

TEACHING STORIES

Reflection by Lynn Hoffman (following viewing a home-made recorded interview):

Does your class know that they were the first audience to see that particular performance and do they know how precious these artifacts are, that usually just disappear?

Posting by Lauren (whose class watched the videotape and then responded by writing letters to the interviewee):

I appreciated your reminder, Lynn, that the video is such an important artifact! It is true that I have never seen anything like it before – unrehearsed reality. Also, I have never had the opportunity to correspond with a person whose therapy I witnessed but did not participate in within the moment. It was truly magical and inspiring.

In my practice as a family therapist, I have equipped my office to record interviews with reflecting teamwork, using closed-circuit television from an adjacent office²⁸. People who have come to consult with me graciously give me permission to share recordings of interviews, read aloud their poems, letters, and journal entries – anything that makes their stories come alive. Guest speakers come to class to speak from the perspective of the service seeker. Other guests visit the classroom and/or the course website to engage with students around their work as practitioners and authors. In the next three chapters, I further describe several of these practices, which significantly contribute toward a collaborative spirit of co-research.

This approach is in dramatic and stark contrast to the tradition of professional distancing that customarily animates case presentations. Family members' stories transport students into intimate experiences of people's lives and relationships. Letter-writing and outsider witness practices enable students to link their lives around shared themes with the people who generously share their stories. I want students to resist the so-called "professionalism" that draws sharp distinctions between practitioners' lives and the lives of people who seek help. Instead, I want us - teacher, student and therapist - to position ourselves as earnestly learning about life experiences from the people who seek our services. I aspire to inspire practitioners-in-training "to constantly confront the fact that if faced with circumstances such that provide the context of the troubles of others, they just might not be doing nearly as well themselves" (White, 1993) p. 132.

PREPARATION

Before they witness someone tell his or her story in person, in writing, or through a video recording, I instruct students on practicing their reflections through letter-writing or reflecting teamwork. From experience, I have learned that complicated instructions can flummox students' initial experience of resonance. Instead, I initially give only a few basic pointers. I ask them to listen carefully, staying as close as they can to the words and sentiments of the story being told, taking *verbatim* notes of anything they hear that particularly catches their attention.

Our shared experience becomes an opportunity to teach specific narrative practices, I provide handouts on outsider witness categories of response (see Chapter Ten) (White, 2003b) and letter-writing tips (see Chapter Eleven). Following a letter-writing or reflecting teamwork exercise, where students have had the opportunity to hear some of their classmates' letters and verbal reflections, we review these guidelines and highlight the considerable skills students demonstrated as well as areas for further tweaking. Always, students are invited to respectfully continue their conversation and inquiry online.

Students take seriously being invited into people's real life experiences. Ella posted the following online after writing letters to a woman, Chava, who I introduced to the class as someone emerging from a dark depression.

Posting by Ella

For me, the fact that this was going to be read by a real person who is dealing with real hardship in her life made the activity a lot harder. I found myself thinking very carefully about the effects of my words. I was concerned that what I had to say wouldn't be useful or important to her. It was a big deal for me that I was invited to be part of this assignment. Whatever insecurities I had about the value of my own experiences and of my voice, it suggested that perhaps I had a role to play in our friend's emergence because we existed in the world together and could shape and share stories and realities. The activity leads me to believe that resistance and emergence are relational and communal projects, which is something I kind of talked about in my letter. I also really want to thank Emma, Kerry, and Foresta for reading their letters out loud and allowing all of us to experience them together. Thinking back on the activity, I regret that I didn't share mine. It was hard for me to get over the convention that it's wrong or embarrassing to share personal stories and feelings in class, even though I definitely don't agree with this concept. The assignment helped me to form connections in a very meaningful way with our friend and with the other students that were able to read their responses out loud.

In this chapter, I share a story taken from my own practice. Kate generously gave me permission to read entries from her journal, after which I invited the students to use class time to write her letters, some of which were shared aloud. I also include a letter that Kate wrote back to the class as well as a postscript reflection.

KATE'S STORY

At age 18, Kate experienced what she named “Hell & Back” – a descent into and recovery from a psychotic depression. Six months later, she experienced what has been diagnosed as a manic episode. Through her talent for writing and the sensitivity of her detailed recollections, Kate teaches us about her experiences of psychosis. After hearing her description of her first experience with psychosis, students wrote letters in which they shared their reflections and asked Kate questions. I then shared with the class Kate’s letter in response to theirs. Kate’s generous sharing of her insider knowledge has contributed immeasurably toward expanding students and my own understanding. Now with this book, Kate’s circle of influence widens.

My impression of Kate matches her own self-description: “I’m a peaceful happy young woman who goes to college and likes to play the guitar and write poetry and learn new things. I want to climb on rocks, make friends with trees, love other people.” Nothing prepared her or her family for “the crisis” that changed her life.

In this excerpt, Kate grapples with her experience of psychosis:

I’m lying on my bed in my dorm room looking up at the ceiling between the words that I’m writing. I’m thinking about several things. One is how my bedside lamp casts a pattern of light up on the ceiling that’s like the weaving of a basket. I can appreciate that it looks interesting but there was a time not long ago... maybe a week or so... when it looked so incredibly divine. It seemed like the work of a great artist rather than Walmart. I’m thinking also about this morning when I did a search on Wikipedia about psychosis. I learned that “psycho” is a term used both for people who experience psychosis and people who are psychopaths.

Psychopaths are people who seem to have no sense of empathy for others and for some strange reason become things like serial killers. Psychosis is when experience becomes too profound for words. I’ve never been a psychopath but I’ve experienced psychosis. It is a process of being lost in nothingness until little sparks of real life begin to show up again. It is an experience of not knowing where you are, whether you really exist, or whether you are lost. Psychosis. Psychopath. The word “psycho” labels us both. I hate the definition of the word “psycho.”

Students are riveted when I read Kate’s journal entries aloud in class. The following excerpt offers a glimpse into Kate’s experience of the crisis that landed her a two-week stay in a hospital psychiatric ward.

Hell & Back

It’s not entirely a bad memory, thinking of the time I spent in the hospital. It was kind of like, “Whoops, I left this life for a little while and had to go through a kind of ‘training process’ to get semi-near to where I left off.” It was like a purification process – a whole system shutdown and then a

gradual rebooting. I came in with overwhelming pain, hopelessness, confusion and crazy thoughts and ideas. My inner pain seemed to cause muscle spasms. In my hopelessness and confusion I would lose balance and fall to the floor. Everything around me seemed at times to take place in slow motion. It became difficult to determine whether the people around me were real, whether I was real. I could not make sense of my own thoughts and emotions. I tried many times over and over, spinning in circles, coming to conclusions and then rejecting them. As my lens looking out into the world became increasingly scary to look through, I began to stop peering out. That's one way to put it. It was more like I stopped responding to what I saw. I did not recognize my world. I didn't feel connected to it. I honestly didn't know if it was the world I had known or if it was heaven or hell or an alternate universe. All I knew was that I was somehow not in the right place and I had to either find my way back to my old life or move on to something better, even if that meant through death.

In this terrible time, it was like my physical body was there, but my spirit felt it did not belong. It couldn't find its place and for a day or so it seemed to disappear... or to reduce itself to the smallest flicker of a flame.

This was the Monday after I had been admitted to the hospital, the worst day of my life and in the lives of my parents. The doctors listed me as "mute catatonic." I stared blankly at nothing. I said nothing, ate nothing, did nothing. I showed no sign of recognition towards anyone or anything. I was frozen and lost. I remember hearing the words "We're going to get you back Kate. You're going to come back to us." These words were the only thing that felt real.

In the following journal entry, Kate further describes what led up to her psychiatric crisis.

In the days before going to the hospital, when my depression began to get very serious and debilitating, I was not overwhelmed with pain or sadness. I was more overwhelmed with confusion – constantly unsure and aware of myself. I knew that what I was dealing with was depression. Any time I was struggling with a symptom – difficulty concentrating for example – I would remind myself "it's just the depression. I'm not going crazy." But it became too confusing to constantly identify myself with depression. Was what I was feeling and thinking real or was it just an illness temporarily taking control over the "real me?"

I've known depressed people in my life and I remember sometimes wanting to just shake them out of it or somehow clear their vision. Now that I was depressed could I trust my own thoughts and emotions? In everything I did I would check myself: is this normal? Does this make sense? I couldn't stop monitoring myself.

What I hate more than anything about my experience with depression is that I could not stop talking inside my head – and all the talk was about myself. It was like my mind just kept trying to analyze and understand itself. I would come to my own conclusions about what was happening with me, thinking if I could just explain it, I could solve it. “I’m depressed because I’m too anxious and self-conscious right now to connect with anyone so I feel alone. I’m anxious because I know people are noticing me acting differently and are worried so I can’t stop wondering what they’re thinking. They’re worried because I am depressed....”

When I realized I had gone in a circle with my thoughts I would say “Stop it! You’re not making any sense.” And at that point sometimes I would panic because there seemed to be no solution – nothing I could console myself with. Sometimes I could tell myself “have patience” but this didn’t stop my mind from running.

They say that when you are depressed you should try to do the things you would normally enjoy doing even if you don’t feel like it – unless it is too difficult or unpleasant. People will tell you it is very challenging dealing with depression – you really have to fight it. And some will tell you, “Be gentle with yourself.”

When I was depressed, I couldn’t figure out what to do with myself. This was partly because I lacked creative energy and motivation, partly because I had trouble focusing on one thing and partly because there were so many options and no guidance. I had graduated from high school. There was no daily community of people expecting my presence – nothing to provide me with structure and social interaction. I was in open space. There was no obvious goal or direction. I had planned to take a year off to work, travel and volunteer but hadn’t made specific plans. For some reason the wealth of opportunities, the infinite choices, overwhelmed me. Plus, I began to fear an inability to function if I put myself in a situation of responsibility, which was certainly not normal for me. This led to the avoidance of actually finding something to give myself daily structure and social interaction. I didn’t know where to start and I was afraid that if I did start my symptoms of depression would humiliate me and lead to deeper depression.

I spent my hours mostly alone, trying to solve the problem. I wanted to feel better before I jumped into a new environment with responsibilities but I didn’t know how to make myself feel better while being alone all day. I began to feel like there was something I was supposed to do, something that had to happen before I could feel better. I thought maybe I needed to “fix” my relationship with a best friend from whom I had begun to feel very distant. “I need to write to Sandra. I need to talk to Sandra. I need to connect with Sandra before I can feel better.” But I couldn’t do it. My symptoms of anxiety and depression made it too difficult. And perhaps there was no “fixing” that could be done. Things were changing. People were leaving. It was time to

move on to the next thing. But what was my next thing? I imagined my friends and I standing in a circle. Normally we'd all be facing one another but now it was like everyone was facing out into the world. I was the only one still facing inward. And all I saw was a bunch of backs.

That summer I went directly to a camp in Maine where I had been a camper and now had a job. About two weeks in I came home, after experiencing for the first time symptoms of depression that made it too difficult for me to live and work on the island camp. Not realizing I was experiencing depression, I described my troubling symptoms to the director as "having a mental breakdown" based on the fact that I couldn't concentrate enough to get any work done or pay attention to other people, needed to cry two or three times a day, and couldn't explain what was going on with me. I left camp feeling totally bewildered and embarrassed.

What I didn't realize was that my fear of deeper depression, which caused me to avoid new challenges, actually itself led to deeper depression... or so it seems. Upon returning, I was afraid of people noticing my symptoms of depression. I didn't want people to see that I was anxious about talking with them, especially when talking about camp. What should I say when they ask me why I had left? "I didn't feel up to it. It wasn't the right job for me. I couldn't do it. I didn't want to be there." How could I say this. When I returned home after being a camper, I thought to myself, "I belong here. I have to come back." So what do I say to people when I chose to be home over camp? If they know me they will know something is wrong with me. If they don't know me they will misunderstand something very important about me. My parents reminded me, "People understand. These things happen to everybody. You've been dealing with a lot lately and you're just in between jobs right now. That's all you have to say." OK. I could deal with that. But that didn't make things any easier. I had escaped responsibility by leaving camp but I hadn't really escaped.

I had decided that I would take several days after returning home to just re-coup and not worry about anything. I wouldn't even tell anyone I was home. After about the fifth day back I got a message on the answering machine from Sandra: "I heard a rumor that you were back in town...." And I knew I couldn't stay in hiding forever. Already my friends were thinking about me, possibly worrying about me. And I couldn't avoid the anxiety of wondering what they were thinking.

Usually the best way to deal with anxiety is to go through with the things that make you anxious even if you do end up failing or embarrassing yourself. I've always known this. Fear doesn't go away by avoiding it. Why then did I spend hours, even entire days, holding a phone in my hand and not dialing? Why then did I stand in front of the calendar staring at the days, trying to prepare myself for the weeks ahead, hoping that if I could just imagine them, I could survive them?

I never needed my friends so badly than during that time and yet I had never isolated myself more. I desperately wanted to connect with someone on a deep level and therefore couldn't sleep at night thinking about them and how I hadn't talked with them in what felt like so long. "What the hell am I doing?" I would sit up in bed and say out loud to myself. Sometimes I would panic, stiff as a board in bed, heart beating rapidly, as I thought to myself, "I'm ruining my life. I'm losing all my friends because they think I don't care about them because I haven't called them or talked to them in so long." When I'd get up to go to the bathroom I'd sit on the toilet and feel as though I were flushing not my waste but my vitality down the drain. Weak in body and spirit, sleep-deprived, my muscles ached and trembled. When I did see my friends it was as though all of my need for them, all the pain and suffering that had built up suddenly came to the very top. I felt as though my whole body were throbbing with it. I couldn't concentrate on anything except the desire to connect with them, to share with them what I was going through and for them to know how much I needed and cared about them and would miss them when they left. But to converse with them I had to be fake. If I touched on anything real I would feel dizzy, and for some reason I couldn't cry in front of them without panicking, because I couldn't explain why I was crying... there were no words to explain my suffering. Why was I even suffering? I couldn't think of a good enough reason. Nothing tragic or traumatic had happened. So what was wrong with me anyway?

Here, Kate describes her experiences of anxiety and confusion, and the effects on her relationship with her parents:

Kate's Journal Entry #3

Normal, everyday anxiety most people can talk themselves out of, right? If I'm anxious about something I just say things like "It's ok. Don't be ridiculous... you've done things much more difficult in the past. You'll be fine." I breathe deeply, put myself in others shoes, that sort of thing and I usually feel better. During this particularly difficult summer, I realized at some point that I was talking to myself non-stop, day and night, trying to talk myself out of my anxiety and ultimately out of my depression. After a while, instead of comforting me, it was just noise inside my head that prevented me from sleeping, reading, conversing, and experiencing life. I would jump out of bed in the middle of a sleepless night when in the midst of my thoughts I realized my problem was really that I was thinking too much.. There was no solution. I couldn't heal myself with my will. I couldn't find my own escape. I needed someone or something else to find it for me.

Days and nights like these I started to "hover." I would get up in the night and stand outside my parents' bedroom trying to decide whether I should go in or not. "I need help," I would say to myself, but when I tried to think of what I would say to them I went blank...The wall of miscommunication

CHAPTER 8

between us was such that this ordinary act of asking for help was a miniature of what I actually needed.

Before long, I was hovering during the day as well. My dad would be cooking dinner and I would be pacing back and forth outside the kitchen doorway. My parents knew that I was suffering: grieving the loss of high school, difficult relationships and thinking of camp. I don't think they realized as soon as I did that time alone was not going to heal me.

Sometimes I wouldn't even notice that I was hovering and whoever it was would say, "Kate, are you ok? You're kind of pacing back and forth..." This made me feel like crying and I would say, "Yeah, I'm just thinking," and then retreat to my room, deciding that I had to and would figure it out on my own after all. One time when I was hovering outside the kitchen, my dad said, "Kate, I'm listening if there's something you feel like saying."

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't.

I remember my dad taking me to the new Dunkin' Donuts that had just opened in town to spend some father-daughter time drinking Coolatas. "I wish I could just snatch you up and free you from all those little demons or whatever it is that seem to have such a hold on you." He said at some point. This was no metaphor to me. "I need you to," I replied.

This was one of the many times when I began to feel there was a pane of glass between the world and me. I was on one side and the people I loved were on the other. I could see to the other side but I wasn't there. I was somewhere else... and the glass was getting thicker.

A few days after the last words she wrote in that journal, Kate was in the hospital. She asks, *"Is it too extreme to say that I was losing my mind? I don't know."*

In Journal Entry #4, Kate describes the difficulty she experienced in attempting to adequately describe what she remembers of her period of crisis and hospitalization:

Kate's Journal Entry #4

This is the most difficult place to return to in writing. Not because it's painful but because words seem hopeless in their ability to explain or express the experience. But I'll try because if there are any experiences of mine that feel important to relate to others, this is one of them. There are many things, which though confusing and difficult at the time, can be understood and described in hindsight. I've been able to do this with a lot of memories from when I was depressed. To a very small degree I think I can do it with that deepest and darkest time. But for the most part it is a mystery to me – as it would be for anyone. Our bodies and brains, like most things in nature, may have scientific explanations for their miraculous and unbelievable ways, but

they don't necessarily satisfy the soul. I'm sure I will seek meaning and understanding from the memory of that time for the rest of my life.

There are so many lenses to choose from when deciding how to look back at that memory. Interpretations of it can be almost contradictory and yet I find myself at different times believing all of them to a degree. If I were asked now to explain what happened I would say, as I have said, "Something was happening inside my brain having to do with chemicals and neurotransmitters that affected my conscious state. In cruder terms I went crazy, and though the experience of it was real I can look back now and recognize how utterly confused I was then.

However, there is much more to be said if I am to get at how I really feel and deal with that memory. I guess I could start with this: Say that you come to a point when everything in your immediate experience signifies to you that you are dying. Regardless of reality, your interpretation of your emotional and physical experience is that you are dying, perhaps have somehow already died, or worse yet, are living in some literal form of hell. If this is the case, as it was at one point for me, explanations of chemicals and neurotransmitters will probably satisfy very little of your curiosity of what's happening.

Kate reflected on her philosophical and religious ideas about what happened to her:

What really happened to me? I do believe that to an extent I did die and am now alive again. There must be ways in which a person can die besides that of the physical and ultimate death of the body. And if this is true, as it seems to be, then hell exists and it is not an eternal punishment for the sinner but perhaps just the turmoil of feeling disconnected from Creation (whether deserved or not).

I'm not sure if I believe that when we die (truly die) that we somehow maintain an individual experience. I do believe however with certainty that we stay eternally connected and alive with the creation we are a part of. I think of the earth as a recycling machine; just as rain can be lifted from the ground and made back into clouds so can our souls evaporate into life as beautiful if not more so than the life we experience now.

When I think back at how I felt then...it was as though not my body but the spirit of life within me (which lives on even after the death of the body) was dying. This thought terrifies me. As you can see I have religious and philosophical ideas about what happened but of course I don't have a clue. It is so completely strange to me. All I really have is the experience.

Kate then described the events that led up to her hospitalization:

Several nights before the real crisis, I was babysitting my little friends Andrew and Aaron. I remember feeling disconnected from what I was doing. Nothing came naturally but instead required a decision... If I reasoned that I

ought to feel a particular emotion, I would decide to feel it. I was aware of the sensation that my brain was functioning differently than normal.

I don't know if it was one night or several, but I remember lying in bed and feeling that it was a physical impossibility for me to sleep. Instead I would stay conscious but have dream-like visualizations that I could control. I remember visualizing something like a bar graph of people in my life and if the bar went high enough for one person it meant that I should think about that person. Similarly I would imagine a web of stick figures that I was in. I would look at the web in my mind to see with whom I was most strongly connected. It was as though everything that would normally come naturally now took a conscious effort to grasp. Who were the people in my life that mattered? Was there anything in those relationships that I was supposed to be doing that I wasn't doing? I felt very uncertain of myself and for a good reason because clearly I was not functioning the way I normally would.

Yesterday I got out the calendar from when this all happened and tried to piece together that time, especially the week before the hospital. On September 1, 2004, a week and a half before I was hospitalized, I talked with Peggy (the therapist I'd been seeing since I came home from camp) about how I was doing much better. She suggested that I write a letter to myself for a future Kate in case I ever went through that depression again, which I did when I got home. Here is a short excerpt from that letter:

“For a future Kate who may find herself struggling: What feels so impossible to heal is really quite fixable. When it seems like no one can possibly understand, when it feels like you are disconnected from the world, or hovering like a ghost, or empty, or hurting... it is only a matter of time and faith. Hopefully it will never come to this again.”

That same day I had an appointment with my regular doctor to check up on my medications. We decided that I could cut back on the Lexapro I was taking. Clearly this was a mistake, though it seemed to make sense at the time. The following week I was doing relatively well. I went twice to community soccer, I babysat twice and I went to a poetry workshop session at the library. The following Sunday, a week prior to the crisis, I babysat Andrew and Aaron as I mentioned above.

It wasn't as though the confusion came out of nowhere. Even though I had reported feeling better I didn't feel “recovered” or anywhere near better enough to say that I felt fully like myself again. I think the first sign that things were becoming worse again was when a mother of a friend called that Sunday to ask if I could walk her dog. Already feeling stressed and a bit overwhelmed I said no but by the end of the conversation had shifted over and agreed to walk the dog. During that conversation it was like my own needs felt so weak against the needs of others. At the same time, I felt ashamed at my own sense of feeling overwhelmed. It was like I was

embarrassed to say, “You know I really can’t handle another responsibility right now.” Normally I would be able to say this. Perhaps that feeling I was getting, the heavy warning that I might be dealing with too much, was so real I was afraid to acknowledge it. It would be like showing weakness in the face of danger, thus proving the danger to be real.

Kate’s writing gives students an insider account of a growing gap between a person’s inner life and what is projected to the world. She wrote the following journal entry the day before she went in the hospital).

I seemed to have created a gap between what was going on inside me and what I projected to the world. What I projected was what I wanted to be true or what I thought ought to be true, while what really was going on could not have lived up to that alternative I had created for the outside. There is a breaking point I think, when the gap between your inner reality and projected reality becomes so wide, that a person can look you in the eyes and it is as though they are not looking at you at all. When this happens, it may seem that you have lost sight of yourself, that your inner reality no longer exists, because you can no longer see yourself in the eyes of those who look at you.

“Are you hungry?” My mother asks. Oh God, it is like she is talking to someone else but I am the one who needs to answer. “Yes.” I say. I take the pizza. Like a robot I lift it to my mouth completely disconnected from the idea of hunger, a triviality at the moment. The sensation of its taste is one more signal sent to my brain out of so many that are just too much to handle. It is an overload of experience. Wrong decision. I swallow it anyway.

Looking back on herself on that night, Kate saw someone “running on the fuel of a fake reality.”

I see someone sprinting in darkness when they should be feeling each step to test if it’s safe to continue in that direction... Not that the fake reality I was running with was an impossibility... more likely, the true reality was so unexpected, so unusual, and so successfully hidden from others, that it was just too easy to overlook and pretend did not exist. The true reality was that I was suffering. There was pain inside me, so deep it was eating away at me without my even being aware of it. That pain needed to be seen. It needed to be touched and felt and held before it could be let go of. It needed a finger pointed at it with the words, “YES! That is sharp and hot and a reason to stop what you are doing, drop everything, kneel over it, pay attention to it, and hold it till it subsides.”

I don’t think my failure to project my inner reality to the world, and to myself for that matter, is really a failure or a fault that I could have prevented. You see, it was so deep and hidden that even if someone had pointed at it and said, “Look, you are in pain. That is why you can’t function the way you normally would.” I wouldn’t have been able to see it. Of course I knew I was in pain to some extent.... I just couldn’t fathom that feelings of hurt and

CHAPTER 8

sadness, something I had always been able to keep at bay, could build up enough force to break up on the shore and disable me where I had always otherwise been safe.

In my fake reality, the one to which I clung so desperately until the final breaking point, I saw no reason for feeling overwhelmed, no reason that I should have to stop and pay attention to myself. Or if I did, I saw no alternative but to go forward as I always had, to be seen as I had always been seen. I imagine this is why my emotional experience changed from doing and feeling what came naturally to constantly having to decide what to feel and do as though there were a right way and a wrong way. “What do I need to do and feel in order to maintain the level of emotional strength, normality and acceptability... that others and myself expect me to be at? How I am supposed to feel and act? This is how I will decide to be.” When I tried to force my inner reality to the confines of what the outer world saw or to what I thought they saw or wanted them to see, disregarding my true reality, this was when I began to sprint in darkness. This is when I convinced the world I could see clearly when in fact I was sprinting at a brick wall and had no idea.

STUDENTS' LETTERS TO KATE

After hearing these accounts of Kate's story, I invite students to write letters to her “from the heart” that convey ways in which they are moved by hearing these accounts of Kate's experience. I encourage them to ask questions that express their earnest curiosity. I let them know that I will screen the letters so they need not get caught in worrying about “correctness.”

It is hard for me to choose between the many letters that students have written to Kate.

Finding Resonance

I encourage students to write about what particularly caught their attention. I let them know that in narrative practice, we are seeking “an embodied response,” which links lives through shared themes. Several students' letters focused on a particular aspect of Kate's story that resonated with their own experiences. Anonymity makes it possible for students to reveal personal stories they might not otherwise share with classmates.

Letter from Nina

Dear Kate,

I really don't have words to express how beautiful your writing is and how meaningful your story was to me. Your description of your experience as death and rebirth of the spirit was so powerful. I have struggled with depression at various times in my life, but depression and other mental health problems have never been acceptable in my family, so I have never really

explored the experience. Hearing your descriptions of your experience was so moving to me because it is some of what I have felt. I really hope you continue to write your story, and publish it, because I think it can help so many people. It also helps me as a social worker in training – hearing your descriptions of your thoughts and feelings, while in the hospital and how the staff responded to you and how you hoped neighbors would respond gave me greater insight into the experiences of clients and hospital patients. I think this will help me be more responsive and helpful to people I work with in the future.

*Thank-you,
Nina*

Letter from Andrea

Dear Kate,

I'm not sure I can write much because your story is very close to my own. It was difficult and painful to stay present (to really listen) and pay attention as Peggy read your words to us. But I did stay present and I did my best to listen.

I know well what it is to be in a psych hospital, to have people trying to help and yet experienced the “pane (pain) of glass” between me and them that you described for me. Returning to the world was like coming slowly and uncertainly out of a fog. Indistinct shapes, muffled sounds, gauzy understanding.

I too have longed to write my story – in part for myself, in part for those who want to understand. But I am not good with words, I'm good at listening. So that is what I hope to do. I will trust you to write for all of us who have been in – and come out.

*Thank you for your words.
Andrea*

Rich Description

I am often amazed at how readily students' letters written from the heart put into practice principles of narrative therapy to freshly describe what strikes a chord. Their letters reflect back in Kate's words what has caught their attention, the images evoked, and how Kate's behind-the-scenes account transports them to new understandings. For example, after hearing Kate's journal writing about her experiences with depression, Chappell described her amazement at Kate's ability to capture the confusion and paralyzing effects of depression and anxiety:

I am struck by the details that you remember from this time and your willingness to sort through them piece by piece. I have an image of someone, with love and patience, piecing back together a broken piece of china that

CHAPTER 8

means a lot to them. It is sometimes so much easier (at least for me) to sweep the pieces up and toss them away. It seems like sometimes the piecing back together can serve as a powerful reminder of the breaking of the thing rather than its state of wholeness. Your story and your writing push me to look at the wholeness of a thing.

Sarah was struck by Kate's images of "a glass getting thicker between you and those you love," and "all of your friends facing out of the circle as you faced their backs." These images gave meaning to and resonance with Sarah's experience of depression 10 years prior. "Your images are powerful messengers to remind me of that time." Sarah further described the relevance for her experience as a social work intern working in a psychiatric unit the previous year:

Your description of the highs and lows experienced in your brief contacts with the woman in the hall told me so much. What I heard as intense driving for connection even in the simple (yet not simple) questions you were asking reminded me of the importance of someone's mere attempt to listen. It reminded me of the necessity of trying to listen even harder when someone seems confused and unsure. Thank you for your powerful story and writing.

Several students connected with the spirituality theme in Kate's account, such as conveyed in the following letter:

Hello Kate,

Your writings conjured up for me those thoughts and images at the fringe of human experience and understanding – those moments of what some have called existential dread. That sense of being utterly cut off and separate from the rest of creation and our sense of solidity with in it. That sense that has been crazy-making for me too.

I am particularly struck by the level of cognition you retained throughout your trial. No doubt it was different than what we rely upon during most of our waking moments, but there it was nonetheless. In listening to your words, images of mental gymnastics came to mind. It was as if your mind were bending and twisting, spinning and jumping, all in an attempt to make meaning of its new landscape.

How does the spiritual lens through which you understand those early moments of coming back to this reality impact your understanding of our world now? Are the "angels" who were on the unit with you still felt as experienced in this reality or were they inhabitants of that in-between place you describe so well?

Thank you for sharing part of your story with me. I hope to read of your continued adventures someday. Peace and blessings.

Often practitioners-in-training are taught to use their professional knowledge to analyze others' experiences. Narrative therapy instead encourages its practitioners

to connect with their earnest curiosity. When given a fresh opportunity, students ask many questions about Kate's experience. They situate their questions in the specific context of what they heard Kate say and its relevance to their own professional and personal lives. Rather than through a professionalized expert-in-training lens, their expressions of curiosity convey human-to-human connection.

In her letter, for example, Allison described how Kate made her experience understandable:

Letter from Allison

I pictured you standing outside your parents' room wanting to tell them "I need help," and remembered feeling that way myself many times throughout my life. When you described going to Dunkin doughnuts with your dad, his attempts to help you and your wanting his help but not knowing how to tell him to help you (and not knowing what that would look like) made me cry. Your revisiting of this difficult period is courageous and I will take this courage with me to revisit difficult periods in my own life. I know you will continue to do so and that inspires me. Thank you for sharing so much of yourself.

In their letters, students chose something in particular from the many images that stood out to them. Ann commented on the following:

I was moved by your description of how your inner feelings became expressed through your physical self, how your inability to manage emotional distress was translated into physical immobility. I have sometimes experienced a similar feeling (although not as severe as you). I want to ask you, what did it feel like to begin making progress toward physical movement and emotional expression? How were you able to begin that process of healing and change?

Beyond Pointing Out Positives

Students frequently express a deep appreciation to Kate for sharing her writing with them. However, their acknowledgements do not simply point out positives; they give concrete examples of the impact of Kate's story on their lives and relationships. In Ann's letter, she offers the following acknowledgement:

I was struck by your bravery in being willing to make yourself vulnerable to a group of people you have never met. In hearing your story, we gain greater knowledge of how many different paths to healing there can be. I also hope that for you, the act of communicating and sharing your story is part of your own healing.

Melissa's situates her question by first describing what she heard Kate say about her experience of meaning-making and how this account resonated with her own experiences:

Letter from Melissa

Dear Kate,

Thank you for sharing some of your story with my class. I was particularly struck by your description of how you were making meaning of your experiences up to and including hospitalization. If I got this right – I understood that for you, biological explanations (more making logical sense) are not enough. You spoke of living and dying, not just as biological events, but as acts of Creation. These concepts speak to me of a certain richness of experience I imagine you bringing to everything you do. It resonates with my own belief in living my life to the fullest (whatever that means) and my feeling of satisfaction in the attempt even when frustration threatens to overwhelm me.

As a soon-to-be social worker, your story has helped me to understand that I want to try to listen to people who may lose their voice. And I'm left to ponder how I can do that. Did you have the experience that there were people trying to understand what you were going through? And if so, did it matter in any way?

*Thank-you,
Melissa*

KATE'S RESPONSE

Kate was delighted to receive these letters. She expressed puzzled appreciation to think that her experiences could help train aspiring therapists:

Wow... Thank you so much for your letters in response to my writing. I thought of that writing mainly as a release for myself – to get off my chest some powerful memories that stick with me, but to see that it has an effect on other people, that it may mean something to others besides myself and people close to me means a lot to me. It is such a gift to risk sharing something personal and frightening and then to receive a response of such understanding and curiosity. Thank you so much.

A lot of the letters asked such really good questions that I want to make an attempt at answering them.

Kate then listed the many questions that students posed in their letters to her:

Students' Questions

- Could anything have been done (by you, your therapist, by your community) earlier on in your depression to keep it from becoming so disabling or do you think that you needed to follow your feelings to their completion and begin again?

- Did you have the experience that there were people trying to understand what you were going through? And if so, did it matter in any way?

- *Did the outside world penetrate your world? Were you processing what people said and did? Were you aware of your own body and your own physicality?*

- *How did “touch” feel to you and when/how and by whom it was helpful and when it was not.*

- *I know for myself there is certain music with which I feel a very deep, in a sense spiritual connection, and I imagine that if I were in a similar situation this music would help me stay connected to what I love about this life. In your writings you mentioned playing the guitar, so I wonder what role music might have for you in this way?*

- *How does the spiritual lens through which you understand those early moments of coming back to this reality impact your understanding of our world now? Are the “angels” who were on the unit with you still felt and experienced in this reality or were they inhabitants of that in-between place?*

- *I am so curious to know what, if any, contributions your religious beliefs made to your understanding of what you were going through. Did this experience lead you to a new place in your understanding or your spiritual identity? Or did it confirm understandings that you previously believed?*

- *What did it feel like to begin making progress toward physical movement and emotional expression? How were you able to begin that process of healing and change?*

- *I would love to know when you felt you were ok again and how you knew that.*

- *I wonder what your old life was within your family and your surroundings. I wonder also what your new life is like and how your loved ones reacted and responded to you.*

- *You mentioned that you felt as though you were dying. Do you feel as though some part of you has died? Have you laid something to rest?*

- *I wondered how you will continue to bring yourself closer to that experience, and what you hope to gain from the experience of revisiting and retelling your story. Where do you want this journey to bring you?*

- *How did you come to choose this (parent/child center) experience in your life? What does the volunteer work bring to your life? Particularly working with children”?*

Kate then begins with a detailed response to the first question:

One of the questions was whether something could have been done (either by me, my therapist, my community, etc.) earlier on in my depression to prevent it from becoming so disabling, or whether I had to follow my feelings to their completion and begin again. This is a very important question for the sake of a person at risk of going through what I went through but also for myself in the future. It’s also an extremely difficult one to answer. I think in my own case, it’s easier to consider the possibility of prevention for future scenarios

than it is to look back and imagine how things could have gone differently. It was such unknown territory for me and for those close to me. Even though my dad is a psychologist, I don't think he could have imagined a week or even a day prior to the crisis that I would end up in the psych ward of the Rutland hospital for two weeks. It seems almost as though it had to happen as it did in order for me to learn from it and heal.

One of the things I think about when I look back is how the crisis wasn't really the worst thing that happened during my depression. In fact it was more like the climax that provided me with the force to heal. During my depression, which lasted several months, it was like I was being chased by this constant fear of what it could do to me. Behind every anxious feeling there was also that feeling that I might just go crazy, become mute... or maybe my brain would just decide to shut off at some point. I think of my "crisis" as the point when I couldn't run anymore and those fears caught up to me. The thing is, and this is what is so liberating, the fears caught me, even had a hold on me, and yet here I am. I now have an answer to that haunting question: What happens if the things we fear do catch us, look us in the eye, and say, "you can't escape me now?" I can't say it wasn't a challenge – a frightening one which I thought I might never come out of. But by having those fears catch me, I could look them right back in the eye, see what they were all about, and learn that ultimately I had the power to conquer them. Someone in the hospital told me, "sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better," and that was absolutely true for me. I had to hit rock bottom before I could push off and come back to the surface.

So could it have been prevented? I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't reduced the amount of medicine I was on two weeks prior to the crisis. Would I gradually have healed without such a dramatic downfall first? I don't know. I was on medication, I was seeing an excellent therapist, and I was meeting with my doctor...I didn't know at the time how I could possibly have prevented it because I had to learn from experience. But I think if it were to happen again I would know how to do things differently, as would the people around me. I know now that the medication I've taken is much more likely to help me than harm me (as was one of my fears). I have resources now that I didn't have before, such as information packets from the hospital, a written safety plan, a daily schedule I can follow if I need to, a crisis phone number and of course support people I may not have otherwise been aware of. Also, the more I share about the experience, the less I'll feel ashamed or embarrassed about seeking help if I need to in the future. I hope that answers your question.

Kate's Recommendations for Practitioners

Given her unique personal experience, I asked Kate if she had any additional recommendations for practitioners. Here is what she said:

The best things that therapists did for me was help me to rediscover self-expression. For me this is what I feel was lost during the time I was in the hospital for major depression. Depression for me in general has the effect of losing my sense of self and my ability to be expressive. It seems like for many mental illnesses an essential piece of the healing that needs to occur is the process of expressing oneself. The classic idea that when someone is having problems they need to “talk about it” is part of this idea that self-expression is healing. However, I think it may be really important to know that there are some other effective ways of helping a person find positive self-expression. In my case I needed help recovering from a depression that put me into a mute, catatonic state. Both time and medicine helped me recover but these would have been useless without certain exercises that helped me regain confidence in my ability to “be me again.”

One of these exercises was sitting in a circle with a group and tossing a ball around. I remember at that point believing myself to be a ghost that no one could see. I literally believed that I had no physical connection to the world that I was looking at. When one of the therapists threw a bean bag in my direction (calling my name out as she threw it), I did what I thought at the time was impossible - I caught it. What’s so amazing about depression is that we don’t realize the things we are still capable of. I truly in my heart did not think that I was a part of that group - that I was in any way connected to them - until I was put in this position of having the opportunity to catch the ball and throw it back. It was part of re-learning that I could in fact interact with people. It also may be good to point out that little experiences are keys to larger concepts. For example, in this ball exercise I remember that I kept passing the ball right back to the person who passed it to me. Soon this therapist pointed to someone else just as I was about to pass it to her, indicating that I could choose to pass it to someone new. To me, this moment contributed to my re-learning that I had the ability of “creating something new” in a sense. It’s hard to explain but it was like a reminder that I could be creative. I could do more than merely react to my environment. I could add my own spontaneity.

One of the worst things that practitioners can do to someone suffering from mental illness is to forget that they are still a real person who deserves as much respect as anyone. I clearly remember the way in which practitioners often talked to one another about me as though I weren’t in the room or didn’t inform me of what was going on. I think they assumed I didn’t understand (which perhaps I didn’t but the way they acted made me feel as though I didn’t exist which was already part of the problem I was dealing with and that feeling did not need to be encouraged). I remember being taken to see the head doctor in his office and there were two nurses in there as well. As I replied or didn’t reply to the doctor, one of the nurses would make a concerned face at me and then type something on the computer. The other nurse was also writing something down as I talked. They didn’t even

introduce themselves when I came into the room. I felt like they were analyzing me and testing me, and it made me very uneasy and certainly influenced my nervous behavior. Remembering my experience, I think it's important for practitioners to do all they can to try to see the person behind the illness – we are really under there somewhere and we need more than anything to be recognized. One of the simplest ways to connect with that person is to have a picture of something they love and ask about it. Or to have a picture of something the practitioner loves. My favorite practitioner in the hospital showed me a picture of her with her dog and she asked me whether I liked dogs and if I had one. She shared with me something about herself and gave me that opportunity as well. I liked her because she treated me as a real person who was worth talking to, not some object for tests and pills.

Postscript

I emailed an earlier draft of this chapter to Kate, which she shared with her parents. We then met in the local coffee shop to catch up and review her responses. More than a year had passed since we last saw each other. I was immediately struck by Kate's radiant health and poise. A reflective young woman, Kate knows herself well and is fully engaged in living her life as a college student. In a couple of months, she will spend a semester abroad in Asia. I would like to give Kate the last say in this chapter, thus ending with her words, which she entitled, "Looking Back Again."

It's been three years since I graduated from high school and thus three years since the beginning of the depression that led to my first episode. After I read a draft of the chapter Peggy put together of my writing and the responses her students wrote, she asked me if I had any more thoughts or reflections now. When I look at this writing again, I remember that period of necessary reflection and how important telling my story was. I felt like I needed to share it as much as I needed food to eat. It was so important and Peggy helped me to do it. Though I don't always write about it, I often still reflect back on the experiences I've had with psychosis and depression. Chappell wrote in her letter to me about how when something is broken it is often easier to sweep up the pieces and throw them away, rather than try to piece them back together. Piecing back together often reminds us of the experience of the thing breaking. As she hinted at, and what I experienced, is that piecing together a thing to make it whole again is a gift even if it reminds us of something difficult that we wish had never happened. When I reflect and tell others my story, I make it impossible to sweep the pieces away. This is okay because I need that story to help me understand who I am. It helps me see a bit more wholeness in myself than I would otherwise see. I am not depression. I am not psychosis. I am Kate and there are so many things I want to do with my life besides deal with that diagnosis I was given three years ago. Surprisingly, talking about it helps me do those other things.