

What I would be doing if I were with you! Address to the Narrative Therapy as Contextual Practice in South Africa Conference, Cape Town, October 12/13, 2009

By David Epston



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I am writing to you today from a very long distance away. Although Elize Morkel suggested I appear in a more obvious guise; for example, by way of a conference call or a video, I prefer the, by now, rather old-fashioned medium of the letter, even if this particular letter has avoided postage and instead has arrived electronically. Letter writing is a medium that I am most comfortable with, and that very medium has already a venerable tradition in narrative therapy practice. William Decker (1998) suggests that a letter is different in kind, 'by the space it provides for imagining the ways in which one may exist in reciprocity with others' (p. 241).

Sitting here at my computer screen with my finger touching the keys of my keyboard has always seemed to me like 'touching' the other in thought and sentiment. I doubt if there has ever been a letter I have written that has not brought me closer to those with whom I was in correspondence.

In my mind's eye, I am imagining you all convening in Cape Town for your inaugural narrative therapy conference. I would have wished I could have accompanied you just as a witness to this event; but in some ways it thrills me even more to write to you 'imagining' myself joining you through this means.

It seems to me many years ago that I was invited to Cape Town by Elmarie Kotze and Elize Morkel to present a workshop to you; and then, if my memory serves me right, I returned a year

or two later. I had earlier presented in Pretoria and I found the enthusiasm with which I was greeted quite remarkable. And I am not referring to the fine details of hospitality; I am referring to something entirely different. It was rather the open-mindedness and open-heartedness of everyone I encountered. It was almost as if you were seeking for something that suited your purposes – although I was never entirely clear what your purposes were. The problem of giving workshops is that you are like a professional sportsman. All you can think of is the next ‘game’ and every moment is a kind of preparation for that. Still I sensed that you were seeking for something. I only hoped that narrative therapy and community work might play some part in serving your purposes.

Ever since Michael White's tragic death in April, 2008, I have felt compelled, quite contrary to my usual preference to look to the future, to be more retrospective. In a manner of speaking, I have found myself turning around and looking backwards through space/time. Perhaps, too, it also has something to do with my aging. I find it difficult to disentangle these strands that have me looking backwards. And it is events such as your inaugural conference that remind me of time passing, in fact in intervals of a decade. I know I date narrative therapy to a workshop Michael presented at the second Australian Family Therapy Conference in 1981 in Adelaide, even though it went un-named as such until early in the 1990s. We were worried at the time that a name would circumscribe or rein it in. Our fears proved groundless, because I cannot see anything like that happening. One of my most pleasing pastimes is to Google narrative therapy and see what comes up. How many times do I run across theses from South Africa, many of which I peruse with a kind of enchantment?

Why? Whenever Michael and I would get together over the intervening years and would tell each other of our return from travels overseas or of our itineraries for the future, we would marvel to one another, ‘Would you have ever guessed there would be an interest in narrative therapy in Korea/Uruguay/Brazil/Mongolia?’ In fact, when, at a recent narrative therapy conference in Adelaide, there was a wonderful presentation by a colleague from Bhutan, I had to admit to myself but no-one else that I did not really know where Bhutan was, although I had some vague idea it was near Tibet.

The passage of narrative therapy from its homelands in Australia and New Zealand to South Africa – or in fact to any other place – can be thought of as a metaphorical kind of translation from one language/culture to another. As such, it brings to mind what is referred to as ‘translation studies’, the discipline that of late has come into being, given how vital the matter of translation has become in a global world. And that the very act of translation can no longer be taken for granted. There is a well-known Italian quote, *‘Traductore traditorre’* which translates into English as, ‘The translator is a traitor!’

There are indeed different translation paradigms that have to do with what kind of connection there should be between the original text or work and the translation of it. Translation theory rests on two different assumptions about language use itself. One assumption is what is referred to as the instrumental concept of language, which sees it as a mode of communication of objective information. The other hermeneutic conception of language emphasises interpretation, where the meaning made of words shapes reality. This has led to two competing models of translating. The first regards translation as a natural act, emphasising the commonality and universality of human experience and similarities in what appear at first to be disparate languages and cultures. The second sees translation as unnatural, as the uprooting and transplanting of fragile meanings of the source language to another. It is a traitorous act. Here cultural differences are emphasised, along with the foreignness of the text. One style of translation smoothes over difference; the other foreignises and de-familiarises it.

I set out these two competing paradigms for your interest. Why? Because, if I were present as a fly on the wall, I would have equipped myself with several 'research' questions to focus my attention on your conference papers/presentations/workshops and, in particular, in those informal discussions in the corridors between workshops. It is here where the best talk happens at conferences. Toilets aren't a bad place either to start a good conversation. I know I have had enduring conversations with male colleagues that admittedly began in a men's toilet.

To what extent over this decade of 'translating' narrative therapy through your languages/cultures/circumstances have you 'foreignised' its source texts and practice? What would I, as a Kiwi, find strange and unfamiliar? And how would I go about learning how you have perhaps unwittingly innovated narrative therapy into a South African narrative therapy?

I hope you might share my interest in this matter as you inaugurate this conference, about twenty years after it arrived on your shores thanks to Michael and Cheryl White's first visits to Johannesburg, Cape Town and the Valley of a Thousand Hills (just outside Durban), I hope too you might consider sharing my interests and if you have time, can you get back to me and let me know how you have taken narrative therapy over and made it your own.

References

Decker, W. M. (1998). *Epistolary practices: Letter writing in America before telecommunications*. Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press.