



## Healing narratives:

*A journey of transformation and renewal*

*by Mercy Shumbamhini*



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### *Abstract*

This article shares a narrative journey with a young man grappling with the effects of problematic substance use. Substance use had disrupted his dreams of becoming a medical doctor, keeping him out of university for a year. I embarked on a transformative journey with the young man and his family, guided by ideas and practices of narrative pastoral therapy. This narrative journey was non-blaming, collaborative, participatory, inclusive and contextual. The family and I wove a new tapestry telling a story of healing, transformation and renewal.

**Key words: substance use; addiction; drug; Zimbabwe; narrative pastoral therapy; narrative practice**

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Author pronouns: she/her

My home country of Zimbabwe faces a rising drug use problem, which is a severe public health threat for adolescents and young people. The majority (70%) of people treated for drug-related disorders in Africa are under 35 years old (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Young people who use illegal drugs face both health risks and legal consequences. In addition to illicit drug use, Zimbabwe has the highest rate in Africa of 15- to 19-year-olds engaging in heavy “episodic drinking” (70.7% of males and 55.5% of females) (World Health Organization, 2019). Prevention, treatment and support services are crucial to mitigate the adverse effects of problematic alcohol and other drug use.

I was introduced to the Shingai family<sup>1</sup> through a member of their church community who had heard of my work in narrative pastoral therapy. The family was seeking support for their beloved son, Tatenda<sup>2</sup>, who was struggling with substance use and the impact it had on his relationships and sense of self. Tatenda had always aspired to become a medical doctor, but at the time we met, this dream had been shattered and his future seemed uncertain.

My initial meeting was with Tatenda’s parents. During that first conversation, we discussed their concerns and began formulating a plan for supporting Tatenda. Following this, I met with Tatenda alone to understand his perspective and begin building a relationship. Eventually, we had sessions with all three family members together, and over time, other family members also joined, offering support and contributing to the healing process.

Guided by the ideas and practices of narrative pastoral therapy (Klaasen, 2020) and inspired by the work of Michael White and David Epston (1990), David Denborough (2008), and Alice Morgan (Morgan, 2000), we sought to weave a new story of healing, transformation and renewal. Our narrative journey began with words that were heavy with pain and grief, yet vibrant with possibility.

## *Narrative pastoral therapy: An overview*

Narrative pastoral therapy is a therapeutic approach that integrates narrative therapy principles with pastoral care.

Narrative therapy is a respectful and non-blaming approach that views clients as experts in their own

lives. Developed in the 1980s by therapists Michael White and David Epston (1990), it emphasises the stories we create and carry with us throughout life. Narrative therapy “views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them in reducing the influence of problems in their lives” (Morgan, 2000, p. 2). The therapist does not have answers to the problems being experienced by the person seeking assistance. “The person consulting the therapist plays a significant part in mapping the direction of the journey [hence] narrative conversations are interactive and always in collaboration with the people consulting the therapist” (Morgan, 2000, p. 3). Narrative therapy emphasises collaboration, participation, inclusivity, context and non-blaming approaches (Epston & Freeman, 2011; Shumbamhini, 2005, 2008, 2022a; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). “The therapist is interested in seeking out and creating conversations and stories of identity that will assist to break from the influence of the problems they are facing” (Morgan, 2000, p. 14; see also White, 2000).

Narrative pastoral care also emphasises the importance of stories and narratives in shaping individuals’ identities and experiences. According to Klaasen (2020), narrative pastoral therapy is a non-blaming approach that focuses on the externalisation of problems as separate from the person. It is collaborative and participatory in its approach, with the pastoral therapist working together with clients to co-create new narratives that reflect their values, hopes and dreams (Lasair, 2020). Narrative pastoral therapy also considers the cultural, social and spiritual contexts of the individuals involved.

### ***The influence of Catholic faith on my work with the Shingai family***

As a Catholic nun, my faith deeply shaped my approach to narrative pastoral therapy with Tatenda and his family (see Doehring, 2015). Alongside our therapy sessions, the family’s regular practices like attending Mass, Eucharistic adoration, choir participation and meditation played a pivotal role in their healing. Attending Mass provided a sense of peace and connection, helping Tatenda and his family reflect on their journey and feel supported by their church community. Eucharistic adoration offered Tatenda spiritual strength and a deeper connection to his faith, fostering hope. Singing in the choir and practicing meditation helped Tatenda express himself creatively, calm his mind and enhance

his emotional wellbeing. These faith-based practices, supported by the mission of my religious congregation to walk in solidarity with others (Sevenhuijsen, 1998), were combined with practices from narrative therapy to enable the Shingai family to retell their stories in preferred ways. Through these therapeutic practices, the family moved from a place of despair to one of hope and renewal, empowered by their faith and community (see Pargament, 2007; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

## Breaking the silence

At our first meeting, the silence of Tatenda's parents held the pain they carried. Substance use had become an unwelcome guest in their family, the phantom that haunted their nights and stole their joy. Dreams of their son graduating were buried beneath layers of despair and sorrow. Our narrative journey began by acknowledging their collective struggle, and the shared burden that weighed on their hearts. They felt vulnerable and tears flowed freely.

As a narrative pastoral therapist, I stepped into their lives guided by the belief that stories could heal. Our first session was held in their living room, the air thick with unspoken grief. Tatenda's parents sat together, their eyes revealing the weight they carried. I listened with empathy and compassion, creating a safe place for them to unveil their pain and struggles and all that they had tried to do for their first child and only son. They spoke of Tatenda's laughter, once vibrant but now muted.

Through tearful conversations, we explored the depths of their despair, and in acknowledging pain, we also acknowledged the possibility of healing. The Shingai family stood on the threshold between what was and what could be. Their silence was no longer frightening; it became a sign of resilience. Together, we set forth on a path that would guide us from despair towards recovery, transformation, renewal and healing.

There was no "right" or "wrong" direction on our narrative journey; curiosity and a willingness to explore unknowns were crucial. Freedman and Combs (1996, p. 16) emphasised that narrative therapists work with people to bring forth and thicken stories that do not support or sustain problems. We deconstructed the dominant story of addiction – the relentless cycle of guilt, shame and failure. And we focused on alternative

narratives that empowered the family and Tatenda. For example, Tatenda's determination to seek help, the parents' unwavering love, and the siblings' care and loyalty. Together, we rewrote the script, using the following narrative ideas and techniques to emphasise agency and choice.

## Externalising the problem

One of the key techniques we used in this narrative journey was the externalisation of the problem. For Tatenda, addiction felt like a ghost haunting his nights. We personified this problem and named it "the Shadow", creating a clear distinction between Tatenda and his addiction. This technique helped Tatenda and his family see the addiction as an external force rather than an intrinsic part of Tatenda's identity. It became something that they could confront and fight together, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Mercy<sup>3</sup>: Tatenda, can you tell me more about the Shadow? When does it usually appear?

Tatenda: The Shadow comes at night, especially when I am alone. It whispers that I am not good enough and that I need to escape.

Mercy: How does the Shadow affect your life and your dreams?

Tatenda: It makes me feel trapped and hopeless. It took away my chance to go back to university.

Mercy: What do you think the Shadow wants from you?

Tatenda: It wants to keep me in the dark, away from my family and my goals.

Mercy: How do you feel about standing up to the Shadow? What strengths do you have that the Shadow does not?

Tatenda: I have my family's support and my faith. I want to fight back and reclaim my life.

Through externalising the problem, Tatenda and his family could see the Shadow as something they could collectively confront. This process empowered them to take action against the addiction, rather than feeling overwhelmed by it.

## Tracing the origins

We explored Tatenda's first encounter with substances, which was a rebellious act and a desperate escape. His parents also shared their struggles, revealing generational pain. However, resilience emerged alongside the weight of their history.

Mercy: Tatenda, can you remember the first time you encountered substances? What was happening in your life then?

Tatenda: I was feeling lost and rebellious. It was a way to escape my problems.

Mercy: How did your parents react when they found out?

Tatenda's Father: We were devastated. It brought back memories of our own struggles.

Mercy: What strengths have you and your family shown in facing these challenges?

Tatenda's Mother: We have always been resilient. We have faced many hardships, but we have always found a way to support each other.

By tracing the origins of Tatenda's substance use, the family could understand the deeper context of his struggles and recognise their collective resilience.

## Exploring effects

We discussed how the Shadow affected their lives: it brought sleepless nights, stole the trust that had previously existed between them and caused laughter to fade. But Tatenda's sister Mary reminded us of a different story: the moment he reached out for help. That glow of hope shifted the narrative.

Mercy: How has the Shadow impacted your family life?

Tatenda's Mother: We have had many sleepless nights, and it is hard to trust again. Our home used to be filled with laughter, but now it feels heavy.

Mary: But remember the night Tatenda asked for help? That was a turning point. It showed us that he wanted to change.

Mercy: How did that moment make you feel?

Tatenda: It was a moment of clarity for me. I realised I needed my family's support to overcome this.

By exploring the effects of the Shadow, the family could acknowledge the pain it caused while also recognising moments of hope and resilience.

## Deconstruction

As a narrative therapist, I worked with Tatenda to break down his story into smaller, more manageable parts to clarify the problem. Deconstructing made the problem more specific and reduced overgeneralising (White, 1991). Here are some questions I asked Tatenda:

- Tell me more about what you mean by "I have no future". (This question invited Tatenda to elaborate on his feelings of hopelessness and explore specific aspects of his future that he perceived as bleak.)
- When did you first start feeling this way about your future? (By exploring the origins of this belief, I was able to uncover underlying experiences that contributed to Tatenda's narrative.)
- What evidence or experiences led you to believe that the Shadow had overpowered you? (This question encouraged Tatenda to reflect on his self-perception and the impact of addiction on his life. It also helped to identify patterns or triggers.)
- How does the Shadow affect your sense of self? (Here, I explored the connection between addiction and identity. Tatenda was able to explore whether he defined himself primarily through this struggle.)
- Are there any exceptions to these beliefs? (I sought to identify moments when Tatenda felt differently or experienced hope or resilience that challenged the dominant narrative.)

## Encouraging alternative narratives

Tatenda's determination to seek treatment became a sign of hope. His parents' unwavering love, support and prayers represented alternative narratives. They were not powerless or hopeless.

Mercy: Tatenda, what made you decide to seek help?

Tatenda: I realised I could not do it alone. I needed my family and my faith.

Mercy: How have your parents supported you in this journey?

Tatenda's Father: We have prayed for him and with him every day and reminded him of his strength and potential.

Mercy: How does it feel to know you have this support?

Tatenda: It gives me hope. I know I am not alone in this fight.

By encouraging alternative narratives, the family could focus on their strengths and the positive steps they were taking towards healing.

## *Situating in context*

By exploring societal narratives and acknowledging the stigma around addiction, the family realised they were not alone. They gained compassion for their struggle when it was situated within a broader context.

Mercy: How do you think society views addiction?

Tatenda's Mother: There is a lot of stigma. People do not understand the struggle.

Mercy: How does knowing this affect your view of Tatenda's journey?

Tatenda's Father: It makes us more compassionate, kind and empathetic. We know he is not alone in this, and neither are we.

Mercy: How can understanding this broader context help in your healing process?

Tatenda: It helps me see that my struggle is part of a larger story. I can find strength in knowing others have faced similar challenges.

By situating their experience within a broader societal context, the family could gain a sense of solidarity and compassion, reducing feelings of isolation and stigma.

In this way, narrative ideas, concepts and practices allowed the Shingai family to celebrate resilience, rewrite their story and find hope amid challenges.

## *God as co-author in the Shingai family's healing journey*

In our therapeutic sessions, God became a co-author in Tatenda's healing journey, guiding him and his family towards renewal. We began each session by lighting a candle, a simple act that invited God's presence into our space, offering peace and wisdom. We drew strength from stories of biblical figures and saints like St Augustine, St Ignatius of Loyola, Moses, Esther, Joseph and St Paul – each embodying transformation and renewal. These stories mirrored Tatenda's struggles and reminded us that transformation is possible, no matter what one is up against.

Tatenda's own story, woven with pain, struggles and moments of resilience, unfolded like a tapestry of new beginnings. As a pastoral therapist, I listened deeply, attuned not only to his words but to the quiet whispers of an alternative story longing to be told. Over time, Tatenda not only overcame addiction but rediscovered his identity, purpose and connection to the divine. His journey became a testament to the power of faith, hope and love. In our Christian tradition, these virtues are the core of our faith: faith is trust in God's presence and guidance; hope is the belief that transformation and renewal are always possible, no matter the depth of despair; and love is the unconditional force that heals and restores, both between people and with God. Through these virtues, Tatenda found the strength to rewrite his story .

## *The Path of Life metaphor*

The Path of Life metaphor was helpful in Tatenda's transformational journey and healing. In narrative therapy, metaphors act as powerful guides. They help us navigate the complexities of our lives, offering fresh perspectives and alternative narratives (Denborough, 2008; Epston & White, 1992; Ncube, 2006; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). The Path of Life is a therapeutic tool that I developed and have used with adults, children, couples, families and communities who have experienced hard times in many contexts.

It is inspired by Psalm 16:11: “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (New International Version, 2011).

The person draws their life path, from its beginning to the present and beyond, enabling them to speak or write about past struggles, growth and strengths. They identify significant milestones – moments of joy, achievement, challenges or turning points that illuminate their journey. These moments are opportunities to celebrate their strengths and accomplishments, reinforcing the progress they have made. This process not only honours their past but also empowers them to move forward with renewed confidence, courage and hope. Each segment of the path can be enriched with symbols, colours and images that represent different life stages and experiences. This creative process is deeply therapeutic, fostering a profound connection with their narrative. The visual metaphor recognises that life is a journey with ups and downs, but each step is a part of a larger story.

For Tatenda, exploring the different landscapes of his Path of Life – gardens for growth, dry lands for challenges, orchards for abundance, rivers for struggles, hills for obstacles, forests for introspection, and cities for community and family – allowed him to reflect on diverse aspects of his life and how he had navigated through them. Re-memembering the people who had walked alongside him on this path – family members, friends, mentors, teachers and spiritual figures – provided a sense of connection and gratitude. It highlighted the importance of relationships in his life journey. Through this metaphor, he discovered new possibilities and embraced his transformational path with courage and hope.

## *Integrating religious practices in narrative pastoral therapy*

Since the 2000s, the integration of religious practices and spirituality into therapy has become more recognised. Therapists in various fields, including psychology, social work and family therapy, have increasingly acknowledged the importance of addressing spiritual concerns as part of healing (Anderson, 1992; Brownell, 2014; Coyle, 2014, 2017; Townsend, 2009).

In my narrative pastoral therapy I draw on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), a story that teaches about compassion, community and the importance of offering care to those in need. In this parable, a man is left beaten and half dead by the side of the road, and several passersby ignore him. But a Samaritan – someone traditionally seen as an outsider – stops, tends to his wounds, and ensures the man receives further care. The parable emphasises the role of compassionate action, not only in individual healing but in community engagement and care.

This spirit of compassion and interconnectedness is central to narrative pastoral therapy. Just as the Samaritan went beyond mere observation to actively engage in the man's healing process, narrative pastoral therapy encourages the therapist and community to become active participants in a person's journey towards healing. This is not confined to the therapy room but calls for a broader, holistic involvement of faith and community. By drawing on the values of this parable, narrative pastoral therapy invites individuals to see their stories in a broader context, where healing and transformation occur within a supportive, compassionate community rather than in isolation. I, therefore, believe that narrative pastoral therapy can include various religious practices, including prayer, songs and music, worship and scripture reading. These practices can enrich the therapeutic process, providing a deeper connection to the person's spiritual journey and fostering a sense of peace and healing. By integrating these elements, narrative pastoral therapy offers a comprehensive path to wellbeing that honours both the psychological and the spiritual dimensions of life. Below are descriptions of how I incorporated prayer, songs and music, and scripture reading into my narrative pastoral therapy practice with Tatenda.

### **Prayer**

Mercy: Tatenda, would you like to start our session with a prayer? It might help us centre ourselves.

Tatenda: Yes, I think that would be good.

Mercy: Would you like to lead or should I?

Tatenda: I can lead. Dear Lord, we come before you today seeking your guidance and strength. Help us find the path to healing and give us the courage to overcome our challenges. Amen.

Starting sessions with prayer helped Tatenda feel grounded and connected to his faith. It provided a sense of calm and reassurance, creating a supportive environment for discussing difficult topics.

### **Songs and music**

Mercy: Tatenda, I remember you mentioned that you find comfort in music. Is there a particular hymn or song that resonates with you?

Tatenda: Yes, "Amazing Grace" always brings me peace.

Mercy: Would you like to listen to it together now? We can reflect on the lyrics and what they mean to you.

Tatenda: Sure, I would be very grateful for this. Let's do that.

Listening to and reflecting on hymns like "Amazing Grace" helped Tatenda express his emotions and find consolation. The music provided a therapeutic channel and reinforced positive messages of hope and renewal.

### **Scripture reading**

Mercy: Tatenda, is there a scripture passage that has been meaningful to you during this journey?

Tatenda: Yes, Psalm 23 has always been a source of comfort.

Mercy: Let us read it together. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want..." How does this passage speak to your current situation?

Tatenda: It reminds me that I am not alone and that there is guidance and protection available to me.

Reflecting on passages of scripture like Psalm 23 helped Tatenda find meaning and reassurance. It provided a spiritual framework for understanding his struggles and reinforced his faith in a higher power.

In sum, integrating these religious practices into narrative pastoral therapy offered Tatenda and his family multiple pathways to healing and support. Through prayer, songs, music and scripture, Tatenda and his family reconnected with their faith, found solace in familiar rituals and drew strength from their spiritual beliefs. These practices not only enriched the therapeutic process but also made it more holistic,

spiritually uplifting and culturally relevant. This integration provided a profound sense of comfort and empowerment, guiding them towards a more resilient and hopeful future.

## *Embracing cultural strengths: The Shingai family's path to healing*

In the realm of narrative pastoral therapy, drawing on cultural strengths and familial support systems plays a pivotal role in fostering healing and transformation (Kwok, 2016). This approach emphasises the importance of storytelling, cultural proverbs and community involvement in the therapeutic process. The following dialogue between Tatenda and myself illustrates how these elements can be harnessed to create a supportive and healing environment.

### **Extended family networks**

Mercy: Tatenda, can you share a story about a time when your extended family came together to support you?

Tatenda: There was a time when I was really struggling, and my uncle organised a gathering where everyone shared their experiences and offered advice. It made me feel less lonely.

Mercy: That sounds powerful. How did that experience change your perspective on your struggles?

Tatenda: It made me realise that I have a network of people who care about me and that I do not have to face my problems alone.

Mercy: How can we bring that sense of community support into your healing process now?

Tatenda: I think involving my family more in my recovery could help. Maybe we could have regular family meetings where we talk about my progress and challenges.

Mercy: That is a great idea. Let's plan to include your family in our sessions and create a support system that reinforces your journey towards healing.

## ***Storytelling and proverbs***

Mercy: Tatenda, let us discuss some proverbs or stories from your culture that have been meaningful to you. Can you think of one that relates to your current situation?

Tatenda: Yes, there is a Shona proverb that says “chara chimwe hachitswanyiri inda”, which means “one finger cannot crush a louse”. It reminds me that I need the help of others to overcome my problems.

Mercy: That is a beautiful proverb. How can we apply its wisdom to your journey of recovery?

Tatenda: It makes me think about the importance of asking for help and not trying to do everything on my own. I need to share my experiences with my family and community.

Mercy: Absolutely. Let us explore how we can incorporate this proverb into your daily life. Perhaps we can create a ritual where you reflect on this wisdom each morning to remind yourself of the support around you.

Tatenda: I like that idea. It will help me stay focused on my recovery and remember that I am not alone.

Mercy: Great! Also, do you have a story from your culture that has inspired you?

Tatenda: Yes, there is a story about a wise old man named Mbizi [Zebra] who lived in our village. He was known for his wisdom and kindness. One day, a young man came to him, frustrated with the challenges he was facing. Mbizi told him a story about a tree that stood strong through many storms because its roots were deeply connected to the earth and intertwined with other trees. The story taught the young man the importance of staying grounded and seeking support from those around him.

Mercy: That is a wonderful story. How does it resonate with you?

Tatenda: It reminds me that I need to stay connected with my roots and lean on my family and community for strength.

Mercy: Let us think about ways to keep you connected and grounded as you continue your recovery.

Incorporating extended family networks and cultural storytelling into Tatenda’s therapy sessions were powerful tools for his transformation, healing and renewal. By involving his extended family, Tatenda gained a robust support system that reinforced his sense of belonging and collective responsibility. The use of proverbs and storytelling not only provided comfort and wisdom but also offered new perspectives on his challenges, helping him to see his recovery as a communal effort. These culturally sensitive approaches ensured that Tatenda’s healing journey was deeply rooted in his cultural identity, making the process more meaningful and effective. By embracing these elements, Tatenda was able to find strength in his heritage and community, leading to a more holistic and sustained recovery.

## ***Embracing Ubuntu***

Finding strength in heritage and community is also linked to Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophy meaning “I am because we are”, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of community support. This philosophy aligns seamlessly with the principles of narrative pastoral therapy, which focuses on collective narrative and the support of the community in the healing process. The concept of Ubuntu has been eloquently discussed by African religious philosophers such as Mbiti (1969) and Tutu (1999), as well as African writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1972). In our narrative pastoral therapy sessions with Tatenda and his family, the principles of Ubuntu were central to our approach. By focusing on the collective strengths and shared values of Tatenda and his family, we fostered a supportive environment where Tatenda could envision a future free from the Shadow. The philosophy of Ubuntu reinforced the idea that his wellbeing is intertwined with the wellbeing of his family and community, highlighting the power of collective healing and resilience.

When I first met Tatenda he felt lost and ashamed, believing his dreams were shattered. I reassured him that his family and community were there to support him. During a family meeting, we discussed ways to help, such as spending more time together and praying. Tatenda agreed to join a community prayer session, which made him feel supported and hopeful. I then encouraged him to see his struggles as a challenge to overcome together, not a failure. By the final session, Tatenda felt confident about his future, knowing his family and community stood by him.



As Tatenda' re-established connections, the philosophy of Ubuntu also led him to take a series of actions that reflected a deep commitment to others. After overcoming his own struggles with substance use, Tatenda felt a strong urge to give back to others. Volunteering at a local support group, he shared his story, emphasising the importance of community. He told others, "We are not defined by our struggles. Together, we can overcome 'the Shadow'. Let us support each other and find strength in our shared experiences". His empathy and commitment to mutual healing created a space for others to find hope and strength in their own journeys.

Tatenda's Ubuntu spirit extended to environmental conservation. He joined an eco-friendly club, believing that taking care of the environment is a reflection of how we take care of each other. He organised a community clean-up and tree-planting event, uniting families and neighbours. His leadership not only rejuvenated the environment but also symbolised growth and renewal for the community.

As Tatenda started to escape from the influence of the Shadow, he began to volunteer at an orphanage and visited elderly residents, offering companionship and support. His presence brought joy and comfort to those who needed it most, reinforcing the idea that healing and care extend beyond individual efforts to the wellbeing of the whole community.

Through these actions, Tatenda created a ripple effect of hope and transformation. His journey of personal healing and dedication to others serves as a powerful reminder of the power of community and the resilience of the human spirit. These stories exemplify the core of Ubuntu – I am because we are – and highlight how we can all contribute to healing and positive change in our communities.

## *The healing power of letters*

Letters are very powerful tools in narrative therapy (Epston, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). The family wrote letters of encouragement, forgiveness and hope. At my suggestion, the parents wrote to their son, expressing their unwavering love even when disappointment threatened to consume them. Tatenda responded, sharing his fears, regrets, and newfound determination and resilience. Here are two of the letters.

### ***Letter to Tatenda from his parents***

Dear Tatenda,

Peace and blessings from Mom and Dad.

As we write on this paper, our hearts ache with love and concern. We have witnessed your struggle and the battle against substance use. But know this: Our love for you remains unwavering, unyielding. We love you dearly.

Disappointment may knock at our door, but it cannot extinguish the flame of parental dedication. We see beyond the darkness that threatens to engulf you. You are our child, the one whose laughter once echoed through our home, the one who dreamed of being a medical doctor.

We write not to reprove, but to extend a hand and express our conditional love. Our words carry hope, forgiveness and the promise of a new story, new path and new life. We remember the child who clung to our fingers, eyes wide with wonder. That child still resides within you, Tatenda.

You are not defined by your struggles, Tatenda. You are a constellation of resilience, stitched together by love and shared memories. We believe in your capacity to heal, to rise from the depths. You shall overcome, you shall finish your last year of studies, and we believe you are going to become what you have loved to do so much, to become a medical doctor.

Hold this letter close, as if it were our arms wrapped around you. Let its words be a compass – a guide back to the path of light and path of your life. We will wait, watch and pray. For even in the storm, you remain our beloved son. When you need something, please do not hesitate to come to us, we are always there for you, our beloved son.

With all our love and forever,  
Your Parents

### **Tatenda's response**

Dear Mom and Dad,

Your letters touched me deeply. Each word is powerful, full of encouragement and love. I know I have disappointed you, but in your forgiveness, I find peace, strength, hope and healing. You see beyond the wreckage, the shattered promises, and the nights lost to cravings. I remember your tender and caring hands wiping tears from my cheeks.

This newfound determination burns within me. I am not merely a vessel for addiction; I am a vessel for new life, a new narrative and a new path. The path ahead may be dark, but your love lights the way. I promise to fight, for you, for my sisters, for us. I will win because your love is so great and powerful. And I am confident of this: you are always there for me. Thank you, Mom and Dad. You are the best.

Thank you for bringing Sr Mercy into my life. She is so gentle and yet so powerful in making me see how special I am. The narrative journey, especially the Path of Life, has enabled me to look back with gratitude. I also deeply appreciate the meditations during our narrative journey. Meditation has played a crucial role in my healing and transformation. It has reduced stress and anxiety, helping me to relax, stay focused, and maintain emotional balance and resilience. Through meditation, I have found a sense of calm and clarity, enabling me to respond to the Shadow with greater resilience and positivity.

Your unwavering support and love have been my guiding light. I am committed to this journey of recovery and transformation, knowing that with your love, I can overcome any obstacle.

I love you too, Mom and Dad.

With gratitude and hope,  
Tatenda

## *A ritual of gratitude: Celebrating new beginnings*

A Holy Mass at the Shingai family home marked the closing ritual of our narrative journey. Amidst prayers and hymns, we celebrated Tatenda's preferred ways of being and his new, alternative story. The Eucharist became a feast of thanksgiving, a powerful symbol of renewal and hope. Fr Thomas, a dear friend of the Shingai family, spoke words of encouragement that resonated deeply with everyone present.

The Shingai family had invited their friends and Tatenda's friends to join this celebration. After the Mass, we gathered for a delicious meal prepared by the Shingai family. As we ate, we shared our experiences and alternative stories – those that challenge and deconstruct problem-saturated narratives. This communal sharing was a testament to the power of collective support and the strength found in unity.

The friends of the Shingai family witnessed Tatenda's transformation, renewal and healing. This ritual of gratitude not only celebrated Tatenda's journey but also reinforced the bonds within the community, illustrating the profound impact of narrative pastoral therapy. It was a moment of collective joy and hope, a powerful reminder that through faith, love, and support, new beginnings are always possible.

Before I left the Shingai's homestead, I handed them a sealed envelope and said this to them:

I am filled with both gratitude and hope. Our journey together has been one of resilience, love, and transformation. Your son's struggle with substance use was a challenging battle, but he faced it with courage. Through your unwavering support and his determination, he found his way back from the depths of despair. Today, as he prepares to return to university, he carries not only his own healing but also the promise of healing for others.

In the sealed envelope I left with you, there lies a therapeutic letter which serves as a reminder of this remarkable journey. When doubt creeps in or old wounds threaten to reopen, I urge you to open it. Within those pages, you will find words of encouragement, stories of resilience, and a picture of a son who reclaimed his life.

Remember that hope is a charm against despair. As you move forward, may your narratives continue to heal, transform, and renew. Let this experience be a sign, a testament to the power of love, family, community, and the human and Ubuntu spirit which I have experienced throughout this journey with you.

And so, the Shingai's faces etched with gratitude. They carried not just hope for their own healing but the promise of healing for others.

## Conclusion

Witnessing Tatenda's journey has been a privilege and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. His unwavering commitment to taking responsibility for his life, growing in faith, and maintaining hope has been truly inspiring to me. Tatenda's return to university in

August 2024 to complete his studies marked a significant milestone in his journey of renewal and transformation.

I am honoured to remain a part of his transformational journey, witnessing and celebrating his alternative story, a story of healing and renewal. What an honour it has been to be part of this beautiful and inspiring story. Thank you, Tatenda, for allowing me to walk this path with you!

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Shingai is not their real name, it means "be brave".
- <sup>2</sup> Tatenda is not his real name, it means "thank you".
- <sup>3</sup> Our conversations took place in a mixture of English and Shona, with Tatenda often preferring to speak in English. After our sessions, I transcribed and translated everything and then reviewed the content with Tatenda and his family to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected what they wished to express.

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