



Walking bravely in the face of uncertainty:

A narrative family therapy practice story

by Tamara Wilson



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Abstract

This paper shares a story of practice with a family who initially came to counselling because the 17-year-old son was suicidal. Our work came to focus on the family as a whole and their process of coming back together after being separated for some years in response to the father's drug use. We developed a new understanding of the mother's decision to ask the father to leave the family home as an act of bravery that had contributed to the wellbeing of all involved. Through identifying individual and collective wonderfulnesses, the family members developed a new shared identity in which bravery, resilience and calm could provide a foundation for responding to current and future life challenges.

Key words: *family therapy; narrative family therapy; separation; youth; drug use; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: she/her

Jennifer contacted the Calgary Family Therapy Centre expressing concern for her 17-year-old son, Jessie. He had stopped going to school consistently, was expressing suicidal ideation and had made several suicide attempts that resulted in either police involvement or hospital visits. Jennifer further reported that she and her son had been having explosive fights that involved Jessie posturing and threatening her. Jennifer and her partner, Owen, also had a daughter, Sara (10 years old). Jennifer and Owen had recently got back together after years apart because of Owen's drug use. The family had been seeing one of our students with my help, and as the student completed her practicum at the centre, the family was transferred to me.

I met with the family to explore how they felt their work with the centre had been going. Jessie began sharing his reflections about how far he felt his family had come in overcoming some of their difficulties. He also reported that when his mom had asked Owen to leave their home, he had been quite young, and at the time felt quite angry and uncertain about why Owen had left their family. I asked questions about Jessie's understanding of his mom's decision to ask Owen to leave. Some of the questions I asked were:

- How did you make sense of what was happening at that time?
- Who supported you with understanding these things?
- How did the comfort your mom offered you help you with understanding the changes?
- What do you think she considered when making the decision to ask Owen to leave?
- What abilities and values did she most likely draw on when making this decision?

I asked these questions to assist Jessie to thicken his account of his mom and to also highlight her abilities and skills through his eyes. Jessie indicated that he later understood that Owen had been involved in drug use and was therefore not able to support his mom in taking care of him and his sister at the time. Jessie described his mom's decision as brave.

Jennifer appeared to disagree with this. Instead, she described her decision as selfish: "I hurt a lot of people, and it was a really hard time". I asked Jennifer if she shared Jessie's view of her decision as brave. She reiterated that her choice to disengage from her relationship with Owen was experienced as negative

by many people in her life. Owen shared that through reflecting on his process of healing and recovery, he had also come to see Jennifer's actions as brave. I asked Owen to convey how Jen's brave decision had been a resource to him (in other words, an opportunity to discover his unique competencies related to recovery and healing). Owen reported that being on his own without Jen and the children allowed him to feel the loss of the comfort that Jen had provided. He further indicated that he used his experience of loss to learn new ways to "fight" his way back to sobriety or what he called "living". Owen described the journey toward sobriety as experiencing life in a new way that he was previously unable to access while under the influences of drugs. This led to a conversation in which we built up an alternative story centring on coming back together, collaborating, and tackling mental health as a team.

Tamara: What was the experience of leaving like for you, Owen?

Owen: I was devastated. Angry initially and blamed everyone else for a while.

Tamara: What stands out for you with respect to later seeing things differently?

Owen: I moved to another province and met a wonderful counsellor who helped me understand my addiction and some of the trauma I went through as a kid. She worked with me for two years as I got sober, and I learnt later that Jen taking the lead with our separation was probably the only way I was going to get clean. If I didn't have time alone, I wouldn't have been able to be the boyfriend and dad I am now.

Tamara: What does it mean to you, Jen, to hear Owen talk about his experience of the separation?

Jennifer: It's nice to hear that.

Tamara: What is it that you both learnt about the most from this experience that now helps you in your co-parenting relationship?

Jennifer: I think we learnt how to be more patient, not only with each other but with the kids. Jessie can attest to this!

Owen: Yes, I agree with patience, and we learnt that taking a break doesn't mean the end; it's just a pause to help with bringing back some calm.

Tamara: What values have you constructed together that help you embody calmness in your accountability holding?

My intention in this conversation was to address Jennifer's and Owen's tendency to focus on mistakes and regrets from the past, their sense of not working together, and their frustration about the "stuckness" they experienced in relation to the ups and downs of Jessie's mental health.

I asked Jen if her decision to ask Owen to leave could be seen as a resource for healing in her family and invited her to share her views on the healing effects that occurred following her response to Owen's drug use. I intentionally came back to this theme to thicken the narrative as it appeared that Jen was uncertain about whether or not her decision was an act of bravery. Although Jessie and Owen recognised this, I sensed that Jen had different ideas. By eliciting details about the healing effects of Jen's decision to ask Owen to leave, I hoped she might start to shift her focus from noticing the negative effects (being separated, not allowing Owen to see Sara or Jessie, shame from extended family) to seeing this decision as a significant (and healing) one.

We also explored a counter-story of Jen's request for Owen to leave as an act of protest against the drug abuse and its negative effects of the family. I began by asking whether Jen saw her boundary setting as a protest against Owen's continuing drug use.

Tamara: How possible is it that you were creating this boundary and making this decision as a way to protest Owen's continued use of drugs?

Jen and Owen reiterated that they did, indeed, see it this way.

Tamara: What was it exactly that you were protesting?

Jennifer: I was trying to stop the cycle of parents using drugs in front of their kids, and I was protesting the potential risk of this being passed on to my children. I also didn't want to put up with Owen being inconsistent and having my children be unclear if they could count on him or not. Even if this meant being out of their life, at least they would know for sure.

Jessie: Yah, that was hard at first, not knowing what happened to Owen, but I knew later why my mom did that.

Tamara: Owen, what would you add about what Jen might have been protesting?

Owen: She was protesting my abusive and dismissive words and actions toward her and my inability to hold myself accountable.

I later invited the family to reiterate and co-construct strengths they observed in one another as developed from their responses to the adversity in this story. I asked if it would be okay to name Jessie as "resilient", Jennifer as the "brave powerhouse" and Owen as a "calming force", as Jen had described him in past sessions and again today. At the Calgary Family Therapy Centre, when externalising, we often co-construct the naming of an externalised quality or relationship practice or pattern (whether it be problematic or healing) as part of our social constructionist posture (see Tomm et al., 2014). This approach recognises that if the family members themselves have a say in defining what it is that's present, and in defining preferred ways of being, this can bring forth further preferred actions and possibilities. I asked:

- Jen, I noticed you've used the term "calming force" to describe Owen. Would it be okay to continue to use that name to describe him in our work together?
- Owen, Jessie, what do you think?
- Who else would agree with this name, "calming force"?
- Say we were to name each of you, what names would you give yourselves, Jen and Jessie?

Owen: I see Jen as a symbol of bravery.

Tamara: I was wondering, given what you've described, if I could add the word "powerhouse" to brave, Jen? Something like "brave powerhouse". What do you all think?

Owen: I like it!

Jessie: Yah, me too.

Jennifer: I suppose so.

Tamara: Hmm, what might fit better for you, Jen?

Jennifer: No, that fits actually.

Tamara: What about for you, Jessie? I was wondering about something related to your resilience and your ability to be resourceful?

Jennifer: I like resilience for Jessie.

Jessie agreed.

This was an example of naming a “wonderfulness” (Marsten et al., 2016); however, we also co-constructed and named healing patterns with the assumption that having conversations (using reflexive questions) with the family about their preferred ways of being would invite greater uptake of these preferred patterns as they constructed them together and said them out loud (Tomm et al., 2014).

I was later able to invite the family members to draw on these “wonderfulnesses” when I invited them to write a letter to their past. I asked each family member to speak and write about some of their hardships and the ways they had drawn on their family values and principles during these times. My therapeutic intentions here were to orient them to seeing the abilities they employed as they faced life challenges. My hope was that writing about this might solidify and enrich their understandings of their abilities and achievements. Jennifer shared how her commitment to parenting and creating a safe space allowed her to move forward after asking Owen to leave. Jessie conveyed how he also had to practice bravery when he and his mom moved into a women’s shelter temporarily. Jessie also added a memory of a time when he, his baby sister and his mom went to visit a family member out of town. The memory of this road trip became something his whole family held on to over the years. Jennifer recalled how Jessie had been able to help her navigate their way there and named him her co-pilot. We highlighted how they had worked as a team on that trip and how fear had taken a back seat as Jessie and Jennifer found their way to the cousin’s home. I suggested that Jennifer’s position as “the brave powerhouse” had been present here too.

As the family shared the road trip story, I was listening for any moments to amplify the preferred qualities reflected in their co-constructed names, and I was also on the lookout for any pieces of information that I could pull out to further thicken the counter-story of navigating uncertainty together and collaborating under unfavourable circumstances. I was hoping to intertwine both individual and collective competencies to deepen the family members’ sense of agency over adversity (that they had some say in how things went) and to orient them in discovering meaning in both their intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities – something we had already been working toward in the therapeutic process. I sought to re-establish a new identity as

a family in which bravery, resilience and calm could become the foundation for current and future life challenges.

The family talked about moments of confusion and loneliness and the ways in which they continued to push forward using skills of resilience and bravery. Jen noted that they each had slightly different goals but similar principles, so we highlighted what I called “walking forward in the face of uncertainty” to amplify their abilities of perseverance. I suggested this phrase as the family appeared to be struggling to put names to qualities. I offered it tentatively and created space for them to take it or leave it. My therapeutic intention with naming it as I did was to reiterate the idea of working together even when intrapersonal goals may be slightly different. Highlighting that not all goals always need to be the same has been a theme in the work I have been supporting Jen in doing as she has had some trouble accepting that her and Jessie’s goals and expectations weren’t always aligned. I invited Jessie to speak and write about the different growing up practices that he engaged in during the years when his mom was parenting mostly on her own and how these growing up practices contributed to where he is now. I took care to do so in ways that didn’t dishonour Jen’s extraordinary parenting abilities or the significant care she provided to him.

Another theme in our work centred on the parents’ strong (at times, impositional) desire for Jessie to become more independent and less reliant on Jen in particular for working through day-to-day stress (school pressures, household responsibilities, etc.). So, while I was orienting the family toward collaboration and working as a team, I was also looking for an opportunity to orient Jessie towards recognising his own inner competencies as he worked toward what he called “adulthood”.

The letter-writing exercise occurred in another session. The family was invited to write to “the past” as a way of becoming witnesses to the values and abilities that had been highlighted in our previous session. I invited them each to write a brief letter (about a paragraph long) to the part of the past that was brought forth in the previous interview – Jen’s decision to ask Owen to leave their family home temporarily. I asked them to recapture the highlights from our previous session (co-constructed names, collective and individual abilities, values and preferences). Next, I invited them to write about a particular moment that stood out to them in relation to being brave, embodying a calming force and

exercising resilience. I also asked them to add details about the wonderfulness they were able to draw on during that time and that they built up as a result of the adversity (as explored in our previous session). Further, I invited them to give themselves some encouragement or advice related to exercising kindness to themselves when it came to remembering what they might be prone to calling a mistake. Lastly, I asked the family if they thought it might be helpful to include some comments about gratitude for the journey, but reiterated that they should include this only if it fit. This idea was brought forth as a way to tentatively reinforce and orient the family towards noticing the healing developments that they contributed to while not negating the significant pain and adversity they had experienced. Later, they read their letters out loud to one another. I asked them to share any surprising details they hadn't yet talked about and anything that stood out to them as they heard each other's letter.

I asked the family to take these letters home and to consider sharing them with other family members who they were in contact with during that time (Jen's sisters for example) as a way of reinforcing and solidifying their competencies and achievements to outsiders who could potentially also strengthen the noticing of these abilities. I hope to offer a follow-up exercise of writing a letter to the future together. In hindsight, writing individually perhaps didn't reinforce the significance of collaboration that we had been working on but nonetheless was therapeutically generative as I noticed significant collaboration during the session.

Note

¹ In hindsight, perhaps I focused too narrowly on encouraging Jennifer to recognise her decision as brave and inadvertently missed an opportunity to amplify other potential values that might have been more significant to her. Inviting Jen to share her preferred ways of understanding this act could have brought additional competencies to the fore.

References

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