



Walking in virtual forests: Using Minecraft to create digital Trees of Life

by Paul Graham



Paul Graham is a therapeutic family practitioner for the Reconnect program on Awabakal and Worimi lands in New South Wales, Australia. He holds a master's degree in social work from Charles Sturt University, a master's degree in family studies from the University of Newcastle, and a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work from The University of Melbourne. He is interested in the ways alternative subcultures interact with therapy models. paul.graham1991@gmail.com

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4018-509X>

Abstract

This article introduces the use of the video game Minecraft to complete the Tree of Life narrative therapy process and discusses new possibilities for practice that the medium creates. This is explored through a story of practice with an individual, with whom the practice provided an alternative to a traditional intake session. It also includes a story of practice in a group setting, as a program offered within a school.

Key words: *Tree of Life; video game; Minecraft; school; children; youth; young people; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

Graham, P. (2026). Walking in virtual forests: Using Minecraft to create digital trees of life. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 128-137. <https://doi.org/10.4320/UKYC1538>

Author pronouns: he/him

The use of video games as tools to facilitate therapy sessions has become increasingly prominent in recent years (Bender, 2023). In my youth I was an avid player of video games and spent many hours playing a Nintendo 64, both on my own and with friends. However, as I got older, I moved away from playing video games and as a result missed much of the development that came with the sixth and seventh generations of video game consoles, particularly the presence of internet connectivity (Kemerer et al., 2017). I am not entirely removed from video game culture — I still play the occasional game, so I hold some degree of insider knowledge — but to position the young people I have worked with as the experts in these systems, I have taken an outsider perspective.

I began working in out of home care 10 years ago, and video game consoles were present in every group home I entered. I would often sit with young people as they played video games and was regularly impressed with the passion they showed. Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) was played by young people of all ages, and they would regularly express pride in their creations. I would see young people looking up tutorials on YouTube to build working cars, planes and even computers from the materials within the game. It became clear to me that Minecraft had incredible potential for creativity and engagement.

I was not alone in this observation. Since Minecraft was released in 2009, it has emerged as not only one of the most popular video games of all time (Mavoa et al., 2018) but also an effective educational tool (Baek et al., 2020). Minecraft released an “education edition” that has been rolled out in schools across Australia. The education edition features all the same features as the full game but with added controls for teachers and the incorporation of additional learning tools (such as items that allow for chemistry lessons).

I was curious about ways I might draw on young people’s engagement with Minecraft to facilitate therapeutic conversations and saw its potential as a tool for facilitating the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life methodology within narrative practice draws on the metaphor of a tree to assist with the creation of a second story (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). Different parts of a tree are used to represent elements of a person’s life: the roots are used to explore where the person is from and their histories; the trunk represents values, skills or abilities; the leaves are used to reflect on significant people and relationships; the fruits represent gifts the person has received, and so on. The drawing and labelling of a tree creates space to view the story of a life from a different perspective (Ncube, 2006). Through the process of creating their tree and responding to prompts, participants can be invited to engage in further narrative practices (Dickson, 2009). These include externalising, where problems are named and located as outside a person (Carey & Russell, 2002; White, 2007); re-authoring, where alternative storylines are created to assist in exploring preferred identities (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007); and re-membering, where relationships with others are explored to develop understandings of our identities (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). In a workshop setting, individual trees can be joined together to form a “forest”, providing opportunities for discussion about the “storms” or collective problems that trees may face.

Ncube (2006) and others (e.g. Carmichael & Denborough, 2015; Elhassan & Yassine, 2017; Ken, 2022; Nicholas, 2021; Senehi, 2015) have invited participants to draw on paper to create their trees. The use of Minecraft to render trees creates an alternative practice utilising digital resources to assist people to develop alternative storylines in their lives.

Working in Minecraft

Minecraft presents a number of possibilities for therapeutic conversations. It is a virtual sandbox with blocks that players can use to build structures (Davis et al., 2018; Mavoa et al., 2018). A sandbox game has no predetermined goals and instead allows for creativity in the way one interacts with



Figure 1. A Minecraft avatar

the game world (Ching, 2012). There is no one “correct” way to play. Minecraft players have access to a limitless virtual “Lego box”, allowing them to grow their confidence in a low-stakes creative environment (Kilmer et al., 2023). The user operates an avatar that can walk within and around the structures they create. Customisation of this avatar provides opportunities for identity workshopping (Li et al., 2013), and while there is risk of addiction when players have a high-level of self-identification with the avatar (Zhong & Yao, 2013), there is the potential to discuss values and personal goals through avatar exploration.

There are many different playstyles and difficulty levels within Minecraft, which are relevant to those considering its use for the Tree of Life process. For playstyle options, there is “creative mode”, in which the player cannot be “killed”, can choose any item to use from a menu, and can fly around the map so they can access any area with ease. Alternatively, there is “survival mode”, in which all resources must be collected by the player before they can be used. Within either of these modes there is the option to set the difficulty anywhere from “peaceful”, with no enemies in the world, through to “hard”, where the “enemies” are more active in attacking your avatar and what you have built (Faulkner, 2025; Overby & Jones, 2015). These enemies take the forms of skeletons, zombies

and “creepers” (which explode if touched). The game also offers a quest for users to collect a number of items that will allow them to face the “ender dragon” and “finish” the game.

When players or administrators are setting up their worlds, they have control not only over how the world is created and how characters in the game react to the player, but also who is able to access it. This means the game can be tailored to be an individual experience, or through internet connectivity, other players can be invited in.

One of the strengths of using Minecraft is that it has become highly accessible. It is available on computers, every major video game console, and there are even options for the game to play on smartphones (Scianca, 2025). Its low-resolution graphics mean that it can run on computers with lower processing power, meaning anyone with access to a device from roughly the last decade should be able to access and play the game.

Minecraft is a “cross-platform” game, meaning that people using a variety of devices can access the same online server to play with others (Scianca, 2025). This offers possibilities for engaging in collective “forest of life” processes. However, there are limitations to this. There are two editions of Minecraft and players will need to be aware of which version of the game they are playing to ensure they are able to access the server. Beyond this, Minecraft has been available since 2011, so while cross-platform play is available for current consoles and computers, people playing on older machines may not be able to connect with people playing on a different system. Players must also ensure they have updated their games to the newest edition to increase the chances of cross-play compatibility (Scianca, 2025).

Video games have frequently been subject to moral panics and have been blamed for causing social isolation, antisocial behaviour and even school shootings (Ferguson, 2008; Puri & Pugliese, 2012). Despite little evidence that video games cause such issues, this

discourse ignores the many positive elements that can come from playing video games. Beyond improving reflexes and hand-eye coordination (Rosenberg et al., 2005), video games played a crucial role during the COVID pandemic in maintaining social connections (Ballard & Spencer, 2023; Marston & Kowert, 2023).

Not just mindless entertainment, video games have the potential to facilitate play-based learning (Ritterfeld & Weber, 2006). Since the 1990s, “edutainment” has emerged as a process to improve engagement in learning settings. Play-based learning has broad implications for how video games can be adapted to multiple settings to improve learning outcomes (Kenwright, 2017). This process can also be flipped to great effect. That is, employing “gamifying” elements to tasks can improve engagement and increase the chance of people entering a “flow state” (Chan et al., 2019; Guerrero-Puerta & Guerrero, 2021; Nicholson, 2015).

Trialling the Minecraft Tree of Life with John

John, a 12-year-old boy, was referred to our service because had been refusing to go to school over the past few months. In the referral it noted that he was struggling with “anxiety” and would often shake if he was near the school. When I met John, I did our standard intake process (asking about his family, community, school etc.), but John responded to nearly all my questions with a shrug and “I don’t know”. I wasn’t sure if John would return, but when I called back the following week, I was told he was looking forward to working with me. Our next session was similar, in that any questions I asked John were met with a shrug of the shoulders and him saying he wasn’t sure. The exception to this was when we spoke about video games. John went into depth about the game Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) and the friends he had met online through playing. John also spoke about Minecraft and how a group of online friends were working together to finish the game.



Figure 2. Using signs to mark the various parts of the tree John created in Minecraft

Seeing John’s passion for video games, I asked if he would be interested in doing a session using Minecraft. I described the Tree of Life methodology and, as I was not overly familiar with the game, asked if he would help me trial the process within Minecraft. John agreed, and as we sat down at his computer, he showed me some of the world he had been playing in with his friends before generating a new world for us to work in. Once this had loaded, I asked John to find an area where we could “build” a tree. He noticed a relatively flat area with sunflowers growing on it and flew down to begin building.

I explained that the first thing we would need to build was the root system of the tree. John was initially unsure whether to build these underground or above ground. He settled on having “wavy roots” that were partially above ground. Once he had built out a number of roots, I explained we would need to label them in some way. John then showed me two options for signs: a hanging sign and a signpost. We settled on attaching the hanging signs to some of the above-ground roots.

I asked John to use the signs to name places that were important to him. John then labelled the roots with “Croatia”, where his extended family had moved from, alongside various local areas and some locations from video games. John told me

about the “battle bus” from Fortnite, which had been an important online meeting point for his friends through COVID. John also named San Francisco, which he said was for his favourite basketball team, the Golden State Warriors.

We then moved away from the roots and John installed signposts on the ground. I asked him to write on the signs any activities he currently engaged in or enjoyed. John named basketball, Minecraft, Fortnite, handball and drawing. We spoke about John’s interest in basketball, and he shared that his dad was a fan of the sport and that it was something they watched together. When I asked about drawing, John got up excitedly and said, “I have a whole binder full of drawings”. John began looking for the binder but soon sat back down saying he would try to find it during the week to show me. I said that I would love to see his drawings and asked some questions about what he liked to draw. John said, “anything really”, and then noticed that it had turned to night in the game. He quickly built a bed and “rested” his avatar in it to return the Minecraft world to daytime.

John then built up the trunk of the tree from the roots and placed some more hanging signs around it. I asked John to label the trunk with his values, skills and abilities. John noted first that he was creative. I reinforced this by noting his love of drawing and the way he used creativity in Minecraft. John also noted that he was caring and competitive. I asked John when he was competitive, and he said that it was video games and sports where he would see his competitive side show up.

As we built out the branches for the tree, the game world again turned to night. John dropped to the ground briefly to fight away some skeletons that had appeared around the area before putting his avatar to bed to return to daytime. John initially said he didn’t have many hopes or dreams “at the moment”, but after thinking further, he began labelling the branches with “travelling”, “getting better at Minecraft”, and “getting better at Fortnite”. When I asked John about where he would like to travel to, he said he mainly wanted to visit San Francisco to see his basketball team play.



Figure 3. John used picture frames to represent “fruit” on his Minecraft Tree of Life

As we moved out to the leaves of the tree, John named various family members and some of the friends he had made through video games. When I asked John how we could put “fruit” on the tree, he was at first unsure. John then showed me that he could place on the tree a “picture frame”, which could display any item in Minecraft. John set some frames along the branches and inserted pictures of apples within them. John hung signs from these frames and recorded some of the gifts he had received like his love of basketball, the support he had received from his parents, and friendship from the people he had met through gaming. We finished that session with me thanking John for his help in showing me how the Tree of Life could be done in Minecraft. I asked him how he found the session. John said he found it made it easier to talk about his life and that it was fun.

For our next session, we used John’s love of drawing to externalise anxiety (which was represented as a large wave named “Mr Wave”) and began unpacking some of the effects of the problem. This included drawing on metaphors for waves: that as you swam past a wave you would be able to reach a calmer part of the ocean. By engaging John through his interests in video games and drawing, I was able to begin exploring the values and skills John already held and help him to discuss his experiences.

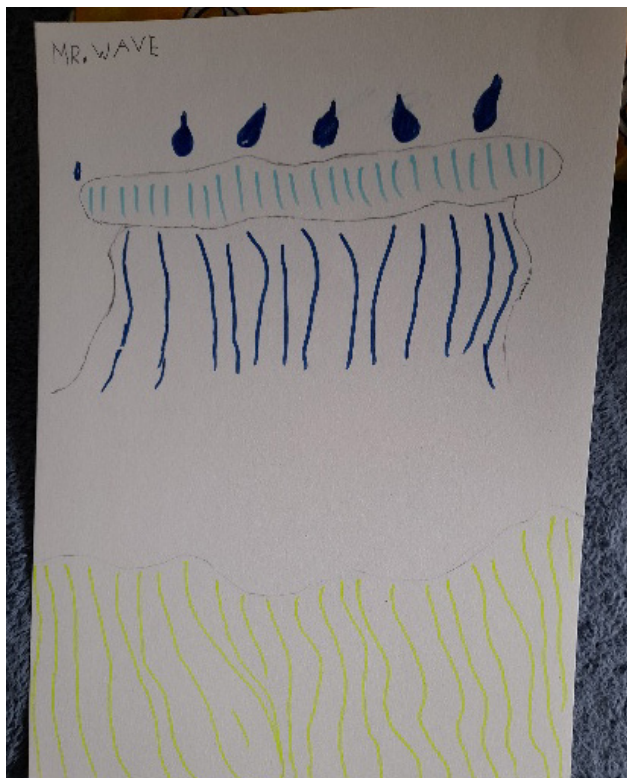


Figure 4. "Mr Wave"

Using Minecraft for Tree of Life groupwork in a school

After the successful process with John, I spoke to the chaplain of a school we regularly work in and asked if they would be interested in running a digital Tree of Life program. The chaplain had a few young people in mind and began setting up a group to engage in the process. We ended up with a group of six young people who were both skilled with computers and interested in being part of the group. Their names were Tony, Dan, Benny, Chris, Sam and Bob. The group met for six weekly one-hour sessions, with our final session consisting primarily of a celebration.

In our first session, I described my limited knowledge of Minecraft and Tony stepped up to help. I asked if it was possible to set up a single world that all the members of the group could have access to. Tony immediately set up a "flat infinite world" and invited the others into the server. After explaining how the group would play out over the next few weeks, I invited the young people to make the world their own and play around. Within minutes, Dan had built a

house surrounded by a moat made from lava, while Chris had built "a laser beacon to shoot into the sky". I acknowledged their skills and asked questions that invited all the young people to assume the role of expert in Minecraft.

We moved into creating the roots of our trees. Benny created a flying tree with roots made from "glowing obsidian". He noted that he wanted his tree to be "like a futuristic thing". The young people used signs to list places that had played important roles in their lives. Benny spoke about the Big Banana in Coffs Harbour, which had been a holiday destination when he was younger. This led me to reflect on the Big Oyster that had been in Taree when I was younger. The other young people spoke about the many "big things" around Australia that they would like to visit. Dan named his love for the local skate park and how he had met many of his friends there, which led into discussion about important friendships (and spending time at their houses). These discussions moved quite naturally into the "ground" section of the Tree of Life process, where we discussed activities such as skating, drawing and playing video games.

As we discussed the values, skills and abilities that would populate the trunk, Bob spoke about the value of "being free" and how when given more freedom he tended to "do the right thing". As we were speaking, Dan hollowed out the inside of his trunk to create a cubbyhouse. This allowed us to discuss how one could choose to "live inside" one's values and the protective qualities they could have. All the young people in the group listed "creativity" as a skill, which

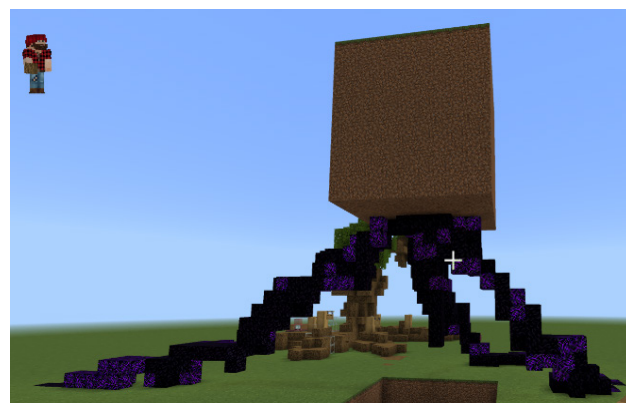


Figure 5. Benny's futuristic tree



Figure 6. Dan's tree-trunk cubbyhouse

I reflected was apparent in the creative ways they were approaching the Tree of Life process.

As we moved on to creating the branches of the tree and discussing our hopes and dreams, we spoke about the height of the branches, and how the higher branches could be used for more "important" hopes. Tony decorated his branches with white blocks, which he said were "like teeth". When asked what the teeth represented, Tony said, "Nothing really, I just think they look cool". Tony spoke about his goal of "getting fit". We discussed how he had recently signed up to the gym and the skills he was using to pursue that goal.

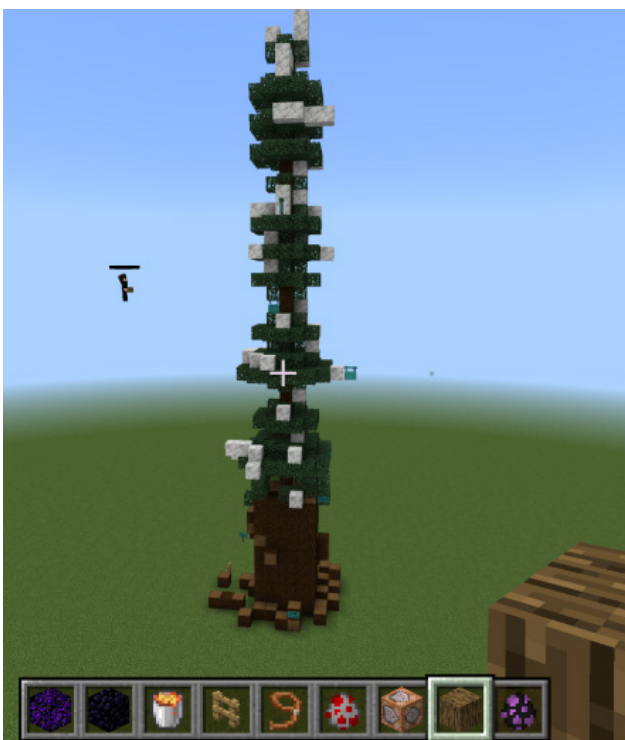


Figure 7. Tony's "Teeth Branches"

Bob said that his dream was that his sister who had died at a young age would come back to life. We spoke about how hard it was to lose a young family member, and this allowed for the use of re-remembering questions (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). My co-facilitator and I discussed ways we could bring Bob's sister into the present, how she might feel knowing she was so cared for, and the role Bob played in her life.

Moving on to the leaves and the fruit of the tree brought many great conversations. Benny said that a "gift" he appreciated was his phone. When asked who gave him the phone he said, "I got it myself, with my own money". We unpacked this further, discussing how his aunt supported him with pocket money and the ways his aunt had cared for him. Bob and Dan spoke about how their brothers had introduced them to riding bikes and scooters. As we expanded on this, we spoke about the ways riding bikes had helped Bob and Dan form many of their friendships (including with each other).

Minecraft provided many options for creative ways to collectively explore "when the storms come" (Ncube, 2006, p. 12). From the menu in "creative" mode, we were able to change the weather. This allowed us to create a strong visual representation of storms arriving, with additional commands allowing us to create lightning flashes. The game also has its own metaphors for problems in the form of "mobs" like zombies, skeletons and creepers. As we used these metaphors to speak about the hazards people can face in life, Bob described a period when he and his family had been homeless. Bob said his family was able



Figure 8. Chris's tree with a hopscotch area and laser beam to the side

to get through it by reaching out to others (namely his aunt and grandparents). I asked further re-remembering questions about what it meant to those family members to be able to care for Bob's family.

When asked about the experience of completing the Tree of Life in Minecraft, all the young people said that they had enjoyed the process. Bob and Dan noted that it had been easy to identify the similarities between their lives and the trees. I also thanked all the young people for sharing their Minecraft skills, and the group agreed that the program had been a positive experience for them all.

Observations

Minecraft is a computer game, and even within a setting of flat grass, there remain distractions that may take away from the process. For example, Benny wanted to show me how to make an "ender portal", which forms part of the optional storyline of the game. Once through the portal, the player must defeat an "ender dragon" before they can return to the "overworld". This distraction derailed Benny's engagement for roughly five minutes before we could return to the Tree of Life process.

Due to the world being infinite when set up, it is possible for participants to get lost and be unable to locate their tree. When a person starts creating their tree, it would be helpful to have them make note of its coordinates on the map so they can easily return to it. Coordinates can be set to show up in the bottom left of the screen. With the coordinates in hand, players can use the "teleport" command to return immediately.

Just as drawing a Tree of Life creates ways for people to express their inner worlds through metaphor, Minecraft offers the same affordances while drawing on skill with a mouse and keyboard rather than a pen or pencil. Controlled digital environments can provide safety for sharing stories, with players able to decide on private or public expressions, and in turn, what elements of a story to share within these spaces.

Throughout the group program, there developed a true sense of collaboration and community building. The participants continually shared tricks and tips for each other's constructions, and the free-form creation that came with Minecraft meant there was no competition. All the participants were building this world together. Due to negative discourse that surrounds digital media, creating a space where skills with technology were affirmed helped to form second stories around the young people's interests and to form bonds across the group, which in turn had the effect of turning feelings of vulnerability into feelings of teamwork and connection.

The wide range of materials available in Minecraft allowed many opportunities to customise a tree, like Benny's use of glowing obsidian and Tony's inclusion of "teeth". There is potential to explore the choices made when building trees. For example, sections of the tree made from different materials may hold additional meaning. We might ask: "What does it mean that you chose to represent this section using that material?"

Possible future developments

My best hope for this work would be the creation of an online server that anyone could join to create their own Tree of Life. I imagine that people from all over the world might access the server, not only add to the "forest" but also to walk around and experience all the rich stories others have shared. I believe this would create a powerful living document and instil a sense of community among all who contribute.

In the work described in this paper, I used creative mode when the young people were constructing their Trees of Life. There is potential to expand this practice into survival mode, in which building a tree would not only require more effort and time to gather materials, but also be exposed to the risk of having "enemies" destroy it. This may deepen understanding of challenges that people face and provide a strong visual metaphor for problems.

The use of Minecraft in this way provides an opportunity to enrich distance therapy sessions. As Thompson (2024) noted, video games offer exciting new options to integrate therapy approaches in a fun manner. I hope that this paper will help practitioners add this approach to their work and more readily integrate narrative approaches into their distance sessions.

Acknowledgment

I would like to give my thanks to my manager Kathryn Manning for her continued supervision, mentorship and support in my therapeutic practice.

References

- Baek, Y., Min, E., & Yun, S. (2020). Mining educational implications of Minecraft. *Computers in the Schools*, 37(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2020.1719802>
- Ballard, M. E., & Spencer, M. T. (2023). Importance of social videogaming for connection with others during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Games and culture*, 18(2), 251–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221090982>
- Bender, M. (2023, November 23). Meet the therapists offering mental health support on Minecraft. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-hero-journey-club-offers-mental-health-support-on-minecraft/>
- Carey, M., & Russell, S. (2002). Externalising: Commonly asked questions. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 76–84.
- Carey, M., & Russell, S. (2003). Re-authoring: Some answers to commonly asked questions. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 60–71.
- Carmichael, L., & Denborough, D. (2015). Alternative stories: Narrative practice with vulnerable children and young people in India. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 51–99.
- Chan, C. K., Leung, H. M., & Kung, M. W. (2019). Understanding the effect of gamification of learning using flow theory. In W. W. K. Ma, W. W. L. Chan, & C. M. Cheng (Eds.), *Shaping the future of education, communication and technology: Selected papers from the HKAECT 2019 International Conference* (pp. 3–14). Springer.
- Ching, D. (2012). Passion play: Will Wright and games for science learning. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 7(4), 767–782.
- Davis, K., Boss, J. A., & Meas, P. (2018). Playing in the virtual sandbox: Students' collaborative practices in Minecraft. *International Journal of Game-Based Learning (IJGBL)*, 8(3), 56–76. <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijgb.2018070104>
- Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Dickson, J. (2009). "The mighty oak": Using the "Tree of Life" methodology as a gateway to the other maps of narrative practice. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (4), 9–23.
- Elhassan, O., & Yassine, L. (2017). Tree of Life with young Muslim women in Australia. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 27–44.
- Epic Games. (2017). *Fortnite* [Computer game]. <https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/home>
- Faulkner, C. (2025, May 2). All Minecraft game modes and difficulty settings explained. *Gamespot*. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/all-minecraft-game-modes-and-difficulty-settings-explained/1100-6531283/>
- Ferguson, C. J. (2008). The school shooting/violent video game link: Causal relationship or moral panic? *Journal of investigative psychology and offender profiling*, 5(1–2), 25–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jip.76>
- Guerrero-Puerta, L., & Guerrero, M. A. (2021). Could gamification be a protective factor regarding early school leaving? A life story. *Sustainability*, 13(5), 2569. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052569>
- Kemerer, C. F., Dunn, B. K., & Jananefat, S. (2017). Winners-take-some dynamics in digital platform markets: A reexamination of the video game console wars. *University of Pittsburgh, PA*.
- Ken, T. (2022). Bringing narrative practices to work with Anangu people. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.4320/ulhf5982>
- Kenwright, B. (2017). Brief review of video games in learning and education: How far we have come. In M. Aoki & S. Ratanotayanon (Eds.), *Siggraph asia 2017 symposium on education* (pp. 1–10). Association for Computing Machinery.
- Kilmer, E., Spangler, J., & Kilmer, J. (2023). Therapeutically applied Minecraft groups with neurodivergent youth. *F1000 Research*, 12, 216. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.129090.1>
- Li, D. D., Liau, A. K., & Khoo, A. (2013). Player-avatar identification in video gaming: Concept and measurement. *Computers in human behavior*, 29(1), 257–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.09.00>

- Marston, H. R., & Kowert, R. (2023). What role can videogames play in the COVID-19 pandemic?. *Emerald Open Research*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.1108/EOR-02-2023-0011>
- Mavoa, J., Carter, M., & Gibbs, M. (2018). Children and Minecraft: A survey of children's digital play. *New Media and Society*, 20(9), 3283–3303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817745320>
- Mojang. (2011). *Minecraft (Java Edition 1.0)* [Video game]. Microsoft.
- Ncube, N. (2006). The tree of life project. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 3–16.
- Nicholas, E. (2021). Seeing the forest for the trees: Exploring the forest aspect of the Tree of Life process to sustain and nourish socioecological action. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 1–9.
- Nicholson, S. (2015). A recipe for meaningful gamification. In T. Reiners & L. C. Wood (Eds.), *Gamification in education and business* (pp. 1–20). Springer.
- Overby, A., & Jones, B. L. (2015). Virtual Legos: Incorporating Minecraft into the art education curriculum. *Art Education*, 68(1), 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2015.11519302>
- Puri, K., & Pugliese, R. (2012). Sex, lies, and video games: Moral panics or uses and gratifications. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, 32(5), 345–352.
- Ritterfeld, U., & Weber, R. (2006). Video games for entertainment and education. In P. Vorderer & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Playing video games: Motives, responses, and consequences* (pp. 399–413). Routledge.
- Rosenberg, B. H., Landsittel, D., & Averch, T. D. (2005). Can video games be used to predict or improve laparoscopic skills? *Journal of Endourology*, 19(3), 372–376. <https://doi.org/10.1089/end.2005.19.372>
- Russell, S., & Carey, M. (2002). Re-mem-bering: Responding to commonly asked questions. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 23–31.
- Scianca, C. (2025, January 7). Is Minecraft cross-platform? Everything you need to know. Shockbyte. <https://shockbyte.com/blog/is-minecraft-cross-platform/>
- Senehi, J. (2015). Our Tree of Life in the field: Locating ourselves in the peace and conflict studies field through the Tree of Life experience. *Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 47(1–2), 10–28.
- Thompson, S. A. (2024). Breaking the stigma: Integrating psychology and therapy approaches in modern-day video games for mental health and well-being (Publication No. 1012) [Honors thesis, Eastern Kentucky University]. *Encompass*. https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/1012
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.
- Zhong, Z.-J., & Yao, M. Z. (2013). Gaming motivations, avatar-self identification and symptoms of online game addiction. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 23(5), 555–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2012.748814>



Reclaiming the Tree of Life: Collective storytelling, re-memembering and legacy in later life

by Helena Rose



Helena Rose is a systemic psychotherapist, supervisor, narrative practitioner and clinical psychologist working in the UK. Since 2013 she has worked in the National Health Service with people who live with distressing unshared experiences, voices, visions and sensations – also known as psychosis – and their families. She is also a lecturer in family therapy and systemic practice at the University of Leeds.
helenadrose@gmail.com

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1624-1320>

Abstract

This article describes a storytelling group with older people living in a nursing home in the UK, developed in collaboration with creative activity workers as part of a diploma in narrative therapy. Grounded in collective narrative practice, including the Tree of Life, the group created experiences of connection, dignity and legacy among residents (many of whom were living with memory loss). The project reconnected the author with the social and political roots of narrative therapy, creating space to resist ageism, individualism and marginalisation through shared storytelling, witnessing and community rituals.

Key words: *storytelling; Tree of Life; groupwork; older people; aged care; dementia; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy*

Rose, H. D. (2026). Reclaiming the Tree of Life: Collective storytelling, re-memembering and legacy in later life. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 138–148. <https://doi.org/10.4320/ACNW1376>

Author pronouns: she/her

This project began with a conversation over coffee in the initial aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I learnt that my friend's niece was a creative activity worker in a nursing care home for Jewish elders. During the pandemic lockdowns when residents were unable to see family and loved ones or go out into the community, the workers in the care home had persevered in offering reading and poetry groups. I was later invited to meet some of the residents to learn about these groups and what they meant to them. After a morning spent talking with the residents and activity workers about their lives, interests, hardships and loved ones, they expressed an interest in forming a new group – a *storytelling* group – which we might go on to create together.

Collective narrative practice: Roots and philosophy

Narrative practice emerged from within social movements that challenged taken-for-granted authority and put forward alternatives in mental health services (C. White, 2011). Collective narrative practice emphasises naming injustice, double-storied accounts (of both hardship *and* the ways in which people resist or survive hardship – including through holding on to their values), and linking lives through witnessing and collective documentation (Denborough, 2008; M. White, 2003).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, we heard repeated remarks from powerful political figures about the virus being “nature’s way of dealing with old people”, that older people should “accept their fate”, and “let the young get on with life and get the economy going” (Weaver, 2023). Discourses of frailty and vulnerability in later life became cemented by these comments, perpetuated by neoliberal economic ideologies that prioritise productivity and competition in society (Freedman & Combs, 2020).

Collective practices have the potential to unsettle such discourses by fostering mutuality and shared purpose (Freedman & Combs, 2020). Barbara

Myerhoff’s work with Jewish elders, for example, showed us how public rituals, ceremonies, protests and performances offer opportunities “for being seen and, in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality, and being” (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 105).

I had noticed that my day-to-day practice as a systemic psychotherapist and clinical psychologist had become limited to clinical spaces that were dislocated from the communities we were meant to serve. My re-engagement with Myerhoff’s work deepened my appreciation for the potential of collective practices *within* communities. Moreover, I revisited the idea that these practices might also act as means of resisting neoliberal fatalism (Freire, 1999) – the kind of despair that is felt when “solutions” to social problems cannot be found in conventional places. I was therefore moved to explore collective narrative practices in new and unfamiliar places.

The storytelling group

The residents who were interested in joining this storytelling group met in the nursing home’s coffee shop – an established space for music, visitors, celebrations and everyday chats. Our group was made up of eight to 10 residents, between 83 and 98 years old, with a regular attendance of two men and six women. We met once a fortnight over a period of eight months. At least five of the group members had some kind of memory loss (generally referred to as dementia) that affected short-term memory more than long-term memory. Some members experienced disorientation about time and place. Each session was a new experience for them. Sometimes they forgot that we had met or what we’d talked about previously. I was grateful in these early meetings for Bobbi Rood’s (2009) work with groups for older people. Rood highlighted the importance of varying method and materials, pacing, using objects and photographs, adapting questions, and the importance of repetition and consistency.

We began with informal storytelling activities: our names, neighbourhoods, recipes, favourite songs

and precious objects. I found that these supposed “warm-ups” quickly opened up alternative stories of identity and took us to some unexpected places. We heard how one woman changed her surname to a more “English” version to disguise her Jewish heritage and protect her children from antisemitism. Another member brought a newspaper cutting from a paper she worked for as a journalist and spoke about her pride in doing this work as a woman back then. These early conversations assisted me to re-engage with how we *listen* in narrative practice: paying careful, close attention to residents’ unique words and meanings, and as Lynn Hoffman (1998) has suggested, being “never ... more than an inch from [their] experience” (p. 152).

Introducing the Tree of Life

I had been considering introducing a collective narrative methodology such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) to offer a consistent, tangible, visual framework for our conversations in line with Rood’s (2009) suggestions. As a non-Western, culturally grounded approach, the Tree of Life also creates opportunities to recognise social and systemic issues in people’s lives, such as racism and poverty. Tree of Life groups have been conducted with refugee youth (Stiles et al., 2021) and survivors of gun violence in the US (Hill & Soprych, 2024). Chow and Fung (2021) developed a Tree of Life group for Chinese older people living in Hong Kong where they highlighted and reconnected with stories of wisdom and dignity.

I hesitated, however, because over time this practice (in the UK at least) had become more familiar to me as a task at corporate style “away days” and team-building exercises. I have noticed how readily it is requested, suggested and taken up as a prefabricated worksheet or template. It has even made its way on to my social media feeds, promoted as part of a brightly coloured, visually appealing generic therapy resource bundle that can be downloaded (for a price). Rendering the Tree of Life as a standardised, printable, replicable *resource* in this way decontextualises and depoliticises it. I had therefore been left

feeling sceptical and with a sense that its origins in Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo’s community work in southern Africa with children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, and the inspiration from the work of Paolo Freire (Denborough, 2008), had been lost in the service of more Eurocentric, individualising aims and purposes.

However, I also learnt about the significance of trees for the residents. The abundance of trees in the local area gave them a feeling of peace and calmness, particularly in the context of the confusion or distress some felt at not being “at home”, moving somewhere unfamiliar, or no longer living with family or loved ones. They also told me about *Etz Chaim* (the Tree of Life) being associated with wisdom and vitality.¹

I began to feel that the Tree of Life could offer us something more in keeping with its founding philosophy and purpose. We spent a session talking about trees and their meanings; I shared an example of the Tree of Life with the group, and they expressed interest in using this as a foundation for our storytelling activities.

Adapting the Tree of Life methodology

Traditionally, a Tree of Life group invites members to create individual trees that later form a collective *forest of life* to explore how we weather life’s challenges together (Ncube, 2006). However, I felt that this approach risked excluding some members who may have difficulty participating in their preferred ways. I decided to ask each of the group members what they would prefer – to make their own trees or collaborate in creating some kind of collective tree to document multiple stories in one place. This approach allowed for diverse forms of participation, including nonverbal expressions and practical assistance from activity workers. It meant that we were gathered around the table together, talking and listening as a group. It also enabled the creation of a large-scale artwork that the group wanted to display in the coffee shop.

Echoing Rood's (2009) recommendations, I adopted a decentred and influential position (M. White, 2007), introducing the Tree of Life framework and its categories of inquiry to create possibilities for the group to tell and witness stories of love, loss, struggle, survival and legacy. As we got to know each other, we developed our own rhythms and rituals for meeting including making our coffees, asking how each other's day was, and then engaging with a particular part of the tree. I listened, made notes, asked questions, invited responses, asked questions about these responses, and invited group members to ask questions of one another.

The roots: Exploring origins

In our session about "roots", group members shared stories of their origins: their countries of birth, familial heritage, what they did for a living and their hometowns. These stories reflected pride as they spoke about vibrant cultures and communities that had shaped their identities:

"It's a very 'go ahead' kind of place."

"A fantastic city."

"Great music!"

One member asked us to play some music by a famous performer of the time. The group all recognised the song, and they sang along together – I had not heard the song before, but I did my best to join in and keep up!

The ground: Daily life and sustaining practices

Our conversations about the "ground" focused on the here-and-now and what sustained us in daily life. Some residents spoke about life at the care home and their relationships there. Others spoke about how they missed their "own place", how there had been confusion about where they were going and what this place was at first. They described how difficult it had been living under the visiting restrictions of the pandemic, and talked together about making friends and the importance of friendships in feeling more *at home*.

The trunk: Skills, abilities and qualities

We used the session working on the "trunk" to talk about group members' skills, abilities and personal qualities. Here, the conversation became even more of a shared practice. When group members were initially unsure about their abilities, other residents made rich and detailed contributions. We learnt about one of the men who was an engineer – how this led him to be very focused, calm and patient. He spoke about how he brought those skills to being a father. We heard from another man who said, "I dedicated myself to my wife over a lifetime". We learnt that she lived a distance away due to needing specialist nursing care, and they had not been able to see one another for some time. We later heard that, following the session, he had drawn a self-portrait and posted this to her. We were all affected by this story; some members of the group shed tears and remembered people they missed, who had died or who they were no longer in touch with.

The branches: Hopes and wishes

The "branches" provided opportunities to talk about hopes, dreams and wishes. I noted that group members had less to say about hopes for themselves. I reflected on how we ask people about *hope* at different stages of life. Some elders may hold hopes for a future they might no longer be present for yet have contributed to and created. An adaptation of the "branches" conversation is to talk about hopes for people who matter to you, rather than hopes for your own life (Ncube, 2006). The group spoke at length about this:

"For my children to have a good life – to be healthy."

"To have good fortune in life."

They also expressed their hopes for the other group members:

"For the people here to be happy and healthy."

The leaves: Significant relationships

The “leaves” were used to represent people who had been important in group members’ lives, past and present. Many of the members spoke about their mothers.

“She was the best ever –she worried about everyone, and she laughed about everything.”

“She was soft –she had a lot of love to give.”

Others spoke about their memories of family and wartime evacuations, with one member recalling:

“I was their only child, they kept me with them during the war, they couldn’t bear to send me away.”

One woman told us a story about moving cities to live with her brother and his wife (against her father’s expectations of marriage) to meet her “true love” to whom she was married until he died.

The fruits: Gifts received

The “fruits” provided an opportunity to talk about gifts – both tangible and abstract – that the group members had received. Again, they often spoke about their family and loved ones, gifts of qualities or skills that they had received, as well as spiritual practices and rituals that they continued to practice in their daily lives.

Flowers: Cherished memories

Our conversation about the “flowers” explored cherished memories. This was a lively session with one woman recalling meeting her husband at the local dance hall. She enjoyed telling us how he waited for her each week until she decided to speak with him. One of the men in the group recalled going to North Africa with his work – how this had opened his eyes to different ways of life. For most group members, cherished memories were about family, cooking or eating together, and important celebrations. We learnt how one of the women made her daughter’s wedding dress, as her mother had done for her.

The Birds: Legacies and future contributions

The “birds” on the tree told us about the group members’ legacies – what they hoped would be carried on from their lives into the lives of others. This was a tender and moving conversation. There were echoes of re-membering conversations (M. White, 2008) when group members spoke about the influence that they hoped they might have had on the lives of their families and loved ones. For example, one man told us about his nephew who was “born disabled”. His nephew had cerebral palsy and had set up a charity supporting young people with disabilities to access sport in the community. We heard that, when his nephew was growing up, it was him, his uncle, who spent time playing football with him and noticing his different abilities. We asked what he hoped his nephew learnt from this, and he said it was “having a good attitude towards himself”.

Solidarity, transport and linking lives

I learnt from the activity workers that, in the time in between our sessions, the group members

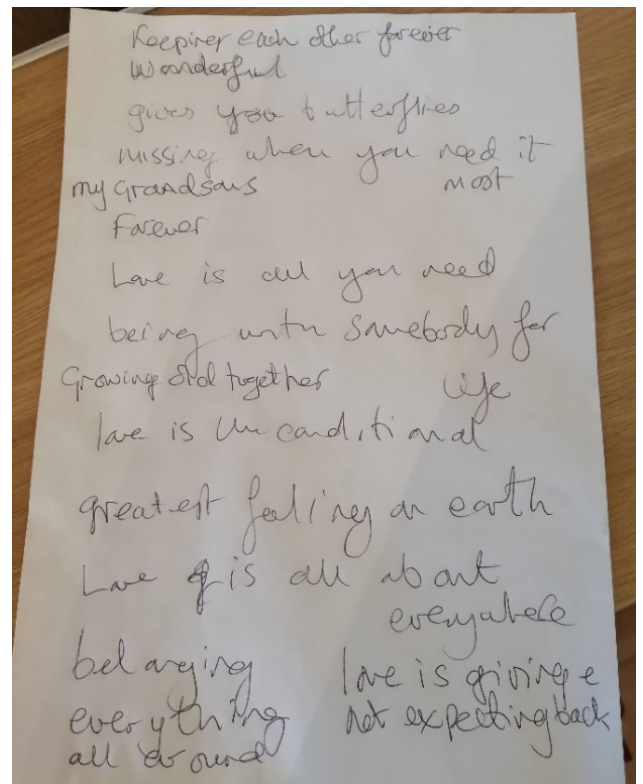


Figure 1. Collective poem about love

had become engaged in their own documenting and artmaking following on from our themes. For example, they created a shared poem about love after our “leaves” session (Figure 1). It included the phrases “growing old together”, “the greatest

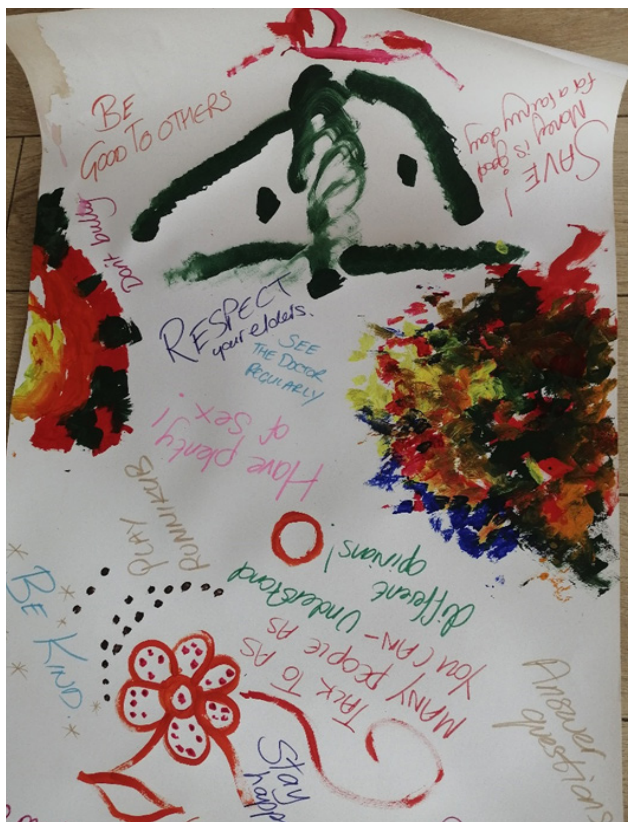


Figure 2. Advice for future generations

feeling on Earth”, “belonging”, and poignantly, “missing when you need it most”.

After the session about the “birds” – our legacies – they created a collective artwork with advice to future generations (Figure 2), which highlighted the importance of talking and listening to others, having fun, not raising your voice, “respecting your elders” and having “plenty of sex!” This was displayed on the coffee shop wall for other residents to see and talk about too.

In her documentary film *Number Our Days* (Myerhoff & Littman, 1976), Barbara Myerhoff looks at the camera and tells us, “Someday, I will be a little old Jewish lady”. Spending time with our group invited me to think about where I will be when I am older, how I will be telling the stories of my life and to whom. These are not always easy or comfortable questions to ask ourselves. A theme from the group was about stories being carried across generations, the hopes that members had for those who knew about them, and what others might learn from them. A *futured* form of re-mem-bering, engaging with the stories we would *want* to be told about us, may assist us to bring such meaning and purpose back into our present:

Think of a story that you would want to be told about you or recounted one day in the (near or distant) future:

- Who already knows about this story? How do they know about it?
- What does it tell them about what matters to you?
- What would you want people who hear it in the future to appreciate about you?
- What do you hope they might take, learn, or hold onto from it?
- How would you hope it might contribute to their lives?
- Is there some part of this story that you might like to revisit, keep onto, or hold in your own heart right now?
- What do you hope it might make possible for you?

The activity workers and care home staff reported that relationships within the group began to change. The group members themselves spoke about how our sessions had created opportunities to get to know one another in new and different ways which they took with them – eating dinner together, talking with one another outside of the group and having coffee together. The group members themselves spoke about growing feelings of friendship among them, of feeling closer to each other, and feeling more in touch with one another's lives *beyond* the care home or the here-and-now. They described feeling connected to important people in each other's lives who they had not even met in person. One of the women said that "It's like there's an army of people behind us now!"

Practice notes:

Collective storytelling, memory and holding identity in later life

In our storytelling sessions, group members seemed to (re)discover resourcefulness and creativity while reconnecting with intergenerational narratives that may have been overlooked or forgotten. I noticed that the more abstract parts of the tree required careful scaffolding – a clear and detailed location within the landscape of action and a more gradual movement from the "known-and-familiar" to the "possible-to-know" (M. White, 2007) to adapt to different cognitive abilities. Conversations proceeded slowly to avoid outpacing some group members. However, this had the advantage of creating opportunities to "loiter with intent" in the stories that people told (Winslade & Hedtke, 2008, p. 75), allowing rich description and opportunities for responses, questions and witnessing in the group.

One of the women mischievously told us about a favourite memory from her childhood – how her parents and grandparents spoke in Yiddish so that the children couldn't understand them, and yet she *could* understand Yiddish and so always (secretly) understood what they were saying. She would

often tell this story, sometimes several times during a session, but instead of moving on ("We've heard this one before ..."), the group would always respond with raucous laughter and enthusiastic approval. I noticed that it did not seem to matter, to anyone, whether this story was linear or consistent – each time it brought joy and opportunities to make more connections and meaning.

Anne Basting's collective storytelling practices with people with dementia (2009) have demonstrated that the creation of an imaginative, improvisational and relational space matters more than "factual accuracy" or linear narratives in this respect. This resonates with what happened here in the group: stories did not need to be consistent or chronological to affirm identity, spark joy or strengthen relationships. Collective or community storytelling (as an alternative to traditional "reminiscence" therapy or "life story work") has been found to have a range of effects for people with dementia including recalling memories, expressing emotions and feeling more connected (Debnath, 2025). It can build connection and reduce isolation (Novy, 2018).

Lars-Christer Hydén (2017) has suggested that despite the often fragmented and nonverbal nature of dementia narratives, collaborative storytelling functions as an important social mechanism for maintaining relational identity within a wider social web. In this respect, listeners become active co-constructors who listen with a "third ear" to discern emotional intent and gesture over factual accuracy; their collective interaction shapes, holds and protects valued identities.

The Tree of Life group offered a practical method for *holding* identity in later life, as described by the feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2009), with an emphasis on stories that reflect preferred identities, dignity and agency. The group also disrupted what Lindemann Nelson (2001) termed degrading or dismissive "master narratives" of ageing such as inevitable decline. I loved how the group chose to include "have plenty of sex!" on their spontaneous collective document – challenging the assumption that ageing brings a decline in sexual interest or desire (Vetere & Burton, 2019).

Salter (2020) demonstrated how group facilitators can support those who are in the position of being a witness (audience) to show appreciation, and to make connections to wider discourses that the story speaks to. Therefore, when we heard one woman telling us about going against her father's plans for her marriage, we reflected on how that was something unexpected for that time and how this made her brother's support for her even more significant. Through such conversations, we learn that we have things to say that others will listen to, that we tell *worthwhile* stories, and subsequently, that we are worthwhile people.

The Tree of Life has been used in family and couples therapy settings, offering a way to reinforce preferred identities and strengths as well as paying attention to cultural backgrounds and values (Chimpén-López et al., 2022; Méndez & Cole, 2014). If we are to consider the notions of collective storytelling and relational identity in the context of dementia, the Tree of Life has potential to create a foundation for families to offer one another what Hilde Lindemann Nelson has called "clumsy holding" – a form of holding that, although sometimes fragmented or chaotic, is an exercise of moral agency and persistent engagement with one another's stories, identities, meaning and purpose (Lindemann, 2009).

Practice notes: Ethics, accountability and learning

I recognised the differences in power and privilege between myself and the group members and how this might affect authorship. Establishing permissions and consent took time at the outset to ensure this was a meaningful process. We talked about how the project would be written about and who might read it, potentially being something that might be published in a magazine or journal. Two group members had worked as writers or journalists and so had some ideas about what this might mean. We talked about being "visible" (i.e. identifiable) in the writing. Although some members were ambivalent, others preferred not to be identified, but all wanted their words and writings to be shared.

We also spent time talking about contributions – the freedom to choose whether or not to contribute at different times and in a variety of different ways. I took care to offer all members a chance to contribute and to be heard. Some group members were more verbally expressive than others. Some needed scaffolding of conversations (M. White, 2008) to feel that they had something to contribute. This was where loitering with intent, spending time in the landscape of action, and using prompts such as photographs or objects were particularly helpful.

I was also aware of times when some stories were readily afforded status (for example, stories about travel and career accomplishments), and it took time to afford the same kind of attention to everyday stories such as caring for baby brothers and sisters or working in a father's garden allotment. This was another part of the practice where being decentred and influential (M. White, 2008) was important, as it orientated me towards staying with the person's stories, knowledges and skills, keeping them as the focus.

The decisions about which stories the group lingered on, and how silence, discomfort or nonparticipation were handled, shifted over time as the group developed. One member (whom I will call Sylvia here) often expressed frustration about not being *allowed* to return home. There were times when she was upset or angry and others simply sat quietly. I admit that I felt uncomfortable in these moments, as if they disrupted the comfortable environment we had been creating. I questioned whether I was managing the process too tightly – perhaps even suppressing expressions of anger, injustice or protest. Were we becoming too cosy? That would surely contradict the philosophy of collective narrative practice (Denborough, 1995). I also wondered about the prejudices that might be at work, about older people as vulnerable, stoic or polite. Anger or protest is often framed as behavioural disturbance in this context; how much did residents feel pressured to uphold a "good resident" identity? (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

This became an opportunity to more actively negotiate the process with the group, making space for protest and resistance. When Sylvia raised her frustrations again, I invited her to continue. I asked what home meant to her and what it was like to have choices permitted or denied. The group listened and responded with their own accounts of dislocation and displacement, alongside how friendships and rituals created new notions of home. Although she often revisited these frustrations, Sylvia also began to join more regularly in other conversations, and I noticed how this created new opportunities for her to participate and to be witnessed. For example, during our “trunk” session exploring abilities and skills, another member told Sylvia that she was seen as “very tenacious and determined – seeing things that others don’t”. While this was a way for Sylvia to develop new stories of life and identity, I now wonder how much this recognition was a direct reflection of the frustrations she voiced, which created so much resonance for the others.

My concerns about the Tree of Life process being standardised or superficial dissolved when I encountered and witnessed the group members’ stories, but it also required more than this from me. I learnt about the importance of actively inviting and making space for discomfort, protest and resisting getting too comfortable or cosy in collective practice. I hope that this, together with working with locally meaningful symbols and embedding the practice within relational philosophy of narrative therapy, will help me to stay in touch with the social and political roots of the Tree of Life.

Concluding reflections: Re-membering and resonating with death and dying

This group had deep personal significance to me because my closest friend, Anna, had died not long before we began meeting. As a social researcher, she had been working on a project about “living well with dementia together” (Austin et al., 2016)

and the resonances with the group were clear to see. Anna and I shared a love of talking about narrative ideas from our different perspectives and experiences, especially the idea of identity as a relational project (Freedman & Combs, 1996). She understood how people and communities “carry” the stories of their loved ones, seeing identity as something that is “distributed, performed, and fluid” (Combs & Freedman, 2016, p. 211).

When I spoke about Anna during one of our Tree of Life sessions, I wasn’t just mentioning her; I was purposefully engaging in an act of re-membering that acknowledged her part in the group’s creation. Two members responded by telling us how being in later life had brought them closer together – that they were best friends. One of the women explained that her friend had died recently, three months before her new (and now best) friend moved in. We spoke about how the “rules” of friendship might change as we age, and how this might be particular to the lives of women, who often lived much longer than their husbands (Blieszner et al., 2019). I asked what they had learnt about making friends when you are in your nineties. They both laughed and said that if you like spending time with someone then “You should just tell them ... there isn’t time to be self-conscious about such things”.

During the group, and unbeknownst to its members, my father was in the last months of a terminal illness. I look back and wonder why I felt able to talk about Anna and not my father. Perhaps I was cautious about centring my own experiences. Maybe I held back from naming death so openly because I assumed it would cause distress or upset in the group, or perhaps I did not yet have the words. It was a tension I was holding throughout and was certainly influenced by, yet I remain unsure about my decision.

Narrative practice has much to offer around the continuation of relationships after death (Hedtke, 2000), in contrast to conventional Anglo-American grief psychology, which encourages us to “say goodbye”, “let go” and “move on” (M. White, 1988). Barbara Myerhoff found that when people tell stories about someone who has died, they are not

just reminiscing but are actively re-engaging with that person's voice and legacy. Re-remembering therefore has the potential to re-energize our own identities, creating meaning and purpose and carrying us into the future.

I began to see my own identity as something being *held* by the group. Although death and dying were not often named directly, we kept company with them throughout: talking about loved ones who had died, not having time to waste, thinking about those who will live beyond us. Witnessing and participating in the group members' storytelling gave me some courage to have some tender, final conversations with my father before he died, and this changed our relationship in ways that might

not have been possible otherwise. It is testament to the power of collective storytelling and re-remembering that my continuing friendship with Anna moved me towards this project, and my relationships with the group members transformed my relationship with my father before he died. As Michael White once said, "We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this" (1995, p. 7).

Note

¹ It is important to note that applications of the *Etz Chaim* symbol diverge significantly across various Jewish communities and theological traditions.

References

- Austin, A., O'Neill, J., & Skevington, S. (2016). *Dementia, vulnerability and well-being: Living well with dementia together*. University of Manchester, Manchester Institute of Collaborative Research on Ageing.
- Basting, A. D. (2009). *Forget memory: Creating better lives for people with dementia*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Blieszner, R., Ogletree, A. M., & Adams, R. G. (2019). Friendship in later life: A research agenda. *Innovation in Aging*, 3(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igz005>
- Chimpén-López, C. A., Pacheco, M., Pretel-Luque, T., Bastón, R., & Chimpén-Sagrado, D. (2022). The couple's Tree of Life: Promoting and protecting relational identity. *Family Process*, 61(4), 1403–1416.
- Chow, E. O. W., & Fung, S.-F. (2021). Narrative group intervention to rediscover life wisdom among Hong Kong Chinese older adults: A single-blind randomized waitlist-controlled trial. *Innovation in Aging*, 5(3), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab027>
- Combs, G., & Freedman, J. (2016). Narrative therapy's relational understanding of identity. *Family Process*, 55(2), 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12216>
- Debnath, B. (2025). *Storytelling with dementia-affected elderly* [Master's thesis, University of Lapland]. Lauda. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2025062072428>
- Denborough, D. (1995). Step by step: Developing respectful and effective ways of working with young men to reduce violence. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, (2&3), 73–89.
- Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. Norton.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (2020). Individuals in competition or communities in connection? Narrative therapy in the era of neoliberalism. In S. McNamee, M. M. Gergen, C. Camargo-Borges, & E. F. Rasera (Eds.), *Sage handbook of social constructionist practice* (pp. 193–202). Sage.
- Freire, P. (1999). Making history and unveiling oppression (D. Denborough & C. White, interviewers). *Dulwich Centre Journal*, (3), 37–39.
- Gilleard, C., & Higgs, P. (2000). *Cultures of ageing: Self, citizen and the body*. Prentice Hall.
- Hedtke, L. (2000). Dancing with death. *Gecko*, (2), 3–8.
- Hill, J., & Soprych, A. (2024). Beginning the healing journey: Re-storying violent loss through Tree of Life narrative groupwork. *Advances in Social Work*, 24(2), 269–285. <https://doi.org/10.18060/27353>
- Hoffman, L. (1998). Setting aside the model in family therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 24, 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1998.tb01071.x>
- Hydén, L.-C. (2017). *Entangled narratives: Collaborative storytelling and the re-imagining of dementia*. Oxford University Press.
- Lindemann, H. (2009). Holding one another (well, wrongly, clumsily) in a narrative. *Metaphilosophy*, 40, 416–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01592.x>
- Lindemann Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Cornell University Press.
- Méndez, G. A., & Cole, E. M. (2014). Engaging Latino families in therapy: Application of the Tree of Life technique. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 209–224.

- Myerhoff, B. (1982). Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility, and re-membering. In J. Ruby (Ed.), *A crack in the mirror: Reflective perspectives in anthropology* (pp. 99–117). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Myerhoff, B. (Writer), & Littman, L. (Director). (1976). *Number our days* [Film]. KCET.
- Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 3–16.
- Novy, C. (2018). Life stories and their performance in dementia care. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 57, 48–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.12.003>
- Rood, B. (2009). A time to talk: Re-membering conversations with elders. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 18–28.
- Salter, L. (2020). Stories “matter”: Storytelling as community learning within a whole systems approach to recovery. *Murmurations*, 3, 44–67. <https://doi.org/10.28963/3.1.13>
- Stiles, D. A., Alaraudanjoki, E., Wilkinson, L. R., Ritchie, K. L., & Brown, K. A. (2021). Researching the effectiveness of Tree of Life: An Imbeleko approach to counseling refugee youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 14, 123–139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-019-00286-w>
- Vetere, A., & Burton, P. (2019). Love and leather in later life. *Context*, 165, 31–33.
- Weaver, M. (2023, October 31). “Nature’s way of dealing with old people”: The damning messages revealed to Covid inquiry. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/oct/31/natures-way-of-dealing-with-old-people-the-damning-messages-revealed-to-covid-inquiry>
- White, C. (2011). Epilogue: Continuing conversations. In D. Denborough (Ed.), *Narrative practice: Continuing the conversations* (pp. 157–179). Norton.
- White, M. (1988). Saying hullo again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, (Spring), 7–29.
- White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and essays*. Dulwich Centre Publications
- White, M. (2003). Narrative practice and community assignments. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 17–55.
- White, M. (2008). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.
- Winslade, J., & Hedtke, L. (2008). Michael White: Fragments of an event. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 73–79.