

April 21st, 2022

Dear Narrative Therapy,

Before we first met, about a decade ago, I wasn't sure how I felt about meeting you... and had it not been for Lindsay's encouragement, I likely wouldn't have shown up to meet you. Before meeting you, I was passionate about my work as a harm reduction outreach worker with pregnant people in downtown Toronto. The people with whom I had the privilege of working alongside taught me so much about the impacts of systemic, structural and institutional oppression - the ways that they had been storied by people in positions of authority in undignifying ways, and about the devastating effects that these stories/descriptions had on their lives. They lost the right to parent their children, they lost their homes, they were criminalized, denied access to shelter beds, made to jump through impossible hoops, submit to de-humanizing practices, etc. They also taught me about the skillful, resolute ways that they stood up to, and resisted the undignified ways that they had been storied. I learned about their unwavering commitment to their children and community members (among other things) that survived despite these stories.

At the time that we met, I had been working with a group of women who were grieving the loss of their right to parent their children. Our drug laws, colonialism, racism, classism, ableism played a role in why it was that these women lost their right to parent their children. Together, we created a collective document, using their words, with the hope that this document could affect systemic change within the child welfare system. My reluctance about meeting you, NT, was not personal - it was political. It was about not yet being able to see how the project of pursuing social justice, and the project of "being a therapist" were combinable. But when I met you, and heard David Denborough describe creating collective documents in your name, all of that changed. It was like finally having a language for the work that I had already been doing in the community. I don't believe in the concept of soul mates, or even the idea of having a "soul" but it did feel like I'd finally found what I'd been searching for, for a very long time. Perhaps kindred spirit fits best with how I think about you. You have changed my life in so many profound ways and I am so grateful. We met when I was about 37 years old, and I am now 48. I sometimes wonder what my life would look like had I met you earlier.

At the time that you and I met, I also met a bunch of other wonderful people who had known you for a long time. Two old friends of yours: Ruth Pluznick and Natasha Kis-Sines, facilitated one of the workshops I attended, and we connected because Ruth and Natasha had done a project with young people who had parents who faced mental health difficulties (and in some cases were forcibly separated from their parent(s) by The State – so we had this overlap in terms of what we cared about). I really admired their work, and how they talked about it. I was struck by the ways that the young people's skills and knowledges about their lives and relationships with parents who faced mental health challenges were given an opportunity to be richly storied. Through Ruth and Natasha's respectful and skillful interviewing skills, stories emerged of the skillful ways these young people and their parents responded to living with a mental health difficulty - stories of fun they made, love, care and resistance emerged. Ruth invited me to go to a potluck back at the agency, Oolagen, where she was the clinical director.

When I walked in the door, people were eating, while some were playing music and singing in the boardroom. It was then that I decided that I really needed to work at Oolagen. The vibe, the friendliness, the music... I was mesmerized. But the main reason for wanting to work at Oolagen was because of you - everyone there had a close relationship with you, and I wanted to be closer to you too.

Somehow I managed to get a job at Oolagen in 2012. My official title was "Individual and Family Therapist". What a huge departure from the work I'd been doing up until then... biking around Toronto, meeting with women in shelters, coffee shops, hospitals, their homes, fighting with various systems ... At the beginning, I felt like I had somehow duped Ruth and Marilyn into hiring me. I believed that there must have been some kind of mistake on their part, or at least, if there hadn't been a mistake, it was only a matter of time before they would come to realize there had been one. I knew nothing about being a therapist, nothing about post structuralism or post modern approaches to therapy. This story followed me around for a couple of years. All of my co-workers with whom I had the privilege of working at Oolagen: Olya, Dale, Jia, Ruth, Emma, Geert, Mackenzie and Marilyn had such deep relationships with you, and I felt in awe of their skillfulness, their knowledge of you, and their intelligence. The more I got to know you, through their relationships with you, and through how they lived out the values and ethics they shared with you in their conversations with young people, and the more I got to witness the effects of them "doing" these ethics, the more I wanted to know you better and to deepen my own relationship with you. Witnessing the effects of externalizing conversations, and the ways that my colleagues skillfully unearthed the skills, knowledges, preferences, values, purposes, commitments of the young people who came to consult with us at Oolagen felt like a certain kind of magic. Young people could often be heard at the end of a therapy session saying that they had come to the walk-in hoping to learn some skills or strategies, but what they were leaving with was a sense that they already had skills (often that they were self-taught) about how to navigate difficult problems in their lives. In other words, they were leaving with a greater sense of agency over their lives. This was intoxicating to me.

My co-workers also brought you into our team meetings, which were nothing short of mind-blowing (paradigm shifting) for me. Together, we questioned a lot of the taken-for-granted practices that we had been taught in social work school that did not fit with our shared values and ethics. For example, I had never before questioned why I had never offered my session notes to the people about whom they were written, nor invited their input. Nor had I questioned whose interests were served by my complicity in these secret file practices (and whose weren't). I was a different person at the end of these team meetings than I was going in (in preferred ways). I was blown away by the collaborative and respectful ways you helped my co-workers and I relate to the young people we were privileged to consult with, to one another, and to the people in our lives outside of work. You infused our conversations in the hallways, lunch room, board room, when we went for pints after work, and you even made your way into our text messages and our jokes (and you still do!). We interviewed each other, we invited people to interview us, we re-wrote our forms (got rid of tick boxes!) to better reflect our collective ethics. It was, and remains so, the most fertile environment that I had the privilege to work in.

NT, I don't know if you'd remember this, but early on when I started at Oolagen, I was under the influence of Fear much of the time. Fear relied on my inexperience as a therapist to scare me about the

responsibility I had taken on to facilitate conversations with young people. Every time a young person came to Oolagen for a walk-in session and they got assigned me as their therapist, Fear had me lamenting, for their sake, that they hadn't gotten one of my incredibly skillful colleagues instead. So, I was very committed to deepening my relationship with you as quickly as I could. I wasn't too subtle about my interest in you, was I? Do you remember me taking you out for pints after work at Bar Volo? Well, I guess I was the only one drinking, but I would have a pint and dive into the *Maps of Narrative Practice* book. It was blissful. Ruth used to say that I was very "diligent" and I think that word fits. But before meeting you, I doubt that word would ever have been applied to me. You inspired my diligence, NT! I don't think I have ever applied myself to learning anything so diligently in my life. This is a unique outcome, no?

In those early days/years of our relationship, I would prepare for every session by creating lists of questions (inspired by your ethics). Sometimes I would just explain to the people I consulted with that I was trying out a new way of working, and that was why I had prepared some questions in advance. Sometimes I would offer folks to see the list, and I might have asked if they were drawn to any of the questions in particular (and if so, why) or perhaps none of the questions on the list were of interest to consider. Eventually these lists (which, for the most part served as a safety blanket) became less "necessary" as the questions were accessible to me without the lists. In all honesty, I might have asked one or two of the questions on the list in any given conversation, because conversations indubitably go in unforeseen directions. In retrospect, while these lists provided me with some sense of comfort, their usefulness was in the practice of creating questions.

A turning point for me in our relationship (or perhaps in how I related to our relationship) came about two years into my work at Oolagen. Some folks who were doing the Master's of Narrative Therapy and Community Work Degree from the University of Melbourne came to Oolagen to co-learn about you with us. I felt that even though I was not nearly as skillful as my co-workers, I could still invite them into my sessions. This felt like the least I could do, given that they had traveled all the way from Vancouver because of their shared interest in you. Because my co-workers had been so generous with me up until that point (inviting me into their sessions as an outsider witness, asking me questions after my sessions that helped me connect with my own ethics and preferred ways of doing/being in this work) it felt like a way that I could pay it forward. I offered to have Sumie join in as an outsider witness in my sessions. Afterwards we debriefed, interviewed each other about the things that stood out to each of us, and why they did, and what this might be connected to that mattered to us. We co-sparked questions for upcoming conversations and lines of inquiry. We co-authored letters to young people, created party hats out of office supplies for a final session, and of course, we went for pints to debrief some more (I think by now you know that we both like IPAs). We interviewed our colleagues, asked them to interview us. I remember taking risks in sessions that I'd never before taken. We both grew a lot, laughed a lot, and I believe deepened our relationship with you and with one another. To this day, we consider ourselves "narrative soul sisters". So, NT, I wouldn't know Sumie, Ruth, Natasha, Jia, Dale, Olya, Erling, Charlie, Finn, Uzma, Kai, Mark, Angel, Sarah, Katie, Sam, Steve, Greg, Darcey, Sarah Beth, Peggy, Ceci, etc., if not for you, NT, and I cannot thank you enough for this.

I am so grateful for my seven years at Oolagen because without Oolagen, I wouldn't have the relationship with you that I have today, or with many of the cherished individuals I named above. To me, you are not a technique that I use in my sessions, but a worldview. You help me relate to people in ways that fit with ethics I care about. You help me to not locate problems inside of people, and to see problems in the broader social context that often give rise to them. You've helped me deepen my critical thinking skills, and to be on the lookout for dominant discourses and their influence on how I relate to myself and others (and vice versa). You don't insist that I de-politicize my practice. You help me to avoid pathologizing, individualizing and de-historicizing problems. You help me to do curiosity in ways that I am so grateful for. You help me to engage in "supervision" (co-learning) and therapeutic conversations that don't position me as having "superior" knowledge or skills. You help me not to impose meaning, and instead allow me to co-discover the meanings that the people I am so privileged to consult with give to their own experiences. One young person with whom I had the privilege of consulting at Oolagen once described how she experienced our conversations: "In the past [in therapy sessions] I always sort of felt like I was under a microscope... and people [therapists] were analyzing me... You don't really feel like a human being after that... and through this (experience), instead of looking up at the other end of the microscope...now it feels like we are both sitting at the microscope, and I choose what I want to look at, into myself." This was music to my ears, NT, and I have you to thank for helping me to engage in this work in ways that made this possible to hear. How do I thank you for this?

So, NT, I was asked by Mookie what I might value about the people in his class engaging with you... I don't know how to answer this, because while you have changed my life in so many profound and preferred ways, and helped me to be in relationship with myself and others in so many preferred ways, you may not be for everyone. This is something you have taught me - that there is no one "right" way to go about this life, or this work. But perhaps I/we could ask them what it is that drew them to you? What captured their attention or their heart when they met you initially, and/or how about now? If they do feel drawn to you, what do they hope that you might offer them/the people they consult with? What might this be connected to that matters to them? How did this start to matter? Is there a story?

Love, Amy



PS. NT, how could I forget one of the most precious relationships of my life, that happened because of my relationship with you?? Oolie, who is named after Oolagen, because she was given to me by the parent of a youth (a surprise gift) on the last day that Oolagen existed as Oolagen. And check out which book she is lying on. RIP Oolagen, you remain in my life and heart forever.