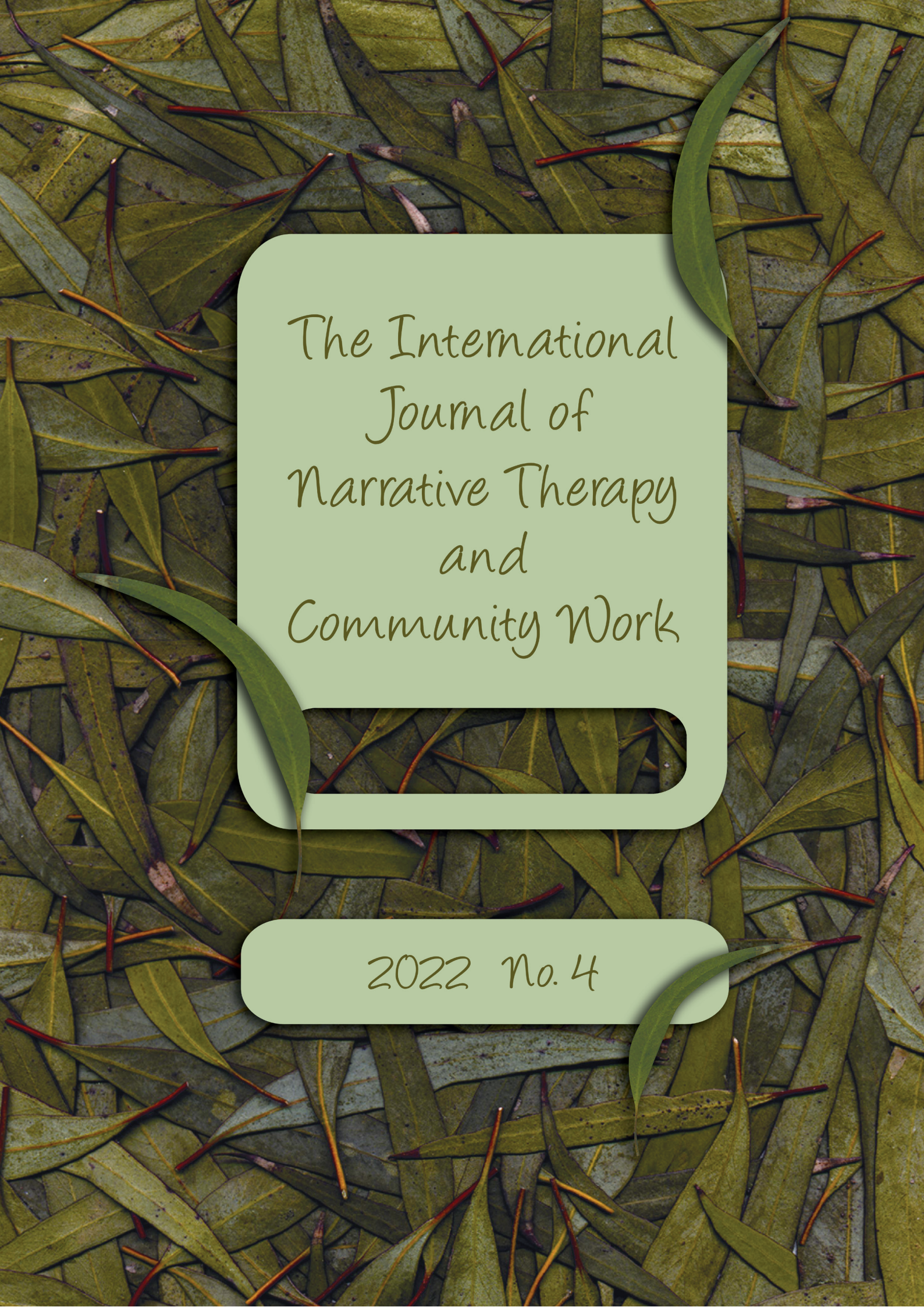

The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work
2022 No. 4



Editorial

Dear Reader,

Welcome to this issue of the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work.

It features descriptions of narrative practice that are responding to current social predicaments in diverse contexts.

The first piece, by Chelsea Size, considers the confronting existential realities of the climate crisis and ways in which narrative practices can be used to help resist overwhelm and sustain climate activism. Recognising that stories shape our lives and the life of our planetary home, the paper examines both broad systemic issues and the everyday effects of living in a time of climate crisis. Recognition is given to modern/colonial ways of being and anti-colonial practices. Narrative questions are offered in connection to three themes: place, spiritualities and acts of resistance and the paper documents rich stories, insider knowledges and skills of living. It's an offering and invitation to the field of narrative practice.

The second paper, from Joyce Ng in Hong Kong, demonstrates the application of narrative practice in supporting people to respond to the challenges associated with leaving the land we call home. It addresses different moments in the migration experience, from making the decision and preparing for departure, to finding ways to maintain connection with people and places when separated by distance. The skills and knowledge that participants developed through each of these stages were recorded in a series of collective documents that tell a different story about the resilience of Hongkongers during this period in history, and their eagerness to join with others experiencing similar predicaments. It is a poignant piece and also an example of skilled and creative practice.

We then hear from the African continent, as Caleb Wakhungu shares the facilitation guide for his approach to 'Raising our heads above the clouds' that has been developed in Mt Elgon, Uganda. This is followed by short stories of practice by Marie Claudine Nyirakigwene and Niyibizi Muhayimana Annociata from Rwanda, Deborah Mrema from Tanzania, and Hugo Kamya from Uganda/USA. David Denborough also offers a reflection about how this approach fosters community economy through collective narrative practice.

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While these first three papers all provide responses to collective hardships and crisis, the next pieces focus more on personal/individual experience.

Following a loved one's suicide, bereaved persons are sometimes revisited by pain in the form of intrusive imagery. Miguel Feliciano's paper, 'Engaging with imagery in the context of grief after suicide' focuses on externalising intrusive imagery and also addresses the potential for imagery to be evoked to support re-membering conversations. It provides thoughtful options for counsellors in relation to how an image can become a site where new, preferred meaning can be made.

This journal issue ends with a personal testimony from Joanna Bayes, about her own experience of traumatic brain injury and then a reflection, 'Bearing witness, externalising and re-authoring' by Franca Butera-Prinzi, Nella Charles and Karen Story who are family therapists and members of the Acquired Brain Injury team at The Bouverie Centre in Melbourne.

With pieces from Australia, Hong Kong, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and USA; and ranging from personal testimony, counselling practice and ground-breaking collective practice, this issue provides a glimpse of the current creativities within the international field of narrative therapy and community work.

Changes coming!

After 40 years, I reckon we're ready to hand the journal over to the next generation and so we are soon to announce some significant changes to this journal. These will include a new editor, new publishing schedule, different forms of media, and a burst of younger generational contributions. There are, however, some things that won't change. This journal will continue to be the place to stay in touch with the latest ideas and developments in narrative practice and it will continue to approach publishing with a particular ethic and politic. This includes a transparent review process and care with the politics of representation:

> *We want people to have a chance to represent their own experience in the writings rather than authors representing the experiences of others. At the very least this means that, wherever appropriate, anyone referred to in the writings has a chance to read and reflect on the ways in which they have been represented.*

We believe the politics and ethics of publishing are just as important as ethical/political considerations within the counselling room or in community work.

Thank you dear reader for your continuing interest in the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Thank you also to the contributors of papers in this particular issue. We look forward to your feedback.

With warmth,
Cheryl White

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Resisting the cycle of apocalyptic overwhelm:

Exploring place, spiritualities and acts of resistance in the face of climate crisis

by Chelsea Size



Chelsea Size is a narrative practitioner and ordained deacon in the Uniting Church of Australia. She lives on Kaurna Country in South Australia and is currently working as a spiritual care chaplain in aged care. Chelsea is committed to climate activism and is curious about how the sharing of resonant stories, connection to place and insider knowledges can encourage wider contribution to the climate movement. chelseasize@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper considers the confronting existential realities of the climate crisis and ways in which narrative practices can be used to help resist overwhelm and sustain climate activism. Recognising that stories shape our lives and the life of our planetary home, the paper examines both broad systemic issues and the everyday effects of living in a time of climate crisis. Recognition is given to modern/colonial ways of being and anti-colonial practices. Narrative questions are offered in connection to three themes: place, spiritualities and acts of resistance. The paper documents rich stories, insider knowledges and skills of living to invite further exploration of collective practice to respond to the climate crisis in urgent and significant ways.

Key words: climate crisis; climate grief; climate anxiety; ecological grief; solastalgia; burnout; activism; place; spirituality; collective practice; narrative practice

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As I go about my daily life, awareness of the climate crisis travels with me everywhere. It lodges in my chest like a knotted ball of overwhelm. I constantly wonder: how do I continue to live my day-to-day life with the knowledge of the present and future dangers of the climate crisis? How do I sustain climate activism alongside the constant juggle of a young family, work and study? And how on Earth do I talk to others about this?

Sally Gillespie (2020, p. 3) noted that 'for many of us … initiating and sustaining conversations about climate crisis is difficult. Sex is an easier dinner table topic than melting glaciers':

> Too often the conversation halts with uneasy jokes about rising sea levels and a quick change of subject. People are left stranded, often not knowing what to think, because of the lack of opportunity to talk freely about the confusions, fears, frustrations and griefs that are a part of the climate crisis territory. (Gillespie, 2020, p. 3)

I wondered how narrative practice might assist individuals and communities to talk about the climate crisis, to examine the 'business as usual' stories that govern the way we live, and to respond in urgent and meaningful ways.

I decided to ask people involved in climate activism about their insider knowledge of resisting overwhelm, pursuing difficult conversations and sustaining climate action. This paper shares stories from conversations with seven activists of diverse backgrounds in relation to gender, class, race, sexual identity and connections to faith traditions. In addition to their reflections, the paper offers questions that were useful in guiding conversations about the broad systemic issues associated with climate change, and the effects of these on people's daily lives.

More than personal: Staring into the climate crisis

> If it doesn't start personal, it does not start. But if it ends personal then it ends. (Pancho Arguelles, as quoted in Denborough, 2008, p. 191).

The climate crisis is pervasive and ongoing. It entails significant uncertainty. We may be forced to grapple with the reality that, as Rebecca Solnit (2021) put it, 'the world as we knew it is coming to an end' (Solnit, 2021). The stories we tell ourselves at this moment in history could have profound existential effects for the health of our planetary home and the future of life for all species (Conyer, 2019; Gillespie, 2020).

While this paper draws on activists' personal experiences, the climate crisis and our response to it cannot be relegated to the personal. It is important to resist the individualisation of the climate crisis and continually ask how we might contribute to 'social movement' (Denborough, 2008, 2019). How can narrative practitioners work alongside communities and individuals to resist despair and support action?

To stare into and examine the climate crisis is to question the systems and discourses that our whole Western society is built on. Narrative practices responding to the climate crisis are inherently political practices. Liberal Seburikoko, a narrative practitioner from Rwanda, reminds us that 'the effects of climate change encroach far more on some communities than others, with direct and profound implications for people's lives, livelihoods and opportunities for continued subsistence' (Seburikoko, 2020, p. 11). As a narrative practitioner located within the dominant culture in Australia, it has been important that I am aware of how my way of life has been enabled by policies and practices of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism. Suša et al. (2022) identified four structural elements of this 'modern/colonial' way of being:

- 'the denial of the limits of the planet'
- the denial of the 'systemic violence' that underpins our current way of life
- the denial of our interconnectedness with each other and all living things
- 'the denial of the magnitude of the problems that we face' (Suša et al., 2022, p. 161).

Climate crisis affects us all. It is also important to remember that it has impacted and will continue to impact communities that are marginalised far more than others.

When the safe riverbank feels flooded

While exploring the multifaceted and distressing problems that are connected with the climate crisis with the seven activists, I drew on narrative practices to ensure the conversations did not contribute to an increased sense of overwhelm or despair. Narrative

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practitioners who are working with communities and individuals who are worried about the threats of the climate emergency have found a number of ways to co-create a 'safe-territory of identity' or 'riverbank position' from which to have conversations. Safe territories of identity are places to stand and tell stories of difficulty or trauma without being re-traumatised or 'swept along by the current' (White, 2006, p. 89). When considering how I might create such places of safety in our conversations, I was drawn to further consider the 'riverbank' metaphor.[1] With crippling flooding happening in Australia, Pakistan and around the world, I wondered: What kinds of narrative conversations might help develop strong stories (Drahm-Butler, 2015) when the safe 'riverbank' feels *flooded?*

I had noticed that each of the published articles concerning narrative therapy and the climate crisis uses nature metaphors and connection to place and plants. Elizabeth Nicholas (2021) explored the forest aspect of the Tree of Life process to sustain and nourish climate activism. Beata Makarusanga (2020) used culturally resonant gardening metaphors to elicit cultural practices and local knowledge that could be applied to the care of children and their caregivers culturally resonant gardening metaphors to elicit cultural practices and local knowledge that could be applied to the care of children and their caregivers. She wrote: 'gardening offered many rich metaphors which people took up in creative ways, not only to describe their experiences, but also to connect with their treasured values ... it provided a shared language and foster[ed] connection' (Makarusanga, 2020, p. 9). Similarly, Liberal Seburikoko (2020) used the metaphor of kitchen gardens to work with children and their families experiencing severe drought. Alongside this, Seburikoko (2020) and the rural farming community enabled contribution and social action through regenerative agricultural practices such as enhancing soil health, agroforestry and climate resilience.

The climate crisis is an extension of stories, systems, actions and ways of life that necessitate an active forgetfulness of humanity's interdependence with the Earth and all living things. In consideration of the ways that narrative practitioners are working with communities around the world, it made sense that my work would also come back to this ancient wisdom about place.

Place of sustenance conversations

Drawing inspiration from these stories of practice (Makarusanga, 2020; Nicholas, 2021; Seburikoko, 2020), I began to explore ways in which conversations about a 'place of sustenance' (Trudinger, 2006) might help to develop safe territories of identity. From this grounding, I hoped that conversations might thicken alternative stories and encourage the resistance of colonising and neoliberal individualistic discourses. Mark Trudinger (2006) observed that:

> Generally [in narrative therapy], such explorations of place are uncommon. In contrast, metaphors related to place are often used in narrative practice … But the relationship to place itself to identity is not often explored. The 'territories of life' are usually metaphorical, not literal; we have re-engagements with history but not re-engagements with place. (Trudinger, 2006, p. 12)

In these conversations about connections to place, I wanted to remain accountable and committed to anti-colonial practices and stories. Aunty (Reverend, Doctor!) Denise Champion reminded me that the land is multi-storied too. In her book *Yarta Wandatha,* Aunty Denise wrote:

> I always say Australia is like one gigantic storybook. There's a story in every part of the land and sky and sea. When we, as Adnyamathanha, gather and tell our stories we always say yarta wandatha – the land is speaking. We also say yarta wandatha ikandadnha. The people are speaking as if the land is speaking. So, the land is speaking to us and through us in these stories. There's a oneness there … We are not separated from the land our mother. (Champion, 2014, p. 19)

I wondered what might be made possible if we explored rich stories that give room for the land to 'speak to us and through us' (Champion, 2014, p. 19).

Stories of place have shaped the way I see and understand the land, sky and waters that make up this planetary home of ours. I grew up on the land of the Barngarla people, on a farm on what is now known as the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. My early identity stories and the way I saw the world were shaped through my settler-coloniser ancestry (mostly English and Scottish) and the rural farming community in which I lived. Growing up, I did not participate in or overhear any conversations in which families asked whose

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land they had taken or about the ongoing impacts of clearing land and broad acre farming. Stories from my evangelical Christian family and community had me wondering whether we as humans were here to 'subdue' or 'steward' creation – or perhaps something else?

Weaving alongside these two dominant stories (among many other discourses) was an alternative story thread, which can be traced back to my dad. Dad introduced me to the practice and attitude of wonder and curiosity. My brothers and I shared the thrilling experience of being drawn into Dad's plans to put a nest box on top of the local grain silo to encourage the peregrine falcons to lay their eggs (and they did!). I grew flowers with Dad and arranged freesias, stocks and roses for our kitchen table. We raised chickens together, and camped among the emus, kangaroos and wedged tailed eagles in a local patch of scrub that, wondrously, Dad called 'Secret Valley'. All the while, I was caught up in the practice of curiosity and wonder, which led to a sense of interconnection with the natural world. If I was going to trace back my connection with both climate activism and narrative practice, it would be to here.

The place of sustenance questions that I used within my project were adapted from Trudinger (2006), Denborough (2019) and Freeman (2019).

- Can you tell me about a place in nature where you have experienced sustenance in your life? (It might be from growing up or more recently)
- Can you describe this place to me – the colours, sounds, textures?
- What would I notice if you took me there? (Plants? Creatures? Something else?)
- Can you tell me more about how you experience this place in your body?
- I am wondering about your relationship with this place. When did you first go there? How were you introduced?
- Has your relationship with this place changed over time?
- Is this a place that you revisit in person or are there ways in which you take this place with you?
- Do you hold this place with you in a particular way? As a picture? Feeling? Sensation? Memory?
- If this place could have a conversation with you now, what do you think the place might say?
- Are there things that this place has helped you keep in touch with that might not have been possible otherwise? Maybe possibilities, wishes or hopes for your life?
- I am wondering about the ways that this place continues to influence you and the way you see yourself, others or the world?
- Are there particular things that this place has taught you? Or ideas in society that this place might help you re-think?
- What is it like for you to reconnect with or remember this place?
- How might this place assist you in some of the situations you are currently experiencing?

The following conversation emerged when exploring some of these questions with Dani.[2]

Chelsea: What did you notice when you were outside? What made an impact on you?

Dani: Well, probably the one that really got me, and that actually got me into [my life's work with] salt marshes, was in northern France. There's an area along the coast that is all salt marshes, but they're not salt marshes like ours here; they're salt marshes with grass. It's called rice grass, or *Spartina*, and it does this in the wind [motions with her hands]. It looks like ripples, like the sea, when you're looking at it.

I was not much more than about two and a half, my father informs me, because that's when we were there. I can remember the grass all rippling in the salt marsh. And there were skeins of geese flying over, heading south to Africa, which they do every year. And it just stuck with me. I knew that I was never going to get out of the mud!

Chelsea: I'm wondering, that landscape in northern France, was that something that would visit you? Did you hold that picture in your mind?

Dani: It's always with me, and I hadn't realised until we came to Australia, but I actually navigate by plants … I actually recognise all the plants and where they grow, and I carry them with me. When I travel, I write about the different habitats that we are passing through. Drives [my husband] up the wall actually!

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Chelsea: I'm wondering what you think it is about navigating by plants, or carrying them with you, that might tell you about what you find sustaining or enriching?

Dani: It's the mystery of it. It's the realisation that I actually know very little about why things are where they are, and how the plant community and the animal community are interacting. There's a whole world going on in that little, tiny patch of green outside the window of your car as you go past that you know nothing about.

Chelsea: Holding these plants, taking them with you, documenting them and holding that mystery, how does it impact the way you see yourself in the world and others? Does something come to mind?

Dani: Yeah, that's an interesting one. The plants help me understand what I'm looking at and where I am in the world. They keep me well and truly grounded. I mean, plants survive in the most amazing places and the most amazing habitats that they feel perfectly comfortable in, even though we don't necessarily.

Problem stories and deconstructing conversations

Questions about places of sustenance provided a rich start to our conversations. Following this, externalising questions were important to consider both the broad, systemic problems of the climate crisis, and also the effects of these in the person's day-to-day life. This also provided opportunities to deconstruct discourses connected with the climate crisis. As Nicholas (2021, p. 7) highlighted: 'the externalisation of problems has a political dimension, and seeks to demystify and deconstruct the ways that external discourses operate in the realms of personal lives'. Externalising conversations also enabled rich double story developments through the use of landscape of action and landscape of identity questions.

Some of the externalising and deconstruction questions I used were:

- Can you tell me a bit more about your experience of living in a time of climate crisis? What types of problems might you encounter day to day in relation to climate change? If you could give them a name, what would you call them?
- I am wondering if you could tell me more about the taken-for-granted stories you grew up with about the natural world/Earth/the environment?
- What impact did these stories have on the way you saw the natural world?
- What is your position on these stores? Were they negative, positive or something in between?
- Can you tell me about what led up to you changing the way you saw the world?
- What impact did this make on the way you moved through the world?
- Did it have you noticing different things or thinking in different ways?
- What might this say about your values, hopes or wishes in your relationship with Earth and all living things?

In my conversation with Kate, we used these questions to explore a personal and particular problem in relation to her whole-of-life engagement in climate activism.

Chelsea: Do you find that the 'feeling crazy' experience gets in the way of you sustaining your activism or are there other types of problems that affect you on the personal level as you try to maintain your activism?

Kate: I find it really hard to negotiate relationships with people who don't understand how much they don't understand. I've chosen to participate in [direct action climate activism] and my family are very conservative. They believe that I'm wasting my life. The numerous conversations I've had with my dad, who constantly asks me the question: do you think what you are doing is 'effective'?

I mean, I'm from the school of 'sitting on the couch watching the TV' would be even less effective than anything I am actively doing! So, the jury's out on whether what I'm doing is more 'effective' than anything else I could be doing. There is no meter I can consult to make sure that I'm being effective.

I'm doing the things that I think are mine to do, like most people. I'm doing things in my day-to-day life: composting, guerrilla gardening, et cetera, et cetera. And I'm

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doing things in the banal activism kind of way. Like signing petitions online. I'm doing a whole lot of things. I'm writing letters to politicians. I'm not convinced that they are effective, but they're not hard to do, and I'm prepared to do them. And then I'm also doing civil disobedience because I do not know how else we can break through on the need for people to understand the seriousness of the situation and the urgency of the need to respond.

Chelsea: It's interesting that the question your dad poses is around 'effectiveness'. It makes me think about cultural ideas about what effective is – what's the story underneath what is deemed 'effective'?

Kate: My dad's bringing capitalism and entrepreneurialism to the table, and asking for an economic rationalist assessment of my activities. And I mean, I want my activities to be impactful. And even assessing that is quite difficult. Social change is just not a straight line from cause to effect. I've studied a lot of social change movements in an attempt to make myself more impactful as an activist, but that does not mean that I have some kind of crystal ball capacity to figure whether what I'm doing is effective.

One of the things I find a little bit heartbreaking is those situations like talking to my brother-in-law, who really is a climate denier. He won't come out and say so, but I think that he is, based on the things that he says. Every so often we've come up with a kind of détente. We don't talk about it. And my partner and I rehearse conversations that could keep us from getting on to the rocky shores of family conflict.

Chelsea: I wonder what might be some of the effects of the 'rocky shores of family conflict' on the way you see yourself and the world?

Kate: That I feel heartbroken. That I feel distressed. I know more about the science than they do because I've read the science. I've now taken to just saying: 'I know you are a highly intelligent person and I know that you are capable of understanding this issue. I've read the science and I invite you to do the same thing, and here's where you can find it.' That there's a consensus of the world's scientists and it's available. The UN has published it. It's not complicated. I don't know what it would take to break through there. Quite possibly, I just need to burst into tears in the middle of one of these conversations.

Spiritualities of the surface

In my work alongside communities of faith as well as through my climate activism, I get many rich opportunities to connect with people of diverse faith traditions, spiritualities and none. Through this, I have become interested in ways in which spirituality is expressed through people's connection with climate activism. Griffith and Griffith (2003) highlight the possibilities that can come from conversations that hold space for exploring connections with faith and spirituality. Therapists have the opportunity to:

> speak about spirituality with those persons for whom it is culturally appropriate and relevant, and [to] not speak about it when it is not appropriate or not their desire … to be receptive to the varied presentations of spiritual and religious life, to be discerning of those times when it becomes a destructive force, and to be responsive in ways that honour and strengthen the circles of community, tradition and faith that sustain and connect. (Griffith & Griffith, 2003, p. ix)

It was important to make room for multi-storied reflections on the ways in which faith may have been sustaining and also times when religious doctrines had been a part of fostering 'hegemonic domination by humans over the natural world' (Conyer, 2019, p. 6). I was interested in having narrative conversations that explored embodied practices of spirituality and faith and avoided getting caught in discussion of disembodied ideas or theological doctrines. It was important to respect the diversity of people's theologies, which may include meaningful connection with essentialist understandings of the self and truth. With a posture of respect and curiosity, my narrative questions continued to provide opportunities to explore identities, experiences and society through a poststructuralist lens. This built on Michael White's interest in what he called, the 'spiritualities of the surface'. He wrote:

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> I am more interested in what might be called the material versions of spirituality. Perhaps we would call these the *spiritualities of the surface ...* This is a form of spirituality that relates not to the non-material, but to the tangible … The notion of spirituality that I am relating to is one that makes it possible for me to see and to appreciate the visible in people's lives, not the invisible. (White, 2000, p. 132)

I developed the following questions to invite exploration of stories connected with faith and spirituality:

- I am wondering if there are stories, rituals, scriptures or people connected to your faith tradition or spirituality that have affected the way you see Earth or nature?
- Did these move you towards the natural world? Away from it? Or move you in another way altogether?
- What were the effects of these stories on your life and your relationship with Earth? Were they positive, negative, neutral or something else?
- Can you tell me more about the values/hopes/dreams that might connect with these sacred or important stories?
- In what way have these stories influenced your climate activism?

In conversation with Amelia, we traced the history of the connection between her faith tradition and her respect for all living beings. As a young child, Amelia lived in Kuala Lumpur. She told me this story:

> There is one clear moment in Kuala Lumpur when I'm riding a tricycle all around our little driveway. And Ah Lam said, 'Amelia, Amelia, what are you doing?'
>
> And I said, 'I'm riding my tricycle'.
>
> And he said: 'No, no. Come look.'
>
> And I'd been riding all over an ant line, all over an ant trail. And there were just dead and dying ants everywhere, because I'd been riding all over them on my tricycle and just not even thinking. And I was so heartbroken and shocked. It really had a deep impact. I would've been six.
>
> And I think that has been at the core of my connection to the Mahayana Buddhist faith: may all living beings be free of pain and suffering. At the core of my climate grief is that impact on other species and ecosystems and the heavy footprint of humanity.

Buhjah, after describing the small everyday practices that sustain her activism, made connections with the faith principle of moderation:

Chelsea: At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned the Islamic principle of 'moderation'. I am wondering if there are connection points between the principle of moderation and the simplicity of your engagement and connections with your cat, surfing and camping? And what might you call that value?

Buhjah: I think so, definitely. I guess the principle of moderation in Islam can be looked at from many different ways, right? The way I apply it to my activism, I see in broadly three different ways. One is in terms of consumption and prioritising relationships and experiences over stuff and buying things. So something like camping or surfing is great because you can have your gear and you can use it over and over again and just keep chipping away at something that's fun and you just keep improving yourself.

And then another way that moderation applies to activism is being moderate in my public-facing actions. Because I feel like when people adhere too strongly to ideology, that's when things start to get quite extreme and that's alienating. I think that whole 'angry activist' thing— I guess I'm not in a position to be that person, even though I do experience anger and frustration. The outlet for that is not what I say in public on behalf of the campaign or the [climate group I am a part of].

And then the third way that moderation is a good principle for me is to value incremental progress and to be able to sustain the work for the long haul. We've got a long fight ahead of us, and I don't want to burn out years into doing the work. There's a lot that I want to do, and I just have to be smart about how I approach the work. Moderation is working quite well for me for the time being.

Conversations around dominant discourses and structures of power were also kept alive during our conversation.

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Chelsea: Who introduced you to that principle of moderation? Was that something that you grew up learning about? Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Buhjah: I guess it's just one of those like principles or moral teachings from prophets and scripture and other religious sources that people accept in theory, but don't imbue in practice. And I don't know if there's any one person or one teaching in particular that made me latch on to the concept of moderation.

One thing that I thought a lot about as a young woman was the idea of modesty. It's well known that Muslims are expected to dress modestly. And I think that's fine, that makes a lot of sense. But the focus on modest dress is almost always on women: this over-policing of women's dress and how we portray ourselves in public. I started questioning that and feeling that the application of modesty should be wider than just what women wear! I think it's absurd. It's of no consequence what a person chooses to wear on the collective morality, or whatever it is that people want to pin it to. So I decided not to wear the hijab but to practice moderation in other ways.

Chelsea: It sounds like perhaps you are resisting ways in which teaching can remain disembodied and not applied to our lives? What is it like to trace these connections or dots across the whole conversation in the way that you have been living out broader interpretations of the principle of modesty?

Buhjah: It's something that I guess I've more recently been verbally exploring in this deliberate and emergent way. I've also been thinking about it and speaking to my Muslim friends. We don't feel particularly welcome at Mosques because in diaspora politics there's toxic patriarchy and all that kind of fun stuff. We still want to have a spiritual practice and worship is still important, but how do we seek to fulfil those needs in our way, in a way that feels authentic to ourselves?

And so, I do think that working in climate is a form of worship. I may not pray enough times a day, but I approach climate work from the point of view of meeting the calls from God and from the Prophet to look after the environment and stand up for justice. And all those kinds of lofty principles! I find that working in climate is a way that I can try to work towards that sort of higher calling.

Epiphanies of the ordinary

Within the conversations that I had with activists, there were so many examples of rich double-storied accounts of skills of living, resisting overwhelm and maintaining climate activism. Bruner (1986, p. 13) talked about James Joyce's view of the 'particularities' of our stories as 'epiphanies of the ordinary'. This phrase felt resonant as I gathered and documented stories of everyday acts of resistance.

The following is a small collection of 'epiphanies of the ordinary' or insider knowledges that different activists shared with me. These tell of the diverse daily ways in which activists resist overwhelm and maintain their contributions to social action in the face of the climate crisis.

There's something about making, even if it is just toast

We were part of the pandemic sourdough mob! We started making bread and now actually we make better bread than we can buy. There's something in just enjoying that. There's something about creating. It's a making thing that is so satisfying. I fold paper cranes as a thing that I can do with my hands. It doesn't require any thought. I can do it in a meeting. It keeps me focused. It is the making and creation that is a little bit soothing. And it's like, 'Oh look, I've done this, and if nothing else today, I've folded 60 paper cranes!' There's something about modelling that and inviting people in. It's so satisfying to be able to create something for yourself and for other people, even if it is toast!

The tonic of just being there

There are different things that I do to give my brain a break from thinking too much or from wanting to project so far into the future or wanting to tackle big, complex problems. It is like forcing the brain and your attention to do things that are very immediate and help give you some sort of a break. When I am surfing, I think 'I'm going to catch a wave. There's one coming. Where do I need to be to position myself so that I can catch it?' When I am camping, I am asking 'Is this spot flat enough for us to sleep on tonight? Can we have a

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fire? Where can we find wood? What are we having for dinner?' It's such a lovely tonic to not just think about how everything that's crap is interconnected. You're only one person with a limited amount of time and resources – you can't fix everything. And so, I guess it's just what I can try to do to keep myself going for the long run.

The practice of plain speaking in life and science

Plain speaking is a Quaker thing. I blame the Quakers for my bluntness. It *is* actually a skill. There's a lot of things that plain speaking allows you to do. It allows you to actually name the stuff that's bothering you without getting aggressive about it. It allows you, right up front, to clarify where the non-negotiables are. It comes down to integrity and honesty.

I use plain speaking a lot in science because I talk to people about systems. The downside from a scientific point of view is that scientists who don't know me make an assumption that I don't know. Those scientists who've known me all my life, they obviously know.

There is a similar problem with publication. We are taught in science to publish in the third person. As a scientist, I push back against that. As a scientist, you bring yourself to the observations you make, and you can change something just by looking at it. And yet for publishing, it's all as if you weren't even there. When you read the early scientific work of Darwin and all the rest, they are right in there! Their writing is so alive, so present. You can read it as bedtime reading! What we've done with publication now is that people try to pull themselves back from the science so much. And I refuse to do that. I've frequently got papers back that said, 'You have to remove yourself from here. This is not scientific writing'. I always argue with the editors and say: when people make an atom bomb, they need to say, 'I did this. I did that'. Not 'the bomb did this'. You have to take responsibility and that means that you have to put yourself into the writing. An ongoing discussion in science is whether or not we've gone too far into removing ourselves from the data.

A conversation between the feminist movement and the climate movement

I think the feminist movement and the climate movement have to get together and have a conversation. I just wrote a song last week which asks 'Which side are you on?' Because with feminism, it was all or nothing (at that time, not now). There was absolute urgency! Now there *is* an urgency in climate change, but people are different. With climate change, it's overwhelming because it's not that tangible in every day. I know it gets a bit hot and a bit cold, but if I lived in Lismore and had three floods then it would hit me. And the women's movement hit us there every day. Like *you always gave yourself the burnt chop and the husband got the good chop*. And the husband got the best, then the kids, and then mum. And so it was very tangible every day to the smallest little detail. Climate change is in the abstract because it's not every minute of the day. When you have a bad day or the weather's different, then you think, *Oh God, this is scary*. But then you can put it away because the next day's perfect.

I don't read the news

I don't read the news. I accept that we are in a climate catastrophe. I'm not effective if I look at all of the things that are hard in the world, so I have pretty strong filters around what I see.

Creating space and time containers

After one friend in particular died, I was given a little tealight candle when I left the funeral. And for a long time afterwards, I would light that candle and recite the little Leunig poem that was handed out with the candle and maybe have a few tears. And then blow out the candle and go to bed. It was sort of like creating a little space and time container for leaking out some of that grief. Over time I've just noticed some things about the way that I grieve.

When my partner and I walked through France, then went to Rome and to parts of Greece, we encountered visual reminders about the suffering of Jesus at every turn, presumably from preliterate times. These reminders were literally everywhere, and I was both confronted, horrified really, and also fascinated by that. One of the things I thought about it was, if so many people in so many places over such long periods of historic time have needed everyday reminders of these things that are deep and significant in their lives, what makes me different? Why would I think that I don't need that? And when we got back, I began to try and figure out, well, what would be helpful?

I've gone through various different iterations: thinking about the earth that I'm standing on. The qualities of the earth and the fact that the earth here is Kaurna land and that it's been stolen. Thinking about water and it being a requirement for life. Thinking about life being fragile and diverse and all around me and wanting to take action in the defence of life and to do so with others. I would go out on my run or walk or whatever, stop in a place near water and just, if there were no

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people around, I'd say it out loud. It has changed and developed over time. It is really about revisiting what is essential. The water cycle, air and atmosphere, these things bring together all non-human life with all human life. This turned out to be another container. Sometimes I would just have a few tears there or just feel some feelings. And at the end of that I would always commit to taking action, with others!

These practices are not just expression. They are iterative and they're intentional. What I'm trying to do is I am trying to *remember*. I think it's quite hard. One of the reasons I think other people find it harder to persist is because they're not able to remember why persistence is important. They can't remember. They can't hold on to *Why am I doing this?* I practice not running my life according to my emotion and not giving in to overwhelm.

The importance of the collective

> History does not finish with us, it goes beyond. (Freire, 1999, p. 39)

These interviews were underpinned by the principles of collective practice (Denborough, 2008). In an early conversation with an experienced activist, she reminded me of the importance of giving the stories back to the community. We considered a number of questions that continue to inform the ongoing development of this work:

- What happens once the initial conversations finish?
- How can we ground the work in something tangible that moves beyond the individual?
- How could a project be developed that does not just sit on a shelf?
- How could the ideas be connected to a collective and contribute to local action and social movement?

Denborough (2019, p. 211) suggested that we need to develop a framework by which to reflect on our work and to explore the ways our work might diminish or enlarge possibilities for social action and contribution. Many of the activists who shared their stories with me told of the influence of other social movements on their sense of identity (Denborough, 2019, p. 199). Our conversations traced the history of the impact of social movements (including feminist, queer and anti-war movements) on the activists' lives, hopes and how they have shaped their climate activism. I hope that further conversations will continue to explore learnings and knowledges from these movements and how they might speak to climate activism.

This work is, without a doubt, something ongoing. The acts of resistance and responses collected in the 'epiphanies of the ordinary' section above, alongside other stories from these conversations, will form the beginnings of a 'living' collective document that can support wider engagement with and contribution to the climate movement. I began with double listening to rich stories from individual activists, and now hope to move beyond the personal into the communal to support both local action and a wider climate movement. In the face of the severity of the climate crisis, collective practice has to be foundational to our therapeutic response as '[t]he current privileging of individualised models of care will leave far too many people without support' (Conyer, 2019, p. 10).

There are still not yet a handful of published journal articles that explore the use of narrative practice in response to the problems connected with climate crisis (Makarusanga, 2020; Nicholas, 2021; Seburikoko, 2020). Whether the research is published or not, the scale of the climate crisis means that narrative practitioners across the globe have the opportunity to show up in these conversations and contribute to the communities they live in through innovative forms of practice and togetherness.

Conclusion

> We will be coming to terms with the urgent realities of our climate crisis for the rest of our lives. We all need to get comfortable with this fact – in a very uncomfortable way. (Shugarman, 2020, p. 1)

There are rich stories from all around the world of people and communities engaging in creative acts of resistance and care in the face of the climate crisis. I am incredibly grateful to the seven activists who shared with me sparkling and difficult stories of their lives and their resistance to what I came to call the 'cycle of apocalyptic overwhelm'. It is uncomfortable, confronting, personal–political (Hanisch, 2006) work for us all. The sharing of stories and direct climate action has made this work more bearable and the possibilities brighter (Bendell & Read, 2022). The community of care, the sharing of insider knowledges and solidarity with communities of climate action has been like a raft for me to cling to when my 'safe riverbank' feels flooded.

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Notes

[1] The riverbank metaphor was first offered to Michael White by Caleb Wakhungu in Zimbabwe (Denborough, 2019, p. 201).

[2] All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

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To leave or not to leave:

Stories of migration from Hong Kong

by Ng Joyce

Joyce cherishes her identity as a Hongkonger. She is keen to explore ways to bring in narrative ideas in her work setting. She is also passionate about using collective narrative practices to work with communities in the local context and abroad. Joyce can be contacted c/- Dulwich Centre, email: dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au

Abstract

Michael White described therapy as 'joining with people around issues that are particularly relevant and pressing to them'. At the moment, considerations about staying or leaving are on the minds of a lot of people in Hong Kong. This paper seeks to demonstrate the application of narrative practice in supporting people to respond to the challenges associated with leaving the land we call home. It addresses different moments in the migration experience, from making the decision and preparing for departure, to finding ways to maintain connection with people and places when separated by distance. The skills and knowledge that participants developed through each of these stages were recorded in a series of collective documents that tell a different story about the resilience of Hongkongers during this period in history, and their eagerness to contribute to others experiencing similar predicaments.

Key words: Hong Kong; migration; place; collective documents; narrative practice

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To leave or not to leave?

This has been a lingering question for Hongkongers for decades. To a certain extent, the decision might be seen as a vote of confidence, or lack thereof, in the future of the city.

In the decade before the handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China in 1997, more than half a million Hong Kong residents left the city (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2003). Many of those who remained resident in Hong Kong held foreign passports or visas, keeping open the option to leave, though they might not have disclosed such possessions (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2003).

Many years ago, on my very first day of school, I remember seeing a stack of passports in different colours on the teacher's desk: British and British National (Overseas) passports in burgundy, United States passports in green or blue, Canadian passports in navy. I lost count of how many times friends told me that they would be moving abroad by the end of the school term. Some might be separated from one or both of their parents, who would become 'tai hung yan' (astronauts): 'settling their families abroad but continuing to work in Hong Kong, flying back and forth as often as possible' (Murphy, 1991). When I travelled abroad during the summer holidays, I saw the look of confusion on the face of the local guide who found it very hard to understand why he was returning passports issued by different countries to the same Hong Kong family.

Hongkongers are indeed no strangers to emigration, separation and farewell. However, if we were asked few years ago – after the handover in 1997 and before the social movement in 2019 or the earlier umbrella movement in 2014 – whether we expected to be at that crossroads of choosing to stay or to leave, and whether we expected to see another wave of mass emigration, many of us would have shaken our heads 'no'. But that is what is happening right now. Every day, the departure hall of the Hong Kong International Airport is filled with people queuing at the check-in counter with a one-way ticket.

Michael White described 'therapy' as having 'to do with joining with people around issues that are particularly relevant and pressing to them' (2016, p. 205). The work described in this paper drew on the potential of narrative practice to respond to pressing issues relating to migration in the context of the present time in Hong Kong. The paper documents the stories of 10 individuals from Hong Kong, aged from 24 to 69. Some were already living abroad, some had booked a ticket and were preparing to leave, and some were deliberating whether to stay or go. Whatever their position in the migration process, I sought to surface the skills, knowledge, beliefs, values, hopes and dreams embedded in their experience. What started off as highly personal stories evolved into a series of collective documents that the participants and I hope might contribute to others facing similar dilemmas or challenges.

With those in power endeavouring to tell the world the 'good stories' of Hong Kong ("Strategies to tell HK's good stories", 2022) as if everything were on the right track, it is especially important to listen to silenced voices in the community, and to archive the local stories of Hongkongers on the ground.

Welcome and safety

I had a long-standing relationship with each of the participants, so 'social yarning' (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) – informal and unstructured chat before discussing the topic at hand – was a great way to reconnect and warm up to a more serious conversation. This was also the ideal time to attend to relations of power and to structure safety (Christensen, 2022).

Instead of positioning myself as an interviewer, I tried to extend my welcome as the host of a conversation, someone who would initiate the discussion while emphasising that we were equal partners in the 'collaborative yarning' that would follow. I explained that we might 'exchange skills and knowledge', 'co-create documents to keep these knowledges close and to share them with others' and 'collaborate with others to provide witness to preferred identity stories' (Christensen, 2022, p. 3).

I was aware of the risk of making assumptions based on our common background and shared experiences. I often checked in with the person to see if I had understood them adequately and accurately. Occasionally, participants would expect me to put pieces together or fill in gaps for them. They said things like 'you know how it is for me' or 'it's just like the old days', or used nonverbal expressions like winking and smiling to convey meaning. At these moments I would first acknowledge our relationship and then try to recentre them as the focus of the conversation and elevate their voice by saying, 'I might know or

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I could guess, but I would love to hear more about what popped up in your mind'.

Some participants were hesitant about sharing their stories as they did not think that their experience would be interesting or worthwhile to others (Yim, 2022). This may have had a cultural basis, as many Chinese people are concerned about 'face' (miànzi), which can be roughly translated as concern for reputation and dignity. Therefore, it was important to structure safety, not only during the conversation, but also beyond, for instance in the writing and distribution of collective documents. It was important to be alert to power relations, not only between me and the participant, but also among the participants.

I tried to reduce the pressure by inviting them to update me about their latest thoughts around the topic of emigration, or about recent developments in their life in a foreign land. I reassured them that they could choose to take a break, end the conversation or even withdraw from the project entirely at any point without giving any reason or explanation. As Yim (2022) found, once people were engaged in dialogue, very often stories and memories would emerge organically from the conversation.

The participants were also offered the option to use their real name to acknowledge their contribution, or a pseudonym to protect their identity. Asking about their preferred way of being addressed also contributed to their owning of the narrative (Yim, 2022). I explained that they would be shown drafts of any documents so that they could check the content and indicate if they were comfortable with how their stories were told (Yim, 2022). They were free to suggest any omissions, changes or additions (Marlowe, 2010). Not only were these important steps to take to be accountable to the individuals who generously shared with me their stories, they were also meant to provide some peace of mind for the participants in the current sociopolitical climate. After all, these stories about the current wave of mass migration might not be the 'good stories' that those in power would like to tell the world about Hong Kong.

Making the decision to stay or leave

Instead of diving straight into the deep water of the struggles and dilemmas involved in the decision-making process, and the obstacles and challenges in the migration experience, I enquired about the very first thoughts they had about leaving Hong Kong and residing abroad: 'When did you first come up with the idea of leaving your country?' (Ahmadi, 2021a, p. 7). I believed that asking about their motivations would set the tone for the conversation and emphasise their autonomy and personal agency.

Ahmadi (2021a, p. 7) followed this question by asking: 'What were your hopes and dreams when you thought about needing to find a new home?' However, given that half of the participants were still at the contemplation stage (Tabor & Milfont, 2011), I thought it might be too far a stretch for them to envisage the future and articulate their hopes and dreams in relation to resettlement. Therefore, I adapted the question and asked them: 'What motivated you to consider leaving or staying' or 'What pushed you to consider leaving or staying?' The word choice was intentional, with the first question seeking to bring forward people's personal agency in responding to the motivating factors, and the second one trying to acknowledge circumstances in life, including the sociopolitical contexts that might push people to make a choice.

Sonia's story

'It was like a long-sown seed.' Sonia shared that her thoughts of moving abroad could be traced back to secondary school, when she had noticed how schoolmates changed after experiencing a different education system and a different culture in a foreign country. When prompted to say more about what stood out to her, Sonia described how her peers had expanded their worldviews and became more receptive towards different things in life.

Among many push and pull factors, personal and circumstantial, that had led her to consider leaving Hong Kong, Sonia chose to talk about her concerns in relation to career development. The following conversation was informed by the 'statement of position map number 1' (White, 2007).

Joyce: How would you describe your job in Hong Kong?

Sonia: The work was routine. The longer I stayed in the field, the more I realised it was too narrow.

Joyce: How did that affect you?

Sonia: I had less satisfaction in my work. I felt that there was more that I could do for my service recipients, but I was constrained by the system's work division.

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Joyce: What would you name this problem that you were facing?

Sonia: Stagnation.

Joyce: Were you okay or not okay with stagnation? Why did you feel this way?

Sonia: I disliked the stagnant state. That was why I applied to work abroad. I wanted to have the chance to engage in different services or even work in different settings. I also wished to take more courses, stay abreast of the latest developments and keep growing professionally.

From a decentred position, I offered Sonia space to choose the storyline that she wanted to focus on. I was influential in prompting her to consider possible connections between her first thoughts about living abroad and her recent considerations about career development. Sonia said that the two were connected by a desire to gain a widened perspective – to see things she had not seen before – and a hope for intellectual development, maturity and 'self-transcendence'.

Samantha's story

'It's hard to recall when the thought of moving abroad first popped up. It's been on my mind for few years, ever since my children entered primary school.' Samantha shared that she had been close to her two children when they were in kindergarten, and they always called her 'Mama' sweetly. However, when they entered primary school, assignments and assessments started getting in the way, limiting their quality time together and causing great distress to parent and children alike. Their relationship became strained to a point where the children started to call Samantha 'Bad Mama' and avoided spending their after-school hours with her.

My conversation with Samantha was not about stirring up stressful memories of daily conflicts between her and the children about school-related matters. Rather, it was about revisiting how she detested being positioned as 'Bad Mama', and thickening her preferred identity as a loving mother who was ready to make significant life changes for the sake of her children's wellbeing and personal growth. Since it was apparent that the children held very important membership status in Samantha's club of life (White, 2007), and that her considerations about migration were closely linked to concern about their wellbeing and development, I initiated a re-membering conversation with her. 'Re-membering conversations are not about passive recollection but about purposive reengagements with the history of one's relationships with significant figures and with the identities of one's present life and projected future' (White, 2007. p. 129).

Joyce: What motivated you to move abroad?

Samantha: My kids had dual exceptionalities – superior intelligence and attention difficulties. After I joined different courses to understand their needs, I realised how challenging it was for them to fit into the education system in Hong Kong. It was sad to see them losing interest in learning, and it was heartbreaking to see them in tears before and after school. By moving abroad, I hoped they could have a more enjoyable learning experience, instead of feeling like they were being sent into a battlefield every morning. And I hoped they would have more room to showcase their creativity, instead of being made to fit a standardised mould.

Joyce: If the kids were sitting here and listening to our conversation, what would they appreciate about you? And what might you be pleased about yourself?

Samantha: They would possibly appreciate me understanding them, recognising their uniqueness, valuing their happiness, and believing that they could perform better in an education system that accommodated their learning needs and fit their learning styles. As for me, I am kind of pleased that I believe that the world is much bigger than Hong Kong, and that we can just go out with them to explore and find a different path that allows them to learn, to play and to have a happy childhood.

Samantha's decision to leave Hong Kong did not 'come out of the blue' (White, 2011, p. 32). Questions about 'turning points' can help people organise their experiences and make sense of them as a narrative (Freedman, 2011). Asking curiously about what led up to the decision supported the participants to put their decision under scrutiny and into perspective. As in Sonia's and Samantha's stories, asking about motivation had the potential to open up narrative conversations and thicken preferred stories.

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Collective document 1: Narrative timeline

I was inspired by a number of narrative practitioners who have used documents in work with people dealing with issues of migration. The documents they produced included letters (Dinneen & Denborough, 2004; Perdomo, 2017), timelines, drawings, poems, photographs (Ahmadi, 2021a), and creative forms like a banner (Ahmadi, 2021b), book (Godmaire-Duhaime, et al., 2018) and exhibition of objects (Yim, 2022).

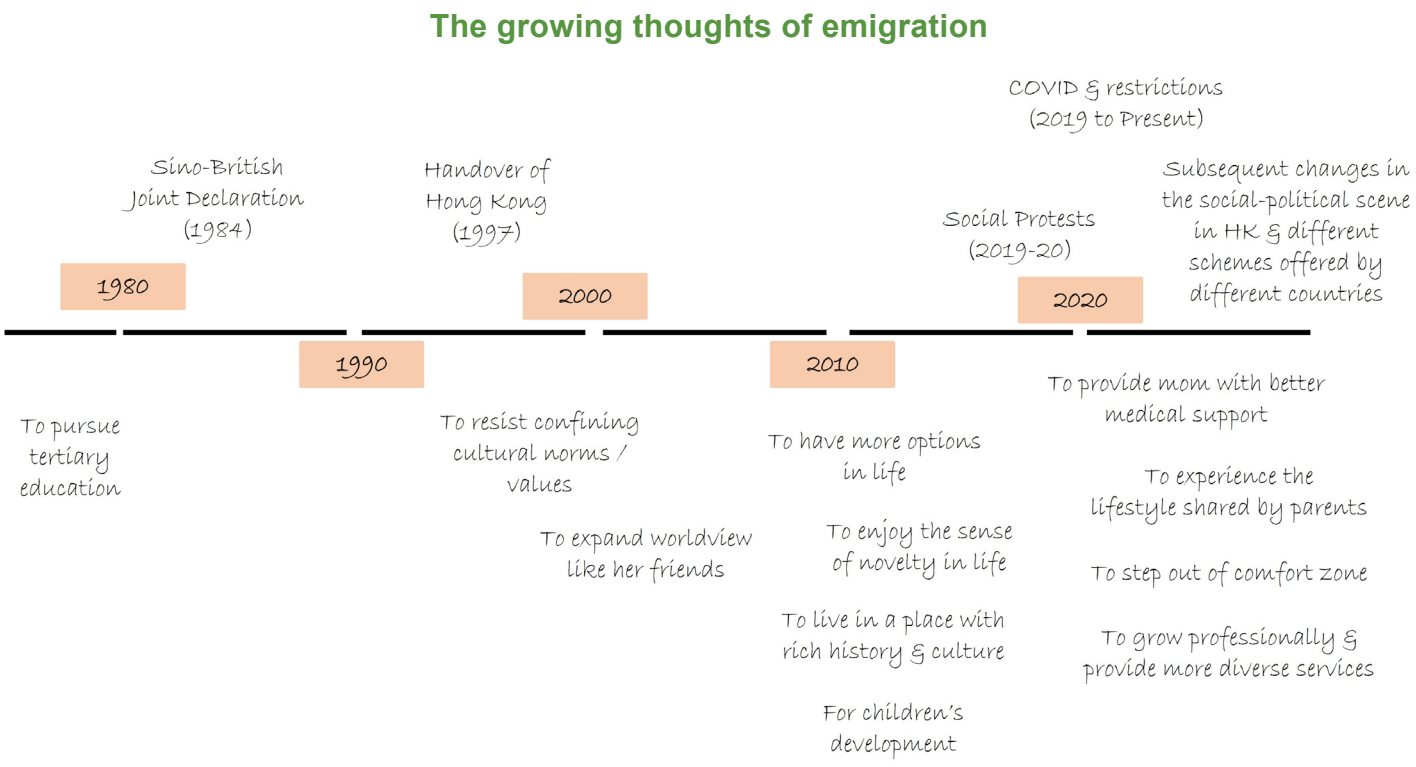
The first collective document that we produced was a narrative timeline that collated participants' first thoughts about moving abroad. It was titled 'The growing thoughts of emigration'. The metaphor was inspired by Sonia saying that the thought of emigration had always been there, like a seed that had been planted much earlier in life but only recently broke through the soil. I shared this idea in subsequent conversations with other participants, and the metaphor was developed to describe three stages of the decision-making process: the long-sown seeds, the recent sprouting and the budding condition.

Because participants' stories existed in a broader context, the upper part of the timeline plotted historical and social events that influenced people's thinking about emigration. Beneath these, personal reasons for considering emigration were documented. Combining people's stories on a collective timeline was an attempt to link the participants' lives and stories in a way that might 'strengthen "unity" while also strengthening "diversity"' (Denborough, 2008, p. 143).

To avoid controversy, the push factors in the sociopolitical context were described in a matter-of-fact way in 'The recent sprouting' section. I would like to invite readers to keep in mind the 'absent-but-implicit' idea in narrative practice (White, 2000) and read between the lines. Implicit in these descriptions were hopes that we wished readers to understand, but decided to leave unwritten in the document.

A language of collectivity was used to turn the gaze away from the individuals, to foster a shared sense among the participants, and to add a layer of sociocentric meaning (Denborough, 2008). I considered using 'we', but it did not seem right because the participants did not share the exact same view on all the details mentioned. Word choices like 'some of us' and 'a few of us' were more fitting, and in the review process, the participants confirmed that they preferred this usage.

The timeline document concluded with an acknowledgment of resettlement schemes. Nearly all of the participants named these as a contributing factor in their decision to stay or leave. These schemes also had a significant influence on the timing of their decision (as there were worries that foreign governments might call off schemes without notice), and the timing of their departure (as there were regulations in relation to arrival time and the duration of stay).



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The long-sown seeds

The idea of moving abroad did not come out of the blue. Most of us began thinking about it long ago.

- When I noticed how confining the cultural norms or values could be, and realised it was hard to fit myself in those existing frames, I began to dream of living abroad after retirement. The very first thought might have popped up when I was in primary school.
  (Siu, in Hong Kong, planning to move to United Kingdom)
- When I heard how studying abroad had opened up a new world for my secondary school friends, I wished to expand my own worldview and widen my horizons.
  (Sonia, in United Kingdom)
- When I joined the overseas exchange program offered by my university and lived abroad for a year, I found that I had the ability to adapt to a new environment, and I realised how much I enjoyed the sense of novelty when living in a foreign place.
  (Alice, in Hong Kong)
- I was painfully aware that the educational system was ill fitting for my children with dual exceptionalities. I knew I needed to provide them with a different learning environment that would allow them to acquire knowledge joyously and shine in their own ways.
  (Samantha, in Scotland)
- When I realised that my work was becoming routine and I was not growing professionally, I looked into the choices that I had in my current work setting, and explored the options I might have in foreign countries.
  (Sonia, in United Kingdom)
- When I reached my late twenties, I reflected on whether I would like to continue on the current path, which was secure but predictable, or explore a new path that might bring more challenges and excitement. I felt like it was now or never to step out of my comfort zone and take some risks.
  (C, in United Kingdom)

The recent sprouting

Recent changes in the sociopolitical scene were significant for some of us.

Some mentioned the social movement of 2019. One of us recalled the shock and anger of seeing the violent attack in Yuen Long railway station on 21 July. A few of us remembered the sadness and helplessness of seeing a vehicle equipped with a water cannon aiming its attack at the students and citizens in the two universities in November. And a few of us shared a sense of gloominess in seeing the closure of various media, the dissolution of civil society groups, and the prolonged detention of citizens before trial.

Some talked about policies put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, like restrictions on the number of people who could gather for wedding ceremonies, funerals and religious observance. Some of us brought up the vaccination requirements to enter premises like elderly homes, schools and restaurants. Some were not comfortable with the ways the policies were formulated, announced and implemented. Some were concerned about how choices, even health-related ones, could be so easily stripped away by policies.

One of us expressed the fear that the bottom line could be pushed indefinitely to a point where we would lose sight of fundamental principles and values that we once cherished.

The budding condition

No matter what our first thoughts of moving abroad were, and no matter what the ultimate triggers were, this question of staying or leaving would not have been on the table without the various resettlement schemes that have been put forward by different countries in recent years.

Preparing for departure

Even though all the participants had their reasons for moving abroad, it was not without struggle that those who had left made the final decision, took all the necessary steps to apply for a visa, and ultimately boarded the plane without changing their mind. Some talked about the anxiety they had about breaking the news to their loved ones. Some talked about their heavy heartedness when bidding farewell to their significant others and to this place that they called home. Some talked about the worries they had about wrapping up their commitments in Hong Kong. Some talked about logistics and practicalities in relation to resettlement. And some talked about the moments of doubt during which they wondered if they had made the right decision and whether life abroad would really be better.

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Keeping in mind the idea of double listening, I listened attentively and tried to elicit an experience-near description of problems while staying alert to possible unique outcomes like small initiatives, skills of living, knowledges of life and positions taken in relation to problems (Westmark et al., 2011).

White (2016) pointed out that 'it is our part to work with people to assist them to identify the extent to which they are knowledged in this quest' and to 'join with people in the exploration of how their knowledges might be expressed in addressing the predicaments that they find themselves in' (2016, p. 205). The followings are some of the questions I asked to discover responses to the stress and uncertainty that preceded departure:

- 'Can you tell me more about the times when the fear is not there?' (Ahmadi, 2021a, p. 8)
- 'Have there been ways in which you … have been able to reduce these effects? If so, how?' (Marlowe, 2010, p. 46)
- 'What have you learnt about yourself that makes you believe you're able to cope with this situation?' (Ahmadi, 2021b, p. 19)
- 'If someone else went through similar experiences to you, what suggestions would you offer them that would be helpful for them?' (Marlowe, 2010, p. 46)

Collective document 2: Tips sheet

The last question, asking the participants to share their hard-won knowledge, was of great significance. When there is a collective purpose involved, it is easier for individuals to speak, even about very difficult things, because the focus shifts away from their individual experience and towards the contribution that they might make to others in similar predicaments (Denborough, 2008). The idea of speaking through me to a wider audience appealed to the participants and led to the production of this 'Last-minute tips sheet' to share with others in a similar situation.

Last-minute tips sheet: The essentials of the new migration 'curriculum'[1]

Part 1: Before departure

Breaking the news

- Be mindful of the timing when you inform your significant others. Think ahead about whether they would prefer to know from the very beginning when you start the application process, or to hear about it when you have a more concrete plan to share.
- Sometimes you might want to share every factor that has contributed to the decision to depart, but sometimes you might want to give just one reason that your significant other might find easier to accept.

Farewells

People

- Prioritise your time. Family comes first. Head home for dinner more often.
- Allow grandparents to spoil their grandkids rotten for a while. It is their way of showing love and care. You might also want to arrange a sleepover to maximise the time they get to spend together.
- Meet up with friends you treasure. You might want to arrange something special and create new memories to be cherished for life.
- Plan and order farewell treats for colleagues well in advance. You are not alone in this wave of migration.

Place

You are not only bidding farewell to people; you are also saying goodbye to this place and everything that smells, tastes and feels like Hong Kong.

- Take the tram on Hong Kong Island. Pass by Causeway Bay.
- Feel the breeze on either side of Victoria Harbour. Or hop on the Star Ferry.
- Give the MacLehose hiking trail a try. Choose a length and difficulty that you are comfortable with. Deviate to Lion Rock if you have never seen it in person.

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- Go to a cha chaan teng and have a Hong Kong-style afternoon tea at 15:15. Order a milk tea, French toast, a pineapple bun or anything that you developed a liking for when you were young.
- Dim sum might be another item to put on your to-eat-list before you depart. No matter how authentic a place looks, and no matter how good the chef is, dim sum just tastes different when it is not prepared in Hong Kong.

Closure

At the workplace (for adults)

- Leave no regrets. Look back and see if there is anything that you always wanted to do. Look ahead to see if there is any final contribution that you can make.
- Inform long-term clients responsibly and service recipients sensitively.
- Wrap up as many tasks as possible. Do the handover systematically.

At school (for kids)

- Discuss with your parents about what contact details you might give your peers. You might design a small notecard for this.
- Prepare an autograph book for your friends to sign and write you a short message.
- You might be invited to give a short goodbye speech on your last day. Give some thought to this and rehearse it at home.

Psychological preparation

- Learn from earlier waves of emigrants. Watch video clips online to see what your destination is like and the cultural dos and don'ts. Engage in some cognitive rehearsal beforehand.
- Don't view the migration experience with rose-tinted glasses. It is not a solution to every problem. Don't romanticise it. There is no promise that life will be better. It is only a doorway[2], a doorway that leads to new experience.
- There will be moments that disappoint or frustrate you. This is part of the package. Be ready for challenges. Be open to changes.

Practicalities

- Reflect on your preferred way of life, whether you want a convenient and vibrant city life or a serene and slow-paced suburban life. Do your research before deciding on a neighbourhood. Don't forget to check out the crime rate in the area.
- Plan in advance if you might need to drive on arrival. The queue to take a driving examination is much longer than before, and it takes time to become eligible to apply for an international driving permit.
- It's not easy to decide what to ship and what not to ship abroad. Start by decluttering. Establish some criteria for yourself. The popular Danshari method (refuse, dispose, detach) might give you some ideas.
- Plan for your pet. Arrange a microchip implant, vaccinations, health certificate, import permit and flight details if your pet will be coming with you. If not, ask around and try your best to find a loving new home for it. Please don't abandon your pet and leave it to fate on streets.

Reframing separation

The participants shared that, among the many things they had on their minds, there was one particular thing that they could not help but keep thinking about: the significant others they had to part from, maybe temporarily, maybe lastingly. They would be separated from their support network at least physically if not relationally.

Athena's story

The various resettlement schemes target different groups of people. Athena had recently obtained a postgraduate qualification, so she was eligible to move to Canada and work in her field. Her husband was trying to apply for internal transfer to his company's headquarters in the United States. Athena's parents had already left Hong Kong and settled in Taiwan, but they were considering moving for a second time to the United Kingdom. Athena's younger sister was still studying at university so she would remain in Hong Kong for a few more years.

When she was asked to give an experience-near description of this situation, Athena paused for a while

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and said that it was like 'fleeing and seeking refuge wherever welcomes us'. When she was asked about the impact of this, she talked about how her significant people would be scattered around the world and how family ties would be broken up. She said, 'None of us knows where we might end up staying, and none of us knows when we might reunite again'. This was a great blow given the collective culture that she was brought up in.

Collective document 3: Map of ties

Noticing that separation from significant others was a common experience among the participants, I felt that there should be a record of this involuntary disruption of people's clubs of life (White, 2007). I tried pinning the participants' respective locations on a world map and calculated their distance from Hong Kong. As I marked down the numbers, I drew lines linking the individuals to their family members. What I saw was not a record of distance, but a 'map of ties' that showed some of the many meaningful and valuable connections across the world that participants had maintained and will maintain. I shared this image with participants in subsequent conversations, and they indicated that they preferred this way of seeing the situation.

Collective document 4: Catalogue of actions

People are never just passive recipients of what life throws at them; they always take steps to respond (White, 2004). To resist 'separation' and hold on to 'cherished ties', we gathered wisdom that participants had about maintaining connection with significant others despite geographical distance.

The list of actions that people might take to stay connected to significant others was originally presented as part of the 'Last-minute tips' document above. However, some of the participants said they did not want to give an impression that they 'knew it all' and they were 'prescribing' actions for others. They did not want to take up an expert position and give out advice. It was decided that a preferable format would be a catalogue containing a list of options that people might choose to take up, with checkboxes that people could tick if they found the ideas fitting and decided to adopt those initiatives. The participants considered this format to be less directive, more engaging and a bit motivational.

Catalogue of actions

Part 1: Staying connected to significant others

- ☐ Just drop them a text message or voice message and await their reply. Don't worry about the time difference. It might just be the energy boost they need.
- ☐ Happiness shared is doubled. Sadness shared is halved. Write a short post or upload photos on a social media platform if you are comfortable to do so.
- ☐ Arrange a video call to see each other 'face-to-face'. Set an agenda for the meeting if there is a lot to update each other about.
- ☐ Do some leisure activities 'together' virtually. With current technology, you could watch a movie or play a boardgame together online.
- ☐ Write letters or greeting cards for festive occasions – the old-fashioned but heart-warming way.
- ☐ Send parcels with decorations and gifts, or order festive food or drinks online and request that the merchant deliver them directly to your loved ones in Hong Kong – just like what you would have done before you moved abroad.

Departure and connection to place

At the time of departure, emigrants are not only bidding farewell to people who are significant to them, they are also bidding farewell to places that hold important memories, with some of them closely linked to their preferred identity stories.

In Chinese, there is a saying that can be loosely translated as 'memories hit when you are back in the scene'. Some participants shared that they would avoid going to certain places before they left the city because they did not want to be flooded with memories that would make their departure even harder. This prompted me to explore whether there might be less stressful ways to revisit memories and acknowledge the contribution that these places had made to their lives (Trudinger, 2006).

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Photo stories

I ended up inviting the participants to consider sharing with me pictures of places that were significant to them, that they had a personal attachment to, or that they considered representative of Hong Kong and would miss visiting after they moved abroad. I explained to those who were hesitant why I thought it would be meaningful to have this conversation, but I also reassured them that it was up to them to take up this invitation or not. I drew on insights from Lee (2017) to adopt a 'decolonial stance' to create space for questions about the question, and to check in with the participants about whether they were willing to try the question or whether they would prefer to move on to something else.

Chan, Ngai and Wong (2012) researched the use of photographs to facilitate narrative conversations, and they found that 'the visual and spatial affordance of photographs can enable the therapist and the protagonist to communicate in ways that cannot be easily achieved with unaided dialogue' (2012, p. 16). For C and Florence, the use of photographs enriched conversations about their loved places in the city and provided additional entry points to preferred stories.

C's story

C provided me a photograph of a Chinese restaurant serving dim sum, which she said had been a significant place for her since childhood. Using questions shared by Denborough (2019, p. 168) for enquiring about a historical place of sustenance, we had the following conversation.

Joyce: What is the history of your relationship with this place? How were you introduced to it? What did you do in this place?

C: I went there on the weekends with my parents throughout my childhood. We had lunch with our core and extended families. We usually chatted through the lunch and kept each other in the loop about what had happened recently in our lives. Since we went there quite frequently, even the waiters recognised us and they would greet us on arrival or stop by to chat a bit if they were not too busy.

Joyce: What is it about this place, and your relationship with it, that has made a difference to your life?

C: It contains a lot of my childhood memories. The staff there and the place itself witnessed my growth. And more importantly, the time we spent there chatting with each other while having tea and dim sum was how we communicated and maintained connection. It was also an act of caring for my parents, grandparents and other seniors.

A conversation that started from a photo of a Chinese restaurant brought forward C's close connection with her family and the importance she placed on spending time with and showing care for seniors. In a subsequent exchange while reviewing the conversation summary, C agreed that this may be a reflection of the value of filial piety in Chinese culture. C shared that she was uneasy about leaving the city without being able to see her grandparent face-to-face one more time because of the restrictions in place due to COVID-19. C did use other methods to keep in touch with her grandparent, but it was not an ideal way of informing her grandparent about such an important life decision, or to say goodbye and bid farewell.

Florence's story

From the photographs Florence sent me, we had conversations with two different focuses, one societal and the other more personal. Here I would like to include an excerpt in which I asked questions shared by Denborough (2019, p. 169) about the 'hazards facing places of sustenance'.

Joyce: Could you describe these two places and share with me the reasons why you chose these pictures?

Florence: The first picture captured a neighbourhood homewares shop. You can see stacks of traditional crockery on the shelves and bamboo baskets dangling from the ceiling. I always walked past it when I headed to my grandparents' place when I was small. It was a testimony to a bygone time – my childhood as well as Hong Kong's past.

The second picture was taken while the 'ding-ding' [tram] I was on passed by the Monster Building – the Yik Cheong Building. When I was not in a rush heading home after work, I often took the tram because I enjoyed the slower pace of life, despite living in a very fast-paced city. I could listen to the sounds of the city, the sound of the tram operating, and feel the night breeze.

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Joyce: It seems to me that these were really meaningful places to you. Are there any hazards or threats now facing these special places? If so, what are these hazards? What effects are these having on the place itself and on those who might visit?

Florence: As you know, Hong Kong is a constantly developing city that doesn't place much emphasis on preserving history or traditional scenery. There is really no guarantee that the homewares shop will still be there when I next come back to Hong Kong. And who knows if trams will disappear one day like the iconic Jumbo Floating Restaurant did?

Joyce: Can you recall a time or times when you have made a contribution to these places? Ways in which you have cared for them, protected them, sustained them?

Florence: I have not thought about this before. Does taking the tram when there are less and less people taking it count? Does it count if I took pictures of the homewares place and posted them on social media platforms with captions introducing it?

When Florence shared the worries she had about not being able to see these two significant places again, she briefly commented on how rapidly change happened in Hong Kong and how little value people placed on preserving things of historical or cultural value. When people's relationships to land and significant places are honoured, it is more likely that they will consider environmental action and preservation (Denborough, 2019). Even though the focus of this part of the conversation inclined towards the macro scene, it was important not to overlook the small lightbulbs here and there about her identity stories, including her appreciation of old ways and items, her cherished relationship with her grandparents, her knowledge of ways to destress after a long working day. These had potential to open conversations about other preferred storylines in her life.

Collective document 5: Collage of memories

We created a collective visual representation of the participants' significant places in Hong Kong, 'weaving together personal narratives to offer a collective account of a community that reflects its cultural experiences and beliefs' (Yim, 2022, p. 972). This was composed of a photo collage and a map showing the locations. It was my hope that this might help to diminish the participants' sense of alienation in feeling nostalgic about certain places, and join them together in coping with this sense of loss. It was also my intention that this collage of memories could become a souvenir to bring with them to their new place of residence, where it could act as a warm and encouraging reminder of what they cherish.



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For migrants,

> Lamenting is not only about what we have lost, it is about all that we bring with us. To lament is to walk forward simultaneously holding the past and the future, the pain and the promise in a hope-filled tension … For those of us who have had to leave our homelands, it is a beautiful and powerful act. And importantly, lamenting is something we can do together. (Kamya, 2001. p. 26)

Migratory grief is a process of personal and identity loss (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019). In leaving their place of origin, the participants faced changes in how they could identify themselves in the official arena. They shared that they were acutely aware of such changes, which were reflected in the new identity documents they carried and the information they repeatedly entered on application forms for housing or employment.

Below are some of the responses I gathered from the participants about how they identified themselves and how they described their current relationship with Hong Kong:

> Hong Kong is where I was born and lived for the past three decades. That sense of familiarity is irreplaceable. It is like my island of safety. A lot of my family members and friends are still there. I will always regard Hong Kong as home. (Sonia)

> I kind of went through a process of psychological adjustment. For now, I would say I am an Australian resident with a visa. I value the identity of Hongkonger, but if I stick to that identity, I would not have the desire to try to integrate here. I still use Cantonese at home so my son can at least learn some. But I think it would be quite different for him as he will be growing up here from his early childhood. Very likely he will identify himself as an Australian with a Hong Kong background. (Stephen)

The issue of acculturation is about finding compromise between holding on to and letting go of certain parts of one's cultural or ethnic identity (Farrell & Gibbons, 2019). An addition to the tips sheet recorded the participants' ideas about acculturation, and an addition to the catalogue compiled insights about how to maintain connection to Hong Kong.

Last-minute tips sheet: The essentials of the new migration 'curriculum' – continued

Part 2: Upon arrival

You might hold on to the identity of being a Hongkonger, but at the same time, start embracing a new identity. Make an effort to integrate by paying attention to, understanding and experiencing the local culture, for example:

- If you are a sports fan, look up the local teams, watch their competitions, immerse yourself in the atmosphere and cheer for the players.
- If you are a foodie, look up famous restaurants, check out local gourmet stores, or even join a cooking class.

You might also want to start sharpening your language skills:

- Listen to English songs on your daily commute to train up your listening.
- Watch TV drama series for 15 or 20 minutes every day to learn the local way of speaking, instead of textbook phrases like 'I go to school by bus'.
- Read news commentary to expose yourself to the local writing style.

Catalogue of actions – continued

Part 2: Staying connected to HOME Kong[3]

- ☐ Keep photos or mementos on display.
- ☐ Keep watching news clips, reading commentary or listening to podcasts to stay tuned to the latest developments in Hong Kong.
- ☐ Keep the language.
  - ☐ Speak in Cantonese when talking to people from Hong Kong.
  - ☐ Read, write and type in traditional Chinese when opportunity arises.
  - ☐ Pass on the oral and written language to the next generation.

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- [ ] Keep the culture.
    - [ ] Cook Chinese food from time to time.
    - [ ] Keep track of Cantonese pop songs, movies, dramas, etc.
    - [ ] Continue to celebrate Chinese festivals.
    - [ ] Pass on the recipes, customs and different forms of art to the next generation.
- [ ] Keep living out the qualities and the values that we hold dear as Hongkongers.

In writing this collective document, we were aware that the word 'keep' kept reappearing and might be rather repetitive. However, after serious consideration, we decided to go ahead with this because we wanted to emphasise the sense of continuity: these were things we did when we were in Hong Kong, and we would carry on these practices on a foreign land.

Eric's story

Eric moved to Canada about 40 years ago. He said he identified as Canadian now, but he appreciated that he had recently been able to choose Hong Kong as an ethnicity on some official forms, including the census. In various ways, Eric maintained ties to Hong Kong and kept abreast of developments there.

Joyce: What has it been like to view Hong Kong from a distance in the past few years?

Eric: It is disappointing to see how quickly it changes. It is no longer the place that I used to know and love. That is why I don't plan to visit anymore. And it is sad to see people suffering, directly or vicariously.

Joyce: What are the actions that you have taken to respond to these changes? Why is it significant for you to do so?

Eric: In a nutshell, I do what I have in my power to do to support new arrivals. I went through the hardships of migration many years ago. I hope to minimise the distress that they experience after they move here. I have knowledge about this place that I can share with them and established contacts that I can connect them with if they are interested. And I hope that those who were traumatised in those intense years might at least have a restful break and recover both physically and psychologically before they find their way forward.

Joyce: Is there anything else that you are working towards?

Eric: I also try to explore with others about preserving in a foreign land what might be disappearing in Hong Kong: from history to recent record; from cultural heritage to contemporary production; from written language (traditional Chinese) to oral language (Cantonese). And so on.

Joyce: What does that say about what you value?

Eric: All the good things that make Hong Kong 'Hong Kong'. They are worth cherishing, retaining and passing on.

When those who migrated long ago and those who migrated more recently continue to care about Hong Kong and embrace 'Hongkonger' as a valued identity in different parts of the world, there is hope.

Hard-won knowledge

Every path has its puddle. In face of obstacles and adversities during the migration process, most participants had moments of doubt and frustration. Opening up space for double-storied testimony, the telling of both the difficulties and the person's responses to them, was crucial (Marlowe, 2010). The following addition to the tips sheet documented hard-won knowledge shared by the participants in relation to two of the most distressing issues of migration: house hunting and job hunting. It ended with their heartfelt advice on self-care.

Last-minute tips sheet: The essentials of the new migration 'curriculum' – continued

House hunting

- Consider your financial situation and come up with a budget to spend on housing.
- To avoid being misled by photos or videos, visit the house or the flat in person if possible.

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Send a message to confirm the meeting time with your agent before heading out – changes of plan are more common than expected when inspecting houses.

- Safety comes first. Trust your gut feeling about the neighbourhood.
- Potential landlords might have different demands. Accommodate the legitimate ones. Bargain within reason. Stand your ground if a request is unreasonable. The search goes both ways.
- Don't rush to sign the agreement. Read the terms and conditions carefully. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification if anything is unclear.

Job hunting

Set a time frame for yourself:

- Determine how long you could spend looking for your dream job, one that meets your interests, skills set, qualifications and aspirations.
- Decide also on a time point when you should compromise, going for a job that would enable you to earn a living while waiting for the desired opportunity to arise.

Be prepared:

- Fine-tune your résumé to meet local requirements. Some personal details might not be needed to minimise discrimination.
- Think about and rehearse your answers to questions that are commonly asked in interviews. After all, you will be responding in a language that is not your mother tongue.
- Jot down questions that you would like to ask potential employers.
- Consider taking up voluntary work to familiarise yourself with the field and build up your network.
- It can be really stressful to sit in front of a computer all day watching out for job openings or waiting for notifications about interview opportunities or job offers. Take a break when you feel overwhelmed. Grab some snacks, do some relaxation exercise, go out for a walk or anything that refreshes you.

Self-care

- Give yourself time to sort things out. Take one step at a time. Be patient.
- Sometimes things might not go as planned. Go with the flow. Be flexible.
- Avoid comparing everything to Hong Kong. Look ahead.
- Open yourself to new experience. Give things a try.
- Reach out to people you trust when you feel overwhelmed. It helps to have a shoulder to lean on or cry on in time of distress.

The participants were much more eager to talk about the stumbling blocks that they had hit and the predicaments they encountered when they knew their tips would be shared with others who would be moving soon. They considered that a worthwhile reason to revisit difficult times and reflect on the experience because they were not just grumbling to me, but 'speaking through me' (Denborough, 2008) to people who might benefit from their experience and potentially have an easier and smoother transition as a result. The collective purpose of contributing to others made it possible to speak about troubles and suffering, vulnerabilities and self-doubt (Denborough, 2008).

Practices of acknowledgment

Denborough (2005) suggested that it can make a considerable difference to participants if they receive a response from the interviewer after sharing their experiences. This could include acknowledgment of the contribution that the sharing has made to the therapist, and the contribution it might make to others. Such 'taking it back practices', as they were described by Michael White (1997, p. 193), reposition persons as knowledgeable contributors with agency (Dolman, 2020). I included such an acknowledgment for each participant when I provided a conversation summary for their review. It took the form of a short note with an image that came to my mind during our conversation. Below is one example.

Dear Ava,

In the spirit of narrative practice, I would like to share with you what stood out to me during our conversation. There were actually quite a lot of things, including your determination not to comply with the vaccination requirement, the rigorous search of the scientific data, and the plan for picking up a musical instrument again. Above all, I was drawn to your

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consideration in relation to reporting your colleague's subtle but systematic unfair acts before you left the job. You were not only trying to wrap up the tasks that you were involved in, but also trying to do something that would help those who were staying. An image popped up in my mind of you clearing a path for those coming after you! Do you think people around you would be surprised, or not surprised, by your courageous and honourable actions?

Warmly,
Joyce

Concluding remarks

Although Hongkongers are no strangers to the topic of migration, decisions about staying or leaving are not made any easier by familiarity. There are many traditional Chinese sayings that discourage people from moving away from home. For example, the warning that 'the value of people is diminished when they are away from their home town' and the hateful curse to 'die on a foreign land as a visitor' without a support network who will grieve for you. In keeping with the traditional value of filial piety, leaving parents or senior members of the extended family behind in Hong Kong often leads to a great sense of guilt. This was why one of the collective documents in this project was dedicated to ideas for staying connected to significant others.

I approached the participants for feedback on my conversation summaries and the collective documents. They also shared some things that they appreciated about this work. First, they said they had enjoyed the conversations, and how they had not been like an interview but a casual chat. A few mentioned that meeting in informal settings contributed to their positive experience. Our conversations had taken place in cafés, on the platform of a metro station and in a park. This was a new experience for me, and I am glad that it was well received. Second, they said they appreciated being asked about their motivation for emigration at the beginning of the conversation. Many of them mentioned that it allowed them to take a step back from their current predicament and recall why they wished to leave Hong Kong and move abroad in the first place. As Godmaire-Duhaime and colleagues (2018, p. 32) noted, 're-exploring and rewriting life stories and experiences, in the context of the creators' new values and aspirations, can be especially fruitful'.

People's initiatives, responses and hard-won knowledge, if not documented, 'can be lost through "perishing occasions", or can simply "fly by" and not be taken up into the accounts of people's lives' (Newman, 2008, p. 26). In this project, I endeavoured to 'rescue the said from the saying of it' (Newman, 2008) so that these stories could be explored, thickened and take root in people's lives. Multiple collective documents were co-created with the participants, and all of these will be living documents (Newman, 2008): whoever wishes to add their experiences or ideas will be welcome to do so. As long as the sociopolitical situation in Hong Kong continues, I believe that the current wave of migration will go on for some time, and entries in these collective documents will continue to grow. They would become invaluable resources for those who would be moving away and resettling on a foreign land.

In one of the sessions, a participant began the conversation by asking me, 'Can I say it honestly?' This stemmed from concerns he had about me interviewing him and quoting his words in my work. This brought to the fore the current ambiguity around freedom of speech in Hong Kong. Although I do not consider this work to be overly sensitive politically, I have to admit that I considered and reconsidered what to include and what not to include in this paper, and laboured over what words to use and not to use. Whatever I wrote or refrained from writing, I was taking a stance. There is power in documentation. And there is the issue of self-censorship. I drew strength from a response I got from a group of fellow Hongkongers when I was preparing to undertake this work: 'live by our values; do the right thing in low profile'. I am not ready to accept that the only option for writing 'honest' words is to write them outside of the city.

While this project was a response to experiences of migration from Hong Kong, I would like to dedicate it to others who might cross paths with this dilemma of staying or leaving home. It is never an easy decision to make.

To my fellow Hongkongers, no matter where we are, we stand as one!

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Notes

[1] This title is a reference to a series of pocket-sized books that students in Hong Kong read outside the test venue before public examinations.

[2] This is a reference to the poem 'Prospective immigrants please note' by Adrienne Rich (1962/1993), in which migration is represented as going through a doorway. The poem was shared by Sonia.

[3] One of the participants suggested using 'HOME Kong' instead of 'Hong Kong', partly because it was an endearment quite commonly used among recent emigrants, partly because she resonated with another participant sharing that 'home is where the heart is'.

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The power of hope in action:

Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds Facilitation Guide

by Caleb Wakhungu



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Abstract

This facilitation guide has been created to assist practitioners to use the 'Raising our heads above the clouds' methodology from the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project. It first outlines the local values that this approach is built on. It then outlines the narrative assumptions and principles that underpin it before taking the reader through each of the steps of the process. The paper also includes stories from practitioners in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda and reflections about how this approach fosters community economy through collective narrative practice.

Key words: community work; collective narrative practice; community development; Uganda; rural communities

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

About Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program

Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program (MESHCOP) is a nonprofit social enterprise established in 2005 with the aim of sparking and sustaining local development initiatives among the isolated and disadvantaged (last mile) communities in Uganda. We work with children, young people, women and men, including elderly caregivers and disadvantaged families who are made vulnerable by poverty, conflict, disease and disasters.

We seek to improve the lives of our and their communities through projects that promote self-sufficiency, economic development and the long-term sustainability of our environment.

Our mission is to improve the quality of life of rural people affected by poverty, disasters, conflict and disease by working with individuals, families and communities to enhance care and support through capacity building, income generation and self-help groups, using our resources in ways that benefit people and the environment.

Important values that most communities in Africa are struggling to defend

Today, when you move around villages, you hear people complaining about how things have changed and how it is increasingly difficult for families to sustain themselves. Our communities are further weakened by poverty, disasters, chronic diseases, wars, climate change and conflict, disintegrating the traditional social support systems that provided protection for people. In the absence of a comprehensive social protection plan in many underdeveloped countries, greater uncertainties and risks associated with competitive pressures in the new economy, fuelled by the digital divide, push many people under the poverty line.

Communities are stretched to breaking point and important values that kept societies, communities and families together are eroding as a result of colonisation, natural calamities, extreme economic hardships, epidemics and adoption of approaches that disempower people, rendering them passive recipients of knowledge. Quite often, programs to relieve the suffering of our people are designed in major world capitals and our people are positioned as passive recipients of aid – a phenomenon that destroys communities' capacities to respond.

Our approach is different. It starts with local knowledge and local values. Some of the values that are being defended in communities we work with include:

Work was not for a wage (money)

The rewards of work have traditionally included food, communal unity, acquisition of moral values, survival and skills. It was during work that therapeutic conversations happened and individuals, couples, young people, families and communities were strengthened.

Sense of community

A sense of community provides a bond between individuals, families and lineages for social harmony in the society and to ensure the society's continuance. In these communities, whenever an act of ill occurred, it was viewed as an act disturbing the stability of the community. It would be taken as an offensive act that destroys community life, that was directed against the principle of community. It would not be left uncorrected. The sense of community was directly linked to the responsibility of maintaining the wellness of the society and important values that are endangered.

The value of family relations

'Families are the basic and essential building blocks of society and as such are regarded as very important throughout Africa' (Assim, 2013, as cited in Leonard & Amukwelele, 2023, p. 216). In Mt Elgon, the family represents people living together by ties of marriage, blood or adoption, thus representing a single household. The types of family found here include conjugal families consisting of one or more mothers and their children, with other people and one or more spouses. Here in Uganda, the family is often considered the primary unit of social life. Historically, it was within the family that traditional values of the ethnic group were passed to the young members of the group. It was also within the family that values of love, sharing, compassion and integrity were taught, and most importantly, the role of parenting the child was a community collective responsibility.

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Respect for elders

In a number of societies in Africa, there was a lot of respect for people in old age, and people considered having grey hairs one way an elderly person could earn the right to courtesy.

> With the application of these values embedded in Ubuntu to the care of older persons, societies would aim for the treatment of older persons with kindness, love, and human-to-human bonds. Old age would also mean an opportunity to be given the deserved attention, as well as holding adults and younger generations responsible for the basic needs of older persons. (Murote & Mungai, 2023, p. 363)

In these societies, respect for authority and elders starts within one's immediate family. This explains why people in these areas have a lot of respect for parents and always hold them with dignity and esteem.

Hard work

Hard work was the means through which societies survived. Because of this, everybody, male or female, young or old, was expected to work in one way or another. As such, hard work was always praised and laziness was condemned. Ugandan societies also understood work as the purpose for which they were created, hence work being part and parcel of life. Work was therefore done communally, and this helped to promote solidarity and community spirit. This work was therefore not aimed at individual richness, but rather for the good of the family, the clan, the whole ethnic group and for the good of the community; hence, the benefits of work were communally shared. The children were prepared by their parents for full participation in social duties. Right from childhood, they were taught the types of work that suited them, and this was relevant to the respective environments they lived in, making work more meaningful and more productive. How do we keep this important value in the face of the changing world?

Justice and fairness

Many African societies in their traditional past did their level best to bring about justice in their communities. This was done by encouraging communal life and discouraging individualism. This meant that the needs of the community were as important as the plans or goals of an individual. All this was meant to ensure proper justice. There was no competition in work, and this helped to eliminate unhealthy behaviours between individuals, which would have led to various injustices. Traditional justice was related to the satisfaction of human needs. It was the role of leaders to ensure that all people enjoyed having their basic needs met. The idea was that if all people's needs were satisfied, then injustices such as stealing would be reduced or completely eliminated. Further still, it was the responsibility of every individual in society to keep law and order.

The sacredness of human life

The traditional societies believed that the life of a human being is sacred. They believed that human life was created by God. Therefore, no human being had the right to take away another person's life. The societies believed that it was everyone's duty to preserve life just as a form of obligation parents have towards their children. From the sacredness of life perspective, the biological world provides a rich field for seeing the universal and permanent value of life in its brilliant diversity. Traditional societies looked at human life in terms of the relationships with nature, the living and the dead. These relationships were considered to be based on love, respect and reverence towards the ancestors. Religious life was not separated from other aspects of life. All things were considered to be produced through interactions of human beings and the divine forces of God. The traditions looked at ancestors as guardians of the spirit who linked human beings to God.

Seeking good relations

Good human relations among people in African societies were defined as a mode of living characterised by empathy and by consideration and compassion for each other. The sense of good relations in Uganda, for example, is rooted in dialogue and conversation. People define good human relationships in terms of the other person's interest. They say it is one's responsibility to look after the wellbeing of other individuals. In traditional African societies, there existed a mutual relationship between the individual and society that helped to build and sustain a moral character in the individual and social harmony in the society. These two elements help to construct a strong sense of belonging and identity. People in these communities say they freely converse and express their problems as they search for solutions communally. Many people in these societies believe that by discussing one's problems with other people, one cannot rush into trouble. The people are more concerned with human relationships than

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the different individuals who make up the relationship. People expect human behaviour to conform to this traditional value to guarantee social harmony. Good relations and social harmony are seen as very important values.

Sense of hospitality

Hospitality refers to the relationship between guest and host, or the act or practice of being hospitable. Specifically, this includes the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors or strangers, membership clubs, conventions, attractions, special events and other services for visitors. Hospitality is looked at as a rhythm of life without which life would not be complete. No appointment or special invitation is usually required for anyone to visit a relative or neighbour. When one goes for a visit, on arrival, a visitor is invited to eat. The visitor is treated kindly, just as one would wish to be treated when visiting another's home.

Honesty and integrity

Honesty is a quality of truthfulness to oneself and others. It is a value that has been highly treasured in our communities. People were known to be objective, truthful and trustworthy and there was a high level of moral uprightness and discipline. The traditional values of honesty and integrity involved one consistently conducting oneself in an acceptable manner, being honest and trustworthy, and taking responsibility for actions taken.

African sense of time

In Africa, people are in control of their time and they are considered more important than time. Our societies put little value on punctuality and rigid schedules, and people have no problem waiting. Conceivably in some societies, the element of time is robustly related to past orientation, like in the practices of ancestors or where past generations are viewed as having an impeccable influence on the present. Time is related to events rather than the clock; for example, cock crows were taken as determining a particular sense of time, such as the first crow at 3am. Other examples are the sun's position, birds singing or animal movement implying a specific time in one's daily routines. Time is also seen in seasons, which indicate a period for specific activity; for example, the season for grazing, planting, weeding or harvesting.

Humans living in harmony with the environment for mutual benefit

The land is the source of wealth in many communities in our African context. In most African cultures, one of the assets that children inherit from their parents is land. It comprises of rocks, water, minerals, soil and plants – all of which are valuable resources that humanity and other living things depend on for survival. Our ancestors protected the land for the present generation, and it is a resource that we have to protect for the future generations. That is why we put emphasis on environmental conservation: tree planting for food, protection of soils from being washed away and generation of oxygen needed for humans and animals. Renewable energies like solar power, wind power and briquettes from agricultural waste are used to prevent depletion of our forests. One way we are defending this value is by engaging with school communities to incorporate practical sessions in class, like ending a session on the importance of trees in our environment with each child planting 10 trees.

> God created lands with lakes and bountiful rivers for people to live. And the deserts so that people can find their souls. (Tuareg proverb)

Honouring connections (including with the sun)

The sun is the star at the centre of our solar system. It is a nearly perfect ball of hot plasma, heated to incandescence by nuclear fusion. The sun radiates light and heat, or solar energy, which makes it possible for life to exist on Earth. Plants need sunlight to grow and animals, including humans, need plants for food and the oxygen they produce. Without the heat from the sun, our Earth would freeze. Most African countries enjoy the sunlight 12 hours a day! Now we harness this resource to make solar panels locally to provide electricity in rural homes and pump water to improve food production.

> The Sun does not forget a village just because it is small. (African Proverb)

Key narrative concepts that guide our work

People always respond to hardship

No-one is a passive recipient of hardship. People are always responding, whether they are children or adults. They respond to try to minimise the effects of the hardship, or to try to make it stop, or to try to

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protect others and so on. These responses are often overlooked or disqualified – so much so that people are often not familiar with their own responses.

These responses have a foundation

People's responses are based on what the person gives value to: this might be a dream, or a hope, or some vision of what life could be about. For instance, the person may give value to rescuing others or being there for others. These responses to hardship are also based on what the person intends for their life, what they want for their life. This includes the person's purposes, goals, aspirations and commitments. These responses to hardship also involve certain skills and knowledges about life.

When we are working with people who have experienced hardship, we are looking for small expressions that might indicate what they value and hold precious. We are looking for openings to explore so that we can learn about the ways they have responded to the hardship they have been subjected to. We seek to draw attention to people's responses and to make it possible for people to tell stories about them.

We can trace the roots of what people give value to

People's skills and knowledge, as well as their values and dreams, are linked to history, relationships and culture. It's our job to make it possible for these links to be spoken about. It's our job to trace the social, cultural and historical roots of people's skills and for stories to be told about these roots.

When people's own skills and knowledge become deeply rooted in history, relationships and culture, these skills and knowledge become more familiar. They also become more available for the person to put to use in dealing with current difficulties they may be facing. At the same time, the links and relationships in a person's life become richly acknowledged. People experience themselves as being linked to others around shared values.

Our lives are multi-storied

We are all constantly making up stories about our lives. We do this by placing events into sequences through time and linking these events together according to a particular theme. All stories consist of these four elements: events, in sequence, through time, according to a theme. There can be many stories told that include the same events, and these stories may have different themes. No single story is the entire story, and a single event or sequence of events can contribute to many different stories. Because we are constantly making up stories about our lives, our lives are multi-storied.

Developing rich alternative stories

Often, the people with whom we are working have become trapped in a dominant storyline of their life which is saturated with problems. For instance, children who have been orphaned due to HIV/AIDS may be living under the influence of a dominant story of stigmatisation. As a result, they may feel hopeless or worthless. This dominant storyline can have a powerful influence and can obscure the initiatives that people are taking to respond to this hardship. We become mesmerised by the dominant story and a person's initiatives remain invisible, overlooked. In these circumstances, it is important to honour all the person's concerns but not to get stuck in the dominant story. It is our task to seek out subordinate storylines, alternative storylines that exist in the shadows. It is our task to bring these out into the light and to richly develop them. We don't want to remain focused only on the big picture. Instead, we wish to seek out small traces that can be woven into alternative storylines.

No matter what a person has been through, there will always be aspects of their experience that contradict the dominant story of hopelessness and worthlessness. Regardless of the hardships that people have been through, there are always treasures to be found. For instance, in relation to children who are orphaned due to HIV/AIDS, there will be ways in which they are taking actions based on what they value in life. They might be expressing care or protection of other children. They may be engaging in acts of memory and honouring of their parents who have passed away. In our work, we are interested in assisting people to use their meaning-making skills to attend to aspects of their experience that have not previously been taken into storylines of their life. We assist people to generate rich alternative storylines of their life.

These alternative stories of identity also consist of events, in sequence, through time, according to a theme. The theme of an alternative storyline relates to what the person holds precious: what they value and believe in. It is our task to assist people to identify actions that they have taken at different times throughout their history that are in harmony with what they hold precious, with what they give value to. We then want to find out how these actions are linked to the lives and contributions of others.

For instance, an adult's current determination to contribute to the lives of vulnerable children may be

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linked to a history of support they received as a young person from a grandfather or grandmother. It may also be linked to certain cultural traditions that they were introduced to as a child and that they have always valued. Rich stories can be told that link their actions in the present to what they value. In turn, the historical roots of these values can be traced. In this way, a person can start to see how their life is an expression of a heritage or legacy passed on to them from significant others, and perhaps also from their community and culture. In this way, lives become deeply rooted in history and culture.

When an alternative storyline becomes richly developed in this way, it provides a foundation for the person to proceed in life. It provides a sense of the future. It enables the person to become more familiar with their own knowledge and skills, and in doing so, provides a different sense of identity. Their identity becomes defined by their values, hopes and dreams, and by their special skills and knowledge. It also becomes defined by their links to significant others who share these values.

PART 2: STEP-BY-STEP FACILITATION PROCESS

Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program and others have been using collective narrative practices to spark and sustain diverse economic and environmental projects and at the same time contribute to the reinvigoration of local cultures. We have developed a new way to raise people's heads above the clouds by providing them with opportunities to rewrite their history and overcome enormous challenges, often marked by abuse, neglect, hunger, labelling, violence and poverty. We nurture resilience, aspirations, capabilities, skills and talents. This process raises people's determination and zeal, and invokes renewed commitment to take charge of their lives and appropriately respond to the effects of adversity in more respectful, innovative, empowering, honouring and sustainable ways.



Figure 1. Illustration by Rebekah Oppenheim

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Step 1: Sharing stories of pride and survival

During the first part of a meeting, we ask participants to share experiences. We particularly want to hear stories about what people are proud about in relation to their family, their community or their own lives. We ask each participant to tell us something that he or she has been able to do well. If they cannot think of something of which they are proud, we ask a different question: 'How have you been able to survive up until now? What have been some of the things you have been doing to survive?'

This is the first step of engagement with the people we interact with. Quite often, the stories being told are problem-saturated, and little or no effort has been geared towards sharing stories that reinforce resilience. Such conversations end up with frustration, anger and hatred, and then the cycle continues.

Sparking conversations about pride and survival open up stories beyond the problem story. They evoke stories of resilience, stories of hope and stories of survival



Facilitators are encouraged to be creative! It is possible to choose any play or task that the group or individuals can work on for a few minutes as the facilitator observes some special skills, competencies or acts of kindness that manifest among participants. They might ask a volunteer in a group to step forwards for a conversation as other group members are listening.

Some questions to support the conversation can include:

- I noticed during the role-play you exhibited the values of life, resistance, hard work, compassion, etc. [quote exact words or phrases]. Could you please share with us a story behind that?
- You shared with us a story of how you have been struggling [e.g. to raise children and support the family]. Is this a first-time experience or something that you have experienced before?
- If you have experienced this before, how did you manage to navigate through the last time you had a similar experience? Was this unusual or have there been times when you've done this sort of thing before?
- Please can you tell a story about an experience you have had that took you some effort to be able to get through
    - Have there been other occasions when you have managed to do this?
    - How have you managed to do this?
- Could you please share with us a story about your work or anything you are proud about as a child, parent or community member?
    - Is this story linked to something that you value?
- What are you engaged in on a daily basis for survival?
    - Can you please tell us a bit more about how you do that? Who else is helping you to do this?
    - Where did you learn these skills from?
    - Were there some steps you took to prepare yourself to do this work?
- What do you think was the turning point that led you to being able to do the work that is enabling you to survive today?
- Now that you are through this situation, looking back, what were some of the ways you responded at the time that perhaps you have not shared yet?
    - What actions did you take?
    - How did you do this?
    - Have there been ways since then that you have tried to deal with this experience?
    - What would you call the skills that were involved in your response to the challenge?
    - When did you learn these skills? Who taught you or supported your development of these skills?
    - When you think of these different steps that you took at the time, and have taken since, what do you think this says about what is important to you?

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These conversations can take a day to allow group members to buzz in pairs! It is important as many people often share problem-saturated stories daily with their peers or counsellors, but rarely find time to share stories of hope, initiative, skills, accomplishments, goals and resilience. At this stage, people start to appreciate that life is multi-storied and there are many things we can celebrate in life that may give us power to reduce the effects of the problems on our lives.

Step 2: Outsider-witness responses

The facilitator invites people to be outsider witnesses. These are people who will be listening to the stories being told. Towards the end of the meeting, the outsider witnesses offer their responses, using a specific format (White, 1995, 2000, 2007).

In narrative practice, an outsider witness is an invited audience to a therapeutic conversation: a third party who is invited to listen to and acknowledge the preferred stories and identity claims of the person consulting the practitioner. Outsider witnesses may be part of a person's existing community, such as family members or friends, or they may be invited from outside these networks, in which case they may be professionals (and may constitute what some practitioners know as a reflecting team). Alternatively, they may be invited from lists or registers of people who have previously sought consultation for similar difficulties and who have agreed to help out therapeutically with others whenever this may be relevant. Outsider witnesses may be recruited for a particular one-off meeting, or if they are a group of professionals who work together, may be regularly present at therapeutic sessions.

When there is more than one outsider witness, particularly when there is a team working together, members of the team help each other in making their reflections. For instance, after one outsider witness has spoken, another might ask some questions about what was just said in order to make the whole process more meaningful.

Outsider witness summary

The outsider-witness process has two parts. Sometimes an outsider-witness process is referred to as a definitional ceremony. It is an opportunity to be witnessed in a particularly acknowledging way.

Part 1 is when the individual tells their story, guided by questions from the practitioner. Part 2 is when the outsider witness(es) respond to this story, again guided by questions from the practitioner. These responses focus on 'resonance and transport', meaning that they focus on how the story resonated for the listener, and how it moved them. There is often then an opportunity for the individual to respond to the 're-telling' that happens in Part 2.

When thinking about outsider-witness responses in terms of resonance and transport, here are some considerations for practitioners and outsider witnesses to keep in mind:

Part 1: Telling

The facilitator(s) will ask participants to volunteer and take the role of outsider witness.

While listening to someone's story, outsider witnesses pay attention to:

Identifying the expression

- As you listened to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination?
- Which ones struck a chord for you?

Describing the image

- What images of people's lives, of their identities and of the world more generally did these expressions evoke?
- What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

Embodying responses

- What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you?
- Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

Part 2: Re-telling

In this second part of the process, those participants who are acting as outsider witnesses are invited to speak. The role of outsider witnesses is not to give

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opinions, or judgements, or advice, or praise. Instead, the witnesses play a role in weaving together the story they have heard with their own stories. This is done in a particular way as the facilitator structures the re-telling by asking them the following sorts of questions:

- What particular things did you hear from the person who shared the story that caught your attention or sparked your imagination?
- How does hearing this affect your picture of the person who shared the story? What did it tell you about them?
- What is your guess about what is important to them? About what they hope for and dream about?
- Did any mental pictures, symbols or images come to you as you listened? If you were to draw a picture of this, what would it look like?
- Why is it that you were drawn to these particular things?
- What is it about your own stories of life that explains why these aspects of this story touched you?
- What was it like for you to hear this story?
- How have you been moved on account of witnessing these expressions of life?
- How have you been changed in some way because you have heard her story?

Part 3: Re-telling the re-telling

In this final part of the process, the practitioner will ask the person who originally told the story questions like:

- How does hearing this affect your image of yourself and your life?
- What does this say about what is important to you?
- Why were you drawn to these particular responses from the outsider witness?
- Where does this take you in your understanding, relationships and ideas for your life?

Tellings and re-tellings happen during these conversations and participants, including the facilitator, are impacted positively as they find pieces of people's stories connecting with their values and aspirations.

Step 3: Hopes and dreams

This narrative process takes as its starting point the initiatives that people are already taking in their lives. No matter the hardships that people are experiencing, individuals and communities are always taking initiatives to try to respond to these hardships and to minimise the effects of such hardships on their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

As mentioned above, narrative practices are then used to elicit and richly acknowledge these skills and values through what are known as 'outsider-witness practices' (White, 1995, 2000, 2007).

These rich forms of acknowledgment and the rituals that contribute to the interlinking of people's stories involve words as well as song and traditional dance. This ceremonial process generates a sense of pride and dignity in participants. It also facilitates a sense of connectedness to skills, to one another and to community histories. It enables people to experience themselves as knowledgeable and as active in the face of hard times.

After such acknowledgment of people's current initiatives and the skills and values implicit within them, it becomes more possible for people to speak of the future. Implicit within people's current actions, no matter how small these actions may be, are certain hopes or dreams for the future.

Having acknowledged the steps that each person has been taking, the initiatives they have been involved with in order to survive, it is important to take care to name the hopes and dreams that each person is working towards.

The facilitator can use participatory methods like inviting people to draw and colour in their hopes and dreams, giving them specific names. Hopes and dreams can include things like building a better house, starting a new income-generating activity or taking children to school. Participants are asked to present to the group and the facilitator can ask the following questions:

- Could you please share with us your hopes and dreams for your future?
- Is this something new or you have held these for some time now?
- How have you managed to keep your hopes and dreams alive?

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- Why do you hold these hopes and dreams important for your life?
- If you went back to yourself at a young age, what would you be doing differently in your efforts to achieve your dreams and goals?
- On a scale of one to ten where can you say you are at present in relation to pursuing your goals?
- What did you do to get there?
- What will you do more to accomplish your goals?
- What aspects of your life will change as a result of achieving your hopes and dreams?
- When we get a chance to meet again in the future, in two to five years, what will have changed?

Step 4: The history of people's hopes and dreams

Once people start to speak about their dreams for the future, it is important to learn about the histories of these dreams. Where did these dreams come from? Who passed them on? This is a very important part of the process of 'raising someone's head above the clouds'.



There is always a social history to people's dreams and wishes. By inviting people to speak about their hopes, and then by tracing the social history of these, a rich textual history is created. It is this process that we refer to as 'raising heads above the clouds'. This involves using the resources of people's stories and histories to spark possibilities for change.

Using tools like the Tree of Life (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006) facilitators can use the following questions to help people trace the histories of their hopes and dreams.

- You have shared with us your hopes and dreams of [mention them]. Has this always been important to you? What is the history of this in your life?
- Who else in your life would have shared these values, hopes or dreams or where did you learn this from?
- Is there anyone who would not be surprised to hear about your hopes and dreams for your future? [This person might be alive or have passed on]
- Is there someone who would recognise and appreciate what your commitment to your hopes and dreams means to you?
- Was there someone who introduced you to the idea of holding on to hope or to dreams for a different future?
- If so, why do you think they chose to share this with you?
- What do you think they saw in you that made them think you might be able to carry this commitment in your life?
- Was there something they might have seen you doing in the past that would have told them that this commitment was important to you back then?
- What do you think it might have meant to them to be able to share this commitment with you?
- What would it mean to them to see you taking these actions now that, despite the effects of these problems and hardships, you are finding ways to honour your commitment to love and care and also to hold on to the hope that life will be different for you?
- What do you think they would say if they were here with us now?
- How would they say it?
- Would there be some way of keeping this person's presence close to you in the coming days?
- Do you do anything that they like or appreciate in your life, like songs? If so, would you like to share the song with the group?

In tracing the history of hopes and dreams, we can also learn about the intentions and purposes that people have for their lives. Michael White described a 'hierarchy' of intentional states (White, 2007). It seems that it is easier for people to articulate what they stand for in life if we ask questions about:

- their intentions or purposes that shaped a particular action
- then ask about the values and beliefs that are supporting these actions

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- then the hopes and dreams that are associated with these values
- then the principles of living that are represented by those hopes and dreams
- and finally, the commitments or what it is that people are standing for in life.

Step 5: Call to action

At this time, we then challenge participants to take an action: to come up with a particular assignment that will be the next step towards fulfilling their dreams. This can be done individually or in groups. It can be a small step or a large step.



Our entire approach is built around making it possible for people to take action, and then ensuring that the action is sustainable. The facilitator appreciates the participants for taking part and sharing their personal stories of resilience, hope, courage, initiatives and survival.

Participants are encouraged to think about the next step they would want to take in order to minimise the effects of the problem in their lives. This can be a small step or big step.

Participants are asked to draw a picture of what they want to do next, including the location and the people they will be working with. They can include the time it will take to achieve this action.

In plenary, each participant is given time to share their next steps.

The facilitator asks questions to help participants elaborate on:

- what they want to do
- how they want to do it
- who they will be working with
- what will change
- who will notice the change
- what possibilities will the change bring
- how this change will affect their relationship with family and community
- when this change might happen
- who in their team will help them achieve this goal and what roles they will be playing
- and whether there are particular skills and competencies they have that will make it possible to achieve their goal.

In the Mt Elgon context where people have an opportunity to design various projects of their own, people learn to become drivers of their lives. New initiatives are born and some challenge the status quo but are carefully handled and nurtured to allow people to find meaning and value in their lives.

Step 6: Documenting the call to action

When working with groups living and working together, this process is not rushed. Each step can take a week, and participants will be taking notes or making drawings and be helped by their friends to write small stories on papers stuck together. At the end of the exercises, each participant will have a small booklet and be the author of the stories contained within.

Participants write down the action that they have committed themselves to, explaining how they have overcome obstacles in the past, their dreams for the future, why this dream is important and where it has come from. They describe the practical steps they will next put in place. Participants experience power over obstacles in their lives when they spend time writing these booklets which remind them of their strengths, skills and knowledge.

Before starting the process, participants are asked not to worry about anything since it is not a competition.

Step 7: Circuiting the documentation and generating excitement

The documents that are created are then read aloud to the assembled group, and participants and the facilitators respond to them during the celebrations.

These documents are also archived in our community library. People read these booklets and provide comments and reflections for their authors. These processes surround people's commitments with excitement. To create audiences and interest around

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people's commitments is one of our key tasks. We seek to get people interested in their own histories, their own dreams, and their own actions.

This is one of the processes we use to 'raise heads above the clouds'. It involves eliciting people's current initiatives and richly acknowledging the skills and values involved in these. It involves linking these skills and actions to hopes and dreams, and then tracing the social history of these dreams. This process of moving backwards and forwards across time gradually builds a collective momentum.

Once it starts you cannot just stand by and watch! Everyone wants to get involved. It becomes possible to run without getting weary.

Raising our voices above the clouds through community radio program

Radio is the most accessible, participatory and effective medium to reach people in the developing world, giving voice to people to air and solve their own problems. Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program chose to establish a community radio program in order to do justice to people's stories of hope and resilience, and the initiatives that breathe life into seemingly difficult situations. The radio coverage is a 10 kilometre radius reaching close to 300,000 people.

Through citizen's media, communities can start to fight epidemics and corruption, and develop methods to hold government officials accountable for their actions. In this way, radio not only informs people about government failure, but it also provides a vehicle through which to work for positive political change.

While the colonial educational system widely used in Uganda puts emphasis on theoretical approaches to learning, MESHCOP Community Radio is designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice and share stories of solving practical problems.

MESHCOP Community Radio:

- reaches out to disaster victims and communities in and around the Mt Elgon Region
- discusses programs within the communities such as education, human rights, peace building and reconciliation, and fighting poverty among communities that have been affected by natural disasters for decades
- promotes dialogue, debate and change fostering sustainable and equitable development
- creates a communication pathway between community organisations and local governments, thereby helping the communities hold developmental workers and the government accountable; people are allowed to discuss programs going on in their communities including achievements and challenges and areas that still need to be addressed.

We are also changing behaviour through radio plays. Our aim is to ensure that the perspectives of the people whose lives are most affected by development (mainly the poor and marginalised) are included within decision-making.

Significantly, the broken-hearted and traumatised find healing and forgiveness as they engage in conversations and receive outsider-witness responses. Plans are underway to use internet radio to join with other people across the globe who can then offer outsider-witness responses live on air.

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Practice example:

Conversation with a single mother working hard to support her family in Rwanda

by Marie Claudine Nyirakigwene



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At SOS Children's Villages Rwanda, I work with children in vulnerable families who are at risk of losing parental care or who have already lost parental care. This vulnerability is due to poverty, big size of families without resources, chronic diseases and family conflicts.

After graduating from narrative therapy and community work training through a collaboration between the University of Rwanda, SOS Children's Villages Rwanda and Dulwich Centre Foundation, I have applied different narrative practices among child-headed households, vulnerable families (couples), single mothers and widows.

I used narrative practices learnt through Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds with a group of widows and women who had been abandoned by their husbands because of poverty, family conflict or the economic pressure of supporting a great number of children.

Sharing stories of pride

During my work with these women, I applied an outsider witnessing approach following the suggested steps in the Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds Facilitation Guide so that the participants could draw inspiration and learn skills from each other's stories.

This story is about Mary (a pseudonym), an abandoned woman who was raising six children. She raised them through hardship and they remained together as a family. The following is part of a conversation with an outsider witness responding to Mary's sharing of her story.

Claudine: What do you think enabled Mary to stay with her children through all these problems?

Outsider witness: It is because Mary loves her children. She is committed and hardworking and she

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has good relationships, physical strengths and endurance.

Claudine: Did anything in Mary's story resonate with your experiences?

Outsider Witness: Yes, Mary's story resonates with me about when my husband passed away and how I suffered with children for the first time after his death, and how I became a hard worker to get food for my children.

Claudine: What values did you hear in Mary's story?

Outsider Witness: Problem solving skills, being a good thinker, good relationships in the community, responsibility, organisational skills, skills in relationship building, commitment, self-confidence, skills in saving money, bravery as a woman.

Claudine: What might other abandoned mothers learn from Mary's story?

Outsider Witness: To be strong, resistance, waiting for good moments, never give up, courage, hard work, love children even in hard situations.

I then asked Mary what it was like to hear her colleague reflecting on her story and the skills and values she had enacted. I also invited the other participants to reflect on their own skills and values, and how they had contributed to their families and communities.

Hopes and dreams

I asked the group: 'What does Mary's story make you think about your own hopes and dreams for the future?'

I invited some participants to answer and one of them replied: 'Mary's story pushes me to be confident and to start my own income-generating activity to make our family stable.'

From these tellings, some of the women renewed their commitment to taking care of their children and ensuring food security for their family.

Mary herself dreamed of keeping her children in school, renovating her house, increasing her shares in the savings group, and buying a better bed for visitors.

In each step, both Mary and the team participated in planning for their hopes and dreams. They linked them to their past and their future and they committed to excite other women in the community.

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Practice example:

Niyibizi Muhayimana Annonciata's work with Gardens for Health International Rwanda

by Niyibizi Muhayimana Annonciata



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Gardens for Health International works towards a world where all families and communities have the knowledge, resources and support to meet their nutritional needs. The simple concept that food alone does not equal good nutrition is at the heart of our mission. We partner with health clinics and schools in rural and peri-urban areas so that communities facing or at risk of malnutrition are equipped with seeds, skills and knowledge to diversify food production, prepare and consume balanced meals, and keep their children and families healthy.

In my work, I witness many problems as I move around the villages, especially for single mothers. The majority of single mothers think it was a 'sin' they committed to the community by having a child or children without living with the child's father. Of course, relationships are not a straight line, and life can change at any moment triggering ups and downs. But most single mothers here are facing frustration, stigma and discrimination.

As divisions increase, so does the anger, frustration, depression and resignation, and children can be at risk of abandonment.

As a practitioner of narrative therapy and community work, I'm committed to support this group of women by using narrative therapy ideas to help them raise their heads above the clouds.

Sharing stories of pride and survival

These women meet regularly to share stories of hope and survival. They get the time together to sing songs, share stories and learn new skills from each other. During the first meeting, they are asked to brainstorm about things that they have done recently and are proud about. Songs and dances and flowery gifts dominate the session to acknowledge people's stories of survival and pride.

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During this meeting, women discover that they have shared stories, skills, relationships and capabilities, and that these matter given the fact that they have been able to survive and support their families. They then do what they call being 'guardian angel' (*malayika murinzi*) for each other: everyone adopts someone else in the group to take care of and check in with each week. This is to avoid feelings of abandonment and loneliness. It also helps the participants to stay in touch until they meet again the following week.

Hopes and dreams

The next session is on the single mothers' hopes and dreams for the future. These might be hopes for their own lives or hopes for their families. These might include taking care of children. Some of these hopes have been:

- having a husband with whom they will not be disappointed, as happened to them before
- reconciliation with the fathers of their children
- working hard to ensure food security for their families
- starting income-generating projects and providing basic needs for their families
- supporting their children in succeeding in school by feeding them balanced meals every day.

The histories of people's hopes and dreams

We want to learn about the histories of these dreams: Where did these dreams come from? Who passed them on? This was very important to them as we seek to make it possible for people to link their current actions, and their hopes and dreams, to the legacies of those who have come before them.

Often when the histories of their hopes and dreams are explored, the women speak of their aunts as their role models, or they tell stories of how their own mothers navigated through hard times. For example, Amina spoke of her mother (whose husband passed away) and how she was able to be patient in any hard situation and to work hard. This example was the reason that Amina had been able to do the same. When Amina's child got sick, she was able to find a job that enabled her to survive with her child. The values of 'hard work', 'patience', 'hope', 'commitment' and 'never giving up', as learnt from her mother, enabled Amina to love her own children and stay motivated.

Changing collective stories

In community, single mothers are often assigned negative identities and values that are not right for them. These might include describing them as

- a burden to their families
- bringing shame to their families
- having been abandoned
- being careless
- having no value in the community.

There is also strong stigma if they are associated with sex work.

Our entire approach is built around making it possible for people to take action, and then ensuring that the action is sustainable.

This group decided to initiate a small saving club that they would add to each time they met as an additional activity. In this way, they could support each other to raise their heads above the clouds to where joy, hope and comfort lie. They were now able to start the journey of hope and build their resilience. Every time they meet, they were saving. Each one in the group has a target to achieve at the end of year, so they do savings with purpose. Along the way, they can lend to each other to respond to emerging needs, and repayments will be made as agreed to allow other group members to borrow.

After the raising our heads above the clouds narrative therapy work, and after putting some money into savings clubs, these are the new identity stories and values that the group discovered for themselves and which they want to show to others in the community. They are:

- patient
- hard working
- empathetic
- good teachers
- good communicators
- good at offering care
- and they value hope and joy.

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The group wanted the community to know:

- please don't judge us negatively
- we are proud of our children
- we never give up
- we are together as a group
- we want to go far and raise our voices.

They have been happy to find new identities, learn new skills, support each other and to rewrite their new preferred stories.

Now they are ready to work on how they can raise their voice above the clouds, in the communities they are living in, as a way of supporting other single mothers that are still experiencing difficult situations.

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Reflection

A reflection from Tanzania

by Deborah Mrema



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As I reflect on my learnings from engaging with narrative ideas as applied by the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, the following theme stands out: no matter where we are located around the globe, our communities have in common the deep desire to navigate the world with peace, joy, acceptance, acknowledgment and purpose. The road to this destination is filled with all sorts of 'clouds'; however, we can overcome them if we can engage our curiosity muscles to question dominant identity storylines.

I work in Tanzania with young people orphaned by HIV/AIDS who have been encircled in clouds like opportunistic infections, discrimination, poverty, stigmatisation and depression. I have observed that turning points occur when we create space for them to share their stories of pride and survival. This went hand-in-hand with acknowledgment of stories of where they come from, the hardships they face in life and their effects, how they survived these, and their hopes and dreams. The Tree of Life activity (Ncube, 2006), for instance, has taken us through conversations about places in our children's lives that wouldn't be predicted by the dominant narrative of 'growing up in an orphanage'. When colleagues who also supported the children in other areas of their development were invited as outsider witnesses, it offered a glimpse of ways caregivers had responded to similar clouds in their upbringing. This showed the children that they are not alone in their obstacles.

In order for communities facing any sorts of hardship to achieve their desired future, I am convinced that there is a need for this pursuit to be guided by discovery, acknowledgment and recognition of the experiences that make us who we are so as to create space for who we can become. There is a need for us (social workers) to engage with our own experiences in the process and to bring to light resonating themes.
I believe by doing this we will support multi-dimensional growth, development and healing of our communities: physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

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Reflection

Finding hope in the midst of struggle

by Hugo Kamya



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The call to raise our heads above the clouds, as Caleb Wakhungu invites us in his work with the people of Mt Elgon, reverberates in many ways. Indeed, it transports me to many places.

It reminds of a journey that began 15 years ago when a group of students travelled with me to Uganda. While there, they saw firsthand people whose lives had been devastated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The scourge of HIV/AIDS left no-one unscathed. Then, just as it is now, no cure or vaccine was in sight.

Today, over 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. There are up to 12 million orphans in Africa. The plight of HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by many other ills such as war, trauma and natural disasters, as Caleb has documented in his work.

Caleb's work brings me full circle to the efforts of goodwill all over the continent: people who have taken it upon themselves to make a difference in people's lives, harnessing the gifts of the people, with the people, from the people and by the people themselves. People empowering themselves to find their own strength through the stories that have held them together over the years.

These are stories of survival and endurance. These are the gifts, the hopes, the dreams and the gifts they bring to the table in their daily struggles. In the midst of those struggles are the gifts that connect us all in our humanity.

Exploring small moments of hope and survival rings true in the work I have done with a little community in the outskirts of Kampala. This children's project, The Makula Fund for Children, has focused on education as the cornerstone of success. Education is a prized commodity all over Africa. Every child longs to go to school if they can afford it. Every child longs to stay in school and bring home a report card that a parent would be proud of. A certificate of pride. Having a child

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go to school and stay in school is a badge of pride and honour for every parent. It is a story of pride and survival. Every parent lives vicariously through their child's success at school.

In this project, we talk with the children about what school means to them. We have explored together stories of pride. The children have told us their dreams for a future. Together, we have imagined what that might look like for them. In one of these meetings, we asked the children if they had one wish what that would be. The story of one child stands out to me: six-year-old Carter told us, 'If I had one wish, I would like to have a pencil'. We were blown away by this response.

We have explored each child's dreams they have shared with us. We have reflected back what these dreams mean to us and to them. We have also pondered together the complexity of these dreams as we have listened to the simplicity of these utterings. We have linked these simple moments in a variety of ways and imagined what a pencil can do, will do and has done, exploring the potential that lies in a pencil.

Our work with the children's project has also led us to ask more questions. We have asked ourselves to imagine what else is missing and what else remains unspoken. We believe that there is much in what is spoken and much in what remains unspoken. There are many stories to any one moment. In what is unspoken are moments of survival and resilience, so we ask about them. We ask the children to tell us what keeps them going and why it keeps them going. We believe that through building a curiosity around these unspoken stories, we will find clues and calls to action in these young persons.

As part of the children's project, we provide breakfast before the children go to school. Breakfast is very important so that they can function at school. Breakfast consisted of a cup of porridge and a piece of bread. On one morning, one five-year-old arrived late and took time to mingle with the rest of the kids. He looked nervously around as everyone prepared to walk to school. My eyes followed him and as we walked the children to a school, as we always did. I checked in with him. I noted that he kept his hands in his pocket as if he were holding on to something. With even greater nervousness and perhaps embarrassment, he revealed a small piece of bread he was carrying in his pocket from the breakfast. I asked, 'How come you did not eat your piece of bread?' With tears flowing down his cheeks, he said he was saving it for his brother who could not make it to the breakfast meeting. I marvelled at this five-year-old's sense of agency, caring and empathy. This was his call to action: he was starting his own vegetable garden. His story of survival was collectively felt in his brother's survival, his brother's hopes, his brother's dreams. Whether it is a pencil or a piece of bread, this is the call to action.

These are the emblematic stories of hope and survival, of joy and anticipation, of pride and life into the future. We have sought to listen with new eyes and to see with new ears. To seek survival in action, in healing, in hope and in the future.

Our work culminates in celebration as children share stories of their achievements. They share these stories in music, drama and dance. Movement provides creative moments of self-discovery and collective discovery. Older kids have engaged in the call to action by starting income-generating activities: brick laying, tailoring, raising poultry or pigs, growing vegetables.

Like Caleb and his team, my work and my team's work with the children's project has been about finding positive entry points finding moments to explore and expand the children's stories of survival, seeking together to build on each one's Tree of Life as a collective. It is ultimately a call to connection, to understanding and to action. The community is intimately involved in imagining what this action should be.

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Fostering community economy through collective narrative practice:

Imagining a new economic politics

by David Denborough

David Denborough works as a community worker, teacher and writer/editor for Dulwich Centre. He is particularly interested in cross-cultural partnerships that limit the chances of psychological colonisation and create possibilities for cross-cultural inventions. daviddenborough@dulwichcentre.com.au

Early on in his descriptions of the ground-breaking work of the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, Caleb Wakhungu described what many African rural communities are up against:

> Communities are stretched to breaking point and important values that kept societies, communities and families together are eroding as a result of colonisation, natural calamities, extreme economic hardships, epidemics and adoption of approaches that disempower people, rendering them passive recipients of knowledge. Quite often, programs to relieve the suffering of our people are designed in major world capitals and our people are positioned as passive recipients of aid – a phenomenon that destroys communities' capacities to respond.

In response, the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project centres local knowledge and local values. This involves honouring cultural knowledge in particular ways that are in sharp contrast to most economic projects that are imposed on the majority world.

Culture and economics

Amartya Sen (2004) has described how, generally speaking, 'economists pay inadequate attention to culture in investigating the operation of societies in general and the process of development in particular' (p. 37). Where culture is discussed in economic literature (Harrison & Huntington, 2000; Landes, 2000), too often the cultures of the majority world are described as somehow 'the enemy' – 'a voice from the past that inhibits societies from functioning in the modern world' (Rao & Walton, 2004, p. 10).

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In contrast, the work of Caleb Wakhungu and the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project is based on grassroots leadership and autonomy in which culture and history, far from being conceived of as the 'enemy', is the gateway to social agency and possibility.

Caleb Wakhungu grounds the approach of 'Raising heads above the clouds' in the following treasured local commitments and cultural values that his community is seeking to defend:

- work not being tied to a wage (money)
- sense of community
- the value of family relations
- respect for elders
- hard work
- justice and fairness
- the sacredness of human life
- seeking good relations
- hospitality
- honesty and integrity
- African sense of time
- humans living in harmony with the environment for mutual benefit
- honouring connections (including with the sun).

The diverse economic practices fostered by the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project are in defence of these values, not in opposition to them. Significantly, these treasured values are not positioned as only 'things of the past', but also as guides by which to orientate to the future. The significance of this is conveyed by Arjun Appadurai in his influential paper 'The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition' (2004). In this paper, Appadurai focuses on one dimension of culture – 'its orientation to the future':

> In taking this approach to culture, we run against some deeply held counter conceptions. For more than a century, culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness – the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future – plans, hopes, goals, targets. This opposition is an artefact of our definitions and has been crippling. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 60)

The work of Caleb Wakhungu weaves between present, past and future, using people's stories of present and past survival to lift heads above the clouds in order to aspire to and take future action. Aspirations have a social history and creating rich textual heritage can enable people to look forwards. The narrative processes described in 'Raising our heads above the clouds' shape individual and collective horizons.

Appadurai also described the challenge of 'how to bring the politics of dignity and the politics of poverty into a single framework' (2004, p. 63), and described the significance of public and ceremonial moments in which the capacity to aspire is built by 'changing the terms of recognition' (2004, p. 77). A scintillating example is provided in 'Raising our heads above the clouds' when Caleb Wakhungu honours the achievements of young people at the public launch of the solar project:

> We acknowledge the achievements of our young people. They may not have had shoes, enough clothes, and books to use at school, at times they may have gone without food, but they persisted through adversity to go on to higher institutions of learning and now they have done something that no-one else has done in our community. They have made our first solar panels. They have assembled these themselves. Over so many generations, our people have struggled to protect their crops from the heat of the sun and the strength of the winds. Their sacrifice has not been in vain. Now the dreams of our ancestors have come true. The hard work of our young people has made it possible for us to harness the heat of the sun. We acknowledge the achievements of our young people. It may have not been so easy for them along the way, but we are so happy that they raised their heads above the clouds. (Wakhungu, as quoted in Denborough, 2010, p. 20)

In this way, the achievements and aspirations of 'the future generation' are linked to the dreams of ancestors. Recognition is offered through the eyes of ancestry. Time and again in the work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, the 'politics of recognition' are connected to 'the politics of material life' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 80).

If culture is a 'dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions' (Appadurai, 2004, p.84), then as practitioners it is our task to find ways for this dialogue to spark and sustain meaningful social action. This task is at the heart of the collective narrative practice at Mt Elgon.

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Cultivating community economy – an anti-colonial economic practice

The work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project represents an initiative in which local culture is utilised as a gateway to social agency and possibility. Having considered the ways in which Caleb Wakhungu is enhancing the capacity to aspire by linking a politics of recognition with a politics of material life, I now wish to propose that the work at Mt Elgon Self-Help Group also provides an example of 'cultivating community economy' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2021) in ways that offer the possibility of invigorating a 'new economic politics' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxxiv).

Feminist economists Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (Gibson-Graham, 2006) emphasised the significance of making 'visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that everywhere abound' (2006, p. xxiv) and in doing so constructing a language of the 'diverse economy … populated by various capitalist and noncapitalist institutions and practices' (2006, p. 54). Their work is an attempt to expand our 'economic vocabulary' (2006, p. 62) to include different kinds of transaction, different types of labour, and different forms of enterprise (2006, pp. 62–63). In doing so, they hope to bring forth 'new ethical practices of thinking economy' which in turn can enable 'different kinds of economic beings' (2006, p. xxvii).

As previously mentioned, the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project is deliberating cultivating community economy in ways that defend preferred local cultural values. These include particular attitudes and commitments to work, to time, to human relationships and to the environment, which are in contrast to dominant Western economic practice. Linked to the defence of these values, the 'Raising our heads above the clouds' process sparks and sustains not only market-based economic activity, but through the principle of 'the gift of giving' and a range of collective narrative practices that link individual action to a collective ethos and collective action (savings clubs, collective house-building processes), it equally prioritises what are sometimes referred to as 'informal economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 58) or 'non-market economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 26). These are economies that sustain values such as 'work as beyond wage/money', 'sense of community', 'the value of family relations' and so on.

At the same time, the work at Mt Elgon prioritises environmentally sustainable economies and biodiversity. Their work therefore represents the use of collective narrative practices to spark and sustain three inter-relating strands of diverse economic practices: market-based economic activity, non-market transactions/relations, and environmental sustainability. The sort of community economy being generated through the Mt Elgon process aspires towards an 'ethical interdependence' (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020, p. 3) of these three strands. It's an approach to economics that is not separate from ecology:

> The 'eco' in economy comes from the Greek root oikos, meaning 'home' or 'habitat,' while 'nomy' derives from nomos, meaning management. We view economy as referring to all of the practices that allow us to survive and care for each other and the earth. Economy understood this way, refers to the ongoing management – and therefore negotiation – of human and nonhuman ecological relations of sustenance. (p. 411)

Cultivating community economies also influences forms of subjectivity – ways of relating to oneself and others. Gibson-Graham (2006) in writing about a slum dwellers' alliance in Mumbai, describe the ways in which certain forms of economic practice are linked to new practices of self:

> Saving groups are the consciousness-raising groups of the Alliance … It is in these small groups that individuals embark on a project of ethical self-transformation in Foucault's (1997) terms, or a micropolitics of (re)subjectivation in Connolly's terms (1995, 1999). To join such a group is to engage in new practices of the self – setting aside savings from what is already too little to live on in the case of the women slum dwellers … In the process, new senses of self are instituted – through self developments as citizens, house designers, investors, or entrepreneurs, through self-recognition of their survival capacities as poor women and migrants, through daily recommitment to the cultivation of solidarity. The savings groups focused on individual self-transformation are the foundation on which alternative economic interventions are built. (Gibson-Graham et al., 2021, p. 411)

Similarly, the work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project involves 'new' practices of self, but these are sparked and sustained by interweaving present hopes and dreams with the perspectives and views of the ancestors. What is 'new' is also 'old'.

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Michel Foucault, in a very different context, wrote:

> The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the economy … but to liberate us both from the economy and from the type of individualization that is linked to the economy. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1983, p. 216)

In Mt Elgon, this refusal is also anti-colonial. It involves the restoration and defence of treasured cultural values at the same time as making real differences to people's material lives.

In critiquing the Eurocentrism and environmental consequences of the assumptions that underpin notions of 'economic development' that are regularly imposed on the majority world, social scientist Wolfgang Sachs (2010) emphasised the urgent need for the greater autonomy of local communities which in turn would make possible:

> transition from economies based on fossil-fuel resources to economies based on biodiversity, and oppose the trend to functionalise work, education and the land in order to boost economic efficiency, insisting on the right to act according to values of culture, democracy and justice. (Sachs, 2010, p. xiii)

Sachs went on to argue that there can be 'no equity without ecology in the twenty-first century' (2010, p. xii) and that this will require a 'decolonization of the imagination' (2010, p. ix). Perhaps the work of Caleb Wakhungu and the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project can provide pathways for our imagination.

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Engaging with imagery in the context of grief after suicide

by Miguel Feliciano

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Abstract

Following a loved one's suicide, bereaved persons are sometimes revisited by pain in the form of intrusive imagery. This paper focuses on externalising intrusive imagery. It also addresses the potential for imagery to be evoked to support re-membering conversations. Through the use of narrative practices, an image can become a site where new, preferred meaning can be made.

Key words: memory; image; visual; intrusive; trauma; suicide; bereavement; narrative practice

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I previously worked as a suicide bereavement counsellor for a local community health service from 2020 to 2022. In that time, I learnt a great deal about the application of narrative practice. Re-membering conversations have been particularly relevant as a way of honouring the continued relationship and bond between the deceased and those who survive them (Hedtke & Winslade, 2004). However, because of the complexity inherent in suicide, such conversations are rarely simple in this field of grief. It is difficult to come to terms with a loved one's decision to end their life. A question that often remains is 'Why?' Other questions can multiply into infinity and often concern the actions or inactions of the bereaved: Is there something else that I could have done to help? Did I do something that influenced their decision? Such questions are shaped by dominant discourses about suicide and responsibility.[1] From what I have observed, there is often a vicious sense of anger or self-blame at having 'failed' to save someone they love or having failed to see 'warning signs'.

Drawing on the absent but implicit (White, 2000), we might inquire about what the anger implies about what is held precious in the relationship, and about the bereaved person's continued devotion and sense of responsibility to the person who has died. People bereaved by suicide are often bound by widely held ideas about death, and specifically the idea of a 'good death' (Sanders, 2020). Suicide in my context in Australia is generally perceived to be irreconcilable with notions of a good death. In my discussions with the bereaved, a good death has been described as involving an elderly person surrounded by loved ones, passing with the knowledge that they are loved. With suicide, at best there is doubt cast about whether the person knew they were loved before they died. At worst, the person may have died alone and feeling isolated. People bereaved by suicide often carry a sense of failure connected to their perceived duty and responsibility to provide their loved ones with a good death.

Within the discussions I have had with the bereaved, there has been fertile ground for the development of multi-storied narratives. These narratives can encompass a renegotiated relationship with the deceased: a complex relationship that defies the boundaries put in place by a perception of failure and allows the bereaved person to come to terms with their own actions or with paths not taken.

This paper offers possibilities for re-authoring the relationship between a loved one who has died by suicide and a person bereaved by their death. It explores the development of preferred identity conclusions through imagery and memory. Three stories are shared to demonstrate the creation or exploration of imagery of a loved one in the mind's eye of the bereaved. The stories presented also show a gradual evolution of practice, of engaging explicitly with evocative imagery and then a re-engagement with the meaning of certain memories. They incorporate elements of different lines of inquiry in combination, including re-membering practices and re-authoring conversations.

Central to this paper is the concept of the 'mind's eye': our capacity to visualise scenarios or memories, real or imagined, in our own mind. The history of narrative therapy abounds with examples of the use of imagery throughout its lines of inquiry. For example, imagery is often evoked in externalising practices, specifically in relation to constructing an image of a problem in one's mind. Imagery is also used in re-membering practices, specifically in relation to seeing oneself through the eyes of another, through which the line of inquiry can be further explored. This has been described as visuality or focalising (see Denborough, 2018, pp. 87–97). Imagery is used in the three stories shared here to contribute to the revitalisation of life through richly acknowledging treasured values that may have become obscured.

Albert: A bereaved son

Albert's father had died by suicide. Albert described having had a close relationship with his father and said that his understandings and performance of masculinity had derived from his observations of his father. Albert described his father as someone capable and strong with a clear understanding of himself. Albert discovered from his family that his father had died by suicide in the family home. In sessions with Albert, he explained to me that there were questions about why the suicide was enacted at home. The suicide also challenged assumptions about Albert's understanding of his father and their relationship. Questions that arose included: 'Am I not enough?' and 'How well did my father know himself if he was able to perform this action?'

In one session, Albert spoke about not being able to feel the presence of his father. Albert explained that he thought he was meant to feel his father's presence and he desired this sense of connection; however, what he was met with instead was absence.

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Miguel: Do you ever get this sense that it's like you take notice of your father, that it's like he's there with you or a part of you?

Albert: I don't know what it's supposed to feel like. What I feel now is an absence, and it makes everything sadder. If I had connection, then I could at least have that. I don't have anything to carry or to move forward with. I need to find him first.

When discussing the concept of 'presence', Albert explained that what was left or what remained of his father were moments – memories of events and sensory recollections – that would remind him of his father, and those moments were where he continued to exist.

Miguel: Then what do you believe or what do you make of what's become of your father?

Albert: I don't believe in reincarnation or Heaven, but I do believe that what he had become was too big to become nothing. The things he left are memories, moments. Things that remind me of him: places, smells, sounds. That's where he exists and it's hard for me to say he left me.

In speaking with him further about memories, Albert described a connection to his father that was fostered in the act of remembering his father's face.

During this session, Albert spoke of an image that had appeared to him in his mind's eye. It was an image that he could interact with of his father sitting in a car with him. Albert explained that the car had sentimental value as it was a vehicle that his father drove, and in which he sometimes had conversations with Albert. His account of the vehicle was suffused with history: the car embodied a history of their interactions.

Albert: The first time since he passed away that I felt his presence was when I had to move my father's car. The memories flooded back. The car smelled so strongly of him … I can picture him, I can feel him. I can think back on those conversations and it feels like I'm talking to him.

In this construct, Albert was able to engage in a conversation with his father; however, his father did not respond to Albert's words. The construct allowed him an opportunity to feel the presence of his father, and afforded him an opportunity to speak with his father.

Miguel: When you're there with your father, are you able to talk to him? Can he hear you? What might he say to you?

Albert: I tell him, 'I can't believe that you're gone', but there's no answer from him. But it's comforting. It means a lot to me that he can hear, otherwise there'd be no reason to say anything. It's comforting because it's him sitting there, listening.

The construct allowed for a level of interaction that would have once been considered impossible because of the forced separation suicide had brought. Words that were perhaps unsaid were now spoken. The construct of the father did not speak in response, but he was listening. Listening is an action too. In some ways, this was reflective of an ongoing relationship with the deceased, present but with a level of interactivity that could not be replicated as though the person were alive. For Albert, the image could be revisited to allow him the presence of his father, and for this to be felt. Albert explained that this was the only time that he was in the presence of his father. The image of his father as he was known, as confirmed in his eyes, was one that he was not only familiar with, but also identified a sense of closeness to within the construct.

Beth: A bereaved sister

Beth's brother had died by suicide. When I was working with her, she spoke of her fear about experiencing the image of her brother's death. There was a sense of dread in relation to the anticipation of this experience. Sure enough, one day Beth attended a session and said that her fear had come to be: Beth had experienced seeing an image of her brother's death. Prior to this, Beth had expressed being grateful that this was something she had been spared and she hoped she would never have to experience.

At this point, I took care to find out whether or not Beth wanted to speak more about this experience. This was a delicate negotiation. When Beth said that she would like to speak about this, I asked, 'Could you tell me more about this? What is it that you were noticing? What is that you were seeing?'

Beth explained that the imagery that had been conjured in her mind's eye was of the day of her brother's passing: his tending to his pet, his drive to the site of his death and the mechanics of the act itself. When asked about her presence throughout this construct,

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this image, Beth explained that she existed as an observer, able to travel alongside her brother.

It was important at this point to check in with Beth about her experience of this 'travelling alongside' her brother and also about Beth's experience of this conversation we were sharing. Hearing that she was happy to continue the conversation, I wanted to understand her level of interactivity with the construct, and thus the potential for action: if an image visited itself on her, how or in what capacity might she respond to this intrusion? For this purpose, it was necessary to understand what could or could not be done in accordance with her experience. She told me that in the image, she was invisible to her brother and could not feel his touch.

Miguel: I'm just trying to understand the limit or the boundary of this image or your level of interaction with it. For example, can you move closer to him? And if you can, would he notice you?

Beth: I can get close to him, but he can't see me.

Miguel: Are you able to touch him or are there senses that you can use as you move through this image?

Beth: All I can do is watch him and follow him; I can't do anything else.

She could be with him as he fed his pet, as he drove to his destination, and perhaps most importantly of all, she could see the expression on his face as he prepared to end his life and as he did so.

Beth had explained to me that one of her greatest concerns for her brother was in relation to him having died alone with no-one to be there with him and no opportunity for others to comfort him prior to his passing. In the image she was able to see, Beth could bear witness to this act. She had not been present; however, through engaging with the image, she was able to be there with him as he passed. Following this, Beth explained that the image of her brother on the day of his death was no longer distressing for her.

In this instance, I felt that my function was to assist Beth as a guide as she traversed the construct, to explore it with her and to learn of its limitations, so as to explore a line of inquiry regarding about her response to trauma, or what options could be afforded to Beth in this instance in terms of responding. Thus, it was necessary to ask her what meaning she was able to derive from this experience, from this conscious act of bearing witness in the only way that she could.

I asked: 'If your brother were to bear witness to this, to know that you had been with him at the time of his death, what would it mean to him? Might he appreciate that you did what you could to ensure that he wasn't alone?'

Michael White once wrote that 'no-one is a passive recipient of trauma', and that we each do what we can in order to minimise the effects of the harm done, if we cannot prevent the harm itself being done to us (White, 2004, p. 48). Angel Yuen wrote about the need to explore an individual's response or responses to trauma visited on them, the meaning associated with it and the reverberations throughout their life (Yuen, 2019). Beth may not have been able to be there in person when her brother passed, but she was able to do so within the confines of the construct.

Re-authoring and responding to trauma

In the process of engaging with the image, even though Beth was limited in interaction to bearing witness to her brother, the act of witnessing in and of itself was a response. When speaking with Beth about revisiting or reengaging with the image, she explained that it was deeply important to her to bear witness to what happened to her brother in the confines of the construct, and to not turn away as she did not want her brother to be alone.

There was the potential for double story development in this act of witnessing. It invited questions about what strength it must take to not turn away, about what is valued in the relationship.

In relation to the landscape of identity, there was value afforded to the familial relationship of brother and sister and to the idea of loyalty to the deceased, which remains and is not made immaterial because of death. In this story, witnessing was an act of loyalty to ensure that her brother would not be alone.

Miguel: What do you think it would mean to your brother that you were able to see this, that you were able to bear witness to his death and not turn away? If he were to notice your action, if he were to know that you had done this so that he wouldn't be alone, what do you think it would mean to him?

Beth: I think he'd be grateful, and I think he'd be appreciative of this. I think it would make him feel happy and put him at peace.

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Miguel: And what about you – what does it mean to you that you were able to do this for him, and to know that this is how he would respond?

Beth: If he knew that I did this, it would bring me peace. I could never turn away from him. I hope he knows that.

Cate: A bereaved partner

Cate's partner had died by suicide. When I first began to work with her, Cate spoke of the difficulties she experienced in being able to function in everyday life, in attending to self-care, and in engaging in work or other activities. Cate said that she had repeatedly been visited by the memory of the day she learnt her partner had died.

Cate expressed a great deal of concern about how she had responded when she discovered that her partner had passed away. She explained that she was concerned about the blankness of her expression when she was informed. I asked Cate for permission to enquire about the details of the memory: the sights and sounds and history of the event to create an impression, for it to be populated in the mind's eye of both the client and the therapist. Asking permission showed respect for her sovereignty over her memory and her past, centring her experience and decentring me by positioning me as nothing more than a witness. I asked:

- Would you be willing to invite me into the memory, so I can see it alongside you?
- Paint me a picture. If I were there, what would I be noticing or what would I be seeing or feeling? Was it a cold day or a warm day? Where are we exactly?
- Are there any sounds that caught your attention?

Within the constructed memory that existed in the mind's eye, the memory could be interacted with even more so than in the previous stories. Cate could see the actions of her past self, could comment on what she was seeing and could interact with her past self. The sensory experience of touch was also present within the construct. Questions were asked in order to evoke this sense of Cate actively witnessing her past self and her past self's actions on that day, so that she might be able to refer to herself and her past in the third person to provide a recollection of the events of that day from a distance, and to ultimately interact with the memory.

From here, I asked questions to assist Cate in coming to a new understanding of her previous actions, which had previously plagued her.

- What do you notice of what you see of your past self, particularly in relation to her expression?
- What does it communicate or what does it speak to that there is a lack of expression evident?
- When you look upon and see this sense of numbness, what purpose might that serve for your past self?
- Might this sense of numbness aim to protect her from this moment?

Miguel: In relation to the enormity of this moment, do you believe that your past self would have been able to survive this moment if numbness were not there to protect her from this event?

Cate: No, it would've been too much for her if she felt all of it. The numbness saved her.

Within the bounds of the construct, Cate was able to re-experience the event from a different perspective. Rather than living through it as a first-person account, she was able to provide a third-person account commenting on the actions of her past self. She was able to see herself interacting with the police. She was able to see her past self's sense of numbness, her interactions with those who had accompanied her and her experience of isolation. Most importantly, Cate was able to interact with her past self and embrace her.

When I asked about the effects of these questions, Cate said that the imagery of the event no longer replayed in her mind. Although the event remained upsetting, it was relegated to the past, rather than existing in the present. Cate also explained that she had benefited from being able to share this memory with me so that she no longer carried it alone.

Temporality

In this instance, the element of temporality took on a unique aspect. I have found it interesting to consider Deleuzian ways of relating to time. In Lorraine Hedtke's and John Winslade's (2017) writing about Deleuze's concept of time, they mention a demarcation in the conceptualisation of time: Chronos and Aoin. Chronos is a conceptualisation of time in accordance

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with linearity: the past, present and future in all their measurements – seconds, days, weeks, months and years. Then there is Aion, the perception of time as a fluid construct in which the past flows into the present and the future exists in the now (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017).[2]

Through engaging with the past so directly, time takes on an almost geographical component. The past is something that can be traversed, witnessed, and in Cate's experience, interacted with in a way that is different to what had originally occurred.

These modes of time are relevant in this case because through this knowledge it can be understood that the person's experience of time is no longer subject to linearity.

Cate had experienced frequent intrusions from the past, specifically images of the day of her partner's death. These images would fill her nightmares and intrude in her days, thus existing in the present. Cate explained that what had been particularly helpful in relation to this practice of working with these images was that this event now resided in the past and no longer occupied her present.

Taking care when engaging with traumatic imagery or memories

Albert, Beth and Cate brought experiences that I imagine were intense and profound for each of them, and that had the potential to be retraumatising. As Michael White insisted, there is no reason for someone to experience re-traumatisation through the process of treatment; perhaps distress, but never trauma (White, 2004).

In my experience with engaging with images from memory, it seems to be most relevant when discussing traumatic imagery with clients, whether this imagery appears through the conscious revisiting of a memory or the examination of nightmares that invoke feelings of distress or powerlessness. The conscious choice to carefully examine these images can give rise to opportunities for exploring alternative storylines, rather than the single-storied and thin descriptions of these images that might ascribe to the person's qualities of being helpless or having failed. Engaging with imagery in this way serves the goal of developing a multi-storied narrative. It allows us to make visible the person's values by ascribing value to action: the action of witnessing a brother's death, or talking to one's father in their car, or witnessing the past and looking upon it with compassion.

Engaging with particular imagery from memory allows opportunity for the client to bear witness to the actions of their past self or their responses to trauma. Importantly, the practice also allows for someone else to be invited into the memory, to bear witness at the behest of the client, while ensuring that the client maintains sovereignty over the exploration of the memory. The witness could be a practitioner, or it could also be an imagined or evoked figure significant to the person.

Shaped by narrative practice, these explorations reveal knowledge, skills or initiatives that may not have been readily known to the client as the event happened. They allow for further lines of inquiry such as re-authoring conversations, and for an aggregation or a re-aggregation of the membership of the client's club of life, which may be seen or confirmed in the eyes and minds of others who view the memory.

Here are some examples of questions that may be asked of someone describing an image or memory:

- As you watch yourself experiencing this event, what do you notice about how your past self responded or how they were able to survive this moment?
- What skills are being witnessed or what knowledges or initiatives can you see are being utilised?
- What can you tell me about this skill, its history or how it has served or aided you in the past? Would we be able to traverse those memories as well, so as to see and to acknowledge the occasions in which this has served you?
- Was this taught to you by someone, and if it was taught to you by another, what would it mean to them to know that what they had passed on to you had helped you or perhaps even saved you in that moment? If they were with us in this moment, what might they take notice of? What might they see?
- If they were present or if they were to see this memory, what might they notice? What might be confirmed in their mind upon noticing your response, or how you resisted the effects of this event?

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The image as an externality

The intention, then, is to view the image as external to the person; to separate the person from the problem (White & Epston, 1990). In this way, the relationship between the person and the image, in whichever form it takes, does not need to be rendered static. There is the potential for the image to become a site where meaning is made.

Importantly, the purpose is to engender a relationship with the image in which power is not invested solely in the image or the person's experiences of trauma. This involves constantly establishing safety in a collaborative way. I have mentioned throughout this paper the need to check with people about whether they wish to explore a particular image and ways of constantly monitoring the effects of any conversation.

A further practice of safety involves enabling the client to view a memory or an image from a third-person perspective, rather than to re-experience the image or memory in the first person. The client is invited to see themself as though watching events occur to someone else.

- When you go back to when it happened, do you experience it as though you're going through it all over again, or is it like you're watching it happen to someone else?
- Would you be able to see it like it's happening to someone else? If you are able to do that, I wonder what you might see, what you might take notice of.

The client is then also invited to consider what they might notice about the actions or expressions of their past self. To look on the memory or image, to witness it instead of reliving it from the first person, is itself a measure of protection for the client. It prevents them from having to re-experience the past as though it were happening to them all over again. It creates distance between the client and the image or memory.

- As you watch this happen to your past self, what is it that you take notice of? What has caught your attention or is there anything in particular about this image or memory that resonates with you? If it does, why might this be so?

The monitoring of traumatic hyperarousal can also occur as the person is bearing witness to the image. The practitioner need only ask how they are responding to the sight of the image:

- As you look on this memory, as you notice your past self's actions, how does that make you feel?

Conclusion

In suicide bereavement there are sometimes experiences of pain that revisit the bereaved in the form of intrusive imagery. This paper has offered some ways of using narrative practices to engage with imagery in ways that render it external to the person with the hope of altering its meaning and its power. In my experience, through extending re-authoring and re-membering conversations, such imagery can become a site where new, preferred meaning can be made.

Notes

[1] For detailed discussion of such discourses within particular cultures and their implications for those bereaved by suicide, see Sather (2021).

[2] There are also the Aboriginal modes of thought in relation to time, including the concept of 'everywhen'. According to the concept of everywhen, there is no past, present or future; there is the now 'normal time' and there is 'eternal time', which exists in parallel and occasionally erupts into the present (Victoria Grieve Williams in Rutledge, 2020).

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Narrative therapy in trauma care

by Joanna Bayes



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Abstract

The telling of stories is how we make sense of our lives. With trauma, our understandings of our stories are dramatically altered and somewhat reduced. This is particularly so when a patient has a near-death experience, multiple serious injuries and must be passive in order to survive. There is a need to rebuild a narrative in which the person is active, congruent and competent. My story starts with falling off a balcony on the first night of a holiday. Initially I adapted poorly to the loss of agency that is essential to recovery. I clashed with the intensive-care nurses as I fought to protect myself from pain within a state of sedation, delirium and confusion. Trauma deeply disturbs and destabilises a person's sense of themselves. It can permanently impair many facets of our lives and damage our relationships to family and community. The collaborative and interactional process of narrative therapy can rebuild agency and empower trauma survivors. It can help prevent the patient from extending trauma-related vulnerability, damage and passivity into the future. It can assist with processing trauma and gently fostering new stories to incorporate the uniqueness, depth and complexity of trauma and human lives.

Key words: trauma; narrative therapy; recovery; reflective writing

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Creating a narrative in trauma care

As a social worker in an acute aged mental health ward, I watch patients struggle to come to terms with a breakdown of their identities through relapse, dementia or delirium. It was not until I underwent multiple-injury trauma of my own that I could understand the therapeutic importance of building a new narrative that incorporates the shock, pain, distress, disjunctions and interruptions that can lead to hospitalisation. Narrative therapy in particular has the potential to assist with putting the pieces back together. My story started with falling off a balcony on the first night of a holiday.

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Early days

Initially there were fragments. A voice asked, 'Where are you? Why are you here? Can you wiggle your toes for me?'

I replied, 'In Canberra Hospital. I fell off a balcony'. My voice was hoarse. I knew what to say, but I did not believe my words. Rote learnt, spoken before sliding back into unconsciousness. I had no drive to understand what my words meant. They were a newly minted narrative gifted to me by an intensive care nurse. The observer in me was still there, but small, passive and mostly silent. I wiggled my toes.

I started to learn new things. When two people came to move me they caused intolerable pain. I found energy from my oblivion to shout at them, which stopped them briefly. I took strength from this and shouted louder when they came again, flailing my arms so that they could not get close. But they kept coming. They rolled me, holding my ribs firmly, not knowing about the 11 breaks in them, while I shouted for them to stop. Early on there were only three themes: sleep, pain and fight. When I woke, discomfort would make me tug at my nasogastric tube, pull out my oxygen plugs and lift up my top because I was hot and in pain. I was trapped and fought this vigorously, despite being slowed by opiates. I thought I could not bear the pain, then realised I could not escape it either, that I cannot get out of my body. This caused an awful despair and hopelessness that thankfully did not last long. I was given an extra nurse. She sat with me to stop me sabotaging my treatment, asking crossly, 'Do you want to show the other patients your breasts?' I was surprised at her anger, but also her assumption about my world. Shame was irrelevant to me.

Eventually I complied, giving up my body to the hospital, accepting my treatment. In my dreams I was attacked by a man. As he squeezed my neck I let go, choosing to submit to him. It was infinitely easier than struggle.

My post-traumatic amnesia protected me from the full impact of my accident. I had no memories of the fall or of the helicopter ride from the South Coast over the mountains to Canberra Hospital. Nor do I remember the halo brace being screwed on to my skull to prevent movement in my neck. I wonder if I was terrified or trusting, and whether these feelings remain in my body somewhere.

In the early days of wearing the halo brace, I could not sit up. I was anchored to the bed and required two nurses to assist me to move. I adapted but never stopped walking into doorways. I would be shocked with the enormity of the sudden vibrations.

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Alice

My daughter was about to start high school. I wanted to give her a taste of my own childhood holidays. I rented a house in Mossy Point. It had been a Church in its previous life and backed on to a river. The house had a spiral staircase linking the bedrooms upstairs with the downstairs living area. The wood was smooth and potentially slippery. I told Alice to be careful walking on the stairs with socks on her feet. We were under the magic spell of the first night of a holiday, when everything is new and time stretches out before you. I asked Alice to dangle her legs in the gaps between the stairs and took some photos. After the accident, I studied these photos and others from the day before when we were on a bush walk with my father. I studied our pre-accident faces, surprised that life can change so quickly, wondering why our faces foolishly did not register what was to come.

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I was not tethered to time. The line between sleep and consciousness was blurred. When I woke, I was dragged back into the sludge of an opiate sleep. I asked for pain killers straight away, unable to feel anything but pain. It consumed me, and I was consumed by it. I could not properly sequence events and did not yet ask why I fell.

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Injuries

As time went on, my injuries became apparent. The most alarming was a broken neck, a hangman's fracture of my C2 vertebra. As I landed, my neck was forced back by the railing until it snapped. I also broke my larynx, jaw and ribs. My teeth continued to chip in my mouth. I had a brain bleed and damaged lungs. I could not breathe properly or swallow, hence my need for tubes. I had daily injections into my stomach to stop blood clots forming.

Due to nerve damage, my eyes could no longer work in unison. While one focused, the other looked inwards. I could choose which to focus. This resulted in double vision. In my world, there was two of everything. A nurse put a sign next to my bed reading 'Joanna is vision imparied'. The spelling tickled my fancy.

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Midnight phone call

My mother had been woken by Peter, Alice's dad. She rushed him through the social niceties that have no place in overnight calls. Thankfully Peter could drive up, leaving immediately. My mother carried herself through the long drive from Melbourne as best as she could. They were going to a nurse's house. Sarah had taken Alice home with her as Peter insisted she not remain at the hospital, trying to prevent further trauma. It meant that Alice could not be reassured by the life in me. Alice was the witness to events of that night and the following days. When she was not there, I had to rely on my unreliable mental stock art to fill the gaps. Alice answered my questions patiently in the months following the accident. I would badger her in my attempt to fit together the broken parts of my story, endlessly seeking a narrative that made sense. Months later, Alice would reveal the courage of her actions to keep me safe, which were acknowledged with a bravery award.

Phoning for an ambulance is difficult when you do not know where you are and time is ticking away. When Alice found the address and called 000 the operator asked if I was alert and breathing. She somehow found the strength to go out the backdoor to confront this question. Alice kept me still, preventing me from moving my neck and severing my spinal cord, thereby possibly saving my life. She was alone and not alone.

***

Wedding anniversary

It was Sarah's wedding anniversary. She had brought a traumatised young person home with her instead of celebrating with her husband. Apart from deferred alarm at my daughter going to a stranger's house, I was grateful for their kindness, and for giving Alice comfort, reassurance and food.

On the drive to her house, Sarah told Alice about my brain bleed. Alice remembered the last episode of *Offspring* in which Patrick died of a brain bleed from a knock on the head hours after falling off his bicycle. Alice sat with this as they drove down the dark highway. Alone and not alone.

When my mother arrived, she locked eyes with Alice and held the seriousness of my accident in her gaze. Alice teared up, then recovered. It was now a shared experience.

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ICU

My mother remembers approaching my bed in the intensive care unit at Canberra Hospital wondering if I would still be myself. She counts this as possibly the worst moment in her life.

I began to have more lucid moments in which I was aware of Alice and my mother at my bedside. I asked Alice questions. My voice was thick with the opiate syrup coating my nerves, and Alice's answers were neutral, careful not to burden me further. Like a drunk person, I thought my brain was functioning normally, that my speech did not give me away. But I was lost in language.

I managed to ring work, telling my boss that I had broken my neck, that I would not be back from annual leave on time, feeling guilty – a malingerer overplaying symptoms in order to avoid work. I thought it would take a few more weeks before life returned to normal, in denial about the extent of my trauma.

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Sleepwalking

When I was struggling to mobilise in the halo brace, something happened. I was found walking down the fire escape. In my sleep. I was roused by a gentle voice asking me where I was going.

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‘I don’t know’, I said, confused. ‘I think I am disoriented.’ ‘I think so too’, he said kindly, as if we had found something in common. ‘Let’s get you back to bed.’ Like cartoon characters who can walk on air until they realise there is no ground beneath their feet, my halo felt heavy again.

Waking in the morning, I had no recollection of this until a nurse said, in mock reprimand, ‘I heard you went sleepwalking last night!’ Another time my shoes were found two wards up. It was assumed I had delivered them on an overnight sleep mission.

From this incident came a reason for my fall. The sleep consultant reviewed me at my bedside the next day and declared I met the sleepwalking criteria. There was shared relief. On the night of the accident, I had been at a high risk of sleepwalking as I was tired from a day’s driving and disoriented from being in a new place. This had happened to other people. An academic’s son drove to a residential college to begin his degree. He was exhausted and that night in his sleep he fell out the window and broke his neck. His father took to the books and found other people had broken their necks from falling out of windows, off balconies and down stairs due to exhaustion and disorientation. I was part of a new club, in which the first day of holiday would forever be complicated by anxiety and safety planning.

***

Community

One morning my nurse told me I was being moved to the high dependency unit in the neurosurgery ward. By that stage I had a kind of Stockholm syndrome. I was dependent on my irritable nurse to alleviate my pain. She saw the concern and reassured me, ‘I’ll come to visit you’. She did not visit, and it did not matter. She had no obligations beyond the ICU. I was a body to be tended and she had done her job well, despite frustrations.

My nurse handed over to the new nurses within hearing distance. ‘Watch her. She needed specialling’, she said. ‘I had to be specialled?’

People at risk of self-harm or harm to others sometimes have an extra nurse sit with them. Due to my aggressive defence when staff approached, and because I pulled out my oxygen, catheter and feeding tubes, I fitted into both categories. I felt mildly ashamed. I was becoming more reactive.

As the pain became less consuming, I took more of an interest in the activity around me and joined conversations. We formed a small, supportive community. There was a kind politician with a brain tumour and a woman who broke her neck riding a horse with her family. She said in disbelief, ‘I never even wanted to go horse riding’. We were the lucky ones who could reasonably expect to return to our own lives in the future, even if this was corroded by doubt sometimes. Another man had broken his neck in a car accident. His father wanted me to talk to his son who was paraplegic from the severing of his spinal cord and severely depressed. I could not do this. Of the two of us, I was the survivor. The request confused me. I was just treading water.

***

Visitors

I had old friends visit. The faces I knew so well in my youth appeared before me, 25 years older. A blur of the familiar: friends seen through the haze of age, opiates and double vision. I lay in a bed and people came to me, offering their older selves and gifts. This was a part of the stripping away process of trauma recovery. You are laid bare. Then you start to build yourself up again. I did not see myself as others must have seen me, with a steel contraption rising like scaffolding from my head, my eyes flickering and askew, pipelines coming from my insides. My voice sounded raw from breaking my larynx. When I was moaning outside after falling, Alice thought there was a cow in the yard.

Seeing undisguised shock on visitors’ faces at first sight of me was initially confronting. My brother said, ‘You can get used to the halo brace. It’s your eyes that tell you something’s really wrong’. Some people knew intuitively to move with me in this new world. As the weeks went on, however, commenting on my eyes improving was reassuring, hearing empathy in relation to my apparatus was nice. It allowed people to come into my world a little, and I wanted this.

***

Brain damage

My head had taken a blow to the back of it, causing a brain bleed. It was unknown how this would affect me. A nurse said, ‘given the extent of your brain injury, it would be surprising if you didn’t have memory problems’. I have memory problems. I have an acquired brain injury.

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My cognition was formally tested. The possibility that I would score badly caused a spike of anxiety. I strained my brain to remember the shapes, to draw them again. Any evidence of impairment could stop my regular life. I scored 97 out of 100 on the Neuropsychiatry Unit Cognitive Assessment Tool (NUCOG). While this was something I could give out when I needed proof of cognitive function, it did not dispel doubts about my brain capacity, in myself and possibly others too.

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Homecoming

Eventually, after almost three weeks in Canberra Hospital, I was to be flown to Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH). The consultant on the neurosurgery ward in Melbourne was concerned by my post-traumatic amnesia. Before I could travel to Melbourne, I needed to pass a test. An occupational therapist came to my bed and showed me three pictures – a bird, a teacup, keys – that I had to remember for three consecutive days. I took four, failing the first time. Then I made a story out of the elements. A blackbird took my shiny keys from my teacup and flew off with them. I repeated this like a mantra. I passed the test, and was free to return to Melbourne.

I do not remember the flight. Only being transferred from ambulance stretcher to the Royal Flying Doctor Service plane stretcher, roaring along the runway, then being moved to the ambulance in Melbourne. Another missed flight.

RMH was a shock after Canberra. In comparison it was a huge, clattering health factory. The noises, voices and lights of the day seemed to barely dim at night. I was woken overnight and taken for scans. When sleep finally returned I was awoken at 7am for rounds, always too tired to enquire about my treatment. As I was becoming more passive and exhausted by recovery, my brother stepped in to advocate for me, which I am still grateful for. All I wanted now was to go home to my bed and daughter and cat. Finally, after a week, I could. Returning to Melbourne did not feel like coming home. I expected to quickly integrate my post-accident self with my life as a friend, relative, social worker and community member. But this is a slow process. It takes time to incorporate trauma into a life, to join the puzzle pieces and re-form a sense of self. It helps to talk to people close to you or to write about what happened.

Narrative therapy

There is a need for establishing a sequence of events, for putting things in order. But also to reflect on your reaction to events, to the shock and violence of trauma, to the deep-seated internal disturbance it produces. To rebuild a positive sense of self, trauma patients need to be patient with their depleted selves. But first, a space must be created.

Narrative therapy, as developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990), uses language and interaction to assist people to come to different interpretations of experience to facilitate better mental health. It makes room for the redevelopment of a new story. It creates a safe and empowering environment for the patient to reflect on their incident, hospitalisation and treatment, and to recapture agency and strength. This is particularly important when a patient has had multiple injuries from a sudden catastrophic event and who has been passive to assertive medical treatment in order to live and recover. Passivity can lead to a sense of hopelessness and depression once someone is out of the acute stage and discharged home. This was my experience.

The echo of trauma is long lasting. Something happens that almost takes your self, your life, your work and your relationships. It is a brutal experience that can wreck your future plans and change your identity. After the fall, my identity fused with being a damaged body. In the medical system, this was necessary to be treated and healed – and I will always be grateful to the staff who cared for me. A narrative of being a damaged body can be reinforced by others responding to your injuries from positions of love, kindness and compassion. It becomes hard to think or talk about anything else. Narrative therapy can work to gently shape an emotional understanding of what happened and assist to gather or reconcile different aspects of yourself, to move back into a life of competency and empowerment. Social workers have a crucial role in this and should be an important component of a multidisciplinary team that treats trauma patients, both in hospital and in community rehabilitation. In my experience, access to social workers was unfortunately lacking. Social workers know how to listen to stories. They know about grief and loss. They are alert to social isolation and work to link a person with their communities after a hospitalisation. They identify strengths and vulnerabilities with a sensitivity that is barely mentioned. Reconciling someone with a new stage of life is intrinsic to what we do. Within a narrative therapy framework,

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a social worker might be more alert to the complexity of a person's stories and work to collaboratively re-author them so the patient does not extend their trauma-related vulnerability, damage and passivity into their future.

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Bearing witness, externalising and re-authoring:

A response to Joanna Bayes' 'Narrative therapy in trauma care'

by Franca Butera-Prinzi, Nella Charles and Karen Story



Franca, Nella and Karen are family therapists and members of the Acquired Brain Injury team at The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University. The centre offers family therapy, training and consultation on family-sensitive practices, nationally. The team members have extensive experience working with individuals, couples and families who have been impacted by trauma, mental health issues and disability. https://www.latrobe.edu.au/research/centres/health/bouverie

Key words: Acquired Brain Injury, Narrative therapy, Family therapy

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In responding to Joanna Bayes's written account, we reflected on the following narrative inspired question: In what way does the narrator's living of their story touch me, encourage me, inspire me? As clinicians who work with individuals who have an acquired brain injury (ABI) and their families (Butera-Prinzi, Charles, & Story, 2016), Joanna's story encourages us to understand the experience from the inside. As one of us (Franca) describes, it also has us thinking about our own lives:

> Joanna's story is a reminder to me of both the fragility of life and strength of the spirit. In a split moment, this accident turned what would have been a fun family adventure into a near-death experience with a shattered body and mind. What resonated for me was how in a moment of despair and trauma, we can readily relinquish our body and mind to hospital staff to 'put the pieces back together', and how we can easily become 'passive observers in order to survive'. I was inspired by Joanne's courage to not completely give in and how she shifted from a being a passive observer to a fierce activist for her own life. Together with her daughter, mother and friends, she slowly but surely regained agency and empowerment, determined to build a new and preferred life. As a social worker, I am reminded to advocate strongly and trust those who are in a state of trauma, despair and hopelessness while they slowly reconstruct a preferred and valued life within their families and community. (Franca Butera-Prinzi)

Witnessing the ways in which Joanna has found her voice again and is now using it to share her experience to advocate for others, alongside her interest in the role that narrative therapy can play to accompany others, has made us reflect on our practice.

Bearing witness

Bearing witness to people's experiences in a way that acknowledges both challenges and strengths is a core narrative principle that guides our work with families who come to our service for counselling. As powerfully stated by Michael White:

> no-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps to prevent the trauma … and … they take steps to … modify its effects on their lives, or they take steps in efforts to preserve what is precious to them. Even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to protect and preserve what they give value to. (White, 2004, p. 48)

We see in Joanna's story both the overwhelming effect of trauma and the power of her fight to recover and to preserve what is important to her. We see this universally in the families we work with. Through the process of bearing witness, we uncover what keeps people going and what gives them hope in the face of profound challenges. The experience of bearing witness changes us as therapists and people. We are continually learning from families about what makes a difference and the gaps that need to be addressed in services to better meet family needs following trauma. The practices of bearing witness, externalising and re-authoring enable us to accompany people on this journey in ways that are empowering and strengthening of agency in their lives.

Externalising

Through the practice of externalising, we are able to map the impact of a brain injury on the person, including their relationships with family and friends, and their connection to their community and activities, including work and other interests.

When people seek counselling, it is rare that they are connected to the extraordinary determination, courage and strength they have shown in dealing with the challenges of recovery following a brain injury. Instead, we hear narratives that reflect a diminished view of themselves as 'less than' their pre-injury selves. Personal narratives are powerfully shaped by grief and loss as well as societal narratives about disability. There are systemic barriers to rebuilding purposeful lives, such as reduced opportunities for meaningful contribution through paid employment for people with disabilities or support needs, further adding to personal narratives of reduced worth rather than strength in dealing with adversity and challenges.

The person often comes to see themselves as the problem or is experienced as the problem by others. To ask about how the brain injury has affected the person and their lives begins to separate the person from the effects of the brain injury and is an especially powerful externalising process.

The narrative principle of seeing the problem as the problem keeps the person central to the work. In this

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case, the ABI and its effects is the problem, not the person or family members who are dealing with the trauma and stress of adjusting to life after the injury.

To come from a place where we honour and see the person first and foremost beyond how the brain injury may impact their thinking processes, emotions or behaviour is an important principle in our work.

Joanna's written account speaks powerfully of the impact of trauma: 'The echo of trauma is long lasting. Something happens that almost takes yourself, your life, your work and your role as mother, sister and daughter away. It is a brutal experience that can wreck your future plans and change your identity'.

Re-authoring

In the re-authoring process, we listen for and bring forth stories of strength, courage and determination, which are often hidden in the story of trauma. We affirm the inherent worth of people, separate from their capabilities and roles in life, which may profoundly change after an injury. We focus on people's values and goals, and affirm existing and developing skills and interests, creating a space for people to reconnect with what brings meaning and purpose to their lives. This process of re-authoring can be exceedingly difficult when it requires letting go of valued roles and relationships. Grieving what has been lost and working through the trauma of what has happened gives room for a new, more empowering story to emerge, one that incorporates strengths and capabilities into the story of trauma and loss. Through these, new possibilities for meaningful roles and activities in life can emerge.

> Whatever it is we accord value to in life provides for us a purpose in living, with a meaning for our lives and with a sense of how to proceed in life … this establishes a fertile ground for the recovery and reinvigoration of the person's 'sense of myself' and for the development of an understanding of how the person responded to the trauma and to its aftermath. (White, 2004, p. 47)

Collective narrative therapy

We have been inspired by the principles of collective narrative therapy (Denborough, 2008) in bringing together families who have experienced the trauma of a family member sustaining a brain injury. The Tree of Life process (Butera-Prinzi, Charles, & Story, 2014; Ncube, 2006) has provided a safe structure for conversations between people with an ABI and their families (including children) about the impact of the trauma. It brings out what has sustained them and what makes a difference. We have also used the Tree of Life to bring together children from different families while their parents have met separately. A particularly moving part of this work has been when parents have joined the children's group to bear witness to children's experiences – both the challenges and the continued love and bond with their parent, shared wisdoms about what has helped and strengths they have developed through adversity such as increased compassion for their parent with a brain injury and others living with a disability, independence and hope for the future.

Closing thoughts

In her written account, Joanna speaks of the need for safe spaces to enable people to create a narrative of what has happened to them. Individual and family counselling (Perlesz, 1999; Perlesz et al., 1992) guided by narrative principles can provide these much-needed safe spaces for people to be accompanied in ways that are empowering and that build on their resilience through these life-changing journeys.

Resources

On the importance of family after brain injury: https://synapse.org.au/understanding-brain-injury/family-and-carers/

For families with a child or young person with an acquired brain injury: headstogether.org.au

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