



# A narrative family therapy story: Unearthing slugs for the benefit of family healing

by Shannon McIntosh



*Shannon McIntosh, MSW, RCSW, is a social worker, family therapist, member of the Calgary Family Therapy Centre, and clinical associate director for Wood's Homes in Calgary, Canada. She is devoted to strengthening relationships, building resilience and applying advocacy, collaboration and creativity in her work. Shannon is inspired by systemic theory, narrative theory and social constructionism. She's passionate about upholding social justice and enjoys using metaphors, expressive arts and experiential learning to bring forth relational healing. Narrative therapy has been a cornerstone of Shannon's work that has allowed her to facilitate healing conversations that inspire stories of pride, empowerment and courage. Along with her clinical commitments, Shannon has been part of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary where she has taught therapeutic practices, clinical interviewing techniques and integrative theory-to-practice classes for graduate level students. shannon.mcintosh012@gmail.com.*

## Abstract

"The Terminator" was tricking 11-year-old Nathan into aggression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Nathan's parents wanted to find ways to support Nathan and to develop their own coping skills. This practice story shows how we drew on Nathan's particular interest in slugs to help him remember preferred ways of being and to keep everyone safe.

**Key words:** family therapy; narrative family therapy; children; suicide; anger; self-harm; narrative practice

McIntosh, S. (2025). Practice paper: A narrative family therapy story: Unearthing slugs for the benefit of family healing. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 108–114. <https://doi.org/10.4320/DOPL5634>

Author pronouns: she/her

Under the mentorship of Dr Karl Tomm and my colleagues at the Calgary Family Therapy Centre (CFTC), I have had the privilege of walking with many families along their healing journeys. One of the most rewarding of these experiences occurred when I joined with the Taylor family for family therapy sessions. The family expanded my understanding of persistence, kindness, how to stick together during difficult times, and as it happens, the world of slugs. What I found most significant in our work was their vulnerability and willingness to join me in creative whole-family interventions. What follows is an extract of my experience with this wonderful family. Pseudonyms are used in this story to protect the identity of the clients. The family offered permission to share this story, for which I am truly grateful.

Janet reached out to the CFTC for help in supporting her oldest son in managing his strong emotions. Nathan, who was 11 years old, had been taken to the Alberta Children's Hospital because he expressed suicidal thoughts and demonstrated an intense level of aggression in the family home. The hospital's medical team suggested that the family receive in-home support and family therapy through the Calgary Family Therapy Centre. During their clinical intake meeting at CFTC, Nathan's parents, Janet and Steve, reported that Nathan had been harming himself and his younger brother, Oliver (8 years old). The parents also shared that Nathan had been running away. I learnt from Steve and Janet that Nathan had diagnoses of ADHD and sensory processing disorder. Janet also reported that both she and Steve lived with mental health issues and were very much wanting to grow their own coping skills and gain further strategies for supporting Nathan. Due to the nature of the concerns presented by Nathan and his parents, the family was prioritised and I saw them a week after the intake meeting.

I had 10 meaningful and generative sessions with the Taylor family. Eight of these included the parents and Nathan, and I met with the whole family (including Oliver) twice. The family hoped that family therapy would help them find ways to lessen the bad thoughts Nathan was having about himself. They also hoped for Nathan and Oliver to get along better, for more structure to exist in their day-to-day home lives and for "emotional explosions" to occur less often. During our initial session, the family shared that there was a lot of anger in the home. It seemed to manifest through yelling, hitting, swearing, door slamming and malicious comments. I shared some calming strategies and co-regulation techniques. For example, we practiced

ways to "tune in" to one another and pause before reacting. The family also created a safety plan that included attention to the ways in which overwhelm could lead to eruptions and then disconnection and disharmony. The family and I named the experience that Nathan was having "the volcano" since there were many factors contributing to the explosions.

In the subsequent session, we reviewed some of the skills that the family had historically used to respond to anger. They explained that they sometimes had difficulty pausing when angry and reacted aggressively. Together, we wondered if impulsiveness was getting in the way. The family agreed that it was, so we tapped into the family's existing skills of caring for one another and sensing one another's feelings. This led us to come up with a way to "tune in" to one another before anger could take a front-row seat. Given the family's value of honesty (which was cultivated by the parents), family members committed to "calling out anger" when they detected it was on its way. They planned to ask each other how they were feeling when they suspected anger was looming. Though they reported that this required practice and was difficult, they later showed me how they were demonstrating the skill of "tuning-in and calling out anger". This was quite magical to observe.

In our next session, Nathan announced that he had been thinking about the power that anger had over him. "I don't like it, Shannon. It reminds me of the movie *The Terminator* where the cyborg tries to hurt people ... I don't want to hurt people." I assured Nathan (and his family) that they were not cyborgs, and instead, caring and loving humans who were deeply loyal to one another. However, "The Terminator" became a resonant way of externalising anger. Some of the questions I asked to thicken the family's commitment to taking a stand against anger included:

- In what ways have you stood up to The Terminator?
- Who in the family was the first to notice The Terminator's presence?
- Who was second, third, fourth?
- How will you know that you have ejected The Terminator into outer space?

In future sessions, we talked about The Terminator's influence as working against what the family held dear – family connection. Slowing down and becoming alert to The Terminator's influence became a tactic that kept family members on guard for dynamics that disrupted their family connection.

We investigated Nathan's interests and gifts through the "wonderfulness interview" (Marsten et al., 2016). Through this, I discovered that he was fascinated most of all by slugs. Nathan loved everything about slugs – their sliminess, their many teeth (2000–8000!), their blue blood. Above all, he loved the way slugs helped him to remember to slow down and to breathe. Coincidentally, I happened to like slugs too. I told Nathan that because I came from a damp and rainy small town where slugs were bountiful, the sight of a slug brought me joy and happy memories. I told Nathan I used to collect slugs as a child too. This common ground, which Nathan could feel was authentic, strengthened our therapeutic bond, giving us many chances to share language that was meaningful to us both. In subsequent sessions, Nathan brought in slug memorabilia and on one occasion ... a real slug! Oh boy, I didn't expect that; however, this did bring a lot of excitement to the session! The whole CFTC family got on board with the slug fad too, and soon even some of our practicum students were bringing in stickers, colouring pages and fidgets – all with a slug theme. Since the Taylors were so open to students viewing our work, we invited students to retell some of the stories they heard in our sessions. This proved affirming for the family as the students shared how resonant the Taylor's experiences were for them. One of the students generously shared that she planned to take these ideas to her own family who had been having similar struggles.

Given Nathan's fascination with slugs, his family and I wove slugs into every aspect of our work together, which I believe brought a special relevance to Nathan and a sense that we were understanding what was important to him – slugs! When Nathan identified in one session that his dark thoughts were taking over his life, he, his parents and I worked earnestly to co-construct a safety plan we called "the SLUG Plan". It involved using the letters in "slug" to devise a plot to "bring Slug back to the soil – home". Each letter represented a strategy to keep Nathan's dark thoughts away:

- S** = slow down
- L** = listen
- U** = understand
- G** = get a hug, hold gratitude, guard oneself and think of the colour green.

Using the family's language, the SLUG Plan was written by hand and passed on to the family. It involved six steps:

1. Nathan to pay attention to tingly hands, legs and other somatic experiences that Nathan said he felt when he began to feel overwhelmed; we thought this might give him time to pause to remember his calming tools
2. Nathan to distract himself from feeling overwhelmed through communicating about stressful feelings he experienced then looking for slugs, going on a bike ride and running around in the backyard
3. Mom and Dad to watch Nathan more closely
4. Nathan to take space *with* someone or with the door open or ... He could even invite a fur family member to join him; being alone was scary for Nathan
5. Parents to remove sharp items in the home
6. Nathan and parents to make their way to the hospital emergency room or another urgent care centre if dark thoughts persisted.

Throughout our work together, the Taylor family and I also discussed ways to navigate times when big feelings spilled over into meltdowns that left them feeling out of control and remorseful. The parents transparently shared some wisdoms that had shone through following their own emotional outbursts. I feel that this paved the way for Nathan to open up about his inner struggles. Nathan shared his experience of there being two parts of himself:

- Nathan 1: someone who holds emotions inside and tries to feel "in control"
- Nathan 2 (aka "The Terminator"): someone who struggles with getting along with others at school and focusing on his schoolwork.

Nathan described Nathan 2 as a "spirit inside me that kicks the real me out and takes over my body". He shared that this Nathan 2 made him feel "out of control" and "tricked". Nathan originally called this part of himself "Psycho-Nathan"; however, I encouraged him to name it something less derogatory to decrease the shame this name seemed carry for Nathan. He shared that his peers at school called him "psycho" and this hurt his feelings a lot. We agreed to keep calling this The Terminator. Throughout our work together, I wanted to ensure our namings were experience-near and suitable for Nathan, so I consistently checked in with Nathan: "does this name fit for you and why?" I also invited the parents to speak as witnesses and

co-constructors about their feelings and understandings about the namings. Commonly, they would express how sad they felt for Nathan that he was under the influence of such troubles.

I sought to get a richer sense of these fighting parts inside of Nathan.

Shannon: Nathan, can you tell me about times when The Terminator is not present? What is that like for you?

Nathan: I feel peaceful inside and can think more clearly. That's a nice feeling.

Shannon: When you are feeling peaceful, what kind of things are you able to accomplish? What do you feel proud of in these moments?

Nathan: I can build really cool Lego structures and can create slug art that's really colourful.

Shannon: How do you think your family experiences you when The Terminator is not around?

Nathan: They see me laughing, cracking jokes and playing nicely with my brother.

We felt sad together to learn from Nathan that he felt his teacher didn't like him and made him feel like a burden. Janet and I did some advocacy work with his teacher, and we helped her to understand Nathan's special gifts and many other beautiful parts of him that did not seem obvious to her.

I sought to amplify compassion for the struggle Nathan was experiencing and to bring forth hope. A focus on landscape of identity questions (White, 2007) brought forth elements of Nathan's character that he liked and was proud of. Inspired by tales of legendary heroes and mighty warriors from his video games, Nathan envisioned a world where he could be brave and strong. However, beneath these aspirations was a heart filled with fear. He relayed to his parents and me that he was often haunted by shadows of doubt and whispers of insecurity. I learnt from Nathan that this caused him frustration as he really wanted to be a hero in the eyes of his family. During one of our sessions I asked Nathan, "What kind of reputation do you want to have?"

He responded, "I want to be known as a conqueror".

"A conqueror of what?" I asked.

And he answered, "A conqueror of worry".

With this metaphor of Nathan the Conqueror, we had lots of fun weaving together images of ancient scrolls and wayfinding maps and plans for great conquests. We also sought wisdom along the way from "village elders" (his grandparents), companions and talking animals (his family dog). The images we co-created really seemed to fortify Nathan's resilience and courage, and I believe his parents felt his growing strength and heroism. Nathan was learning to triumph over fear.

During my last few sessions with the Taylors, I noticed an emergence of several generative relational shifts within the family. The parents began to show faith in Nathan's abilities rather than anticipating failure. We called this "looking for bright spots and anticipating success". Once Nathan could feel his parents' doubt in him diminish, he began using his initiative to implement positive coping tools. These included keeping heartbeats calm by engaging in family yoga, meditation and reading together. Nathan also began looking for opportunities to use his strong "Nathan the Conqueror" voice. The parents were then fortifying these positive efforts through affirming words and reactions.

I acknowledged the parents' noticing of Nathan's efforts, and the effects of their noticing on Nathan. During our last sessions, Nathan shared that he was starting to speak up bravely with family and teachers by letting them know what he needed to stay calm and focused. For example, he asked for and received a standing desk in his classroom. The family noted that Nathan was able to manage his emotions more calmly, and with parents setting firmer boundaries, Nathan made an effort to respect these boundaries.

An unexpected and poignant theme emerged during a discussion with Janet and Steve. I learnt that both parents had experienced adversity in their childhoods, which they noted had lasting negative effects on their lives and the ways they parented. Steve's experiences had led him to experience relentless fear and anxiety; Janet's childhood experiences were fraught with abuse and abandonment leading her to doubt herself and others. It was heartbreaking to hear Janet's story of being shut out of her mother's home at the age of eight for hours in the middle of winter, and of being told she was no longer welcome in the home. It was also painful to hear her express stories of abuse and being seen as lesser than her sibling (who stayed with her mother). I appreciated Janet's candour about her adverse experiences and her fierce commitment to parenting in a significantly different way. She was transparent about



the lifelong impact these experiences had caused her, resulting in hospitalisations and systemic challenges, stigma and cruel judgement by others. Janet's disclosure ignited a sparking moment in our work that reinforced the parents' strong values of positive and honest parenting. Both Janet and Steve declared their commitment to addressing historical traumas and adverse family patterns so that they could co-construct new, healthy ways of parenting to help their children to thrive and meet their potential.

Shannon: Janet, what significant events in your life led you to imagine an alternative life as a parent?

Janet: I knew I did not want my children to have the same experiences as I had, and I am digging deep to consciously do things differently.

Shannon: Steve, what is it like to witness Janet's commitment to parenting in a different way than how she was raised?

Steve: It's been really inspiring to me, and I've learnt a lot from her. It hasn't been easy as I also did not have a perfect childhood. We talk a lot and cry a lot together too.

Janet: Yes, and we argue when we notice each other slipping back into familiar old ways.

Shannon: What do you notice from each other that keeps you strong together?

Steve: We're both brutally honest with each other and this keeps us accountable to our big goal – being the best parents we can to Nathan and Oliver.

Our last session together was a celebration of the family's accomplishments. There were slug candies and streamers, and I presented a certificate of accomplishment to each family member. Nathan's certificate was titled "Nathan the Conqueror"; the parents' were "Pavers of a New Path"; and Oliver's was "Brother and Inventor Extraordinaire". The students who had been observing my sessions with the Taylors came to the final celebration as outsider witnesses. When they came into the therapy room after viewing our presentation from the observation room, they shared their reflections about the family's strong commitment to making positive changes. One particularly creative MSW student had thoughtfully and generously created a slug stickers board that formed the word "CONGRATULATIONS!" Another student shared a slug poem with such funny lyrics. This was truly a slug extravaganza. Near the end of the session, I read the family a therapeutic letter to highlight some of the positive shifts I had witnessed as well as the ways in which the family had moved me in numerous ways. These are the words I shared with the family.

Dear Janet, Steve, Nathan and Oliver,

I'm writing to you to share what an honour it has been to work with your family and to thank you for trusting me in guiding healing and finding preferred ways of relating to one another, to find lightening of the dark thoughts and to collectively make meaning of some family patterns that were passed on to you unfairly. During this final session together, I want to express to you some of the sparkling, inspiring moments I've had the privilege to witness in your family and to pass on some reflective questions that I hope will live on inside of you all. Through my eyes, your efforts have been extraordinary and will no doubt pave a path to promoting health and wellbeing for the generations to come. Our conversations have certainly left me feeling hopeful about the positive shifts your family has accomplished. Some of the strategies that you identified as helpful in enhancing peace and connection within your family as well as fitting for your family's culture included:

- co-constructing the SLUG safety plan
- exploring somatic sensations that indicate stress is coming on (in Nathan's case, tingling hands and legs is a sign of stress)
- reviewing the cycle of stress within the home
- practicing co-regulating techniques such as yoga, meditation and reading together

- co-constructing strategies to reduce dark thoughts and shutting down
- getting to know anger and anxiety on a personal level (this helped us to get to the root of the aggression that Nathan was experiencing and helped us to learn more about Nathan 2/The Terminator as well as gaining preferred ways to relate and manage adverse behaviours)
- using mantras to decrease worries; for example, sayings such as “there will always be more help” and “I am not my thoughts” really helped
- recognising Nathan’s community of care so he did not feel so alone in his struggles (Nathan was able to identify several family members and natural supports, such as teachers, who were on “Team Nathan”)
- co-constructing a Book of Lessons from Nathan including moving slowly – like a slug, using the word “stop” and moving away, not starting fights, not being sneaky, making your own mark in the world, taking a breath, and thinking of something else (distracting); Nathan offered permission for me to share these ideas with other 11 year olds
- empowering Nathan to push through The Terminator’s influence (“hard work pays off”)
- keeping a “first-aid kit” of craft supplies at Nathan’s school desk to distract from blurting out
- empowering Janet and Steve in their dedication to and love for their children.

Nathan, thank you for teaching me so many things about slugs. I had no idea there were 2000 types and that they belong to the gastropod family and have so many teeth. You also reminded me of the magic of humour and how creativity and art can soothe worries and remind us of who we are. Will it be okay with you if I pass this on to other 11 year olds who are battling similar Terminators?

Oliver, I enjoyed hearing about your inventions, and seeing you wear your lab coat to sessions helped me to envision you as a famous scientist – which I believe you are already.

Steve, your dedication to pausing to respond was witnessed, and I was deeply moved by the patience and light in your eyes when you were speaking with your family.

Janet, I believe you are a remarkable trailblazer! You have taken the adverse experiences of your traumatic history and have used them to propel both yourself and your family towards increased faith and hope. One of the many ways you’ve done this is to study to become a psychologist. This is remarkable and I believe you will go on to help others in meaningful ways.

Your voices will go with me to inspire other families along the way.

With sincere warmth, care and gratitude,  
Shannon

Following the reading of this therapeutic letter, there were tears from all, which I felt encapsulated gratitude for the rapport we shared, appreciation for the strong efforts made by the family, and celebration of this family’s achievements. Janet asked if they could share the letter with other professionals working with Nathan now and in the future so that Nathan’s care team could see him with the same strengths, struggles and potential as I do. Of course, I agreed.

I thoroughly enjoyed all my sessions with the Taylor family and was inspired by the values they held: generosity, honesty, kindness, humour, having fun together, hard work and sticking together through difficult times. I endeavoured to harness these values throughout our work together by naming them and inviting the family to use them every chance they had. I believe this made it possible for the family members to enact these values in order to escape the problems that were getting in the way of their preferred way of

living. I was also very touched by Janet's and Steve's brave and strong efforts to carve out a life and future for their children that was different from their own and conducive to ongoing wellbeing, peace and harmony. Their commitment to showing up honestly and authentically was testament to their trailblazing

ways and commitment to doing things differently. I'm certain that the Taylor family will remain in my heart and thoughts. They will continue to inspire my practice and remind me of the joy and honour I feel in helping to uncover and thicken stories that reflect a family's preferred ways of living.

## References

Marsten, D., Epston, D., & Markham, L. (2016). *Narrative therapy in Wonderland: Connecting with children's imaginative know-how*. Norton.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.