

Consulting your consultants, revisited

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This article questions the notion of children as hapless, biding their time, through a slow maturation process until they become useful adults. We argue that young people¹ can be instrumental in their own lives and this extends to addressing serious problems they may encounter. We suggest, in addition, that young people's knowledges² can be useful to others. We offer a map (White, 2007) for this practice in how to consult young people on behalf of others in need. With the use of letters and transcripts, we provide examples for each step in how to support young people as they find surer footing and a clearer voice, taking up the role of protagonist and advisor. Through the consulting process, insider knowledges are privileged. Narrative structures are utilised to give order and coherence to such knowledges. A future petitioner is introduced to provide immediacy and narrative drive to the consultation.

Keywords: knowledges, young consultants, collaborative storytelling, narrative, story-full, re-telling, protagonist, veteran of the problem, witness, identity, knowledge-able, author-ity

INTRODUCTION

When children participate, usually at the request of their parents or caregivers, in individual or family therapy, it is likely they will be the beneficiaries of (or be subjected to) the ideas, theories, strategies and interventions of the professionals who enter their lives. There is a long-standing tradition supporting the establishment of professional knowledge. This venture is an ambitious one and strives to create a stable canon that is timeless and knows no boundaries (Watters, 2010). Young people, though often characterised as intuitive, spontaneous, imaginative, innocent, etc., implying a kind of original purity, are at the same time, conceived of as inherently helpless. They are not thought to possess any of the requisite knowledge and skill assumed to be essential to the difficult endeavour of problem solving (Montgomery, 2005). The pernicious problems that can intrude upon family life, it is thought, require a response that is made possible only through a kind of slow maturation, made complete in adulthood, perhaps involving some kind of professional tuition along the way (White, 2000). Our aim as narrative practitioners is to destabilise fixed knowledge as it is applied to people's lives and, in this instance, young people's lives. We favour an 'experience-near' locus as the site where wisdom or *sabiduria*³ can be co-discovered and co-generated. This shifts our attention from the 'experience-far' and singular, to the plural as we move from locus to loci and from knowledge to knowledges. Our interest is in flattening hierarchies of knowledge and the ways they have been established between adults and children and, moreover, between 'experts' and children. We are not advocating for a reverse-hierarchical model of family life with a conception of children as organically or intuitively correct. We do not argue here for one structural view of truth over another. It is any structured or ordered truth as a stable fixture for understanding that would assign exclusive rights to any single site, to which we object. We do suggest that young people, like anyone else, can and ought to be engaged on their own behalf in the face of potentially difficult problems, and that the terms of engagement may well be grounded in the local knowledges of their families and communities, and in the imaginations, talents, skills, humour, tender hearts, keen minds and weird ablenesses (Freeman, Epston, Lobovits, 1997) of young people themselves.

As more detailed images of children's skills and knowledges come into focus, it is incumbent upon us to bring them to the centre of the work and to pay heed to them not only as valuable but perhaps even as invaluable. We assert the following: that young people's knowledges are just the kind, that in the first place, deserve to be known to young people themselves. They can become well acquainted with their skills and talents, both as a matter of pride, and their family's dignity (Epston & Marsten, 2010). When confronted by challenges or dilemmas, they can be supported in coming to know themselves as capable and up to the task of meeting the circumstances that beset them. Insider knowledges (White, 2004; Epston, 2008) – those knowledges that are derived from personal experience, and that of family and community – can be accessible as their knowledges of first choice. Outsider knowledge, or ideas derived through empirical undertakings, should be understood as potentially limiting as a result of its incubation and development outside the lives of the particular young people and families who consult us. Our interest is in staying within the context of insider descriptions and characterisations nearest to the 'encapsulated contingent events that are embedded in the flow of everyday life' (Denzin, 2003, p. 8).

This local endeavour is to be distinguished from a view of knowledge or self as a private undertaking or something individually possessed. We support 'an account of identity that is achieved through engagement within community' (Marsten & Howard, 2006). Knowing oneself well depends on the experience of being well known to others (Cooley, 1902). We join with Louise Collins (2010) and others (Gergen, 2009; Foucault, 1978; Denborough, 2008) who have tempered individualistic conceptualisations of identity, in adopting a communal metaphor in understanding how identity construction is undertaken and enriched: 'One comes to be a person through a variety of relationships with others, whereas classical liberalism assumes that personhood is given a priori' (Collins, 2010, p. 190).

Collins suggests that individuality can be more richly conceived of as '... relational autonomy, in its acknowledgement that self-definition is a project undertaken in relation with responsive others' (p. 190). It is in shared understandings and by means of 'reflecting surfaces' (Myerhoff, 1978; Cooley, 1902) that we come to know ourselves and

know what we know. It is in the experience of being 'in the public eye' that young people come to a more or less legitimated status and, as a result, a more emboldened or resigned mode of living. Young people may be unfairly challenged to construct alternative stories of self in the seclusion of individual therapy. In narrative practice, family, community members and therapist all serve as witnesses in what serves as a regrading ritual (Epston, 1989; White, 2007) in which young people come to know themselves differently than they would if placed in a more isolated form of practice and subjected to the kind of professional gaze that could amount to a degradation ritual (Garfinkel, 1956). Barbara Wingard (1999) describes an experience of local wisdoms being reclaimed by Aboriginal communities in South Australia:

Not only are we telling our stories differently, but we are listening differently too. We are listening for our people's abilities and knowledges and skills. We've been knocked down so many times that we often don't think very well of ourselves. But we're finding ways to acknowledge one another and to see the abilities that people have but may not know they have. (p. 11)

This inclines us to an understanding of knowledge as requiring legitimation through various forms of witness, documentation, and subsequent circulation (Lobovits, Maisel & Freeman, 1995; Denborough, 2008). In meetings, the narrative practitioner acts as scribe, dutifully attending to the ideas, turns of phrase and trace knowledges uttered by young people. As scribe or amanuensis (but here it is the senior person taking dictation from a far younger person), it is incumbent upon the narrative practitioner to verify that s/he is getting it down right and tending to the important elements of the story as confirmed by the young person as narrator. As has been described elsewhere (White & Epston, 1990), these notes can be turned into valuable documents such as declarations of independence from the Problem, letters of intent, etc. (White & Epston, 1990; Epston & Marsten, 2010). A process of documentation creates a permanent record as both evidence and authorisation of this as a species of knowledge (Jordan, 1997).

This kind of effort can be an eye/ear-opening experience for young people as they come to both see what they know and hear what they themselves

have to tell. As is the case with any useful body of knowledge, it is treated as an enduring resource. Publicising and sharing information, discoveries, strategies, tricks and treats in how to face difficult problems can take many forms (Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004; Borden, 2007). In partnership with young clients, we often notify family and community of recent achievements. Shared authorship in professional publications is sometimes enjoyed between narrative practitioner, children and their families (Epston, 1989; White, 1989; Epston & White, 1992; Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997; Epston, 1998; Epston, 2008). And as will be seen in the next section, young people are relied on for their hard-won victories, and consulted on behalf of others facing similar problems who may very well seek our help.

FROM CLIENT TO CONSULTANT

Although this genre of inquiry has been extensively documented in previously published works (Epston & White, 1992; Epston, 1998) we intend, in the following, to provide a 'map' (White, 2007) for this unique practice in how to engage a young person in the role of consultant. The consultant role in general has been long established as that of advisor and expert, though here we distinguish young people's knowledges as born of lived experience and carried forward as part of a grassroots effort to put local and community knowledges into circulation. We assert that this is a different species of knowledge that can be introduced without risk of dominating or de-legitimizing new young clients (Kleinman, 1994). In practice it has had quite the opposite effect. Once personal knowledges of our young consultants have been given honoured status, they pave the way for those seeking help to join forces and begin to take a greater interest in what they too might know (Epston, 1998).

However, there is still a bridge to cross. Because children are commonly expected to receive rather than donate knowledge, it is safe to assume that they could be easily disoriented by such a request for consultation (Johnson, 2010). In anticipation of consulting young people, it is useful to keep in mind that the main professional people in their lives so far have likely been teachers who have their own technology of questions and formats of enquiry. But their queries often implicate a rightness or

wrongness to them in which teachers have a monopoly on deciding the matter. In fact, young people could reasonably construe a particular intention in the questions from their teachers as implicit 'tests' or 'assessments' of curricular knowledge. We will do best to steer young people away from deciphering questions according to such a template of power/knowledge relations (e.g. teacher-pupil) (Guile & Young, 1998). There is nothing covert or clever in our request to a young person for consultation. It represents our attempt at an accountable practice and also has nothing in common with strategies evinced by such practices as reframing or positive reinforcement. Where the latter would rely on 'The use of positive consequences to increase desirable behaviour ...' (Thomlison & Thomlison, 1996, p. 43) in accordance with the aims of those in charge, here the object is '... to prioritise people's notions of what they are doing and why they are doing it ...' (White, 1995, p. 216). We are regularly inspired by the intentions and justifiable achievements of children, and indebted to them for their impact on our own maturing practice. Without these archives of each 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we would be on our own.⁴

Reiko Ishida, a character in the novel *Norwegian Wood* (Murakami, 2000), describes the (fictitious) therapeutic retreat where she and other 'patients' live:

The best thing about this place is the way everybody helps everybody else ... Other places don't work that way, unfortunately. Doctors are doctors and patients are patients: the patient looks for help to the doctor and the doctor gives his help to the patient. Here, though, we all help each other. We're all each other's mirrors, and the doctors are part of us ... Sometimes we're better at something than they are ... Patients with problems like ours are often blessed with special abilities. (p. 97)

TRELLIS AS METAPHOR

Of course, our consultants are not strangers to us. Our histories together date back to our first encounters when they were in the grips of daunting problems. Over the course of however many number of interviews and therapeutic letters appended (White & Epston, 1990; Epston, 1998), they have

come, with considerable effort and ingenuity, to tell a very different story than the problem-saturated account likely first told by their parents or caregivers. Still, as we propose a consultation, we must assume that it is an unprecedented experience for them. We anticipate too that young people might consider such a request with some confusion and even suspicion. As we have suggested above, they might regard it as a kind of implicit assessment or test, a check up in regard to how they are 'holding up', or they might feel themselves being subjected to a 'doubting Thomas' seeking to discredit them and the aura of magic that was experienced in the telling of a counter-story (Lindeman Nelson, 2001).

We choose the trellis as a metaphor (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997) for how young people are supported in the establishment of their preferred identities: 'Adult story-tellers provide a trellis on which children's imaginations and narratives flourish like vines' (p. 7). We offer both structure and space for young people to latch on and spread out. The rootstock of a growing vine is supported, but from there on the direction it takes is largely unrestrained. Young people are provided a certain kind of structural aid that encourages growth but is rooted in the local soil of their lived experience and that of their families and communities. The structure or trellis offered is of an alternative design to that usually provided to children. It is intended to counter the grand narratives that would prune and limit our comprehension of young people, those dominant understandings that would draw our attention to the kinds of manicured stories that narrow the field of possibilities and render children helplessly dependent. It is the other accounts that interest us; those stories that languish un nourished. It is with the aim of stimulating growth in previously neglected soil that we set up our trellis. It is the unstoried events and budding plotlines that draw our interest and stimulate our curiosity. The lines of questions we begin to develop are often like the first drops of water to a seedling tree in a drought.

1. LAYING THE GROUND: LETTER OF INTENT

We act carefully to mitigate any sense of burden or risk that might be experienced by the young person. We might broach the subject towards the end of our time together, after s/he has maintained desired gains for some time and feels herself in the

soil of an alternative story. Often, before the onset of the consultation, a letter is sent with the purpose of the meeting stated explicitly, that s/he is being sought out as the inventor of ideas and as protagonist and storyteller. The story s/he is being asked to re-tell has already been collaboratively developed and documented during the previous course of therapy. It is a story in which the young person had a great impact and was positioned as lead author, but at the same time, buttressed with supports that sustained her/his involvement. In our current request for consultation, we deliver a letter offering the same assurance to the young person and parents, that we will be there every step of the way as interviewers and collaborative storytellers aiding the young veteran of the problem in both the retracing of previous discoveries and in supporting forward movement, on behalf of others.

Sample Letter

Dear Sammy,

I am writing to you with a request that I knew some time ago I would be making. It was during our second meeting that you declared, 'I want more happiness and fun'. We all leaned in and paid close attention to what you said. We wondered together (you, me and your parents) if this statement was your way of putting Fear on notice, that you'd had enough of the unhappiness it had brought into your life. I made a prediction in my mind at that moment and thought, 'I will be writing you a letter one day soon to ask for your help'. As it turned out your dream of a house filled with happiness and fun was the very idea you'd been looking for. It was as though what you said was the very thing you'd been waiting to hear. From that moment things began to turn in your favour.

I am now writing to ask for your help. As I believe you know, I feel a fierce loyalty to young people whose lives are being turned upside down by Fear. Others know this about me too and give my number out to families looking for assistance. It is just a matter of time (maybe days, or even hours)

before I will be getting a call from a family with a young person in a situation similar to the one in which you found yourself when we first met.

Given the ways I saw you take your life back from Fear, I'm absolutely convinced you are the right person to add your knowledge to this particular situation. I'm certain that your discoveries would be a great help to many kids I will be meeting with in the near future. Besides, I'm sure it would be fun for all of us to go over again, the story you called 'Happiness and Fun Forever!' Be assured though, if you agree to lend support to my future work, I will be there with questions to support you in telling your story and describing what you have come to know. It is my hope that I could meet with you and your parents and get your ideas about how to help other kids. I've already thought of some questions I'm eager to ask you. Please talk this over, the three of you, and let me know as soon as you have come to a decision. If you'd like a list of some of the questions I have in mind, I would be only too happy to write them down and send them to you.

Many thanks in advance.

2. SETTING THE LATTICE: LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING GENRES

With the form of a story as structure, we invite a particular way of speaking about experience that has the potential to put children at ease and on familiar ground. When we meet on the occasion of a consultation, we engage in age-old storytelling conventions. We make our tone most recognisable to the young person as that of storyteller. Listen to any 'talking book' for children and you will recognise such a tone. The content is entirely rooted in the story that was previously collaboratively developed. The story is told with genuine enthusiasm and in a broad melodic vocal range as is the custom in any compelling storytelling experience. In this way, as the story is revisited, it is brought back to life. Within narrative formats,

additional genres of storytelling that are already well known to young people are employed:

The term genre [here] refers to the family of stories – mysteries, romances, or fables – that shares particular subject matter, style, and narrative conventions. (Engel, 1995, p. 169)

Engaging the young person in this way helps to give additional shape to the story and fosters a more closely felt and vivid rendering. We focus on not just experience, but on the potential of language to enchant, and imbue experience with greater meaning. As Marcela Polanco points out:

It is not a language that tells about a lived experience; rather it is a language that once again brings the lived experience to life. It is a living vocabulary. Life is happening in the vocabularies, not besides them or prior to them. (April 19, 2010, email correspondence)

We rely on those time-honoured conventions in children's local culture that alert young listeners to the anticipated thrill of a story well begun with phrases like: 'Once upon a time ...' or: 'A long time ago ...'. As in any story that begins in these ways, it is to be expected that there will be a hero/ine and a plight or two to overcome along the way. It is also anticipated that our young consultant will be at the heart of the story as its narrator and protagonist along with the collaborating storytellers (e.g. therapist, parents and other attendees). At the outset of the conversation we render our young consultant *story-full* and establish favourable conditions to recruit her/his excited participation. We begin by telling the story back to her/him to refresh the young consultant with a re-telling (White, 1997; Marsten & Howard, 2006) of her/his own story. For example:

Once upon a time there was a girl named Martha, who fell under the spell of Fear. This young girl was brown-eyed and had been fun-loving before Fear cast a spell over her life. Even when the Problem had her Fear-full, she still went to school so she could play with Sonia and Emily. She patted her dog, Mutt, and took him on his leash for walks. She helped her Mum and Dad in their vegetable garden and loved vine-ripened tomatoes more than any other kind of vegetable. Still, Fear crept up on her and started bothering her by night and putting scary

nightmares into what used to be her sweet dreams. But it wasn't long before she and her family decided the Fear was going too far, so they introduced the Problem to their family's bravery and courage. They transfused their bravery into Martha until she had enough of her own. Then she took her nights back from Fear. She told me (DE) about flushing Fear down the toilet. Her bravery, and that of her family, meant she could sleep in her own bed again and sweeten her dreams. And did she ever have sweet dreams.

By means of the re-telling of a young person's return to prominence in her own life in the form of a speech genre that is by now familiar and inviting, we help to establish the conditions for her emergence in the role of storytelling consultant.

3. TRUSSING THE VINE: ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

In anticipation of consulting our young consultants, we ready ourselves for the key role we will play in helping to bring their voices and imaginations to the process. In consulting the young person on behalf of those who may find themselves in near identical predicaments, the young person finds her/himself in a new role as young expert and veteran of the problem (e.g. Temper Tamer, Fear Fighter, Worry Wizard, Supplier of Asthma Expertise, Anti-Anorexic Ally, etc.). We strive to ensure from start to finish that we do not overburden her/him as a veteran but circumscribe any requests for consultation to be well within her/his grasp. Once the story s/he co-authored has been re-visited with full acknowledgement of the young person's role as protagonist, the conditions are set for consulting your consultant questions.

The face-to-face interview may begin with the kind of question that is elaborate enough to invite both reflection and reverie, giving our young protagonist time to get into a storytelling mood:

Let's think back to the beginning. It was soon after I'd met you when you first began to turn the tables on Fear. If I remember correctly it was something you said that we all instantly knew was important. Something about being tired of the way Fear was controlling your life, something about bedtime ...

Providing the young person with ample time and support for their anticipated response to a slowly

unfolding question can alleviate any pressure to 'get it right' but instead ease the young person into a knowledge-able position.

4. TENDRILS AND CLASPERS: YOUNG PEOPLE LATCH ONTO THE STORY

We must be sure that the array of questions we ask delivers enough in the way of ties and links to elicit their knowledges, spark imagination, and provide a treillage for support and elaboration:

In the ideal scaffolding situation described by Bruner, the parent is in tune with the child's developmental level and therefore talks in a way that demands linguistic skills that are always a bit beyond what the child is currently doing, but not beyond his reach. (Engel, 1995, p. 115)

This points the way to the key role played by the narrative practitioner whose questions aim to stimulate the story's further development while not deluging the young person. Even so, we must also be aware that fatigue will likely set in at points during the meeting. Like any project that is inventive, one is necessarily required to 'roll up one's sleeves' and even press beyond the 'so far' known. Children are justifiably provided with intervals for rest and relief when it becomes obvious they are tiring. We rely on parents or others in attendance at these times to 'carry the ball' for stretches, while the young person takes a breather from the thrill and demands of the consultation. As the parents have been relegated to watching from the sidelines, most often they re-enter the fray with considerable gusto for the story being told. This often has the effect of re-energizing the story and bringing it back to life. Parents are engaged in ways to reflect on and bear witness to their children's achievements (e.g. acts of courage, ingenuities of mind and imagination). These kinds of acknowledgements can instantaneously re-inspire young people to shift from states of weariness to extreme activity as they reinstate themselves as narrators.

We attend to our responsibility as hosts and collaborators to help with the pacing of the consultation, bringing the story back to life as we turn again and again to the young person in the collaborative story-telling process. It is through such means that repeated bursts of narrative drive lend momentum and excitement to the story-telling.

What further distinguishes the consultation is the introduction of the future petitioner whose hour of need is at hand. It is with a sense of immediacy that an appeal for assistance is made to the young person.

5. STIMULATING GROWTH: THE FUTURE PETITIONER

The young consultants we consult are invited to re-tell their stories to a very particular audience. In addition to the presence of family members and the narrative practitioner, we invoke the presence of future petitioners; young people, perhaps the same age but preferably a year younger than our young consultants, who, if experience has taught us anything, will very likely be seeking our help in the near future. It is on their collective behalf that we are seeking this consultation. The request is a sincere one. *Are we not going to meet another young person struggling with a problem akin to this young person's problem?* We have learned that the benefits of consultations we are able to pass on are immeasurable. They give us a much greater advantage as we team up with new clients, in the face of serious problems, than if we had to go it alone or start from scratch each time. We notice that questions posed on behalf of future petitioners bring forward stories of our consultant's expertise quite differently than questions would if raised on our own behalf as professionals. Instead of 'looking up' to a professional a generation or two her/his senior, s/he is now looking across to a future petitioner who is desperately seeking out our consultant's knowledge. In an effort to enlist our consultants in earnest we might propose:

You never know but it seems to be the case that just when I meet a kid who gets brave, I meet another kid soon after who is having the fun squeezed out of her/his life by something or other scaring them. Can you see why I am so interested in how you might be able to lend a hand to the next kid I may meet who is dealing with a problem like the one you dealt with and then dealt to?

A request is made of our young consultants from particular vantage points:

A. *As Proxy for a future petitioner.* This is accomplished by bringing the future petitioner's interests and concerns to the current meeting, as her/his emissary. This involves a request to hear the

story and its details concerning just what ideas, skills and know-how our young consultant made use of in transitioning from a position of sufferer of the problem to that of veteran:

Say I was to meet a boy named Bobby, who is a year younger than you, but who is really being bothered by the Problem that used to bother you. If he asked you 'what was the very first thing you remember getting up to when you started to take your life back from the problem – what might you tell him? What advice might you offer him?'

B. *Assuming the Role of Petitioner.* Here the narrative practitioner seeks permission from our consultant to embody the personage of the petitioner as a visitor from the future, and establish the sense of immediacy that can accompany such a personal request. Such a request is posed simply:

Would you mind if I speak as Ozzy, who is six years old and having the wits scared out of him by Fear? (Such a request has, to date, never been turned down.) 'My seven-year-old brave friend, is it true what David told me, that you went from being fear-driven to driving fear out of your bedroom almost overnight? Should I have hope that I could do something like that? Or should I give up?'

6. TENDING THE VINE: STICKING TO THE STORY

How we assist in the unfolding of our young consultant's story is guided by the narrative metaphor in rich and detailed form. We collaborate in the construction of alternative stories and are therefore working with the many elements of narrative – *a desired end, events linked together across time, memorable experience as witnessed and plotted experience* – with the intention of achieving, over the course of conversations, a re-storied sense of self (Epston, 1998; Morson, 1994; White, 2007). It is not enough to investigate a person's many experiences and find those that stand for hope and possibility apart from the Problem – as if to imply that all people need to do in order to take control of the direction of their lives is build on examples of having done so in the past. The detail and consideration that go into storytelling in narrative construction are distinct.

In turning to young people as consultants, we anticipate being joined by gifted storytellers. As one example, they certainly have experience and

demonstrate skill in 'devote[ing] a great deal of energy and ability to collaborative storytelling with their friends' (Engel, 1999, p. 51). We anticipate that 'children often need a partner to tell a story' (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 66). With the narrative metaphor in mind, we take careful steps, as already described, to create the conditions for collaboration. Once a young person is engaged in dialogue and feeling sure-footed, we get behind them as they assume the lead and infuse the story with momentum. At other moments our consultants may lose the thread, their imaginations running away with them, taking them far afield. Given that we have come together with a particular purpose in mind – that of further story development and the retracing of events to arrive at a distinct account of the young person's identity – we might:

A. Assume an editorial role in keeping the unfolding of the story in line with themes, initiatives and actions, all fitting together as elements of the plotline:

Your imagination is so lively today. I'm guessing this may be due to the ways you've used your Bravery to take your mind back from Fear. Am I right about this? Is your mind your own again? If I asked you questions, do you think you could concentrate your mind to help me understand more about the ways you introduced your Bravery to Fear?

B. Assume a supportive role at any moment when the young storyteller wavers in her/his account. Much like a parent trailing closely behind a young child attempting to master the two-wheeled bicycle, we would be diligent and reach out to steady them with questions that would help aid them in regaining their balance and getting back on the track of the story:

I just realised how many questions I've asked you – so many – and you've come up with such interesting answers. Are you getting out of breath and needing to catch some more of it? Do you need a break? I could talk with your parents for a few minutes? Or do you want me to keep firing away?

C. Reiterate the structure of the story in an effort to assist in the re-initiation of the telling:

Okay, here's the way I'm getting it so far. You were missing out on fun too much of the time. You called on your Bravery to stand by

you when Fear came around. You've begun to explain to me how you used your Bravery to make you Brave again and how you started to see Fear for what it is – a liar and spoiler of fun. Am I on track here?

D. Re-charge the telling with the dramatic evocation of the younger petitioner in need. This is done in a way, not to burden, but rather invigorate our consultant, recasting her/him in the role of protagonist. For example:

DE: Are you interested Pete?

Pete: No it's boring!

DE: Can you understand why we are interested? Your Mum and Dad could not have guessed that you could have come here and within the next month do all the courageous things you've done and are doing. They wouldn't have been able to guess that. And it may no longer be of any interest to you, but I will be meeting boys and girls your age and Fears will try to spoil their lives – won't let them sleep at night – would you be willing to think about them and help them?

Pete: Okay.

DE: Thanks. Well, say a boy, about seven or eight came and I said to him 'I know you think this is a big Problem but would you believe that I met a boy, called Pete, who just overcame it within a month ... went from being really frightened by Fear to being pretty brave about Fear. He did a whole lot of new things that surprised his Mum and Dad.' And if he said to me – 'Will you ask that boy how he did it?' And I told him 'He is a bit bored by it.' And he said, 'I'm in trouble ... I can't sleep at night. I'm grumpy in the morning. I'm scared of everything. Please get that boy to help me! I don't believe he could do that in a month.' What would you tell him? Say his name is Tommy.

Mom: So what would you tell him?

DE: If Tommy said to you 'Pete, I heard a month ago your life was pretty much controlled by Fear...' what would you tell him?

Mom: What's your answer?

DE: And he went on to say 'Pete, please, please I'm desperate. I can't sleep at night. Please help me.' Would you say 'There is no hope for

you? Your life will always be run by Fear.' Or would you say 'There is hope for you?'

Pete: There is!

E. Shift from an urgent tone to one that is inquisitive and back again as a way of repeatedly refreshing inquiry as the moment demands.

- Can you picture someone younger than you really having a rough time of it with Fear and trying to figure out what to do and where to turn?
- If you take a minute to think back to the time when you first started figuring out that Fear was only there to spoil your fun and not at all to protect you, what was the first clue or thing you spotted about Fear that helped you begin to turn things around?
- What would you say to a younger person who is about to give up hope on figuring Fear out and even the hope of ever growing up?

It is our commitment to the invigoration and reinvigoration of story form, and our understanding that people rely on narrative structures to make sense of their lives, that encourages us to assist young people, their families and communities to organise their experience in this way. After all, the dominant stories that haunt also benefit from all of the stabilising elements narrative provides. Problem stories justify their presence by resurrecting 'key' moments from the past. They launch ahead of us into *fated futures* with the assertion that we are doomed (Morson 1994), and they fill our heads with moments real and imagined that, if we took problems most seriously, would argue for a core, or single story of identity (Adichie, 2009). The kind of aggressive occupancy achieved by problems serves as a call to action and invests us with a sense of mission to undertake rich story development in the service of alternative claims of life and identity.

7. FLOWERING VINE: FLIGHTS OF IMAGINATIVE FANCY

With the young person supported, and authorised to tell, there is no predicting how a story might be embellished or where her/his imagination will take us. In a recent conversation with David M. seven-year-old 'Jira' talked about her love of the outdoors. She alighted on a recent memory of a classroom outing and was off and running with her

description of the world around her, both real and enchanted:

Jira: ... and we picked a bunch of nature and flowers and leaves ... and found tons of stuff, and it was really fun. We got honeysuckles and those jacaranda flowers and we actually experienced a lot of stuff. We used a lot of science, cause we squirted out the honeysuckles. We realised they could be a good drink for the fairies, and like squirted out the bottom. We called it fairy milk of the purple jacaranda things, cause it's like this white liquid that comes out and it's edible and it's really sour and they could use it for the fairies.

DM: So Jira, we were talking earlier about your imagination and how good it's gotten, especially over this past year. Is this a really great example of what your imagination is capable of imagining?

Dad: I'm really impressed!

Jira: Yep! Except I don't think the fairies are imagination. I think they're real.

DM: Right. That's right. My mistake ...

Young people, provided the opportunity and encouragement, can bring a world of imagination to the storytelling endeavour. With the aid of collaborative partners as both audience and assisting co-authors, young people can make contributions to their stories and their own lives that could never have been anticipated by others, no matter how many 'older' heads are put together:

DM: How did you find out about the fairies? Did the fairies let everyone in your class know about them?

Jira: No, only me and Mimi (Jira's best friend).

DM: What did the fairies notice about you or about your friendship with Mimi that helped them decide to show themselves to you?

Jira: They trust us.

DM: What did they see that made them trust you? If the fairies floated near you or sat lightly on your shoulders for a while what would they see you and Mimi doing that would make them love and trust you?

Jira: That we're really nice and friendly and we believe in them ... 'cause they're real.

DM: Is knowing about fairies just one of the things some kids are much better at than adults? Is this one of the things kids have to help adults with just like you had to help remind me about fairies?

Jira: Yeah! Because adults forgot how to believe in fairies. I know ... me and Mimi play with the fairies and we're gonna collect milk for them. Mimi's coming over tomorrow ... or on Saturday and my Mom is gonna take us back to where we collect milk for them and we're gonna have a fairy party at my house and we're gonna give them milk ... fairy milk and cookies ... but me and Mimi are gonna drink regular milk because fairy milk isn't good for people ... it's just for them ... to them it tastes good.

DM: You've got me wondering Jira ... did the fairies pick just the right kids when they picked you and Mimi. Did they pick two of the nicest and most trustworthy people in your whole school.

Jira: Yep!

As we learn about Jira, her kindness, trustworthiness, and earlier her imagination, it then becomes possible to explore how these skills for living can assist her in addressing the problems she is facing. In our experience, it is skills such as these that are often most effective in addressing serious problems.

8. FLOURISHING VINE: INTRODUCTION OF ADULT MYSTIFICATION

As just seen, young people become at once, narrators and protagonists, and often actualise much more than their parents had previously known about them and their knowledges. Parents may be baffled and amazed by their children and delighted to enter the magical realms of their worlds. Parents are afforded the rare experience of transport into the fanciful world that children are adept at creating and inhabiting. It is made rare, not because parents are disinclined to enter their children's worlds, but because they have most likely been burdened with sole responsibility, and perhaps even blamed for any problems that have entered their children's lives, and as a result have been denied any sense of wonder and possibility that their children might bring a host of special skills with which to meet

problems. It is not unlikely that parents have experienced therapy themselves, whether formally, in weekly office meetings, or informally through exposure to 'experts' on television and radio, and been convinced, through such exposure, how 'fragile' young people are (Meyer, 2007).

Once the idea of children's ingenuity becomes known, parents are relieved and eager to learn more about their children's contributions. An atmosphere of suspense can help to establish that it is young people who are in knowledge-able positions, and all others (e.g. family and community members, therapist) really do not know the 'whole story', as so far it has remained untold. Here the anticipation and excitement of the audience helps shape the telling. It would seem the more mystery the audience cloaks the telling in, the more wondrous the telling.

The following comments and questions offer a sampling of ways to heighten the sense of anticipation as young people prepare to embody positions of authorship over the conditions of their lives:

- I can't wait to find out what you're thinking. This is a real mystery to me.
- Do you want to keep us in the dark a while longer, so that when you finally do catch us up, we'll find it even more interesting?
- How enjoyable is it to use your mind and imagination in ways we could never have guessed?
- How about you (to parents)? Are you on the edge of your seats with curiosity? I know I am!

As young people enter into dialogue and begin to tell stories, with the help of carefully scaffolded lines of questioning, we might find opportunities to further distinguish the worlds they are capable of inhabiting. The following questions can serve to accentuate the difference between young people's 'high level' clearance and access to special worlds and the limited 'low level' access available to us as adults:

- To parents: Is it a mystery to you that for so long Jenny was seemingly at the beck and call of Fear and after the first meeting she turned the tables on Fear and Fear was at her beck and call?
- To young consultant: So that's how you did it! I would never have guessed that!

- To parents: Given that you obviously know Jenny so much better than I do, could you have guessed it?
- To parents: Wouldn't most people our age have guessed the opposite?
- To young consultant: Do you think I'm getting what you mean? Or should I ask a few more questions so you can set me straight?

Here the young person is positioned to evaluate the audience in terms of 'getting it' where the 'it' is understood to be the young person's knowledges or even magical properties and practices.

9. TRUMPET VINE: TOOTING OUR CONSULTANT'S HORN

In the days and weeks following a consultation, it is likely not long before we reach out again to our young consultant, this time to convey how her/his contributions were put to use by recent petitioners. What is told in conversation and documented in letter form serves as confirmation that her/his knowledges proved to hold more than just private value. In the experience of others, they have proven to be worthy of distribution and put to good use. To this end, they have been made available to future petitioners, with our consultant's permission, of course. With the narrative practitioner serving as go-between, correspondence is often made possible between consultants and petitioners. The narrative practitioner conveys messages back and forth in the form of questions, letters and acknowledgements:

Sample Letter

Dear Jenny,

I was pretty desperate when I went to the Family Therapy Centre with my sister and Mom and Dad. I am only 12 and the Problem had me believe my life was hardly worth living. In fact, when David asked if the Problem wanted me to throw in the towel, I told him 'It sure did!' But when I got sort of talking to you ... or David playing you ... it was as if a light got turned on in a dark room. I saw some stuff that the Problem didn't want me to see or hear about. Hearing about you gave me hope and with hope I felt like a new kind of person. My Mom and Dad told David that I looked

like a new kind of daughter and that it took a while to get to know me as I am now. When David asked them if they liked the person I was for the Problem, or the person I was when I stood up to the Problem, they both said together, 'No contest ... we have always loved her but now we also admire her'.

I know I did this all by myself with my family and David lending me a hand when the going got tough but, if it wasn't for your consultation, the light would never have got turned on, and I want you to know, Jenny, you turned that light on. Thanks for everything.

With gratitude,

Emily.

Petitioners in their turn become consultants themselves and are not simply positioned to receive knowledges but also to convey them. In this way, all league members enjoy the experience of developing and becoming known for the positions of authority they ascend to in their own lives. When a young person migrates from a degraded status in the Problem's eyes, and under the spectre of the 'professional gaze', to a regraded status (Epston, 1989; White, 2007) that is witnessed by family and community, it undeniably affects the young person's sense of what is possible.

Consider a boy, Ben, age 12, who by his own account at the time of his first meeting with David E., was 'getting a lot worse'. (For a more detailed account of David's work with Ben, see the chapter, David Consults Ben, in *Catching up with David Epston* [1998, pp. 175–208]). Ben explained:

Some of my symptoms were touching or doing things a certain number of times, counting, and repeating certain phrases. In general I felt I needed to do things until it felt 'perfect'. I also had negative obsessions about my sister and felt compelled to behave aggressively toward her, which made it hard to live under the same roof.

After reclaiming much of the direction of his life, he met again with David, only this time in another capacity, as consultant:

David: Looking back now from where you are, what were its [the Problem's] ways and means of

sneaking up on a young person and taking over their lives like it did you? Do you have any warnings to other young people? (These 'warning' questions can only be asked of 'veterans' of the problem and are asked on behalf of 'others').

Ben: A lot of stress was building up ...

David: What do you mean by that? (It is important to have some consensual meaning for such a popular psychological term, for it is vital for me to understand what Ben understands by this, rather than what I might mean).

Ben: The normal stuff to do with school ... I almost felt it was bigger because I didn't know about it.

David: Hold on ... are you suggesting that it's knowing about the problem that made you see through it? Did you not know about it? (Ben's phrase 'Because I didn't know about it' catches my attention here and I enthusiastically interrupted him in order to pursue the putative significance of his comment. At times, you have to be quick.)

Ben: Well, I knew I was compelled to do things but didn't know why. My parents said: 'Well, you have a mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder', but it got a lot worse and, as I shrunk, Mr O got a lot bigger. ('Mr O' was Ben's definition of the problem. It fitted better for him than 'obsessive-compulsive disorder').

David: I guess the question that all of us are wondering is: 'How did you shrink it? Did you shrink it, blow yourself up, or do both at the same time?'

Ben elaborates and goes on to describe the positive impact hearing from other 'veterans of the problem' had on his life:

Ben: Tim and Al were in a way my teachers and they had been through it and they knew what to do and what not to do and they passed that knowledge on to me. And I am grateful to them for that.

David: Can I write that to them?

Ben: Sure.

David: [writing] 'Tim and Al, I feel like you have been my teachers ...'

David and Ben co-authored a letter to Tim and Al, and carried on with the consultation. Let us fast forward though, several months ahead, at which point David turned to Ben once again, this time for consultation in his work with the Smith family and their fifteen year old son, Ron. David wrote to Ben explaining that the Smiths 'have driven up from a small New Zealand town, 400 miles south of Auckland. It seems that, for the past four years, Ron has become more and more a slave to what he refers to as IT (this is the unique version of what you have called Mr O).' David enquired as to whether Ron would be interested in turning to an insider for support in his struggles with IT. He responded strongly in the affirmative. With David acting as intermediary, Ron wrote to Ben with questions about how best to approach his relationship with IT. The questions were as follows:

1. *Do you think it is best in the beginning to give the problem a bit of your life while you get most of it back? Is it a bit like taming a wild animal where you throw a bit of meat to it every so often and it gradually becomes tamer?*
2. *Right now, what percentage do you have of your mind and what percentage does Mr O have of your mind? This problem has been bugging me for four years but really started to get bad at the end of 1992. I have been thinking of a 90% (me) – 10% (IT) split. Is that a good way to begin from your point of view?*
3. *How did you get around your attitude to other people who weren't supposedly 'perfect' as Mr O instructed you to be?*
4. *I think it is like a perfection syndrome because it wants you to be perfect. It is like trying to make everything perfect. How did you start opposing it? Did you begin with little or big things? I am confused as to how to make my start.*

Ben answered:

1. *Yes, it is in many ways good to give the problem a little bit while you get your life back. It is too hard to carry a big load in one trip. Many trips of small loads will get the job done.*
2. *Right now, I have 82% control and Mr O has 18%. Mr O has the 18% of my life that I*

value least – spare time. But when something important has to be done, Mr O runs and hides ... It is terrific that you have such great confidence in yourself, but do not go higher than 90% or you will get overconfident and you will then be vulnerable to IT; 80-90% are the best numbers to start with. It is a good sign that you have such an accurate idea about the situation. This shows that you have control over your basic thinking. You have a very good approach to such an obnoxious enemy.

3. *When Mr O had the control to instruct me to be perfect, it made perfection such a big thing on my mind that it made me notice other people's imperfections. Then I thought, at least they don't have the inconvenience of being pushed around by Mr O. Once I went into battle with Mr O, who was my big problem, it was easier for me to feel sympathetic with other people who were battling big problems.*
4. *A good way to get started is to believe that you can defeat IT. Once you have that idea inside you, you're ready to make your start. Little things are good to begin with, but as time goes by, it is good to slowly change those little things to big things. If you want to climb a ladder with 12 steps it will always be tough to jump 6 of them. Go one at a time and, as you get higher, it is good to slowly but swiftly beat IT to the top.*

Good luck and remember Mr O is scum; I would be happy to hear from you and to hear how things are going.

*Your teammate against Mr O,
Ben.*

Through this figurative eye-to-eye exchange, Ron was more readily able to envision a near future relatively free from IT. If Ben's experience was anything to go by, Ron would not have to wait long to become instrumental in his own life. Where speaking with adults can sometimes position a young person much like a sapling in the shadow of a mighty redwood, waiting ages to see the light, Ron, in his exchanges with Ben, was more likely to feel rooted in his belief in youthful knowledges and, by extension, belief in himself. Similarly, Ben had occasion to re-visit his own hard-won knowledges

and find that they were relevant to a wider audience than just himself and his family. This kind of discovery can be thrilling and confirm one's sense of place in the world, as it certainly did for Ben.

10: SUPPORTING FUTURE GROWTH: FROM RETROSPECTIVE TO PROSPECTIVE VIEW

When young people are subject to the tyrannising conditions a Problem can establish in their lives, time collapses. Problems can eliminate any sense of wonder or, in Bakhtin's terminology 'eventness' (Morson, 1994), leaving young people and their parents with a flattened sense of life and a future already decided. The future is foreclosed, portending that the way things are is the way they will always be. With the central role young people play in the establishment of alternative stories, it is hope and possibility that come rushing back rather than doom or fate that would shape their relationship to the future. Time and possibility are opened wide. In this atmosphere, it can be helpful to enquire about the 'near future' (White, 2007) with the following kinds of questions:

- Based on the ways you've put your mind and imagination to work on the Problem, not just for yourself, but for others too, can you guess what sort of fun your mind might have in store for you next? In school? At home? With your friends?
- Now that you've taken your life back from the Problem, and begun to help others take their lives back too, can you imagine where you'll be taking your life next?
- Now that you're moving ahead in life, can I reach a little bit ahead of you and speak with your eight-year-old self even though you are currently 7½? As an eight-year-old, how much more are you enjoying life because of the hard work you did in facing Fear when you were seven? How proud are you of your seven-year-old self?
- Still speaking to future self: Would you have any advice for your seven-year-old self or would you say s/he's doing just fine?

CONCLUSION

It is irregular to count on young people to make central contributions when addressing serious problems. It is unprecedented to turn to young people as consultants when working with others of a similar age. We have made the case here for just

such work and for the relevance of children's knowledges to their lives and the lives of others. This approach, in its sincere belief in children's knowledgeableness⁵ flies in the face of conventional views of children as incompetent (Meyer, 2007) and contributes to undermining dominant cultural discourses. Narrative practitioners maintain a steadfast interest in disrupting those conventional practices and structuralist beliefs that have potential constraining effects on people's imaginations and lives. Through such efforts, other worlds show themselves; worlds in which young people become known to others and themselves as useful. By attending to the detailed work of alternative-narrative construction, young people come into view as protagonists and consultants, enriching their lives, the lives of others, and our work in the process.

NOTES

1. We use the term 'young people' as synonymous with 'children'.
2. Michael White (1995, 2004) pluralised this term to suggest that if we look beyond the familiar there is always more than a single understanding of any event, idea or conception of self.
3. Sabiduria is offered here in the colloquial sense to indicate local wisdom or common sense.
4. As one example, 'David Epston coined the term anti-anorexia/bulimia league to describe a community of insiders and their allies who communicate with each other (often via an intermediary such as a therapist) for purposes of exposing a/b's tactics, sharing anti-anorexic/bulimic strategies, fostering hope, celebrating victories, and engaging in activism. Some leagues meet face-to-face, while others operate more "virtually" via e-mail or FAX correspondence. Although they can take traditional organizational forms, most often they operate like resistance movements working underground' (Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004).
5. David Epston coined this amusing term in the spirit of respect for young people in the playful and imaginative condition in which they can be so readily found.

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