh took his experience of being Zach and some of our questions to his next interview with Zach. Although he didn't ask every question we posed he did ask, 'Does Don know the impact he has had in your life?' Zach couldn't answer that question, but he was intrigued with the process Josh described to him. This led Josh to get in touch with us about the possibility of the actual Zach coming to our program for an interview. Josh had begun seeing Zach when he was not making it in college and his parents were going through a divorce that he described as 'biblical in proportion'. Now, Zach was doing well in a different college and had an apartment in the city. Josh thought the interview could be a kind of celebration of what Zach had accomplished. We welcomed the idea. A few days later, Josh got in touch again to ask if we could invite Don from the Firehouse, who Zach hadn't seen in years, to join us. Don was still working at the Firehouse, in a nearby suburb, and accepted our invitation.

During the interview, Don served as an audience to the story of what Zach called the 'forward momentum of his life'. In the interview we talked about many things, including Zach's memories of Don and the Firehouse, particularly the impact that Don had on Zach's life. Zach said, 'It just kind of relates to the fact that with the exception of my parents, this was the first time that somebody really believed in me. This guy helped me be the person I've become.' He also said that because of Don, he fell in love with teaching and, if he could do half of what Don did for him for someone else, that would be awesome.

Near the end of the interview, when I asked for Don's reflections, he spoke with tears in his eyes. He said that the interview was the high point of his career and that he would never forget it. Kids came back to visit, he said, but no-one had ever talked in

detail about how he made a difference in their lives. This was why he was doing the work, and witnessing Zach speak about him was the first time he was sure that he was actually doing what he hoped to do.

Earlier in the interview, Zach told a story about sitting in the quadrangle at his college reading a graphic novel, *I Kill Giants* (Kelly & Nimura, 2009), about someone coping with her father's dying. In the novel, the main character, Barbara, is under water. She breaks through the water and cries, 'We are stronger than we think!' Zach said that when he read that particular phrase, Aaron Copland's 'Appalachian Spring' (which he was listening to on his iPod) hit its highest point, a gust of wind hit him in the face, and the sun suddenly came out. Everything made sense. He saw that although he was diagnosed with a learning disability, he got through it. He's stronger than he thinks! His parents' divorce. He's stronger than he thinks! His struggles with depression, getting kicked out of college. He's stronger than he thinks! The words from this graphic novel became a mantra. Since that time, Zach has re-read the novel every couple of weeks and now owns 3 copies because he kept lending it out and not having it when he wanted to consult it again. As we talked about how important this mantra was to him I asked, 'What do you think it would mean to the author to know the impact his book has had on your life?'

Later in Don's reflections, Don suggested that Zach actually get in touch with the author. 'This means so much to me, to discover my importance in your life', he said. 'I think it will to the author too. Can you imagine writing a book because you have a message you want to get across and then discovering that you not only got the message across but, in doing that, you helped change someone's life?' To me, Don's advice to Zach was confirmation of how important it was for him to be recognised as part of Zach's team (White, 1995). Zach also claimed Barbara, the character who killed giants, as a member of his team, a latecomer, he said, but definitely on his team.

I love the question, 'Does a particular person know the impact he or she has had in your life? It invites people to think about those who have made a difference to them, how they have made that difference, and whether they know about the difference they have made to others. The question, 'What do you think it would mean to them to know?' invites people to consider how this may be important, not just for them, but for the other person as well. It may introduce the possibility of being in touch with people who have been important and allowing them to be even more important. Zach is not the first person to want to include such people in the therapy. I've had someone's former supervisor, grade-school teachers and many friends join in (Freedman & Combs, 1996), but whether they are included in person or virtually, through re-membering conversations (White, 1997, 2007; Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; Russell & Carey, 2004) or participation, these questions invite people to link their lives with others through shared purposes. I've never known this linking not to be important. These questions ask people to provide a two-way account of relationships, they make visible the contribution of people in each other's lives and, when we are especially lucky, along with all that, they reinvigorate relationships. These events go a long way in supporting people's preferred experiences of life.

Zach commented on how important it was for him to discover that the relationship also contributed something important to Don. The recognition of the two-way relationship implicit in these questions has a strong anti-pathologising effect and helps us experience how we are all in it together.

The second cluster of questions I want to offer also figured prominently in the interview I've been discussing. They are, 'What would you say was the turning point? If we were to think about that as turning from one direction to another, can you name those directions and what went into the turn?' These questions can help people organise experiences in their lives and make sense of them as a narrative. By asking what went into the turn, we can also invite people to recognise that what they do makes a difference in their own lives.

Zach and I began talking about the graphic novel, *I Kill Giants* (Kelly & Nimura, 2009), in response to the question 'What would you say was the turning point?' Reading that novel was the turning point for Zach, along with having what he called 'the self-realisation' that he had overcome all the difficult things in his life because he is stronger

than he thinks. This realisation was the beginning of a huge forward momentum. After he named reading the novel and his self-realisation as the turning point, I asked Zach the second question in this cluster, 'If we were to think about turning from one direction to another, can you name those directions?' Indeed he could. He said that he went from someone who hid from everything to someone who sought out things, from being a 'hider' to a 'seeker'.

Soon after making those distinctions, Zach was telling us that not so long ago he had a huge crush on a woman, the first one in he couldn't remember how long. After working up his nerve, he asked her out and she turned him down. He grinned as he told the story and asked if we wanted to know why he could smile about that. It's because he ASKED her out, he said, and the world didn't end, he didn't fall through a hole. Someone who seeks out things, like Zach, will have things that work and things that don't. Being someone who hides from things is safe, but boring. He prefers being a seeker and he can handle it because he is stronger than he thinks. (I just want to note here that what Zach is calling being strong, can be unpacked. We can ask about the skills and abilities he is calling strength, their history, where he learned them, who figured prominently in these learnings, and so on. But that is another story, for different sets of questions.)

One of the reflections that Zach made was that nothing he said in the interview was exactly new. He had reviewed all of the events, at one time or another, with Josh. But they didn't fit together before, all of once piece. Now, he said, he could see it all went together. It was a trajectory. And seeing that trajectory was fantastic, because it wasn't simply that some good things happened. Instead, he recognised that he liked the direction he was taking in his life.

Questions such as, 'What would you say was the turning point? If we were to think about turning from one direction to another, can you name those directions?' invite just what Zach experienced: rather than perceiving individual experiences, these questions suggest that events can be thought of as linked and that people can detect a direction that these linked events indicate.

Maybe this idea of seeing events in a larger context especially appeals to me because of a personal experience I had when I was younger than Zach. I had been crazy in love for the first time and was in quite a bit of pain when the relationship ended. My Dad, who was always great to talk to, said to me, 'I know that you are pretty miserable, even though you don't like what is happening right now, if you look at your whole life, the things that you have learned, even in this relationship, and the experiences that you have had, are they helping you move toward your goals?' I remember when he asked that question, that I had this great sighing pause and could see a bigger picture and a better one.

This was way before the days of narrative therapy, but my Dad, who happened to be a psychologist, helped me think about the narrative of my life, not ignoring this painful time, but seeing it in the light of some big directions that fit with what I wanted for my life; not unlike the way Zach saw the experience of asking someone out, which he managed to feel good about, even though, as he described it, she 'shot me down'.

The questions, 'What would you say was the turning point?' and, 'If we were to think about turning from one direction to another, can you name those directions?' help us track and link experiences. Asking about a turning point encourages people to recognise a change from a direction they don't prefer to one that they do. We can use the turning point as an opportunity for people to recognise the initiatives they have taken on their own behalf, and the skills and abilities they've used (White, 2011). Although Zach began by attributing his turning point to the graphic novel, he also mentioned 'self-realisation', and what he realised was that he got through a series of difficult experiences using his skills, abilities and supporting team.

The part of the question about naming the directions puts people in a position to evaluate their experience and make distinctions about it. Once two directions are named, people can consider if their choices will take them more in one direction or another. What could be a difficult experience, such as being turned down for a date, can then became a positive example, because it fits with a preferred direction.

Up to this point I've described a number of ways I think these questions are useful. But the reason they are FAVOURITE questions has to do with ways people have responded that I never would

have predicted. Partners in a heterosexual couple consulted me about conflict. It was difficult for one partner to do something without the other attributing some negative meaning. They seemed quite invested in re-telling the drama of each conflict. But with the slimmest unique outcome I asked about a turning point. The couple conferred and began to talk about a time in the last week in which Rachel had fallen and broken her wrist. Tony, by his own description, ridiculed her for two days, calling her a baby and telling her to suck up the pain. On the 3rd day Rachel saw a doctor who diagnosed the broken wrist. The turning point for Tony was realising he had been wrong. For Rachel it was the way Tony looked in her eyes when he apologised. They named one direction as being in league with superiority, and the other as spirituality. I love these questions because they often open vast arenas for inquiry. In subsequent meetings, talking about spirituality rather than being in league with superiority, invited very different kinds of examples, a different tone, and a different kind of commitment to the process than our earlier conversations that sometimes focused on things like one of them eating all the chocolate sandwich cookies and leaving the vanilla ones.

As much as I love these questions, this paper wouldn't be complete without at least touching on those questions I mentioned at the beginning – questions that grow out of a particular moment and help make it more vivid or unpack it or link it with something else. These are little questions, but important questions. I remember quite a long time ago watching a video of David Epston at work. He was interviewing a young person, and I don't remember the subject of the interview, all I remember was the young person reporting that he had told his grandfather something important. David asked 'What was the look on your grandfather's face when you told him?' When the young person described the look, he was back there with his grandfather, and so was David, and so were we. Everything slowed down, and we could all just appreciate that relationship and the significance of that moment. David's presentation got me thinking about those small questions that are right there on the edge of what someone is describing but that open it up or slow it down, or that create the space to make meaning of it.

Another example is from my own work with a woman who moved from Puerto Rico to Chicago to escape her father who had been violent toward her and her mother throughout her life. She found that the effects of the abuse followed her to Chicago and that's why she consulted me. A direction in life that Maria was coming to value had to do with doing, rather than running. When I asked her to tell me about a time that illustrated 'doing rather than running', Maria spoke of being away from work to go to a training and then coming back and having an overwhelming amount to catch up with. But she began talking to herself and found that she could do it. The question I asked was, 'In what language were you speaking to yourself?' Maria's hearty laugh and response to the question opened up an examination of speaking in both languages to herself. Speaking in each language carried different meanings, in addition to the meaning of the words. Maria talked about the significance of how quickly and loudly she spoke, and how each language could support a different aspect of 'doing' in different ways.

These kinds of questions are always different and always flow from the conversation we are engaged in. But for me, anyway, they come from a question I ask myself. The question is: 'What else do I want to know to be able to really see, hear, and feel what the person is describing?' This question helps me focus on some aspect of the experience that has not yet been described. If the person is describing something in the way they usually have told it to themselves and others, questioning an untold part often encourages a fresh experience that may bring new things to light. To answer the question, the person often has to go more fully into the experience. The experience becomes a re-lived one, rather than just a re-told one.

A woman I worked with a number of years ago helped me understand how important this re-experiencing is. Elizabeth's parents had divorced when she was eleven. Not long after the divorce, her father brought her to his place for the weekend. When she woke up Saturday morning she couldn't find her father. After she had gone to bed the evening before, he had returned to her mother's house, stabbed his ex-wife multiple times and left her for dead (although she did survive), and then he killed himself. Elizabeth came to see me when she

was in her early twenties, describing the problems as difficulties with intimacy and inability to trust. I was a fairly new narrative practitioner at the time. In our work, Elizabeth told many stories about times that wouldn't be predicted by distrust or difficulties with intimacy, yet somehow they didn't make a difference. Not knowing what else to do, I described to Elizabeth my understanding of what we were doing and my confusion about why her telling these stories didn't seem to matter. 'Oh', she said, 'That's easy. I wasn't there.' She described to me how she could recite things that happened, but it was as though they had happened to someone else. She wasn't in them.

This last kind of question that I've been describing that I get to through asking myself, 'What else do I want to know to be able to really see, hear and feel what the person is describing?', invites people into experience so that the stories they tell are stories they experience and stories they own – stories that make a difference.

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