



Laughter and issues of class

A conversation with Jane Hales

Jane Hales has worked at Dulwich Centre as receptionist, administrator, typesetter, proofreader, and manager, since 1984 – more than thirty years.

Jane: When I think about the early days of Dulwich Centre, it's the Friday Afternoon Discussions that come to mind. Those free forums that involved short presentations on particular ideas and then rigorous debate and discussion. Who gave the first Friday Afternoon talk?

Cheryl: Kerrie James, in December 1983. She was visiting from Sydney and there was a lot of interest in relation to feminism and family therapy. Kerrie was a highly-regarded, young, feminist family therapist. So we ran a free Friday Afternoon seminar and many people came. In those days, there wasn't a lot of training and workshops were quite expensive. We were hearing from people who, as family therapists, were feeling quite lonely and isolated in their workplaces. These Friday Afternoon events were informal and they placed an emphasis on making room for connection between people. They were held at 4.30 on Friday afternoons and they were fun, weren't they?

Jane: There used to be quite a bit of socialising afterwards. A free talk and free wine! Sometimes, people would stay for hours to talk about ideas. And then there was just so much interest in the Friday Afternoon presentations that it seemed a good idea to write these down in a news-sheet. Typing up the notes on the electric typewriter, then literally cutting and pasting, photocopying, handwriting the envelopes, and sending them out ... it was a very time-consuming process. Starting our own publishing house was quite an adventure. Although we didn't know that was what we were doing at the time ...

Cheryl: No, we didn't. But over time, people from other places wanted copies of the news-sheets and it gradually turned into a journal. A huge issue at that time was the politics of representation. (See 'An open invitation to formulate policies around publishing' on p. 55) At that time, people would write case studies where the professional discussed 'clients' without the 'client' being involved in the representations of their lives. It was written from the view point of the professional. We were trying to find ways for people to have a chance to represent their own experience in the writings rather than authors representing the experiences

Jane Hales



of others. At the very least, this meant that, wherever appropriate, anyone referred to in the writings had a chance to read and reflect on the ways in which they had been represented.

Jane: I just keep thinking of that electric typewriter! And working on draft after draft of the little pink book *Literate means to therapeutic ends* – the first book by Michael White and David Epston (1989). We had a great launch of that little book. Now that was quite the party.

Cheryl: Yes. But do you remember we'd never even planned on publishing a book. It was just going to be a collection of papers around letter writing, but it grew and suddenly there was the idea of a book. Later, after it had been circulating for a year or so, W.W. Norton in New York wrote a letter asking if they could have the publishing rights because they'd like to re-publish it in hardback. We thought the world had tilted on its axis. Seriously? Seriously?

Jane: It was an incredible moment. Didn't you then meet up with the editor from W.W. Norton in New York?

Cheryl: Yes. The Norton offices were in Fifth Avenue, not far from the New York City Central Station. When the editor, Susan Barrows Munro, offered to take us out for lunch, we asked if we could eat in the railway station because we hadn't been there, and how exciting it would be! We sat up high where we could see the trains coming and going, all of these people, it was so fun.

Jane: I can imagine you and Michael would have much preferred the railway station to a formal restaurant.

Cheryl: Michael had real pride in being working class. That's where his heart was, that's where his understandings were. Michael's work, early on, really had quite a strong class-based philosophy, don't you think?

Jane: I think so, yes. We were quite joined in that. In those days, high schools were all streamed in class-based ways. We often talked about how our experiences of schooling and education were shaped by this.

Cheryl: There was something about those experiences that meant Michael's heart and analysis was always with the less privileged. Non-pathologising ways of working are not an intellectual deconstruction, they are also informed by class-based experience. In the mid-1980s, Michael was a family therapy consultant in a psychiatric hospital. He'd grown up in a poor working-class suburb, where people struggled against shame and tried to find their way in a world where they didn't have the same resources as others. Michael had an ease with people who had serious mental health issues. He had a very lovely mother who made sure her house was open to anybody who was having struggles. So when Michael started working in a psychiatric hospital, the 'patients' were not strange people to put under a microscope, they were people like the neighbours, or the family

down the road, or friends. Not pathologising people wasn't a technique, or a theory, it was solidarity. For Michael, it was about remaining true to where he had come from, true to his people.

And what of solidarity? I am thinking of a solidarity that is constructed by therapists who refuse to draw a sharp distinction between their lives and the lives of others, who refuse to marginalise those persons who seek help, by therapists who are constantly confronting the fact that if faced with the circumstances such that provide the context of troubles of others, they just might not be doing nearly so well themselves. (White, 1993, p. 132)

Of course, within psychiatric institutions there was (and still is) a very large distinction drawn between patients and professionals. Part of the ethic of narrative practice, of course, is to stand with, rather than stand apart. Dulwich Centre was trying to create an inclusive culture.

Jane: Dulwich Centre was a place where everyone would pitch in. We'd all do things together. It felt quite different from any other place I had worked. In those days, in doctors' surgeries for instance, you had a strong sense as an administration worker not to step out of line, not to disrupt the hierarchy. This was different. We were a small independent centre, all working together without the hierarchy that was so common in those days.

Cheryl: Yes, and you and the other reception staff played a key role in this. What I remember about this is that your heart and commitment was always with the families seeking therapy, not with the therapists/ professionals. And this kind of kept the building on track.

Jane: What do you mean?

Cheryl: Your concern, your interest, your energy, your passion was with the families who were seeking help. Although the therapists employed you, you were like their conscience, a barometer on how they were doing more generally in relation to receiving the stories of the families.

Jane: Well, as a receptionist you do get a very good sense of how good (or bad!) the therapy session has been. You see the family before and immediately afterwards. And, often I was also the first person to speak with them when they called the centre.

I'd also had my own experience of going to a see a counsellor as a single parent. I had three kids with me. There was a team behind a one-way screen, and the counsellor and the team just sat there and watched me. From behind the one-way screen, nobody said anything. It was horrifying. I just felt they were sitting there watching me, judging me. I think I went three times, and then decided I couldn't do that anymore. It wasn't long after that I started working at Dulwich. We were working together to create a different experience for families – an experience of care, and respect of people. It was really good to be a part of it.



Cheryl: You were also typing Michael's earliest therapeutic letters ...

Jane: Yes. Michael would dictate his letters onto a small tape and I would transcribe them. I'd often find myself in tears. Michael would stop and start the tape to correct his own words, so by the time I was transcribing they had a really good flow. I had often taken the initial referral on the phone, talked with the family when they first came into reception, saw them at the end of the session, and then read the letter that Michael had written to them. The letters always seemed to bring out the person in some way, to acknowledge the struggles they were facing, and somehow convey a sense of hope. There was never anything controlling or directive or patronising. It wasn't all positive either ... it was about understanding what the families were up against and somehow Michael and the families joining to address this. Those letters were written with great care. They were very honouring of people's efforts which was so different than my experience of going to a counsellor as a single parent. It felt great to be part of those letters.

Cheryl: Yes, that's what I was referring to before. The families were your priority rather than the therapists or the students. Then, of course, there were the children!

Jane: Oh yes, your daughter and all the neighbourhood's children would come and play photocopying. They used to help with enveloping and folding up things.

Cheryl: They were employed from the time they were in primary school! They made a real difference to the atmosphere of the centre too.

Jane: I remember the kids becoming very good at photocopying leaves and also their own hands.

Cheryl: Yes, I remember a lot of laughter. We were creating an independent centre, with an independent publishing house. Both of these made a real difference in the longer-term. But I don't want to romanticise those early times, there were hard times too. There are many things I think we would all do differently if we had the time over again.

Jane: Yes, there are a few things I'd do differently. But it's been great being a part of it.

Cheryl: A big part of it – for thirty years!

References

- White, M., & Epston, D. (1989). *Literate means to therapeutic ends*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (1993). Commentary: The histories of the present. In S. Gilligan & R. Price (Eds.), *Therapeutic conversations* (pp. 121–135). New York, NY: W. W. Norton