

**Honouring resistance
and building solidarity:
Feminism and
narrative practice**

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Spirituality and narrative practice

This chapter offers examples of practices that explore ways people who have been assaulted have survived the assault and ways they are reclaiming their lives from trauma. The focus of this chapter is on inviting conversations that open space for recognition of the role that faith and spirituality can have in people's sense of identity and in their process of surviving and reclaiming life after a traumatic event. There is particular attention drawn to increasing a sense of agency for those who felt they were passive in their journey of survival.

I would like to start this chapter by situating myself in terms of my history with religion and spirituality. I was born into a Catholic family, but by the time I was six, my mother had left the Catholic church and over time we attended various Protestant churches. My father had become an atheist, and we had lots of rigorous discussions about the Bible, science and faith. Growing up in a church environment, I have experienced sacred moments and supportive community. I have also witnessed abuses of power within the church and in Christian schools. I have heard many stories of harm and many stories of support, community, tenderness and healing. I also know that spirituality can be separated out from religion, or from the actions of those who have caused harm. Spirituality can be understood to have different meanings and different shapes.

Deconstruction

With these different threads in my hand, narrative practice and the philosophies that underpin it have felt like a good way to weave these experiences and understandings together. I can hold both critique and appreciation. I can step further back or closer in to examine the threads and the tapestry.

Although deconstruction questions open up space to examine power, in narrative practice these explorations are not pushy or disrespectful. We are not persuading people one way or another, but gently creating a safe space for the person to consider the operations of power they have been subject to. This often is seen through expectations on their life, and we can ask about the way family, society or religion may have influenced those expectations. For those who have attended a religious school or boarding school, grown up in an institutional “care” home or lived in a tight-knit religious community or in a cult, these practices of power may be even more influential, as they stretch beyond the daily influence of family and beyond the weekly influences of church, synagogue, temple or mosque. I appreciate that deconstruction offers an opportunity for people to consider what is working well for them and what is perhaps not as useful.

With reflective practice we are encouraged to examine these influences on ourselves as practitioners and to question our own use of power in the counselling room or community space. A decentred posture has us valuing the perspectives of the people we meet with and respecting their right to agency over their own lives. We can welcome people of all faiths or no faith and hear their stories with respect.

*Example questions for practitioner self-reflection*³⁶

- Which aspects of religion or spirituality do I treasure?
- Which aspects of religion or spirituality have I found unhelpful?
- Which aspects of religion might be less visible to me?

³⁶ For those who are atheists, reflection questions might also consider the influence of atheism as a belief system.

- Are there negative effects for others in the community caused by the beliefs and actions of a religious or spiritual community I am a part of?
- Which cultures or subcultures do I belong to?
- Which aspects of culture might be less visible to me?
- Are there ideas or beliefs I am “swimming in” on a daily basis that I have not yet examined?
- What are the effects of these on the way I am hearing this person’s story?
- When I feel a sense of discomfort about what a person has said, what is that discomfort connected to?
- Is this connected to a value I hold or that my religion or culture holds?
- Is there a difference between my values and the values of my religion or culture in relation to this issue? If so, does this mean I need to change my values or hold them more closely?
- In work, or in my time outside of work, when I experience a random thought that doesn’t fit with my values, what does this mean? Does this mean that I am not living according to my values? Or does it mean that I am perhaps being influenced by some dominant ideas in society?
- Is this something I need to reflect further on?
- Does it require some action?

Re-authoring and re-membering

In re-authoring and re-membering (M. White, 2007), we are tracing the history of values, beliefs, principles and commitments, and honouring and celebrating those people who have made a rich contribution to our lives and

the lives of those we are meeting with. We are supporting people to consider how they have contributed to the lives of others. We are collaborating to uncover what assists people to get through hard times. For some, connecting with the sacred is an important part of meaning-making. During the worst times, faith can even support people in a struggle for survival. My life experiences and the different perspectives of members of my family have supported my curiosity in these arenas.

Agency and spirituality

During times of danger and harm, many people find spiritual beliefs, and their relationship to God, their spiritual teacher and/or their faith community, to be highly significant and sustaining. For others, they may have felt a distance from God or their community of faith during this hard time. We can be curious about the situation, events, actions and thoughts that led up to this, and the meaning that the person has drawn from either of these experiences.

I have met with people who have been kidnapped and raped, or who were assaulted during a date and then threatened with murder. Often there is a strong sense of shame and distress about the assault. Among other aspects of the work, it has been significant to acknowledge that in order for the person to be here speaking with me today, they must have somehow escaped. For some, as we have discussed their escape, they have expressed a belief that God assisted them and their gratitude about this. Such a belief can be significantly comforting. While wanting to honour this, I have noticed that for some, it can erase any sense of agency. For some, the idea that God helped them escape does not reduce the sense of shame.

Riley's story

When I met Riley, she was 25 years old and was wanting to reduce the effects of anxiety in her life. In exploring her hopes for her life, she said she had already achieved some goals: finishing university and moving

interstate. She wanted to “meet someone” and eventually get married and have children but said that anxiety was making it hard for her to go on dates. She was concerned that a man might seem to be nice, but that he might be just pretending. Riley also said that anxiety was making her very stressed about having children, as the world is not safe, and she might not be able to protect them. In tracing the history of these fears, Riley told me that five years earlier, she had been held captive and repeatedly sexually assaulted by someone she had trusted. He had tricked her into moving to Australia with the promise of a job. His hidden intention was to sell her into sexual slavery. She was struggling with a sense of worthlessness and shame and stated that she did not believe she was deserving of a good life. I asked her how she had escaped. Riley told me that God had provided a way for her to escape. She told me that she had always known that God loved her. She stated that without God’s intervention, she would not have escaped. I wondered how I might honour her faith and gratitude to God, and also bring forward a conversation about Riley’s agency in her own life.

Below I have listed some questions that I used to explore Riley’s relationship with God and the circumstances of the escape. The questions draw on the concept that people always respond to traumatic or oppressive situations (as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6; also see Wade, 1997; M. White, 1995a). The questions about spiritual beliefs, songs, scriptures and the history of these are drawn from Denborough (2008). For readers trying out the questions listed throughout this book, keep in mind that questions should be shaped by the person’s responses, and not all questions would need to be used. Using the questions included here, the conversation may extend across two or three sessions as we build the picture of God’s support and the person’s own agency. Connection to others is also important.

My questions to Riley were shaped by various intentions:

- to respect and honour her faith
- to support the development of a sense of agency while respecting God’s contribution to the escape
- to explore or build a support team
- to deconstruct self-blame

- to make visible that responsibility sits with the person who kidnapped and sexually assaulted her
- to find out more about Riley's meaning-making
- to explore how Riley had continued to reclaim her life after this horrendous ordeal.

Supporting agency and respecting faith:

Questions eliciting responses

- How did you survive the horrendous ordeal you have described? Were there things you did, or thoughts you had, to make it a little more bearable?
- Were there things you did to protect your mind, body or spirit in some way?
- Can you tell me how you escaped? What did you do?
- How did you think to do that, despite being so frightened?
- What was your hope or intention in doing that?
- Had you been planning it for a while, or was it a spontaneous break for freedom?
- Had you previously tried to escape? Was this possibly useful knowledge gathering for when you finally escaped, or would you describe it another way?
- You said God gave you the opportunity to escape, and that it was his³⁷ plan you followed. How did you know that he was indicating this to you? Did it sound like a voice or a thought, or did he show you a sign?
- Do you have a history of listening to God?

³⁷ In respecting the person's beliefs, we can listen out for how they refer to God or other spiritual figures, including what names and pronouns they use.

- Would you describe it as a dialogue between you, or is it more like God speaks and you listen?
- I'm assuming you could have chosen not to take the opportunity that God provided, or that you could have been too scared to take it. Would you say that you had to take a step, some sort of action to escape?
- What would you call these steps that you took to put God's plan into action?
- What did it take – courage, trust in God or something else?
- Is there something you know from your own experience or from the Bible³⁸ that helped you know that you could trust God?
- What did you do after you escaped?

Further developing the sense that God is on Riley's team:

Re-membering questions

- What might God be appreciating about how you placed your trust in him at that time?
- Do you think it is meaningful to God when people trust him? What might it mean to him?
- Is there another story of a time you took action and God was with you, or when he showed you the way and you trusted him?
- If we think of your life as being a club with invited members (M. White, 2007)³⁹, would you describe God as being in your club or on your team?
- How long has God been on your team?

³⁸ We can ask which sacred text is important to the person.

³⁹ We can offer the metaphors of a “club of life” or “support team” and see which has more resonance for the person.

- If you were to see yourself through God's loving eyes at the time of the kidnapping and your escape, what do you think he would be seeing that perhaps was not visible to you?
- You said your family was unsympathetic and unsupportive after your ordeal. What is it like knowing that God was loving you and supporting you at that time?
- You said God has continued to support you. Were you aware of his love and support during that difficult year after your escape, even though you felt let down by other people, or is that a newer realisation looking back?
- Even though you felt let down by some people, were there others who did support you, or who stood by you?
- Would you say that these people are in your support team?

Riley and I explored these ideas over three sessions. She realised that she had chosen to listen to God, and that she had a long history of identifying his voice and separating it out from "just thoughts". She said she used courage to put God's plan into action. She had also been aided by members of the public in the early minutes of the escape and said that this brought "joy to my heart and helps me understand that although the world is not guaranteed to be safe, there are many good people in it". Riley also described multiple people who had been kind and supportive towards her, even though her family were harsh and blaming in their responses.

Addressing self-blame: Deconstruction questions

- You said that you were "stupid for trusting this man" who assaulted you. Were there things the man who held you captive had said or done that made you trust him?
- Looking back now, with the wisdom you have gained about people who abuse, would you call these things he was saying and doing "tactics"?
- What does it mean to you when you can call these "deliberate tactics"?

- Do you think he used these deliberate tactics on others?
- Given you now know that he has held other people captive⁴⁰, do you think others were also convinced by these deliberate tactics?
- Does thinking about these things now have any effect on the idea that you were “stupid for trusting him”?

Thinking about the other people who had been tricked by this man was in some ways hard for Riley. She said it hurt to think that other people had been through what she went through. However, recalling that other people had been tricked before her destabilised the idea of “being stupid” for trusting him. This was further dismantled as we discussed tactics that various men have used to trick people into entering unsafe situations. These tactics were found in stories from the media, stories from other people Riley knew, and stories from my work with other women. Seeing these more clearly as “deliberate tactics” assisted Riley to consider the amount of planning this man may have put into each time he tricked and captured someone. This located the responsibility with the man who assaulted her, whereas previously the dominant story was that she was responsible for “walking into the situation”. This dominant story had been reinforced by her family after they heard what had happened.

Reclaiming life: Meaning-making questions

- You said you spoke to a friend after your escape.⁴¹
What was your hope or intention with this?
- What other steps did you take in the time after this ordeal to help you get through?
- Despite all that has happened to you, in many ways you have still forged the life you wanted. How was this possible?
What ideas or beliefs did you hold on to in the difficult time after the kidnap and escape?

⁴⁰ Shape the questions to make them relevant to the person. Riley’s captor was in the business of sexual slavery and had kidnapped, assaulted and sold other people.

⁴¹ Or joined a support group etc.

- Is there someone in your faith community who supported these ideas and beliefs or inspired you in some way?
- Were there particular scriptures, songs or spiritual practices that helped you during this time?
- Is there a special meaning or message that these have given you?
- Is there a history of meaningfulness to you of these particular scriptures, songs or spiritual practices in your life, or is this a newer development/revelation?
- If one of your support team members were here right now and I could ask them, what might they be appreciating about the way you have forged your life in the direction you wanted?

Riley was able to identify things that she did to keep connected to God and to community, and particular verses that comforted her. She loved the metaphor of God being on her team and said that she hadn't previously thought that God might be affected by her trust and faithfulness. I asked her whether there were any verses that might challenge the sense of worthlessness, and Riley was able to think of two. We looked them up on my phone and I read these out loud while she let them soak over her. Riley decided to read these again when she got home and to bring them to mind when the voice of shame or the sense of worthlessness tried to harass her.

At the end of the first session, Riley said that she felt proud of herself for all the steps she had taken in her life. She said it was a new thought to consider herself as having acted in partnership with God during the escape. At the end of the second session, we wondered together whether this collaboration between her own knowledge and skills, God's wisdom, and her willingness to listen to God, might help her in the challenges that anxiety was posing.

After the third session, Riley noted that anxiety was less present in her daily thoughts. During the next few months, we also looked at "trust" and how we might know whether someone is trustworthy. We moved from a binary of trust/no trust to movement (Bird, 2004): that there could be a building of trust over time, and that there could be some things she might

trust someone with and other areas where she might not trust them. We also talked about her “radar”, which alerts her to danger, and the ways she had fine-tuned this radar over time. Riley came up with a plan to ask friends to help her meet their friends. She also joined a new Bible study group and joined a mixed sports club. In these ways she could expand her network and could get to know men slowly. Friends could vet potential boyfriends through knowing them long-term, rather than meeting people through an app. These strategies helped to reduce anxiety about dating.

Feedback on similar conversations about religion, spirituality and agency has been that these conversations increase the person’s recognition of their own skills, values and agency, enhancing their sense of self-respect and self-worth. There has also been a sense of joy or hopefulness about life when re-membling a connection with God or a faith community, and the ways in which this has been an important support in tough times.

In this chapter I have invited you, the reader, to consider how your own beliefs influence your work, with the hope that self-reflection assists us to address the power we hold in the therapeutic space. I have also shared the ways I have listened out for and actively invited discussion of faith and spirituality in explorations of surviving difficult or traumatic situations. In these explorations, I have kept in mind the intention of supporting people who have felt powerless in their own lives to have an increased sense of agency in not only surviving abuses of power, but also moving towards the hopes they have for their lives.

Reflection

- Which ideas from this chapter might you take up and try?
- What is your guess about the possible effects of taking up and trying out these ideas?
- Which ideas might you leave behind?
- In what ways do you demonstrate respect for the beliefs of others, even if they don't fit with your own beliefs?
- How will you know whether people you meet with are experiencing an increase in sense of agency on account of your conversations or interactions with them?