

The Team of Life with young men from refugee backgrounds

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This paper describes how the Team of Life narrative methodology can make it possible for young men to speak about what is important to them, what they have protected, held onto, despite the hardships they have seen. This way of working also makes it possible for young men to speak about identity in a collective manner, to celebrate 'goals' that their 'teams' have already scored, and to make plans and preparations for the future. This way of working utilises sporting metaphors which are powerfully resonant within masculine culture and yet, significantly, provides possibilities for supporting and acknowledging alternative masculinities.

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It has been a hot summer's day and the evening cool is just approaching. We are gathered in a campground in the Adelaide hills. There are twenty-three young people here who have come to this country as refugees from Congo, Sudan, Burundi, Somalia, Liberia, and Angola. These young people have seen too much in their young lives and have travelled across the globe seeking safety. They have been at this recreational camp for the last three days and now they are a little nervous. This evening they have invited special people in their lives (parents, siblings, carers) to come up to the camp so that they can hear about the Trees of Life (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008) and the Teams of Life (Denborough, 2008) they have created. The ceremony is about to begin. One of the workers from Refugee Services starts drumming and a welcoming song introduces each of the young people ...

In this paper, I will briefly describe how the Team of Life narrative methodology can make it possible for young men to speak about what is important to them, what they have protected, held onto, despite the hardships they have seen. This way of working also makes it possible for young men to speak about identity in a collective manner; to celebrate 'goals' that their 'teams' have already scored, and to make plans and preparations for the future. This way of working utilises sporting metaphors which are powerfully resonant within masculine culture and yet, significantly, provides possibilities for supporting and acknowledging alternative masculinities.

On the first afternoon of the camp, the young guys are pretty quiet. Within masculine culture, silence can be quite a skill. I am a stranger to them. They do not know each other well, but they know that care needs to be taken before sharing anything of significance. These are young men who have witnessed considerable violence, who have lost loved ones, who have left behind so much that is familiar and are now in the process of creating new lives and learning a new language. Here in Australia they face racism and mistrust. Some are haunted by memories that come to them in the night. In these contexts, I would never expect young men to speak openly, in the first person, about their individual lives. Unless we can create a different sort of speaking context, one in which failure is impossible, then these young men will remain skilfully silent. It is our job as facilitators to make it possible for them to speak.

Musisi Zaid Ssentongo, a colleague originally from Uganda who is also a talented soccer player, leads the young men in exercises with a football. Here is a medium and a language with which they are more familiar than

the spoken word. Football, soccer, is much more than a sport. To many it is the 'beautiful game'. To Brazilians it is 'futebol-arte' or 'art-football' (Bellos, 2002, p. 1). For some young men, it provides a field of 'social freedom' (Worby, 2009):

In neighbourhood soccer, each participant can invent a fantasy persona that is larger than the life they live elsewhere and at other times in the city. The broken pavement of a dead-end street, like the rough and sloping field in a neighbourhood park or playground, can become a fertile medium for the production of a context-bound charisma, an evanescent moment of illumination and power that attaches to a player for an hour or two on a Saturday afternoon. (Worby, 2009, p. 107)

For some of the young men on this camp, the minute their feet touched a football their entire presentation changed. For others, this effect came when a basketball was in their hands. For one young Sudanese man, it is lacrosse that provides a field of social freedom. Within the Team of Life, these sports, their meanings, and the values implicit within them, can provide the starting point for meaningful conversations. We can use sporting metaphors to scaffold new understandings of identity. At the camp, we began this process by creating a collective Team of Life. We took a large sheet of paper and one young man drew the image of a soccer field upon it. After discussing the roles of each of the different players and participants in football (the coach, the spectators, the goal keeper, the reserves, the defense, the attack, and so on) we then used the metaphor of a team to start talking about our lives:

We can think of our life as a team. Who are the people most significant to us? The team members of our lives can be alive or no longer living. They can be present in our lives or people we have known in the past. These are the people most influential (in a positive way) in our lives.

PART ONE: CREATING A COLLECTIVE TEAM OF LIFE TEAM SHEET

Goal keeper

- Who are our goal keepers? If we had to name the people who look out for us, who guard our goals, who are most reliable, who would this be?

Your defense

- Who else assists us in protecting our dreams, in protecting what is precious to us?

Your 'attack'

- Who assists us, encourages us in trying to score goals?

Other team-mates

- Who are some of the other team-mates in our lives, those we play with, those whose company we enjoy?

Coach

- Who is it we have learned most things from? It is possible to have more than one coach. And it's possible that they may or may not still be alive. What are some of the things they have taught us?

Interchange

- Are there some people who are sometimes on our team and sometimes are not ... they might be very helpful to us in life on some days and then on other days not helpful at all? If so, these are our interchange team members. What sort of times do they help? What sort of times do they not help? How have we learnt the difference?

Home ground (field of dreams)

- What are our home grounds? What are the places we feel most 'at home'? We may have more than one place. They may even be in more than one country. Our home ground might be somewhere that we go regularly, or somewhere that we only visit in our memories or dreams now.

Supporters in the stands

- When we are at our home grounds, who are the supporters we imagine in the stands? Who are the people (living or non-living) who are hoping we will do well, who are cheering us on?

Theme song

- Are there particular songs that mean a lot to us, that we could call the 'theme songs' of our life at the moment? If so, what would they be? Why are they significant to you?

Values of our team

- Looking at the team we have created, what is important to this team? What values are this team defending? What does this team believe in?

Naming the team

- What name shall we give this team?

As I asked these questions, the young men's answers were placed on a collective 'Team Sheet'. As we went through the different positions, the young men spoke of their mums, grandparents, siblings, case-workers, even God, as significant team members.

Sometimes their responses were in single-words, sometimes they were mumbled, heads were still down, but together we were creating something. We were creating a collective team. Whenever the conversation was stilted we could return to the realm of football, 'Well, what role does the coach play in football? Okay, then how does this work in the rest of life? Who plays that role in our lives more generally?'

If some questions were too hard to answer at first, we said we would come back to them. This was true in relation to the 'theme song'. No-one had any ideas about this at first. So we went on to consider the values of the team. When we asked about these, there was a pause. No-one answered at first, but I persisted because I could tell the young men were really thinking about this, they were engaged but silent. Sometimes in working with young men, I am listening to whether they are listening. 'This team we are creating, what does it defend? What does it believe in?'

And after a little while, one young man spoke quietly but with great clarity. He said 'Faith and Trust'. I asked the others if they agreed with this and they all said yes. This, to me, seemed highly significant. These are young people who have seen too much of the world's cruelties, who have been placed in situations of profound hardship. And here they were saying that 'It's faith and trust that we defend'. It is an achievement to come through such experiences and uphold these particular values. I tried to ask more about this, and after another pause, the same young man responded, 'These are in our hearts'.

These eight words: 'Faith and Trust', 'These are in our hearts'; were significant offerings. Within young men's culture it's not the number of words we are seeking. Instead we are trying to create a context in which young men can articulate what is important to them and, once they do, we want to 'rescue'¹ these words, honour them, acknowledge them.

There was one other significant event which took place on that first day. One of the young men was very determined to find a name for the team that had just been created. Some debate took place about this and various young men offered suggestions. Finally, it was decided that 'World United' would be appropriate as we all came from so many different countries, cultures and languages.

After this, it seemed time to return to the football field and to kick the ball around again. It's no point getting greedy as a facilitator. Those eight words and a name for the team were more than I could have hoped for on the first afternoon.

That evening, as I drove back to town, I thought about this name of the team and the significance of the eight words that had been shared. How could these be re-presented to the young men in a way that would be resonant to them, in a way that would demonstrate how significant they were? I remembered that we had not been able to come up with the name of a theme song, and so, as I drove, I started to sing the young men's words into a song.²

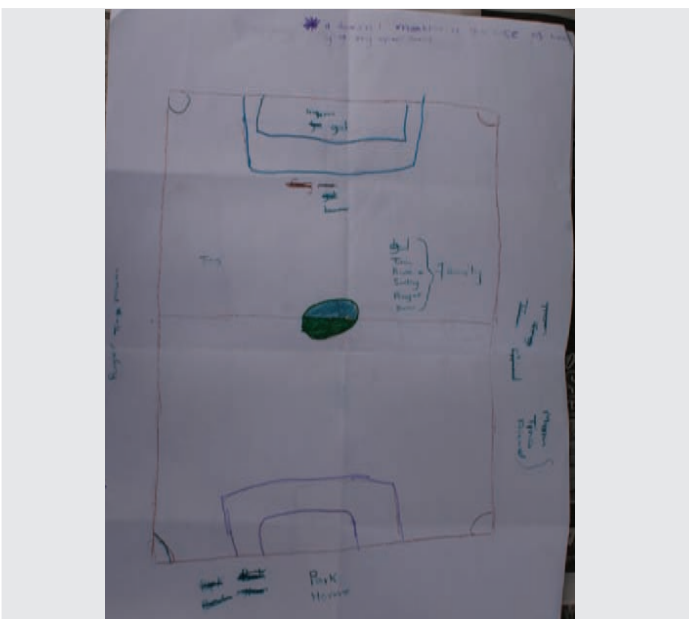
*We are the World United
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*For these are in our hearts
And with team mates all around
This is the World United sound*

The next day I sang this to the young men and they embraced this song, acknowledged it as their own and worked to include phrases from other languages within it. This sparked a momentum. World United had quite quickly become a new collective identity. We were working on something, we were creating something together.

PART TWO: CREATING THEIR OWN TEAMS OF LIFE

The next step was for the young men to create their own Teams of Life. I will include a picture of one of these here. You can see that this young man has named 'mum' and 'God' as his goalkeepers.



Again, what seemed most significant was when this young man tried to name what this team stood for, what it was defending. This particular young man took this question very seriously. He was quiet for some time and then said, 'It doesn't matter if you lose, as long you try your best'. This is the guiding philosophy of his team. When I asked him if he would write this along the top of his team sheet I saw him hesitate. Writing in English is perhaps this young man's greatest challenge. So I sat with him and ensured that this act of writing was not a solitary one. We were in it together. Occasionally he would ask for clarification. The process was a long one. It probably took close to ten minutes for him to write out his team's philosophy. When he completed it, I felt like cheering.

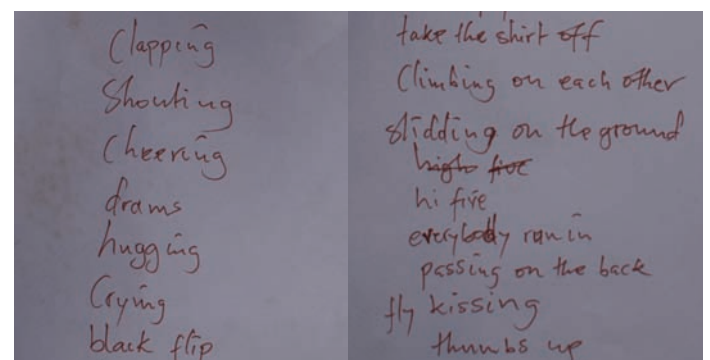
It was Paulo Freire who described how literacy involves reading the world and reading the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In using this Team of Life process, we are enabling young people to give voice to, and find words for, a collective sense of identity, and what is most important to them. At the same time, we are assisting them to learn how to read and to write.

PART THREE: CELEBRATING GOALS THAT HAVE BEEN SCORED

Having created team sheets and shared these with each other and with the young women who were also on the camp, it was now time to turn to a different theme ... celebration.

Celebration is a profoundly significant aspect of sporting culture. Importantly, within team sports these are collective celebrations of collective goals. It doesn't matter which member of the team scores, everyone celebrates.

For this part of the Team of Life process we moved into a shed which was also a basketball court. There were initial scenes of organised chaos as a highly energetic basketball game and vibrant soccer game somehow managed to co-exist on the same field! When time-out was called, we gathered together and I asked the young men to tell me their favourite ways of celebrating goals. They came up with quite a list:



We now returned to the team sheets they had created the day before as I asked them to consider:

- What is one collective goal / achievement that this team has already scored?

Please note, that I was not asking what goal they had individually achieved. That is quite a different question and it is one that leaves much more room for failure. Instead, we were seeking to acknowledge a collective goal. Perhaps the young men may have only played a very small role in the achievement of this goal. In no way does that diminish the significance of the team's achievement. We are actually more interested in reflected glory than individual glory in the Team of Life process!

Once the young men had identified such a goal, we asked them to draw a 'goal map':

- Draw a goal map that indicates the different contributions that people made to the achievement of this goal:
Can you describe who was involved in the scoring / attaining of this goal?
Was it a solo effort?
Or did other members of your Team of Life help out?
How?
Did your coach encourage you or help you with tactics?
- What parts did everyone play in this?
Go through each theme (home ground, goal-keeper; defence, attack, team mates, etc.)
- What skills or knowledge or values did you or others use in the scoring of this goal?
- Where did these skills/knowledge/values come from?
What training did you and others do to make it possible to score this goal?
How often did you do this – each day, once a week?
Where did you train?
How did you learn how to do this training?
Did anyone show you?

This goal map demonstrates how a relative, his sister, his mother, a friend, and the young man himself, have acted together in order to 'stay together through hard times'.

Here is an example of one of the young men's goal maps.



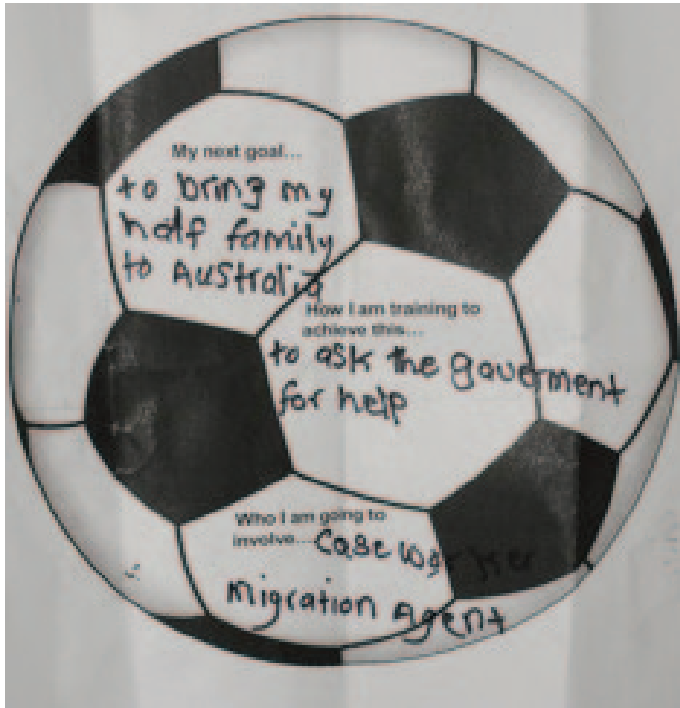
Goals that were named by other young men included 'staying in school', 'friendships', 'academic achievements', 'making it to Australia', and so on.

Then came my favourite part. It was time to celebrate each of these team's goals. Each young man took a football, or basketball, and acted out the goal map! People stood in for the different contributors, we passed the ball between us, and then the young man kicked the ball out through the door of the shed to symbolise GOOOOALLLLLLL! We had asked each young man to tell us which form of celebration he wanted us to perform at this precise moment and so, as the ball passed through door (goals), we would burst into applause and cheering, or start running around, or blow kisses, or pretend to take our shirts off, or slide on the ground, or put our thumbs up, and so on. By now, the young men were very willing to take their turns in these performances of celebration. These are mini definitional ceremonies (Myerhoff, 1982). They are ceremonies of celebration that re-define the identities of these young men as members of teams that have achieved a great deal in the face of significant hardship.

PART FOUR: LOOKING FORWARD – FUTURE GOALS

It is only *after* this shared 'heritage' of achievement has been honoured that we look to the future. On the third morning of the camp, the young men were asked to consider what future goals they are aiming for, how they are training to achieve these, and who they are going to involve in this process.

Here is an example of one of the young men's future goals:



PART FIVE: DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY AND INTER-GENERATIONAL HONOURING

And so, this brings us to where I began this paper. It is the final evening of the camp and the young people are now a little nervous as they prepare to share what we have done together with the special people in their lives who have travelled in buses to witness this.

The young women start the process. They share the Trees of Life and the Forest or Jungle of Survivors that they have drawn over the last three days (see Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008). The young men listen to the young women's presentations, and applaud and celebrate the young women's skills, abilities, values, dreams, and hopes. One of the mothers then stands and makes a speech about what it means to the adults there to hear the young women speak so proudly about their lives. This is a moment of 'inter-generational honouring' (Denborough, 2008). The young women have honoured their elders by including them on their trees. And the elders are now honouring the younger generation with their presence, their words and the constant clicking of cameras!

And now it's the turn of the young men. While initially profoundly reluctant to speak in public, in this ceremony they all play roles in sharing what has been created. There are some unexpected highlights. When I had asked the young men to name the 'theme songs' for their individual

teams, there had been a slight misunderstanding. Two young men had thought I was asking them to *write* theme songs for their teams! And so they had done so. One song evoked 'the eagles' which was his team symbol. Another young man, for whom writing was a significant struggle, had worked tirelessly on the lyrics of his theme song. Apparently, various workers had seen him return again and again to a well-folded piece of paper. When he passed this to me, I read his words and then found a melody for them³:

*We love the world
So we have to make it a better place
In this world
There are many people
Who need our help and our love*

When this song is sung in the ceremony, many people join in. Others are in tears. The young man who wrote these words sits quietly, his cap still perched on his head, but there is pride in his eyes. He is a young man who rarely speaks and yet here his words have become a collective chorus.

MASCULINITIES – CONSIDERATIONS OF GENDER, RACE, AND AN ETHICS OF CARE

It might seem unusual that a sentiment and philosophy of love was evoked through sporting metaphor. But this is not by chance. The realm of sports is multi-storied. It can be a realm of teamwork, co-operation, mutual encouragement and celebration. It can also be a source of competitiveness, violence and cruelty (Pringle, 2007, 2008). Personally, sports were a treasured part of my life as a young person. Then, when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I turned away from playing competitive sports because they had come to represent to me the worst of dominant masculine culture. Within the Team of Life, we use sporting metaphors in particular ways. We take great care in relation to considerations of gender.

It was Bob Connell (1987) who first described the ways in which "hegemonic masculinity" is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women' (p. 183). Throughout the Team of Life process, we deliberately facilitate the performance of what could be called 'alternative storylines of masculinity' or 'alternative ways of being men' (White, 1996).

While dominant constructions of masculinity all too often emphasise an ethic of control (Connell, 1987, 1995; Denborough, 1995; Segal, 1990), the storylines of identity we seek to generate through the Team of Life

emphasise an ethic of care (Welch, 1990). The following table, created by Michael White⁴, outlines the differences between these two ethical approaches to life:

ETHIC OF CONTROL	ETHIC OF CARE
On my terms	Trusting of others
Control of self/others as priority	Partnership as priority
Conditioned responses	Responsiveness to others
On automatic	Spontaneity
Seen to be right	Honesty in regard to truth and personal failings
Emotionally disconnected	Emotionally connected
Sense of entitlement	Humility
Casting an image	Freedom of choice

Every aspect of the Team of Life approach elicits versions of masculinity in accord with an ethic of care. As teams are being created, the role of others (including mothers, sisters and grandmothers) are honoured. As goals are celebrated, it is acknowledged that these are collective not individual achievements. An ethic of care also shapes the ways in which we seek to enable young people to make contributions to the lives of others. In the case of the camp described in this chapter, each activity was framed by an understanding that we were creating something to share with the special people who were to attend the ceremony on the final evening. It is therefore not by chance that the young men's teams, goals, and theme songs, emphasised values of care and contribution.

What's more, as facilitators, we were consistently searching for opportunities for collaboration between the young men and the young women. The young men acted as an honouring audience to the achievements of the young women and vice-versa⁵. During the camp, particular opportunities emerged as sisters and brothers celebrated each other's achievements. In this way, the storylines of masculinity that were being performed involved partnerships between young men and young women⁶.

The masculinities of young men who are refugees are consistently marginalised in Australia due to racism and the consequences of dislocation and trauma. During the camp, in response to the effects of these injustices, we

used sports – one of the bastions of masculine culture – to create space for these young men to define their own moral basis of identity and to have this witnessed by supportive others. This process involves re-authoring storylines of masculine identity (White, 1996).

Through the Team of Life, it became possible for these young men to speak about their values, hopes and dreams, and to re-define their identities as part of teams that have achieved significant accomplishments in the face of great hardship. Creating this 'textual heritage'⁷ of achievement, this 'usable past' (Wertsch, 2002, p. 45), can then enable young people to take steps to address current predicaments and to bring to fruition future dreams.

As trauma, racism and dominant constructions of masculinity can contribute to powerful experiences of isolation and shame, the Team of Life deliberately creates contexts to enhance a sense of pride and dignity. What's more, by enabling young people to acknowledge the contributions that others have made to shared goals that have already been achieved, this approach also strengthens relationships.

At all times, this approach refuses to construct isolated or self-contained masculine identities. Instead, we are vitally interested in how young men's relations are formed through relationships with others and the ethics and values which shape these relations. In this way, this Team of Life process sought to elicit performances of preferred masculine ethics. To me, this is resonant with John Stoltenberg's inspiring book *Refusing to be a man* (1989) which he wrote in the hope of ushering in an ethic of sexual justice (p. 5).

During the camp, there were many examples of performances of masculinity by the young men that refuted the values of hegemonic masculinity. Team values such as 'It doesn't matter if you lose, as long as you try your best'; team goals such as 'Staying together through hard times'; and team songs with a chorus line of 'We love this world, so we have to make it a better place'; all powerfully evoke ethics that stand outside those of domination and control.

It was moving to me, and indeed to all those at the final ceremony, to witness the ways in which these young men, who have seen too much of the world's cruelty, choose to defend 'trust and faith' and to convey their love for this world and for those 'who need our help and our love'.

THE PROCESS CONTINUES: ACKNOWLEDGING HARDSHIP AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESPONSES

Young men of refugee backgrounds face considerable obstacles in their everyday lives. On the last afternoon, we spoke about the hardships that teams can face on and off the field. As part of this process, I read aloud a document from a group of young Aboriginal men from the community of Ntaria/Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory who are a part of the Western Arrente Football Team, the Bulldogs. In this document, they describe some of the ways in which they are endeavouring to 'tackle' the social problems their community is experiencing⁹. In response, World United sent a message to these young Aboriginal men:

Thank you. It was awesome to hear about how you are tackling problems, how you play together for your community, and how you share your skills and talents. When you play football together, you play for each other and you play to get happy. We do this here also. You said that when difficult times come there are special things that you remember. We do this too. We remember family. I remember what my mum told me – that it doesn't matter if you lose as long as you try your best. We also remember people who we are missing or who may have died. I wish my dad was here. Whenever I work hard, whenever I play well on the field, I think of him. I think 'my dad would be pleased that I am doing this'. Sometimes we play for those who cannot be here. We play for those who cannot play. When we are facing hard times we tell ourselves, 'I can do this', 'Don't give up', 'Keep trying'. We are World United and we'd like to support the Western Arrente Football Team in spirit. We'd also like to send you a copy of our theme song.

Thank you again for sharing your words with us.

Asante (thank you)

Akuna matata (no worries)

From World United

This message will now be shared with the Aboriginal young men up north and hopefully they will then respond to World United. We will also start to share the recording of the World United theme songs with others. If you would like to hear this, and/or if you would like to send a message, to let them know what their efforts and stories have meant to you, please let me know⁹. We would be delighted to pass your messages onto the young men and young women of World United.

It seems appropriate to end with the words the young people spoke and sang at the final part of the ceremony.

We would like to welcome you. We would like to introduce our group name which is 'World United'. We have a song we would like to share with you. The words come from our hearts. We hope you enjoy it. Here it is:

*We are the World United
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*For these are in our hearts
And with team mates all around
This is the World United sound*

*We all na wan
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*Tuko wote pamoja
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*Twegate wamu
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*We are the World United
We have a message to send
It's faith and trust that we defend*

*For these are in our hearts
And with team mates all around
This is the World United sound*

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NOTES

1. For more about 'rescuing' the spoken words and translating these to the written word in narrative practice see Newman (2008) and Denborough (2008).
 2. For more information about the use of song in narrative practice, see Denborough (2002).
 3. This song is copyright 2011 Tony Kamara.
 4. This table was created by Michael White from the writings of Sharon Welch (White, 2011, p. 111).
 5. For more information about the use of audiences within definitional ceremonies, see Myerhoff (1982, 1986) and White (2000).
 6. In time, we are interested in ways that this Team of Life process can facilitate partnerships between young men and young women in relation to gender justice in order to respond to, and prevent, gender-based violence (see Denborough, 1995a).
 7. The term 'textual heritage' was proposed by Lowenthal as quoted in Wertsch (2002, p. 62).
 8. This document is entitled 'Special knowledge about "Tackling Problems" from Wally Malbunka and the Western Arrente Football Team – The Bulldogs'. If readers would like a copy, please contact the author.
 9. To do so, please contact the author.
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