Narrative Therapy

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PREFERRED REALITIES

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A NORTON PROFESSIONAL BOOK

W.W. NORTON & COMPANY • NEW YORK • LONDON
Opening Space for New Stories

Today, psychologists have a favorite word, and that word is maladjusted. I tell you today that there are some things in our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted. I shall never be adjusted to lynch mobs, segregation, economic inequalities, "the madness of militarism," and self-defeating physical violence. The salvation of the world lies in the maladjusted.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

... I have to give you a warning—if externalization is approached purely as a technique, it will probably not produce profound effects. If you don’t believe, to the bottom of your soul, that people are not their problems and that their difficulties are social and personal constructions, then you won’t be seeing these transformations. When Epston or White are in action, you can tell they are absolutely convinced that people are not their problems. Their voices, their postures, their whole being radiate possibility and hope. There are definitely under the influence of Optimism.

—Bill O’Hanlon, 1994, p. 28

People are born into stories; their social and historical contexts constantly invite them to tell and remember the stories of certain events and to leave others unstoried. A number of authors (Foucault, 1980; Hare-Mustin, 1994; Lowe, 1991; Madigan & Law, 1992; Weingarten, 1991) suggest that "discourse" is a useful notion for understanding how this happens. Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994, p. 19) defines a discourse as "a system of statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common values." She (p. 20) suggests that discourses sustain particular worldviews, pointing out, "The ways most people hold, talk about, and act on a common, shared viewpoint are part of and sustain the prevailing discourses." Stephen Madigan and Ian Law (1992, p. 33) add that "discourse can be viewed to reflect a prevailing structure of social and power relationships."

Discourses powerfully shape a person’s choices about what life events can be storied and how they should be storied. This is as true for therapists as it is for the people who consult them.

Our stories about therapy have been shaped by a variety of discourses. To name a few, discourses about pathology, about normative standards, and about professionals as experts are quite prevalent. These discourses are propagated by the content of professional education, as well as by the structure of our educational institutions and professional socialization processes. More specifically, most therapists, ourselves included, been indoctrinated to listen with a diagnostic, pathologizing ear. The medical model, with its emphasis on listening for signs and symptoms of disease, exerts such a pervasive influence that few of us can escape its urgings. Our educational system, with its strong emphasis on knowing the right answer, has shaped us to listen for facts of the sort that might appear on a multiple-choice test rather than listening so as to "understand a narrator's frustrations, dilemmas, and yearnings.

These discourses also shape and are carried by practices outside of our field: for example, in requirements for third-party payment, such as making diagnoses and keeping certain sorts of records, in self-help books, in depictions of therapists in the media, and in the expectations of the people who consult us. Freudian "archeological" metaphors about the "deep, unconscious truth" have permeated our culture so thoroughly that we often don't notice their influence. These metaphors invite us to listen for the person's meaning, but for the connoisseur's meaning hidden beneath it.

LISTENING

Given our stories about therapy, which are formed within these prevalent discourses, it is hard for most therapists to learn to listen to people's stories as stories. Our stories about therapy conspire to make us listen with our ears cocked and our mouths set to say "Aha!" when we recognize a "clinically significant item" — something that we know what to do with.

However, as Weingarten (1991) notes, discourses can change and evolve when conversations between people affect culturally available narratives. That is, knowledge at a local level and from subcommunities
can influence larger discourses. As simple as it may seem, in the face of prevalent discourses and dominant knowledges, simply listening to the story someone tells us constitutes a revolutionary act.

When we meet people for the first time, we want to understand the meaning of their stories for them. This means turning our backs on "expert" filters: not listening for chief complaints; not "gathering" the pertinent-to-us-as-experts bits of diagnostic information interspersed in their stories; not hearing their anecdotals as matrices within which resources are embedded; not listening for surface hints about what the core problem "really" is; and not comparing the selves they portray in their stories to normative standards.

Instead, we try to put ourselves in the shoes of the people we work with and understand, from their perspective, in their language, what has led them to seek our assistance. Only then can we recognize alternative stories. Connecting with people's experience from their perspective orients us to the specific realities that shape, and are shaped by, their personal narratives. This sort of understanding requires that we listen with focused attention, patience, and curiosity while building a relationship of mutual respect and trust.

In spite of all of our education telling us that we do know, we try to listen for what we don't know.

Not-Knowing

Anderson and Goolishian (1988, 1990a, 1992; see also Anderson, 1990; Goolishian, 1990; Goolishian & Anderson, 1990; Hoffman, 1991) have written passionately and convincingly about the importance of a not-knowing position for therapists. They see therapy as a process in which "we are always moving toward what is not yet known" (1990a, p. 159). This implies not asking questions from a position of pre-understanding (Andersen, 1991b; Weingarten, 1992) and not asking questions to which we want particular answers.

However, a not-knowing position is not an "I don't know anything" position. Our knowledge is of the process of therapy, not the content and meaning of people's lives. We hope that therapy is a process in which people experience choice rather than "settled certainties" (J. Bruner, 1986) with regard to the realities that they inhabit. As Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 381) write,

The goal of therapy is to participate in a conversation that continually loosens and opens up, rather than constrains and closes down. Through therapeutic conversation, fixed meanings and behaviors... are given room, broadened, shifted, and changed.

We are most successful in achieving a not-knowing position when we concentrate on listening and when our talking is guided by and secondary to that listening. As we listen, we notice and question the assumptions we are making. We ask ourselves, "Am I understanding what it feels like to be this person in this situation, or am I beginning to fill in the gaps in her story with unwarranted assumptions? What more do I need to know in order to step into this person's shoes?" If our internal conversation tells us that more information in a specific area would help us step more fully into a person's reality, we ask her to tell us more. Such constant questioning of our own assumptions invites people to question theirs.

Not-knowing fosters an attitude of curiosity (Cecchin, 1987; Rambo, Heath, & Chenail, 1993; White, 1988a). We are curious about people's unique answers and we encourage people to develop them more fully. When an answer takes the conversation in an unexpected direction, we ask even more questions, following that new direction if it seems relevant.

Just listening and asking facilitating and clarifying questions from a position of curiosity can be very therapeutic. Sometimes people get all they want from therapy through this process alone. Therapy of this sort is, as Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 380) indicate,

...a process of expanding and saying the "unsaid"—the development, through dialogue, of new themes and narratives and, actually, the creation of new histories.

Interpretation

Postmodernists to the bone, Anderson and Goolishian make it clear that they do not believe that the "unsaid" is something that already s. It is not lying hidden in the unconscious or waiting, fully formed, to be noticed and described in the cybernetic structures of family interactions. Rather, it emerges and takes shape as we converse with each other. Therefore, it matters what therapists attend to as they listen. In other words, listening is not a passive activity. When we listen, we interpret; whether we want to or not.

This may sound like a contradiction to our earlier statement—"We want to understand the meaning of their stories for them. This means turning our backs on 'expert filters. What is important here is the word 'expert.' While it is impossible to avoid interpretation, we eschew the belief that we know more about a person's lived experience than the person does. The people we work with are the primary interpreters of their own experience.

In our therapeutic conversations, we are "making up" meanings in
interactions with others, not discovering truths. It is inevitable and unavoidable that we will pick out certain things as relevant and meaningful and that we will ignore others. Our minds are not, and never can be, blank slates on which other people inscribe their stories. If we think of ourselves as experts on pathology, we will notice, remember, and inquire further about things people say that sound pathological to us. If our listening is guided by a theory that says people must "feel their pain" in order to be whole, we will bring forth painful stories. If we have a special interest in disempowerment as an issue, we will invite people to tell us stories of how they have been deprived of power. We can end up making the very things that people came to therapy to escape more real, more vivid, and more oppressive.

Deconstructive Listening

As this process continues, new meanings and new constructions emerge. We call the special kind of listening required for accepting and understanding people's stories without reifying or intensifying the powerless, painful, and pathological aspects of those stories' deconstructive listening. Through this listening, we seek to open space for aspects of people's life narratives that haven't yet been storied. Our social constructionist bias leads us to interact with people in ways that invite them to relate to their life narratives not as passively received facts, but as actively constructed stories. We hope they will experience their stories as something that they have a hand in shaping, rather than as something that has already shaped them. We believe that this attitude helps to deconstruct the "factity" of people's narratives, and that such deconstruction loosens the grip of restrictive stories.

In academic circles, the word "deconstruction" immediately brings to mind the work of Jacques Derrida (e.g., 1988), which explores, among other things, the slipperiness of meaning. Derrida examines and illustrates how the meaning of any symbol, word, or text is inextricably bound up in its context. Derrida and other deconstructionists believe that it is fruitless to search for the one "real" or "true" meaning of any text, as all narratives are full of gaps and ambiguities. Deconstructionist scholars focus on these gaps and ambiguities to show that the officially sanctioned or generally accepted meaning of a given text is but one of a great number of possible meanings.

So when we listen "deconstructively" to people's stories, our listening is guided by the belief that those stories have many possible meanings. The meaning a listener makes is, more often than not, different from the meaning that the speaker has intended. We seek to capitalize on this by looking for gaps in our understanding and asking people to fill in details, or by listening for ambiguities in meaning and then asking people how they are resolving or dealing with those ambiguities.

As people tell us their stories, we interrupt at intervals to summarize our sense of what they are saying. This allows them to tell us if the meaning we are making fits with their intended meaning. Even though our goal is "really" to understand people's realities, those realities inevitably begin to change in the process. In considering our questions and comments, people can't help but examine their stories in new ways. Our very presence makes their world a new and different reality.

As this process continues, new meanings and new constructions emerge. Many of the gaps we notice haven't yet been filled in; people must search their experience to find details that fill the gaps, and as details are added the shape of the narrative changes. Also, when people lour that we are making different meanings from theirs, they can reconfi er their own meanings and modify them. Throughout this process we listen with a thoughtfulness about what new constructions are emerging. Are they useful or desirable? If a person doesn't prefer a new construction, we don't pursue it.

Perceiving Problems as Separate from People

White has introduced the idea (1987, 1988/9, 1989; see also Epston, 1993a, and Tomm, 1989) that the person is not the problem, but the problem is the problem. Externalization is a practice supported by the b f that a problem is something operating or impacting on or pervading a person's life, something separate and different from the person.

When listening to people's stories, we ask ourselves questions like "What is problematic here? What is the nature of this problem? How does it show itself? What does it feel like for this person to have this problem in his or her life? What is influencing the person so that he thinks/feels/acts this way? What is keeping this person from having experiences he would prefer?" In asking ourselves these questions, we are taking the first steps in perceiving problems as separate from people. "Externalization is more important as an attitude than as a technique (Roth & Epston, in press). We believe, based on our experience in using narrative ideas in therapy and in supervising others who are attempting to apply narrative ideas in their work, that when people approach externalization as a technique or a linguistic trick, it can come off as shallow, forced, and not especially helpful.
Internalizing Discourses

Adams-Westcott, Dafforn, and Sterne (1993) have written compellingly about how people who suffer abuse tend to internalize the traumatizing events to which they have been subjected as inner dialogues, and how these dialogues color the interpretation of subsequent events. They write (p. 262),

Problems develop when people internalize conversations that re-strain them to a narrow description of self. These stories are experienced as oppressive because they limit the perception of available choices.

David Epston (1993a) has pointed out that this process of internalizing happens not just with local and particular experiences of trauma and abuse, but with larger cultural experiences as well. He notes Foucault's description of how death and disease (previously treated as if they were located primarily in a social or spiritual domain) came to be located at specific sites within specific human bodies. Epston (p. 171) writes,

... anatomical space became causal space, the home of both death and disease. This was followed by the body being regarded as the repository of human qualities. Mind, intelligence, madness, and a myriad of human qualities were regarded to be located in living bodies.

In the Middle Ages, if a person was "sick," "crazy," or "criminal," the cause and cure tended to be located in social or spiritual space—his ruler wasn't ruling well enough or he was out of touch with the appropriate spiritual community. In modern times, the emphasis is much more on individual responsibility for properly policing our minds and bodies. If a person has a heart attack, it is because she hasn't properly controlled her diet and exercise. If a person is depressed, it is because of a chemical imbalance in certain circuits of his individual brain and a chemical cure is required. According to Foucault, the most politically powerful discourses in modern society divide us from each other and invite us to treat ourselves and our bodies as problematic objects. Epston has called the kind of dominant discourses that support this process "internalizing discourses."

An externalizing attitude can counter the "objectifying" influences of internalizing discourses, by objectifying and separating what had been internalized. But, in order to adopt an externalizing worldview, we must retrain our perceptions so that we objectify problems instead of people.

An Exercise

A turning point for me (JF) in learning to objectify and externalize problems was having an externalizing conversation with myself. I had thought of myself as shy for some time. One day when I was in dread of an upcoming social occasion I decided to talk with myself about the effects of shyness in my life. It was rather remarkable to discover that once I experienced the perceptual shift of shyness taking over in social relations, rather than me being shy, it was much easier to maintain Au~ur kinds of perceptual shifts with others. This discovery inspired us to put together this exercise. You can do it as a "thought experiment."

Pick a character trait, quality, or emotion that you feel you have too much of or that other people sometimes complain about in you. Make sure it is in adjective form, as a description of you, for instance, "angry," "competitive," "guilty," or "nitpicky." In the following set of questions, fill in the trait or emotion where we have "X." As you read these questions, substituting the trait or emotion for X, answer them to yourself.

1. How did you become X?
2. What are you most X about?
3. What kinds of things happen that typically lead to your being X?
4. When you are X, what do you do that you wouldn't do if you weren't X?
5. What are the consequences for your life and relationships of being X?
6. Which of your current difficulties come from being X?
7. How is your self-image different when you are X?
8. If by some miracle you woke up some morning and you were not X anymore, how, specifically, would your life be different?

Note the overall effect of answering these questions. How do you feel? What seems possible in regard to this trait or emotion? What seems impossible? How does the future look in regard to this?

Now, let go of what you have just been doing. Take the same quality or trait that you worked with above and make it into a noun. For example, if "X" was "competitive," it would now become "competition." If "X" was "angry," it would become "anger." In the following questions, where we have written a "Y," fill in your noun. Answer each of these questions to yourself.

1. What made you vulnerable to the Y so that it was able to dominate your life?
2. In what contexts is the Y most likely to take over?
3. What kinds of things happen that typically lead to the Y taking over?
4. What has the Y gotten you to do that is against your better judgment?
5. What effect does the Y have on your life and relationships?
6. How has the Y led you into the difficulties you are now experiencing?
7. Does the Y blind you from noticing your resources or can you see them through it?
8. Have there been times when you have been able to get the best of the Y? Times when the Y could have taken over but you kept it out of the picture?

Now note the overall effect of these questions. How do you feel? What seems possible in regard to "Y"? What seems impossible? How does the future look in regard to "Y"?

Think back to your experiences with "X." How is your experience with "Y" different from your experience with "X"? By turning the quality or emotion into a noun, did you begin to treat it as an object, and in answering the questions did you externalize that object? How was this useful in dealing with the quality or emotion?

Stepping into an externalizing worldview requires that we separate our perceptions of problems from our perceptions of people. As we learn to view problems as separate from people, we begin to see people as subjects.'

David Epston (1993a, p. 172) puts it this way:

If persons fade away or are absorbed into . . . an internalizing discourse, in an externalizing discourse they seem to emerge and come to life as protagonists in their life stories, which can now admit of a life lived forwards rather than one transfixed in various versions of chronicity.

We believe that listening with an externalizing attitude has a powerful deconstructive effect. It biases us to interact differently with people than we would if we saw them as intrinsically problematic. It creates a different "receiving context" for people's stories, one in which we can work to understand their problems without seeing them as problematic or pathological. In this kind of context, the content and meaning of people's stories almost always become less restrictive.

An Example of Deconstructive Listening

The following transcript illustrates deconstructive listening. In it, I (GC) am guided by both a not-knowing position and an attitude of perceiving people as separate from problems.

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'Ve are using 'subject' here in the sense of 'subject of a verb, one who acts.'
man who lives in this patriarchal culture, I am not immune to patriarchal attitudes and beliefs that make it easy for me to treat women in abusive ways. I particularly want to guard against unwittingly duplicating the traumatizing experiences Nan has had with the dominant culture. For example, imposing my ideas instead of listening to hers would duplicate certain undesirable aspects of her childhood and her marriage. I try to guard against this in a number of ways. I have talked with Nan about my dilemma, wondering if she would prefer to work with a woman. When she decided to continue to see me, I arranged, with her permission, to consult with Jill in an ongoing way so that I would be accountable to women in this work. In order not to duplicate her abusive experiences of being coerced, I am particularly careful about following Nan's lead. Deconstructive listening is perhaps the most important practice in this regard.

As we begin to listen in on this particular conversation, Nan is talking about fear and how it immobilizes her at times.

**Nan**: I was never a fearful person. I took risks. But now it really, really gets bad, I guess, during traumatic times, like when Bart threatens me. Like that. . . . And it gets to the point where it almost immobilizes you. To have something control you like that is . . .

**Gene**: Are you saying that the fear immobilizes you?

**Nan**: It's like if you move away from this one spot, it will take over. It doesn't give you answers. It just gives you feelings, that's all. Physical feelings. Physically fearful feelings.

**Gene**: So, is it here right now?

**Nan**: Not to a great degree, no.

**Gene**: How do you understand that? I mean, what's . . .

**Nan**: Well, it works on its own. It controls when it wants to control. It's like, as I said, a separate thing. That's what causes the anxiety. And it's, you know, and it's just stupid things you try to talk yourself out of, and it's like, you wake up in the middle of the night and look out the window and it just feels really fearful. And you feel, "This is so stupid. But it's like, it has its own place in you that you can't control. You can't talk yourself out of it or do anything to make it go away. It just will be there.

**Gene**: So it feels like you don't have any direct power over it, like it kind of comes and goes as it pleases?

**Nan**: Um-hum. . . . but I can act through it, too, sometimes when it's not so bad. I can pick up Mary Pat at school. You can still function some of the time.

**Gene**: And when you go ahead and function in the face of it, What's that like?

(Up to this point, I have been 'just listening.' I have been conceptualizing fear as an externalized entity, and she has been talking about it that way. I have only asked facilitating, clarifying questions phrased in externalized language, to fill in gaps. With this question I make a somewhat bolder choice. Rather than inviting her to keep telling the story of the fear, I ask what it is like when she functions in the face of the fear. Still, my role is primarily one of listening to and understanding her story as she tells it.)

**Nan**: I like to feel like I'm controlling it by functioning while I have it. (Pause) But I know I'm not. It's like it's just letting me.

**Gene**: It's toying with you?

**Nan**: It's just . . . "Okay, go ahead, you do what you've got to do, but I'm going to still be around." You know? "I'm going to get you. I'll get you later." You know? Is this like psychosis or something? Am I getting unbelievable? I don't know.

**Gene**: Well, I'm more interested in this notion that there is a sense that you've got some times that you can have some influence over it. That you can diminish its grip on you. That even though it's there, you can function in the face of it.

(Here, I am acknowledging that my interest is in a specific part of her story. I am interested to know how she can diminish fear's grip on her, but I am not attempting to teach her anything or convince her of anything, just to learn what she knows about diminishing the grip of fear. I also hope she might construct something new in puzzling about how she diminishes fear's grip.)

**Nan**: Not all the time.

**Gene**: I hear that.

(Here, I am acknowledging that my interest is in a specific part of her story. I am interested to know how she can diminish fear's grip on her, but I am not attempting to teach her anything or convince her of anything, just to learn what she knows about diminishing the grip of fear. I also hope she might construct something new in puzzling about how she diminishes fear's grip.)

**Nan**: Like I had an appointment last Friday with an orthopedist to get my cast off.
Um-hum.

And what was it about that particular situation? What was the fear doing that was so effective?

(I maintain the use of externalized language, but otherwise just invite her to tell me more about the fear and how effective it is.)

It was like . . . it was my whole body, inside, like I had to be in a real tight ball and not move.

What was the fear doing to keep you in that tight ball?

And what are those feelings? What were those feelings then?

That I was just going to break apart into many pieces if I didn't just stay curled up in one little area. I had some of this when I was having flashbacks real bad. Flashbacks.

Um-hum. Um-hum.

It . . . at that time it seemed more controllable. Because I guess I knew what it was about. You know, I could . . . I could say okay, this is what happened, this is why you're feeling that way. It was more okay to feel that way. But these are just coming from nowhere.

Well, if you look back at that situation now, now that you're not in the middle of it, can you see something different about the feelings?

(Here, I offer a gentle invitation toward a different viewpoint, but I don't suggest what she should see from that viewpoint. I just listen to her description in her words.)

Well, I think it's fear of losing complete control. It's the only thing . . . I mean, I'm not really convinced that's it. You know what I mean? But, it's just a thought.

How long, total, did it have that . . . was it able to keep you curled up in a ball?

A few hours. Two or three hours. The phone would ring and I couldn't answer it, you know? Oh, there are days when I can't talk on the phone. Or answer the door or . . . (pause) maybe, maybe it's because I just . . . at that time, just don't want to exist. (Pause) And I know I have to exist, so it's like mid-

existence, you know what I'm saying? It's like I have to be there, but I'm not really there.

I think that makes a certain sense to me. It's like you'd like to just disappear for a while. But you know that Mary Pat's going to be coming home from school or that . . . I don't know what other reasons. What are some of the reasons that you have to exist?

(I realize that I don't know why she "has to exist," so I ask her to fill me in.)

I have a responsibility to myself to exist.

Well, say more about that. I mean, I'm interested in that, that responsibility to yourself to exist. What do you believe or understand about that?

Well, I have tried the inappropriate methods. I realized they don't work and I really don't want them to work. I know I need to live. And, ah, I don't know. It's just . . . as I said, it's like I really don't want to be here, but you know you have to be here. And that it's not always . . . it's not always . . .

It's not always going to be like that?

(This is the meaning I'm inferring. I say it out loud with a rising inflection so she can correct me if I'm not understanding her meaning.)

Well, it's not always like that. It already isn't always like that?

Right.

Well, you said, "I know I need to live." You also said, "I know I don't want those inappropriate methods, I know I don't really want them to work." Both of those statements are interesting to me. I mean, why not? Maybe that sounds like a stupid question on my part, but why do you really need to live? Why don't you really want these methods to work?

(I don't know why she "needs to live," and I really am interested to know why.)

Because I know sometimes I want to. It's just that I feel like my whole life has been so damned hard. And I don't like not being able to shut off my feelings any more like I used to. I
mean, I'm still feeling my brother's suicide and my mother's death and that was four years ago, you know? Why should it feel as painful, physically painful, now? . . . But I don't want to die.

In the remainder of this session, Nan and I talk about her mother's funeral. She tells me about the family tradition of not showing feelings and how it kept her from crying or talking about her grief. Earlier in her life, she had been able to completely shut down her feelings, and that had helped her get through some harrowing experiences. Now she is becoming a feeling person; although she thinks this is in general a good thing, it leaves her more vulnerable to the attacks of panic and depression. As the session closes, she reflects on her growing determination to live and to feel—to face the fear and depression and build a meaningful life for herself in the face of them.

At the time of this writing, Nan is still living in the same house as Bart, but they are divorcing and will soon be living separately. They will continue to raise their daughter jointly. Nan has a growing circle of supportive friends and she has gone back to school to finish a master's degree in education. Panic and depression have not vanished from her life, but she is facing them more confidently, and it is only rarely and briefly that they immobilize her.

**DECONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONING**

So far, we have discussed deconstruction as something that is a natural and inevitable byproduct of our efforts to understand people's life stories through a narrative/externalizing filter. Our primary intentions have been to listen to people's narratives and to understand them, not change them in any major ways. As we listen in a way that brings forth an awareness of either assumptions that narratives are built on or gaps and ambiguities in people's narratives, space opens for stories to shift as they are being told.

That said, we often feel that it is important to take a more active role. We agree with Karl Tomm (1993, p. 66), who writes:

> Hermeneutic listening, circular questioning, empathic reflection, and systemic understanding are not enough, especially when problematic patterns of injustice are entrenched.

At some point, usually when it seems that a certain degree of trust and mutual understanding has been achieved, we begin to ask questions of a more purposefully interventive nature. That is, we shift from deconstructive listening to deconstructive questioning.

Deconstructive questioning invites people to see their stories from (Afferent perspectives, to notice how they are constructed (or that they are constructed), to note their limits, and to discover that there are other possible narratives (Combs & Freedman, 1994b). Another name for this process is "unpacking." As people begin to have ideas about how the narratives they are living out have been constructed, they see that those narratives are not inevitable, that they do not represent essential truth. Instead, they are constructions that could be constructed differently. The intent of this kind of deconstruction is not to challenge a narrative (Griffith & Griffith, 1994), but to unpack it or to offer the possibility of considering it from a different perspective. Once this occurs, people can commit themselves to protesting it.

**The Politics of Deconstructive Questioning**

Michael White defines deconstruction more actively and politically. He (1991, p. 27) says,

> According to my rather loose definition, deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices: those so-called "truths" that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of person's lives.

Following White (and Foucault), we believe that dominant stories can be "subjugating of person's lives." We have already discussed, in Chapter 2, how the medical model can lead people to a sense of themselves as "docile bodies," subject to knowledge and procedures in which they have no active voice. There are also subjugating stories of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, and religion (to name a few) that are so prevalent and entrenched in our culture that we can get caught up in them without realizing it.

Deconstruction in White's sense can help us unmask the "so-called 'truths'" that "hide their biases and prejudices" behind the "disembodied ways of speaking" that give an air of legitimacy to restrictive and subjugating dominant stories. In adopting and advocating this type of deconstruction we are taking a political stand against certain practices of power in our society.

When we say taking a stand we do not mean lecturing the people we work with. In the context of therapy, like it or not and even though we take steps to minimize it, the therapist's words are privileged. Inflicting our beliefs on the people we work with would replicate the effect of
the dominant culture's privileged knowledges and practices on those in subjugated positions.

However, not taking a stand supports the status quo. In that sense, one cannot not take a political stand. In a racist society, for example, to ignore racism (to "take no stand on it") is to support its continued existence. We believe it is our responsibility as therapists to cultivate a growing awareness of the dominant (and potentially dominating) stories in our society and to develop ways of collaboratively examining the effects of those stories when we sense them at work in the lives and relationships of the people who consult with us.

Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994, p. 22) has used the metaphor of a "mirrored room" to talk about how the only ideas that can come up in therapy are the ideas that the people involved bring into the therapy room:

The therapy room is like a room lined with mirrors. It reflects back only what is voiced within it. . . . If the therapist and family are unaware of marginalized discourses, such as those associated with members of subordinate gender, race, and class groups, those discourses remain outside the mirrored room.

This notion implies that therapists must continually reflect on the discourses that shape our perceptions of what is possible, both for ourselves and for the people we work with. Although we can never obtain a detached or objective view, we can open up, rather than close down, the number and variety of possibilities available in the mirrored room of therapy. We can reflect on the power relationships implicit in each possible discourse. We can seek new possibilities through self-education and through ongoing, regular deconstruction of our beliefs and practices. We pursue such deconstruction by reflecting with our colleagues and with the people who consult with us on the effects of the stories and discourses that guide our beliefs and practices.

Externalization and Deconstructive Questioning

We believe that people can most easily examine the effects of problem-saturated stories on their lives when they do it in the context of an externalizing conversation. We have already acquainted you with how we listen with an externalizing attitude; now we want to discuss how we ask questions that invite not just therapists, but also the people they work with, to experience problems in an externalized way. The first step in this process is simply taking the language the person uses to describe the problem, modifying it so that the problem is objectified, and asking the person questions about it.

For example, in North American culture, people involved in a whole range of experiences are being labeled as "co-dependent." There are institutions, such as 12-step groups, that reify the label. "Co-dependency" becomes an internalized discourse, so that people begin to make "co-dependent" a part of their identities. When the co-dependency discourse takes over, they lose touch with a multitude of lived experiences that lie outside its confines. People are objectified as co-dependents, and other, once vibrant, aspects of their experience cease to count. To engage in an externalizing conversation with a person who has been subjected to this process, we might begin by asking how co-dependency has influenced her life. If she joins us in this conversation, we, together, will be turning the tables on the internalizing discourse, placing co-dependency outside of the person. Since she is no longer being defined as a "co-dependent," she is free to reclaim other aspects of herself and her experience. She is now in a position to decide what to do with co-dependency. She may decide to kick it out of her life or she may rename it — perhaps as "a caring attitude."

The following transcripts, excerpted from two consecutive meetings, illustrate the impact this kind of conversation had on one person I (JF) worked with.

LAVERNE  So, this is big, this is like a really big problem to me . . . because it never used to be like that. And it's getting, it's getting progressively worse. It's not getting better.

JILL  How do you know it's getting worse?

LAVERNE  Well, I feel like it's getting worse because I'm more scared. You know what I mean? I've never felt like this before. I mean, I felt like this before when they'd be like, LaVerne Skolnik, please step to the front and read like your twenty-page whatever.

JILL  Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE  You know. It's not as, it's not as intense as that. But some-thin' starts stirring. You know? And I just got like . . .

JILL  So, I just want to really, really slow this down.

LAVERNE  Okay.

JILL  And hear what it is.

LAVERNE  And hear what it is.

JILL  So, when you say, something starts stirring. What do you mean?
LAVERNE  Okay. I get this overwhelming feeling of nausea. Not the throw-up nausea.

JILL   Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE  My heart starts to beat fast. I almost feel like I have to go to the bathroom? Um. I mean, I start to sweat.

JILL   Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE  And then I start doing the whole like, oh, we’re going to be sitting there. They’re all going to be looking at me. Not so much, I don’t go through the like, I’m going to say some-thing stupid thing. It’s just, I’m not going to have anything to say. Which in turn is going to make me have absolutely nothing to say, because I’m going to start analyzing the whole thing.

JILL   Okay. Uhn. How does the fear know when to, when it can get you? When it can come in and start creating this overwhelming nausea? And . . .

LAVERNE  Well, that’s an interesting way to pose the question. How does the fear know when it can come and get you? Huh, that’s pretty interesting.

JILL   Why? Why’s that interesting?

LAVERNE  I don’t know. I just like the way you said that. As if like the fear wasn’t, like the fear wasn’t part of, you know what I mean? The fear was something like over there, as opposed to being inside of me.

JILL   That’s how I think of it.

LAVERNE  That’s how you think of it? Yeah, I think I knew that. That’s a pretty interesting way to ask that. I like that. You’ve given me a different way to look at it now. It’s pretty interesting.

JILL   Hmm.

LAVERNE  I have to tell you something that’s going to sound pretty strange?

JILL   What’s that?

LAVERNE  But I feel strange anyways. Um. I mean, when you just said that and I said, I thought, oh, that’s an interesting way to say it. And then I was like, oh, it’s over there. I almost felt like that. I got that, you know what I mean? Like I felt like some of that shit was kind of lifted out.

JILL   That’s great.

LAVERNE  For some reason. Yeah, it’s good. It bothers me that I feel like that.

JILL   Well, I can understand how you would feel that way. Because of the way people talk about problems. So, I can see how that would feel like, you know, sort of a relief.

LAVERNE  Yeah. I mean, literally though.

JILL   Yeah. Yeah. And let me just ask you for, do you think that with that off of you in some way, that you’re, that you can be more aware of some of your own strengths?

LAVERNE  Yeah. I don’t know if that, if, if I’m going to be able to control the feeling, cause I just got like a hint of it. As soon as I said I was relieved?

JILL   Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE  I said that. And it was like right here. Kind of like a, like, 00o hoo. I mean not like a soothing feeling.

JILL   Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE  Like a tossing kind of, but, in here. I think that I can, I mean when I start to feel I can be like, you know, like I can say, "Get out of there, man." You know what I mean? Like to myself, of course.

JILL   Yeah. Well, let me just ask you, back to that question I was asking. How do you think the fear knows when it could, when to sort of get in there? And try to take over?

LAVERNE  Um. I mean. If you think about that literally, it, it doesn’t. I almost like I invite it to come in. Cause how could it, you know, realistically thinking. If we did think it was over there. I’d have to let it come in. It couldn’t just come in.

JILL   Well, I guess what I was thinking is that it might be, there might be certain things it pairs up with that would make you vulnerable to it.

LAVERNE  Oh.

JILL   Like self-doubt. And I wondered if there were particular, you know, if we could begin to identify. Like for example . . .

LAVERNE  Right, I see what you mean. I see what you mean.

JILL   Would that be helpful to know about?

LAVERNE  Right.
(This next excerpt is from our next meeting two weeks later)

LAVERNE I've thought about the fear being outside me. I've thought about that all week. Or, all two weeks. JILL You did?

LAVERNE Yeah, totally.

JILL What'd you think?

LAVERNE I just, it was on my mind and then I had to... Like that guy, Craig wanted me to meet him at his friend's house. And that was the guy that I like took this trip with for the weekend. So, we had a bond.

JILL Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE But, I started to get myself like, I started freaking out a little bit? So, I was on the way there and I like had, this fear was there. I shut the radio off. And started, I mean, I was talking out loud to it. Just being like, no. I was being like, I have complete control over it and if I don't wanta, you know. I was being, you know. As I was doing it I was like tapping my finger on the steering wheel, cause there were a lot of people out. You know. So, I was pretending maybe I was singing.

JILL (Laughing) You did that?

LAVERNE You know, like.

JILL So, you were sort of talking back to the fear? Is that what you were doing?

LAVERNE I was just basically like telling it that I wasn't going to allow it to come into my body kind of thing. As if it were sitting next to me.

JILL Wow.

LAVERNE But I just like, I just like, that just seems like a good way to think about a lot of things, not just that, you know.

JILL Mm-hmm. Why do you think it's a good way to think about a lot of things?

LAVERNE Well, cause it's very, I just think it's very, like it could really give you like a good reality check. JILL Mm-hmm.

LAVERNE You know what I mean? Puts things like in perspective, kind of?
GENE Something... Can you characterize what the 'something' is that's making it easier?

HECTOR Urn. I think some of it might be awareness. (Long pause)

GENE Awareness of?

HECTOR Well, aware with the symptoms, for one thing. So that... in the past it's been, I wake up one day and suddenly realize, 'Hey, I'm being stupid.' You know. Depression. Whereas now I can see the things as they happen, or I can, you know, as the feelings start to come I can recognize them.

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR Which doesn't make them any easier to handle. Urn. Except for the fact that once I've named it, it's, it's easier to... I wouldn't say categorize it, but, well... maybe... maybe it is easier to handle. (Gene and Hector both laugh.)

HECTOR Yeah.

GENE Yeah. Well, what is it about that? I mean, other people say that, too. That, once they put a name on something... urn, once it's not just this formless kind of experience that happens and they wake up in the middle of one day and it's already very intense...

HECTOR Mm-hmm.

GENE ... uh, there's something about naming it that makes it more... more possible to deal with, to struggle with it. To do something. But, I mean, can you say anything more about how that works for you? About what it is about calling it by name that makes it...

HECTOR Well, I think in general human beings have a need to categorize.

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR And I know I'm that way. And the unknown is much more fear-generating than the known. So that, if there's a nebulous cloud of emotion that I can't put my finger on, I'm... I allow myself to be much more open. To being hurt by that.

GENE Hm.

HECTOR Whereas if I can get a hook into it. Sort of like... What's a good analogy? The difference between... can you imagine this sphere of water and this sphere of ice? Okay? (Laugh)

GENE Okay.

HECTOR The water, the water is, when you have no hold on it you can't, it's formless pretty much.

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR But, but the ice, you can at least feel and do something about. You can get a hook into it. You know? You can get a hook into it... Or are you just talking about calling depression, depression? Is it one of those?

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR No, it's much more specific. Yeah. First of all, recognizing the overall thing...

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR ... is helpful.

GENE Mm-hmm.

HECTOR Ah, because then that allows me to go in and pick out the individual things. And then, if I have enough stamina for it, I can actually try to do something about it. But, you know, if I'm just moping around, you know, and I'm not interested in doing anything, can't seem to draw up interest in anything, and I suddenly realize, "Hey, this is the same thing that I've noticed in the past me doing!" A lot of times then I can force myself to go outside, or go do something. Anything. Go play piano, or something, you know? Just to break the mood.

GENE So, I just want to be sure I'm following this and I'm not reading meanings in you wouldn't want me to. Urn... so, naming it "lethargy," or, urn, or "the kind of difficulty doing accounting that I have," identifying it as the first steps toward that kind of mood motivates you to do something about it. Is that what you're meaning to say?

HECTOR Well, the mood is the depression itself.

GENE Okay.

HECTOR And then the naming of this other stuff lets me break that.

GENE Right.

HECTOR Yeah.
As you can see, naming the plot or problem facilitates finding out about tactics and means of operating that the problem employs. This knowledge helps people know how to respond. As therapy progresses, naming and renaming the plot can continue as people's stories develop.

Relative Influence Questioning

Michael White (1986a, 1986b, 1988a, 1988/9) introduced "relative influence questioning" as a way to structure externalizing conversations. In relative influence questioning people are asked first to map the influence of the problem in their lives and relationships and then to map their influence on the life of the problem.

In these two sets of questions it becomes established that, rather an being the problem, the person has a relationship with the problem Everyone participating in the conversation has the opportunity to describe this relationship in a variety of ways. One of the consequences of these questions is that it becomes clear that everyone—not just the "problem bearer"—has a relationship with the problem.

For example, this afternoon Lashawn called our office because her seven-year-old daughter, Lynette, has had a series of problems at school. From our telephone conversation, I (GC) got the impression that unhappiness has made an appearance in Lynette's life and that it has recruited her into a lying and stealing lifestyle. As I talked to Lashawn I discovered that the problem has affected her as well as Lynette. Lashawn had always been close to her daughter before, but now this unhappiness seems to have sealed Lynette off. The unhappiness is coming between Lashawn and Lynette.

Lashawn said that in an attempt to "get to the bottom of it," she has talked to people at the school a number of times. So many times, she said, that no one there wants to talk to her any longer.

"So this unhappiness has ended up getting you a reputation at Lynette's school?" I asked. Lashawn agreed that it had, adding that it might end up being a problem for her other two kids as well, since no one at the school wants to hear from her anymore. She used to be active on the P.T.A., but now this unhappiness is taking so much of her time and affecting her energy so much that she doesn't want to go around to the school anymore.

Further questioning will undoubtedly establish that the problem has had other effects on the lives and relationships of family members.

There are several advantages to bringing forth the problem's effects on a number of people. First, it helps keep the identity of the problem separate from any person. Second, it creates a broader landscape about which we can ask the second set of questions (the influence that the have had on the problem). Third, it mobilizes people to join together working to oppose the effects of the problem. This is particularly helpful in situations where the problem has kept them apart.

For example, while unhappiness has come between Lashawn and Lynette Lashawn out of the picture, we wonder if in the course of relative influence questioning they might decide to team up, working her to keep unhappiness out of the picture.

Once we have constructed some understanding of the influence of the problem on the lives and relationships of family members, we ask what effect family members have had in the life of the problem. In Chapter 5, we will give examples of questions that we use for this purpose. We call them "opening space questions" and use them to bring forth "unique outcomes" (White, 1988a). Unique outcomes are experiences that would not be predicted by the plot of the problem-saturated narrative. Once the landscape of the problem has been broadened by mapping its effects on the lives and relationships of the people involved, there can be many pegs in which unique outcomes might appear. These include experiences that are exceptions to the problem, such as times when Lynette has been happy, but are not limited to those exceptions (White, 1995).

For example, our training team is currently working with a family who requested therapy because the oldest son, who is a senior in high school, is skipping school. The school has indicated that if this pattern continues Juan will not graduate with his class. As Dina Shulman, the therapist working with the family, asked questions, Juan and the family named the problems as "skipping school" and the "not caring attitude" that made way for skipping school. As Dina asked deconstruction questions, the family members spoke of the problem's effects on them as a family—including unpleasant involvement with the school, distrust, anger, and frustration—all of which had begun to color different aspects of family life.

Dina's questions also brought forth the unique outcome that the oldest child, Rosa, had escaped the grip of anger and frustration enough to stop lecturing Juan about what he should do. She had begun to spend more of her time on her own interests and less of it on anger and frustration. Even though Rosa's new actions are not an exception to the problem of skipping school, they certainly would not have been predicted by the plot of the problematic story. Her actions constitute a unique out-come or opening that might be expanded to develop a less problem-dominated strand in the family's narrative. 3

So, as we ask questions about people's effects on the life of the prob-

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3 See Chapter 8 for a letter that the training team wrote to the family including a discussion of this unique outcome.
lem, we begin to see that people’s lives are more multi-storied than the problem would have us believe. Unique outcomes or openings are door-ways to alternative stories.

Exposing the Role of Subjugating Dominant Discourses

We can expose subjugating dominant discourses by asking about con-textual influences on the problem. What ‘feeds’ the problem? What ‘starves’ it? Who benefits from it? In what settings might the problematic attitude be useful? What sort of people would proudly advocate for the problem? What groups of people would definitely be opposed to it and its intentions? Questions such as these invite people to consider how the entire context of their lives affects the problem and vice versa.

Deconstruction of this sort often unmask’s dominant stories that are politically oppressive. As David Reiss (1985, p. 257) indicates, a family’s construction of reality requires some support from outside the family. “Indeed, the family is sustained by, and contributes to, the constructions of the community in which it lives.” Many power imbalances in families are coached and supported by power imbalances in the larger culture, imbalances that are supported by the dominant stories about class, sexual orientation, race, gender, and so on. When people, through the “unmasking” process of relating problems to societal discourses, see their local problems as particular instances of political problems in the larger society, they can become motivated to deal with them differently. When people stop living by the dictates of a political problem at a local level, they help deconstruct the problem at a societal level.

In working with Ruth Ann, I (JF) didn’t have to ask many questions about contextual influences in order to unmask the discourse that was coaching depression in her life. A year after she had consulted with me, Ruth Ann called to tell me that she had gone forward with a racial discrimination suit that she had been considering filing. For the purposes of that suit, she asked me if I would write a summary of our work together. This is the summary I wrote:


Ms. Wilson sought therapy because of depression and anger. She was without a job and having difficulty mobilizing herself for a job search because of depression and self-doubt. This difficulty in facing a job search led to extreme stress because of Ms. Wilson’s responsibilities as a parent. Anger, particularly brought on by unwanted and intrusive memories of specific incidents in which she was mistreated as an employee of ______________, and accompanying feelings of frustration and hopelessness seemed to be dominating her life.

During this time the only relief and sense of peace that Ms. Wilson got was through the support of her church and from friends.

It became apparent during the course of therapy that the depression and feelings of anger, frustration, and hopelessness were caused by mistreatment by her former employer during the entire course of events leading up to and including her being fired. The very real consequences of this job loss included financial jeopardy, loss of a home, and disruption in schooling and security for Ms. Wilson’s children. Additionally, the experiences that Ms. Wilson suffered resulted in loss of trust and feelings of security for her, making job interviews and social connections intensely difficult.

Racism and racial discrimination brought Ruth Ann Wilson’s life to near ruin. However, through her personal strength and re-sources and community connections, particularly through her church, she has been able to persevere in getting her life back on track.

The therapy served to support this process of getting her life back on track against considerable odds.

After she received the report Ruth Ann sent me a note. These reflections on our work together were very important to me.

Dear Jill,

Your report reminded me of what the therapy was like. I don’t know if I ever told you that I didn’t want to come. That old misery had taken hold, I knew that, but I hated the idea of seeing a professional for help when I knew (I hoped) that there was nothing wrong with me. I thought getting it would divert from what I thought was really wrong—how they treated me at work. I never dreamed that in that kind of setting we would call the problem racism. If I wasn’t relying on the EAP I would never have seen a white therapist and, to tell the truth, I didn’t expect a white therapist to understand. You said you probably wouldn’t understand and then went ahead and really understood (most of it, any-way!). I hadn’t imagined that I could know it was racism and still
We can also expose dominant discourses by asking people about the history of their relationship with the problem. Especially useful in this regard is to ask how people were recruited into acting or believing according to the dictates of the problem: "Where did you learn this way of thinking about relationships?" "What models were there for these kinds of attitudes?" "How did fear so easily coach you to believe that?" This type of inquiry often encourages people to consider the discourses of power that shape ideas and actions.

These questions do not have to do with teaching or imposing. As people begin to consider the effects of politics in their own lives, they almost invariably want to pursue the conversation. For example, Ryan came to see me (JF) alone several years after I had worked with him and Darlene in couples therapy. He told me that in the last couple of years there had been periods of time in which he was not attracted to Darlene. They could last days or weeks or even months. His explanation for the lack of attraction was that Darlene had gained a considerable amount of weight. His dilemma was how to approach Darlene on this topic. His attempts so far had resulted in Darlene making it clear that he was "not allowed to talk about it." Although their relationship was very satisfying in other respects, this problem bothered Ryan more and more.

After Ryan and I had mapped out some of the effects of the lack of attraction on him, on Darlene, and on their relationship, I asked about the tactics that the lack of attraction used to get between Darlene and Ryan. After some thought he said that "perfect images of women" enter his mind from time to time.

I then began to ask questions about how these kinds of images had gotten such a strong grip on Ryan's mind — Where did they come from? Who put them into circulation?"

"Wow," he said. "I had no idea it had to do with this." He went on to tell me that he had a job helping out in a drugstore when he was a kid.

The store carried a number of pornographic magazines, which he pored over whenever he had the chance. As he got older he began to buy these kinds of magazines. "So this is about pornography?" he asked me. "Well, what do you think the effects of pornography have been in your life?" I asked.

Ryan began by saying that he had pretty much put pornography aside, so he thought that it didn't affect him at all.

I wondered, then, about the images. When he considered the images again, he concluded, "I think that the influence of pornography has clouded my mind. These perfect images cloud my mind for sure." As we talked more, Ryan said that pornography had a different way of seeing women. He characterized this different way as "not as people." When he realized that the influence of pornography and associated ideas that define women as non-people had taken hold in his relationship with Darlene, he was very clear in stating that he was opposed to this state of affairs. When I asked about how such ideas might affect his daughters, he became even more committed to opposing pornography and its effects.

He said that he realized two things. One was that he had been able to keep the idea of women as "non-people or as lesser people" out of his life in other contexts. He now saw, though, that pornography had confused him in the sexual realm. His second conclusion was that he had let physical appearance dictate his feelings. This did not fit with how he wanted to do things. In the course of talking about this, Ryan decided he could guard against pornography's specifications for physical appearance by saying to himself, "This isn't about sex. It's about love. I want sex to be about love and I love Darlene."

"You know what?" Ryan asked. "I think that pornography was a major factor in the demise of my first marriage, and I won't let it happen again."

In further conversation, it became clear that Ryan had walked away from actually looking at pornography, in the process of putting his life back together after a divorce. He was appalled to discover how some of the associated ideas had stuck around.

I knew from the couples therapy with Ryan and Darlene that religion was very important to him. Inspired by Melissa and James Griffith's work (Griffith, J. L., 1986; Griffith, M. E., 1995) I asked Ryan if he would be interested in having a conversation with God about this. He said that he would do so on his own. In our conversation, he said that he felt that he already had God's direction in putting these images and ideas about women out of his life. He believed that he could gain strength through prayer to fight any vestiges of these ideas. But he also said that he was quite confident that the images and ideas would not be a problem.
anymore. He didn’t really believe in them. He just hadn’t known that they were there. Now that he was alert to them, he thought he could keep them from having an influence.

We agreed to meet again with Darlene to make sure the ideas about women as nonpeople hadn’t snuck into the relationship in any other ways.

A THERAPY CONVERSATION

We end the chapter with a therapy conversation that illustrates many of the ideas we’ve been writing about.

The conversation is with Fran, who came to see me (JF) because of struggles with what she calls depression. In our work together we have found it useful to name a number of problems that make up depression. This excerpt is about “the voice of insecurity.” My questions are not the only ones that could have been asked; you may think of others.

FRAN I’ve been really bummed out, just really moody in the month since I’ve seen you. . . . I don’t know if it’s because of Nathan. I don’t even know if I told you but I found out that Nathan is seriously dating someone and has been for the last six months. I don’t know if it’s an engagement or what. Loretta told me last week. She said it has possibilities.

JILL Yeah.

FRAN But you know I’ve been seeing this guy Chris and I’m just really aggravated with him. He doesn’t seem to want to spend any time alone. Like, to me that’s what a relationship is about. I want to get to know the other person. But he’s really hard to get to know. Saturday night he said to me, “Let’s sleep in on Sunday and go to brunch.” I never do that. I like to get up, go to the gym and work out, and get my day started, but I did. We got up around noon. He took a shower and then kind of nonchalantly told me that he was meeting his buddies to play pool and drink beer. I was really bummed out. He could tell, too. So he said, “Well, we could stop and grab something to eat and I’ll just be a little late.” I told him, “No. You said you’d be there. You should keep your word.” Then he said we could get dinner that night, but I just said, “No.” Then, he said, “You’re a tough chickie.” I could tell he probably won’t put up with that. Now I’ve just been in this bad mood ever since. I don’t know if I’m just not ready to date . . .

JILL And what part is the mood playing?
FRAN I don’t know. Maybe I should be more laid back, not care. I mean, I’ve only been dating him a month and already I’ve told him that I don’t want to just be with big groups of people. I want to get to know him. I mean, I don’t want to just have fun.

JILL Hmm. I’m a little confused. How is caring a problem?
FRAN Well. After I left Sunday, I was thinking, "What’s wrong with me? Why doesn’t he want to spend time with me? And Nathan wouldn’t make a commitment to me. And now it looks like he is with someone else."

JILL So this voice has a lot to do with . . .
FRAN I’m just really insecure.

JILL I guess I’m wondering if the voice of insecurity sort of makes room for moods to take over?

FRAN I just wish I wasn’t so insecure.

JILL You know, I just don’t know how to put this together. You told Chris what you wanted in a relationship. I would think you’d really have to feel secure in yourself to do that. Am I missing something?

FRAN . . . I didn’t look at it that way. . . . I guess it’s true. I’ve changed. A year ago I would have said, "Oh, you go ahead. It’s all right. I’ll see you tonight." But I didn’t do that.

JILL What did you do instead?
FRAN I stood up for myself, but then I started asking myself, "What’s wrong with you? Why doesn’t anyone want to be with you?"

JILL So even though security really comes through in your behavior, the voice of insecurity speaks to you?

FRAN Yeah.

JILL It almost sounds like when it speaks to you, it keeps you from noticing how you’ve been able to stand up for yourself. Is that right?

FRAN Yeah.

JILL How else does it affect you?
FRAN How else . . . ?

JILL Well, let me ask you something else first. What ideas do you think make room for the voice of insecurity?

FRAN I don’t know what you mean.

JILL Well, I guess I was thinking that you were talking about this
dilemma about whether to accommodate yourself to a man and I was thinking that I've heard a lot of women talk about that and not many men.

FRAN It's true. I always ended up scheduling myself around Nathan but he didn't schedule around me. Even when I cooked dinner for him, he'd call and say, "Can we do it at 7:30 so I could go to the gym first?"

JILL Where do you think that comes from?

FRAN Umm. My mother always did everything around my father's work schedule and it seemed like that's the way it was for everyone.

JILL Yeah. What do you think pushed your parents into that pattern?

FRAN Umm. It's just all around you—television, your neighbors, the church.

JILL Yeah, so you grew up with these ideas kind of directing your future?

FRAN Yeah, and I don't think it's really changed. Now women are working but they're still supposed to make the dinner, clean the house, and work around the man's schedule.

JILL So do you think that's fair?

FRAN No.

JILL What do you think is fair?

FRAN I think both people have to pay attention to the other's schedule and what they want.

JILL Okay. So it seems like you've been taking some steps to change a pattern that's been around for a long, long time.

FRAN Yeah, but last night he wanted to get together and I said no because I have an important meeting at work today but I ended up seeing him. But I wanted to see him. Oh, I don't know what's wrong with me.

JILL Is that you speaking or the voice of insecurity?

FRAN I guess it's the voice of insecurity.

JILL Yeah, it seems like it keeps you from noticing that you're standing up for yourself and it seems like it paves the way for moods to taint your life. Do you agree?

FRAN Yeah. It makes me lose track of how much I've changed. JILL What else does it do?

FRAN I think it makes me want to stay isolated, not get involved with anyone to keep from getting hurt.

JILL What kind of effect does it have on your friends and family? FRAN I guess it keeps me away from them a lot.

JILL And would you say that that cultural pattern we were talking about sort of sets the stage for the voice of insecurity?

FRAN Yeah, because the whole world practically is going in a different direction. Well, maybe not some young people but it's just all around you.

JILL Even though it's all around you, have there been times that you've been able to not listen to that voice?

FRAN Yes! On Sunday, after Chris dropped me off, I called up some friends because I wanted to be with somebody. Usually I would just stay home alone and cry, but Sunday I called up some friends and Patty came over and we were going to go to the movies but we ended up getting a video and staying home and I told her what happened and I told another friend, too. And both of them said, "Fran. We're so proud of you. He's lucky to be with you. You don't have to take that."

JILL If I could have talked to your friends about what you did, how do you think they would have described you? I mean, what characteristics would they have said you have?

FRAN They would have said I'm getting better, but they know I was thinking all this negative stuff about myself.

JILL The voice of insecurity we were talking about?

FRAN Yeah.

JILL Can I just ask you a question about that? If the voice matched what you were doing on the outside, what would it be saying to you?

FRAN It would say, "You are ready for a real relationship with someone who wants to get to know you. You deserve that. It's fine for you to see if that's what's happening and if it's not say, 'You know, this doesn't seem like it's going to work out.' That doesn't mean anything bad about you."

JILL Wow.

FRAN Yeah, now it says, "What's wrong with you? He has a right to be with his friends. He's getting all this hassle from you. He's probably not going to put up with it, because I could sort of tell he's getting sick ... "
JILL  So the difference would be that the voice would talk about what you want instead of what he wants?
FRAN  Yeah.
JILL  Has that ever happened?
FRAN  Yes! On Sunday. That's why I ended up calling my friends instead of just being isolated.
JILL  So you were able to talk to yourself instead of letting insecurity take over?
FRAN  Yes.
JILL  What kind of preparation went into being able to do that?
FRAN  I did it by reminding myself that I'm important. What I've learned in therapy is to speak my mind because others don't know if I don't tell them and not speaking feels horrible.
JILL  What does this experience mean to you?
FRAN  That I can get to security if I work at it.
JILL  So would you name the project you're working on "security" or would it be another name?
FRAN  Security.

Story Development

... the narrative metaphor proposes that persons live their lives by stories—that these stories are shaping of life, and that they have real, not imagined, effects—and that these stories provide the structure of life.

— Michael White, 1991, p. 28

Our prevailing narratives provide the vocabulary that sets our realities. Our destinies are opened or closed in terms of the stories that we construct to understand our experiences.

— Harry Goolishian

There are always "sparkling events" (White, 1991) that contradict problem-saturated narratives. In this chapter, we look at how we can invite people to take such events and transform them into stories that they can live—and in the living know themselves in preferred, satisfying ways.

We want to emphasize that the narratives we are talking about are the stories that people live. They are not "about" life; they are life as we know it, life as we experience it. Since, as far as meaning, hope, fear, understanding, motivations, plans, and the like are concerned, our life narratives are our lives, it makes all the difference in the world what sort of narrative is available to a person. To illustrate this point, let us tell you a story.

JESSICA'S STORY

This is Jessica's story,1 and we think you will agree that the changes that occurred in her life were spectacular. While our experience with

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1We have told this story before (Combs & Freedman, 1994b), but we think it deserves telling again.
people is often less dramatic, we chose this story because, as well as being

dramatic, it is very clear, straightforward, and easy to follow. Remember,

however, that what you are reading is a much simplified and ‘cleaned up’

report. It is edited to emphasize how using narrative as a guiding metaphor

contributed to a satisfying outcome for Jessica.

At the time I (JF)\(^2\) met Jessica, she had just completed several years of

therapy. She felt that her therapist' had been helpful and supportive, but

Jessica had not perceived any progress for a number of months before

stopping therapy, and she had come to believe that “it had gone as far as it
could go.” At a conference she attended in Chicago, Jessica heard me give a
talk on sexual abuse which gave her hope that maybe she could go farther.

She called me to set up an appointment, explaining that she hoped I would

see her even though she lived three hours away and didn’t know how often

she could come to see me.\(^3\)

The First Meeting

Jessica worked as a nurse in the emergency room of the only hospital in a

farming community in southern Illinois. She lived alone in a farm-house on

the edge of town, had a sizable circle of female friends, and enjoyed

participating in sports.

In the first meeting she told me that she was 35 years old and had never

had a romantic relationship. She described growing up in a family where

women were treated as the property of men. Her father and uncle touched

her, her mother, and her sister in every way they liked at any time they liked.
The touching was often rough and often sexual, including having her

breast or crotch grabbed while she was helping with kitchen chores and

being forced into sexual contact with a man while the other looked on.

I asked Jessica what the effects of this abuse were on her, both in the

past, as a child, and now, as an adult. She said that when she was a child

the abuse brought forth feelings of fear, insecurity, confusion, helplessness,

and isolation. She elaborated on incidents that illustrated these themes in

some detail. The effects of the abuse on Jessica as an adult were different.

She experienced an inability to engage in a romantic

\(^2\)We will refer back to this story throughout the chapter, using it to illustrate our ideas

in practice. For the sake of ease in reading, when we refer to Jessica’s story, it is written as

though I (JF), who worked with Jessica in therapy, am commenting. I would like to

acknowledge that Gene’s ideas play at least as great a part in this commentary as mine.

\(^3\)In many ways I felt that this therapy was really co-therapy. Jessica saw another

therapist both before and after our work together. Much of the work we did was built on

and later supported by work she did with the other therapist.

\(^4\)One of the ways we accommodated the distance was by incorporating the

possibility of phone calls between meetings.
knowledge that she had used in creating her identity. She told me that these experiences of mastery and of being treated as a person rather than as property nurtured a secret part of her. Over time she was able to develop that part, and it enabled her to stand up to the effects of the abuse and limit their area of influence.

I asked her what it meant to her that she had accomplished so much in spite of the abuse. With some hesitation, averting her eyes from me, she said it meant that she was smart and tough. I said I understood that her home situation was a secret, but I wondered, if other people had known about it, who might have predicted that she would be able to stand up as successfully as she had to the effects of the abuse. She said that teachers and kids at school knew she was smart and tough. Had they known about her situation at home, they would probably have predicted that she would find a way to oppose the abuse and take her life back for herself. Her previous therapist also recognized how tough and smart she was.

I then wondered aloud, ‘If we look back over the years at how you have used your strength and intelligence to take charge of your life—you got an education, became a nurse who handles life-and-death situations, and found ways to limit the effects of the abuse—is this readiness to get married that you are talking about the next step? She thought maybe it was. As we began to talk about what that meant, Jessica acknowledged that it was different to think of herself as someone who could have an intimate life with another person. Not only was she smart and tough, but now she could begin to imagine herself having warm and tender feelings and connecting with someone special. In fact, in her previous therapy she had felt connected to her therapist and had a variety of pleasant feelings towards her. She could now see that relationship as preparation for other relationships. In friendships with women she had also experienced some positive feelings and connection, even though these relationships were often rocky.

As we talked more about the possibility of moving into the realm of romantic relationship, we discovered that simply thinking about herself as someone who could live in that realm was an important step in taking her life back from the effects of the abuse. Because the effects of the abuse had held her social life hostage for so long, there were probably a number of important social experiences that the effects had robbed her of until now. For example, Jessica did not really think of men as people. One number of men who have engaged in abusive behavior have told us that one thing that makes this behavior possible is an attitude that women are not really people. One of the ways Jessica had storied the abuse was the inverse, that is, that men are not really people. Her plan to make friends with a man demonstrated that she had begun to deconstruct this story.

so making friends with a man might be an important step, and now she knew that her intelligence could help her pick a safe man for the project.

*The Third Meeting*

In the third meeting, one month later, Jessica was taken over by distress about events in one of her friendships. In her estimation, a close woman friend often treated her badly—criticizing her, refusing to talk to her—but Jessica had chosen to go on to continue the friendship. It was after a recent bout of these incidents that the distress had taken over. The belief that other people they knew sided with her friend made the distress even stronger.

I asked if Jessica’s implied desire to do something different with this friendship was a part of her project of rescuing her social life from the effects of the abuse. When she considered it in this light, she thought that, although the effects of the abuse had influenced her up to now in the relationship, she was at a turning point. I reminded her of the personal qualities she was beginning to own more closely—strength, intelligence, the ability to have warm and tender feelings, the ability to connect—and wondered how these might be useful in this problematic relationship.

She decided to put her professional self—the part of herself who had done well at school and work, and whose intelligence and strength she trusted—in charge of setting limits and deciding what she should do to take care of herself in this relationship. I asked if she thought this would move her toward being more secure in other relationships. She thought it would.

*The Fourth Meeting*

Jessica came to the fourth meeting (again, one month later) taken over by distress and also by confusion about the friendship we had discussed in our last meeting. She had consistently used her intelligence and strength in setting limits and making decisions regarding the relationship. Her friend had countered with criticism and name calling, which brought forth doubt for Jessica. She particularly began to experience doubt about whether it was possible for her to be healthy, normal, or playful.

I wondered if there were times when she had been sure of her ability to be “healthy,” “normal,” and “playful,” even for a moment. With some encouragement, Jessica remembered learning a song at school. Her grandmother, who lived out of town, was visiting, and when Jessica came home from school that day her grandmother was there alone.
Jessica remembered sitting on her grandmother’s lap and teaching her grandmother the song, singing with her grandmother, who looked into her eyes, smiled, and sang with Jessica, clearly enjoying her company.

I asked what her grandmother recognized in her and most appreciated about her. She said “that I am lovable” and explained that being lovable meant many things. She listed the many things: she was a good person; she was warm; she was fun; she was normal; she was healthy; she was playful; she was receptive; she recognized good things in others.

Then we spent a long time talking about how her life might have been different if she had lived with her grandmother. We developed the story of those differences through time, starting with when she was very little and coming all the way up to how things might be different for her now if she had grown up living with her grandmother.

I asked her to list again what her grandmother knew about her, and I wondered what life would be like if she owned the qualities on that list as truths about herself. She was more thoughtful than verbal in response to this last question.

The First Phone Call

Jessica called me five days after the fourth meeting. She began the conversation by asking, “Do you know what it would be like to wear new shoes, new clothes, new makeup, and new breast implants all at the same time?” I had to admit that this particular combination of events was completely outside my experience, so I asked her to explain. She told me that on the morning after our meeting she drove through McDonald’s on her way to work, as she had every morning, to pick up a cup of coffee. She was handed the coffee through her car window, as she had been every morning, and was asked if she would like sugar and cream, as she had been every morning, and automatically said “No, thank you” (not just “No” as she had every other morning)! She found this quite startling and absolutely normal at the same time.

She said now that she realized who she was, she knew that she was the kind of person who would say “thank you,” and so she did. Hearing herself actually say “thank you” out loud was a startling and clear confirmation of her new identity. She didn’t remember ever having felt this strong for this many days in a row. She noticed that she was both more concerned about other people and more tuned into herself. This was scary, too, because of how different it was. She was feeling strong all the time, but was afraid she must be denying other feelings because she couldn’t believe she was so strong. She was afraid the changes weren’t real, and said that may have been why she used the unreal example of

breast implants. But then she said, “The neatest thing about this is I have something to guide me — my new image.”

Since the last appointment she had also stopped smoking; this was because she now knew she was the kind of person who wouldn’t smoke. She said two things about stopping smoking that were particularly interesting to me. One was, “Cigarettes are taking my energy and I need it for other things.” The other was that in the past, when she was around people she liked, if they smoked, she smoked. She said that now it was important to be able to stay on her own path and have them go on their own.

She ended the phone call saying, “Having a new image of myself has affected me in ways I could never imagine. My car broke down, and I didn’t meet the man of my dreams, but it’s all right.”

The Second Phone Call

Jessica called again eight days later. She had ended the relationship with her friend because she couldn’t tolerate all the blaming. With everyone else, she reported, she was being her new self and liking it. When she was her new self with her friend, it had begun to seem like their relationship would end, so at first she had gone back to her old self in that context. She then decided that she couldn’t do that anymore, so she had ended the friendship. She felt strong but very sad. She believed that she was mourning the loss not only of her friend but of her old self.

I wondered if the new self had been there all along, hidden under the effects of the abuse. That made sense to Jessica, but she said she was still sad. I said that I was not trying to take the sadness away. I was sad, too, that she had been through all that abuse and had been forced into hiding.

I asked about ways other than the sadness that her experience was different. She answered that she felt safer, more open, and more understanding. She said that this process had worked to give permission to parts of her that had already changed and to those ready and waiting to change, as well as giving her something she could use to live by every day, a new image of herself.

The Fifth Meeting

The fifth meeting was one month after the fourth. Jessica’s very positive experience of getting to know herself in new ways had been interrupted and then overcome by a flood of graphic memories of the abuse that she had suffered. The central memory was of her uncle repeatedly thrusting his penis into her mouth while her father looked on. Her voice
became very small and shaky as she described this memory. She reported
that after it happened she went into the bathroom and washed out her
mouth and then rode off on her bicycle.

I was very distressed to hear of this event. I looked directly at Jessica
and said, "I'm sorry that happened to you."

Then, with her permission, I read her the notes from our two phone calls
after the last meeting. She seemed to relax and began nodding as I read the
notes. I said, "You were telling me in that first phone call that you know the
kind of person that you are. If you really owned that new self-image, and
looked back through time with the knowledge and feelings that are part of
the new self-image, what would that you appreciate about the you that went through the abuse?"

"Appreciate?" she asked.

"Yeah, what can you appreciate or learn about the you that survived this
abuse?"

As she reviewed the memories, Jessica identified that she was strong
and resilient, and after some thought she even realized that she was
creative. She silently began to weep. She said that in the past when she had
these kinds of memories she had felt helplessness, terror, worthlessness,
and shame, but she believed that this was the first time she had ever felt grief
about everything she had endured. She said that the grief felt like a good,
pure feeling. It signified to her that she was worthy of sadness over something that had happened to her. We agreed that it was a joyful grief.

The Third Phone Call

Three weeks later Jessica called and said that she was thinking about
canceling her next appointment. Her life was not perfect, but she was
feeling free. Her new image was guiding her and the power had gone from
the memories. Also, her car had broken down on the way home from the
last meeting and she had had to spend the night in a hotel. When things
had been really bad, the three-hour drive each way had seemed worth it,
but now that things were going more smoothly for her, six hours seemed a
long time to drive. She canceled the appointment, arranging to talk again a
month later.

The Fourth Phone Call

Jessica called again in a month. She said that before she had seen me
she felt stuck, but now she was "over the hump." She liked herself. She was
thinking about going back to her previous therapist to get some support for
the new way she was thinking about herself and about life.

I asked her what had been most important in getting over the hump. She
said it was the memory of singing with her grandmother and learning what
her grandmother must have felt about her. It completely changed how she
knew herself. I congratulated her on knowing herself and said I was curious
to hear where her new knowledge might lead her. She thanked me and we
ended therapy.

The Sixth Meeting

Four years (to the day) after our last meeting, Jessica came to see me
again. The first thing she told me was that she was buying a new house. I
asked her what meaning this had for her. She said that it meant that she is
going for what she wants and breaking family traditions.

She came to consult with me because she was involved for the first time
in a romantic relationship. Gary, she told me, was different from her family.
He was fun-loving, a traveler. He didn't have traditional values about
relationships between men and women. He was sexual and playful and
didn't use sex as power. "If this works," Jessica said, "I will be different from
the women in my family." I wondered, wasn't there already lots of evidence
that she was? She agreed that she was, but said that what worried her was
that she reacted to Gary like her sister and mother would when it came to
sex. In her family she had learned that women are not supposed to like sex
and now she was finding intercourse to be painful. She reported that she
was businesslike and efficient, wanting "to get in, have an orgasm, and get
out."

When I asked how she was different from people in her family, she said
that she was the most playful person in her family. She had always had fun at
school and work, but in recent years she has also played in other situations.
She had taken up a number of team sports and thought that she had more fun
in general than she used to. She also had more friends.

These changes had led her to see herself as being more active, involved,
and free. She listed friends who had noticed the changes and told me that
some of her friends had predicted that she would become involved with a
man.

Our conversation brought forth the knowledge that she had prepared for
these changes by coming to therapy and by taking chances. For instance,
she had begun frequenting a riding stable where she initially knew no one,
and she had joined a dart club as its only female member. She had
discovered that a lot of what is involved in play is being open to whatever
pops into your mind. As she said this, she realized that there were
precursors in her youth to these events. As a kid she was good at making
something out of nothing and enjoying daydreams. As a teen-ager she got
into telling jokes.
I summarized these events chronologically and asked what might come next. Jessica thought becoming more playful sexually and playing without structure would be next, but fear stood in the way of taking the next step and had also kept her from getting very close to Gary.

I wondered if going to a stable where she knew no one was an example of overcoming fear. She agreed it was, and added that she had become close friends with a man she met there. Other examples that she offered of overcoming fear included being the only woman to join her dart club and telling Gary about the abuse in her past and the difficulties it had caused her.

I asked Jessica how she had been able to overcome fear in these instances. She said that in the case of telling Gary about the abuse she knew that because of the trouble she had had with intimacy she would lose him if she didn't. So she took the risk and stood up to the internal voice that argued for silence. In a larger sense, Jessica said that she knows that a lot of what we fear in this world doesn't matter that much. She trusts her Higher Power. This knowledge and trust help her overcome fear.

I asked what these examples of taking risks and overcoming fear said about her. Jessica responded, "that I can do it, that there is some part inside of me that is compelled to do it. I guess also that I have perseverance and a belief in my own growth and development."

When I asked what difference it would make if she took these descriptions of herself to heart in the context of her relationship with Gary, she said that owning them in that way could make a difference sexually. She grinned and said, "It makes me want to practice more." She added that she had been trying to please Gary but this conversation was making her interested in practicing for her own pleasure, like she had at horseback riding and darts, for fun and so that she could relax. She also said that thinking about it as practicing made her feel like she could be more in charge. She intended to talk to Gary about these ideas.

As the conversation drew to an end, I asked Jessica if it had been helpful. She said, "Yes. It hadn't occurred to me how much I have changed and accomplished until now."

Jessica called one month later. After our meeting she had talked with Gary about wanting to practice and be more in charge. They went through some "misunderstandings about this but then things got comfortable." Sex stopped hurting and Jessica had been enjoying it more and more. She said that it got more playful and sensual. She and Gary had been having other problems, and she didn't know if the two of them

would end up together, but she felt very pleased with the possibilities she had begun to realize for herself as a sexual and playful person. She hoped the two of them would work things out, but if they didn't she understood that it wasn't because there was something wrong with her. It was because they didn't fit. She now believed that it was possible for her to have a satisfying intimate relationship.

**IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN STORY DEVELOPMENT**

We will return to Jessica's story throughout this chapter, using episodes from it to illustrate elements of the process through which we invite people to develop sparkling events into robust, richly experienced narratives. But before we get back to Jessica, let us share a couple of other stories.

**Transformative Stories Are Performed Stories**

One day in therapy, Crystal told me (GC) a story. Her extended family was gathered for a weekend at her mother's house. She and her sister, Carmen, were in the kitchen leaning against the kitchen counter, talking, with a bag of potato chips open on the counter between them. As they talked they ate potato chips. At regular intervals Crystal thought to herself, "I'm going to stop eating these," but as the conversation continued she and Carmen kept on eating potato chips. Finally, at one point in the conversation, Crystal said out loud, "I'm going to stop eating these." Carmen nodded. Crystal closed up the bag and put it in a cabinet, and the two continued their conversation.

Crystal told me this story because it reminded her of what happens in therapy. "It becomes more real when you say it out loud," she told me. "Maybe we're talking about something I haven't thought about in years, but we're having this whole conversation, and you keep asking me more and more about it. By the time I leave it's like it just happened. You ask me what I'm going to do next, and I say it out loud, and then I do it. Just like the potato chips. You were thinking some of these kinds of things before but they didn't get into what you were doing. Once you say it out loud it's more real. Then you do it."

Milton Erickson used to tell a story about being on a road trip with a friend. As he was driving, Erickson told his friend about another trip he had taken years ago on the same road. As he was telling the story he began trying to manually shift the car. His car was an automatic shift
car, and he had been driving an automatic shift car for years, but the story he was living happened twenty years before—when he drove a manual car—so he automatically moved his feet and reached out to shift as he was telling the story.

This ‘performance’ of stories does not happen automatically or every time someone tells a story. It does happen when a person is immersed in the story and when he experiences the story as meaningful.

We sometimes view therapy as a ritual or ceremony that centers around the “performance of meaning” (E. Bruner, 1986a; Myerhoff, 1986; White, 1991; White & Epston, 1990) on people’s ‘preferred’ stories (White, 1991) about themselves, their relationships, and their experiential realities. Along with Edward Bruner (1986a, p. 25), we believe that ‘stories become transformative only in their performance.’

Our intention, then, is not to co-construct stories that represent or describe experience, but to co-construct stories through which people can live in preferred ways (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; White, 1991). Returning to Jessica’s story, an event in her life on which she performed meaning was the childhood experience of sitting on her grandmother’s lap and teaching her grandmother a song. Jessica immersed herself in that memory and saw herself through her grandmother’s eyes. Then she developed the story through time, authoring and experiencing a speculative history of what her life would have been like if she had lived with her grandmother. After this conversation, Jessica found herself doing a whole range of things that were unusual, from saying “thank you” to quitting smoking. She said that she had gained an understanding through our work of the kind of person she was and that she was being the person she now knew she was. She began living a new story, not simply telling it. The story was both shaped by life events and shaping of life events and self-image.

The People We Work with Are the Privileged Authors

Stories are authored through conversation, and in therapy the stuff of stories is the experience of the people we work with. The story that is constructed is clearly the person’s or family’s own, and it is deeply personal.

We can’t know where people’s stories will go. We can only co-author a story a piece at a time. Each detail stands on the one before and can only be constructed as the one before begins to find form and definition (Tomm, 1993; White, 1991). This is very different from developing a goal and then finding experiences to support it (Chang & Phillips, 1993). It calls for curiosity and involvement in each bit of the story as it emerges. Each bit of construction can be responded to with an infinite number of questions, each of which would lead in a different direction. An important part of our job as co-constructors is to be very alert to the nonverbal and verbal communication of the people we work with so that we can recognize and ask questions about the experiences that seem most meaningful to them (Andersen, 1991a, 1993).

I (JF) didn’t know about Jessica’s experience teaching her grand-mother a song until she brought it up. However, since it was very obviously meaningful for her, I asked her many questions about it.

Because we don’t know where a story will go and because we are not its principal authors, we often use the subjunctive mood. David Epston (1991), following Jerome Bruner, refers to this as “subjunctivizing,” a term Bruner (1986, p. 26) uses in reference to “trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties.” Along this line, we use ‘would’ or ‘could’ instead of ‘will’ as a way of introducing possibilities, but not prescribing them.

Lynn Hoffman makes a similar point about the work of Tom Andersen and his colleagues. She (Hoffman, 1992, p. 18) writes, “They tend to begin their sentences with ‘Could it be that?’ or ‘What if?’ . . and the effect on clients is to encourage both participation and invention.”

OPENINGS TO NEW STORIES

Listening for Openings

As we discussed in Chapter 3, we generally focus on deconstructing people’s problem-saturated narratives before attempting to bring forth new stories. However, although we are presenting the processes separately for sake of clarity, the construction of preferred stories almost always goes hand-in-hand with the process of deconstruction.

Our entryway for inviting people to author and live new stories is through “unique outcomes,” that is, anything that wouldn’t have been predicted in light of a problem-saturated story. Unique outcomes constitute openings that, through questions and reflective discussion, can be developed into new stories.

The way unique outcomes or “sparkling events” become apparent can vary tremendously. A delightful example is Jessica’s phone call beginning with, “Do you know what it would be like to wear new shoes, new clothes, new makeup, and new breast implants all at the same time?” and continuing through her description of saying, “thank you,” at McDonald’s.

I (JF) am currently working with a family whose members are struggling with worries about Alexis, the 17-year-old daughter. They came to
see me the day Alexis had been sent to the principal’s office at school following a challenging confrontation with a teacher. We had an externalizing conversation about the effects of anger in her life and in the life of other family members. I wasn’t sure whether this conversation was meaningful to Alexis. When I asked questions searching for unique outcomes such as, "Have there been times when you've been able to keep the anger from determining your behavior?" she responded with shrugs and "I don't know."

At our next meeting, two weeks later, just after the family entered my office, before she even sat down, Alexis announced, "I did great! I was great! Have you ever read The Fall, by Albert Camus? Well, we had this test on it and first we had a matching section and then there were quotes, not where you identify quotes but where they give you quotes and you have to say who said it and what was happening right before and after it, which is absurd for The Fall, I mean it's this existential novel where they go to this cafe in Amsterdam and talk about their opinions about everything in the world all night long. So how could you know when a particular thing was said? But anyway, then there were short answers like about stuff about symbolism and then an essay. And we had forty minutes to do this whole thing. And I could just feel the anger creeping up on me more and more. So I just said to myself, 'If you were in a college class with like a thousand students where the teacher would never know you or anything and you let this anger get you to blow up, you would just never get through college.' So I just said, 'Nope!' to the anger. And at home a couple of days ago my mom shrunk this shirt that I really like," Alexis said dramatically, glancing at her mother, "and she's always doing that and I told her not to put it in the dryer. But I just went, 'Anger? Nope!'" Alexis made a brushing away gesture with her arm as she said, "Nope!"

Sometimes people offer unique outcomes quite directly, but with less drama than Alexis did. For example, someone may be describing a problem and then say, "It's not always like that," and go on to describe a unique outcome.

If Jessica hadn't told me about learning the song, I might have said, "Anger? Nope!" I just said, "Nope!" to the anger. And at home a couple of days ago my mom shrunk this shirt that I really like," Alexis said dramatically, glancing at her mother, "and she's always doing that and I told her not to put it in the dryer. But I just went, 'Anger? Nope!'" Alexis made a brushing away gesture with her arm as she said, "Nope!"

Most often, openings develop "spontaneously" in the process of listening deconstructively and asking people about the effects of problems on their lives and relationships. If openings don't develop spontaneously, we can inquire more directly about their existence. As we mentioned in the discussion of relative influence questioning in Chapter 3, when we are working with an externalized problem, the most straightforward way of looking for openings is to ask about the influence of the person on the life of the problem. That is, we ask questions like, "Has there ever been a time when the problem tried to get the upper hand, but you were able to resist its influence?" or "Have you ever been able to escape the problem for even a few minutes?" or "Is the problem always with you?" When questions of this sort follow a detailed inquiry into the effects of the problem on the person, people can usually find instances in which they were able to elude the problem's influence. Each such instance is a potential opening onto an alternative life narrative.

In the fourth meeting with Jessica, we were working with the externalized problem of "self-doubt." Through questioning, we found that one of the effects of self-doubt on Jessica was that it led her to ask herself whether she would ever be "healthy," "normal," or "playful." Then I asked whether there had ever been times when Jessica had been sure of her ability to be healthy, normal, or playful, even for a moment. This inquiry led to an experience that proved to be a pivotal opening for Jessica, the one of teaching the song to her grandmother.

There are other kinds of questions that can also bring forth unique outcomes. Here we'll limit ourselves to a few examples of some of these questions in relation to Jessica's story.

If Jessica hadn't told me about learning the song, I might have said,
"I understand that you don’t see yourself as healthy, normal, or playful, but if I were to interview other people who know you, who might say that you are? What have they noticed about you that would make them say that?" Or I could have posed a hypothetical outcome question, such as, "If you grew up in a different household and no abuse had occurred, do you think self-doubt would have been able to get such a hold on your life? Do you think you might be more playful now? What do you think there is about you that would have developed in this way in better circumstances?"

Making Sure the Opening Represents a Preferred Experience

Once we perceive a candidate "sparkling moment," we ask a question such as: "Does this interest you?" "Did that surprise you?" "Is this some-thing that you want more of in your life?" or "Do you think this is a good thing or a bad thing?" Questions like these invite people to consider whether something that we see as a possible opening is really new for them and whether it opens in a direction that they prefer over the direction of the problem-saturated story.

In addition to asking questions, we pay attention to nonverbal communication. When I (JF) wonder aloud how Jessica has moved from one set of effects to the other (p. 79), Jessica readily begins to fill in details of the differences between the past and the present. We see this kind of easy and willing response as evidence that a person thinks an opening is relevant and meaningful, so we feel comfortable in continuing to ask for more details. If someone does not responded so readily, we would drop our inquiry into the particular events in question and go back to listening and questioning deconstructively.

Remember that, especially in the beginning, as we are becoming acculturated to people’s experiential worlds, we listen to their existing narratives. As we listen, we orient ourselves to their values, customs, and preferred ways of relating. The intimate and graphic details that Jessica volunteered were evidence that a relationship of trust and mutual respect was developing. Only as such evidence is perceived do we feel comfortable about moving our focus to the construction of a new story. Especially for people with stories of abuse like Jessica’s, attempting to move too quickly can be yet one more violation and disqualification by a powerful other. At the same time, it is important to be careful not to reify or replicate the abuse by becoming voyeuristically involved and pushing for more detail about the problem story than the person freely and comfortably gives (Durrant & Kowalski, 1990).

DEVELOPING AN OPENING INTO A STORY

Once we have agreed upon a preferred opening that seems relevant and interesting to the people we are working with, we invite them to develop it into an alternative story. For Jessica, teaching her grand-mother a song was a sparkling moment that opened onto a vivid and compelling story. Not only did Jessica "re-collect" the story of that event itself, but she storied a speculative history and a future based on it. As we have seen, although the future was speculative, Jessica began living it.

We don’t have a formula to follow in this process, but we do keep in mind that stories involve events that happen through time in particular contexts and that they usually include more than one person. Remember that a big part of what lets new stories make a difference in people’s lives is that, in telling them to other people, a performance of meaning occurs. In order to make the therapy conversation a "ritual space" in which the performance of meaning can occur, we strive to maintain the kind of focused attention and mutual respect that will make it easy and natural for people to become experientially involved in the stories they are tell-ing. Ideally, people should be reliving the events as they tell them.

Think Like a Novelist or Screenwriter

If you talk to me (GC) while I’m reading, I probably won’t answer. It’s not that I’d be ignoring you. It’s just that I wouldn’t be there. I’d be in a different city or country, in a different time. I’d even be a different person.

Good novels, plays, and poetry create worlds that the reader enters into. We’ve found it helpful to think about what makes stories compel-ling and how our experience and imagination are recruited by particular stories (White, 1988/9).

One way that novelists, playwrights, and other accomplished storytell-ers make their stories experientially vivid is by including detail. Consider this excerpt from Franny and Zooey (Salinger, 1955/61, p. 12 in the 1986 Penguin paperback). In this scene Lane is meeting Franny’s train:

Franny was among the first of the girls [sic] to get off the train, from a car at the far, northern end of the platform. Lane spotted her immediately, and despite whatever it was he was trying to do with his face, his arm that shot up into the air was the whole truth. Franny saw it, and him, and waved extravagantly back. She was
wearing a sheared raccoon coat, and Lane, walking toward her quickly but with a slow face, reasoned to himself, with suppressed excitement, that he was the only one on the platform who really knew Franny's coat. He remembered once, in a borrowed car, after kissing Franny for a half hour or so, he had kissed her coat lapel, as though it were a perfectly desirable, organic extension of the person herself.

`Lane!' Franny greeted him pleasurably—and she was not one for emptying her face of expression. She threw her arms around him and kissed him. It was a station-platform kiss—spontaneous enough to begin with, but rather inhibited in the follow-through, and with somewhat of a forehead-bumping aspect.

In other hands, the same ground might have been covered by writing, `Lane picked Franny up at the train station.' As you can see, detail creates this scene, pulling us into it.

Similarly, when people search for specifics of detail in memories, they tend to become experientially involved. (Notice what happens if you find a memory from a few years ago, then begin to flesh out its details: what you and other people were wearing, who spoke to whom when, what time of day it was, how bright or dim the light was, etc.)

We think that in counteracting the effects of a problem-saturated story, it is important to develop as rich, detailed, and meaningful a counter-story as possible. In our second meeting, Jessica and I (JF) talked about how Jessica had managed to attenuate and compartmentalize the effects of the abuse in her life. Although it was quite abbreviated in our retelling here, a wonderful and richly detailed story came forth. The story was always a possible part of Jessica's life narrative, but until the previous six weeks the events from which it was constructed had been lying around disconnected and gathering dust in seldom-visited memories.

One way of being sure to invite people to include detail in their stories is to inquire about multiple modalities of experience. In the excerpt from *Franny and Zooey*, J. D. Salinger describes what Lane was thinking as well as what he was doing, and what he was feeling as well as what he was thinking.

We've found that people become more experientially involved in an emerging story if they include more than one modality of experience. We were particularly impressed with how different modalities drew us into a story when watching a videotape of David Epston's work. In the conversation we were watching, a teenage boy was telling David about a conver-

... See the transcript at the end of this chapter for more examples of detail in authoring stories.

It can be helpful to ask what people are thinking as well as what they are doing, what they are feeling as well as what they are thinking. And we have also found it helpful to ask about seeing, hearing, and feeling.

I (GC) don't know all the details that Jessica experienced in re-collecting the memory of teaching the song to her grandmother, but every time I hear her story it takes me back to an experience of sitting in *my* grandmother's lap. I must have been about four, and we were in the porch swing that hung to the left of her front door. It was late on a summer afternoon, and the tiger lilies in her fence row were casting long and very distinct shadows across her clover-strewn lawn. She had on a blue print housedress. Her big, soft, warm, pale arms were gently, loosely, cradling me and we were swinging slowly and almost-but-not-quite imperceptibly back and forth. She had bet me that I couldn't count out loud to a hundred, and when I reached a hundred she bet that I couldn't make it to 200. I could feel her breath lightly moving the hair on the crown of my head... .

**Characters and Multiple Viewpoints**

Most stories have a number of characters. Since we think about realities being socially constructed, including others in re-authoring makes

A major way that we do this is through asking about other people's points of view.

The novelist's substitute for the appearance-reality distinction is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events. What the novelist finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions, to take it as an excuse for ignoring all the others. What he *[sic]* finds heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.

(Rorty, 1991b, p. 74)

Changing point of view almost always brings out different details, different emotions, or different meanings. There are many different points of view that we can propose: looking through the eyes of other people (a relative, a co-worker, a best friend, a tormenter), looking through one's own eyes at a different age, "stepping back" and looking...
at the story from a reflecting position, looking back from the future, looking forward from the past, and so on.

I (JF) asked Jessica who might have predicted that she would be able to stand up to the effects of the abuse, had they known about it. Jessica said that certain teachers and classmates would have predicted it. They knew she was tough and smart. Through the eyes of these teachers and classmates, with the knowledge that she was tough and smart, Jessica re-saw her plight in a different way—with the belief in her ability to oppose the abuse.

Later, when I asked Jessica what her grandmother recognized in her and most appreciated about her, I was asking Jessica to tell a portion of her story from her grandmother’s point of view. From that point of view, she recognized that she was lovable (something she did not recognize from her usual point of view). This recognition pointed the way for Jessica to reexperience many "lost episodes" from her life that had to do with being a good person, being healthy, being warm, being fun, being receptive, and being able to recognize good things in others. As she tells these stories and I listen, thoroughly eliciting details, we are engaged in a ceremony; we are performing meaning on the stories, allowing the emotions, actions, and beliefs associated with them to become part of the official record of Jessica’s life.

Attention to the scene or setting of a story is another aspect of making it experientially compelling. It can be important, then, to ask questions that bring forth knowledge about the various contexts of a person’s life. For Jessica, the problem-dominated story took place mostly in the realms of her childhood home with particular family members and in social situations. It also took place in the context of patriarchy, where women are seen as the property of men. The alternative story that she authored included the contexts of school, her professional settings, and being home with her grandmother. These were all less patriarchal con-texts than the one supporting the problem-saturated story.

In other situations, drawing out descriptions of context grounds stories in actual places. This can be important in making sure that these stories are lived stories. Situating their experience in these places draws people into performance of stories.

Dual Landscapes

Michael White (White & Epston, 1990), following Jerome Bruner (1986), speaks of the “dual landscapes” of action and consciousness. He believes that since the stories that constitute people’s lives unfold in both those landscapes, therapists should inquire about both. Let’s look first at the landscape of action. Bruner (J. Bruner, 1986, p. 14) writes that its "constituents are the arguments of action: agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument, something corresponding to a ‘story grammar.’ This is similar to the ‘who, what, when, where, and how’ of journalism. I k e  landscape of action, we plot sequences of events through time.

You can see that much of what we have already discussed under "developing an opening into a story' relates to the landscape of action: detail in multiple modalities involving the viewpoints of multiple characters in a particular scene or setting. What we need to add now is the action itself. What happened, in what sequence, involving which characters?

There were many times when Jessica and I worked together to expand Jessica’s preferred stories in the landscape of action. She told the story of her achievements at school. We explored events from her professional life, where the effects of the abuse had less power than in her social life. She told me in detail, and from two vantage points, the story of teaching her grandmother the song, describing the actions involved and fleshing them out more in each telling. When Jessica returned after four years, she told me the story of her forays into horseback riding and playing darts, and I invited her to expand on these events.

In the landscape of action, we are interested in constructing an "agentive self with people. That is, we ask questions with an eye to enhancing those aspects of the emerging story that support "personal agency” (Adams-Westcott, Dafforn, & Sterne, 1993). The very act of re-authoring quires and demonstrates personal agency, and most people experience Viet in this work. We go a step farther in making personal agency apparent by asking in a variety of ways how people have accomplished what they have. With Jessica, one example is the question about what she had done to create an identity for herself, instead of letting the effects of the ‘abuse create her identity.

Asking "how," or some question that implies 'how,’ is especially useful for inviting stories of personal agency. The answers to 'how' questions can also make stories experientially vivid and develop sequences of events through time. Questions like, "How did you do that?” “What did you do that led you to feel this new feeling?” and "How did you notice this different way of perceiving the situation?” are examples. Answers to such questions almost always come in the form of stories.'

We think about the shape of a story as it comes forth: What happened

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1You might want to try this yourself. Identify a behavior, perception, or emotion from your recent life experience. Ask yourself how that behavior, experience, or emotion came about. Isn't your answer a story of sorts?
before the unique outcome? How smoothly did things unfold? Were there false starts involved? What did this particular episode lead to? In this regard, we are especially interested to know if there is a turning point, a place where the story changes for the good. Although “turning point” is not a fitting metaphor for everyone in every situation, when it is, it becomes a significant event that we can plot in time, so that it becomes a story. If there is such a point, it creates a focus for when a problematic story becomes a preferred one. As such, we believe it is useful to focus special attention on it, bringing forth even more shape and detail, perhaps even treating it as a story-within-a-story.

No matter how vivid a story is in the landscape of action, if it is to have meaning, it must also be developed in the landscape of consciousness. By “the landscape of consciousness” we refer to that imaginary territory where people plot the meanings, desires, intentions, beliefs, commitments, motivations, values, and the like that relate to their experience in the landscape of action. In other words, in the landscape of consciousness, people reflect on the implications of experiences storied in the landscape of action. Thus, when Jessica named the new account of herself “my new image,” she was in the landscape of consciousness.

Jerome Bruner (1986) has discussed how the interplay between these dual landscapes invites empathic and experiential involvement in the lives and minds of the characters in a story. As we read a novel, watch a movie, or listen to a friend recount an amusing anecdote, we only become really involved as we reflect on what people’s actions mean—why they do what they do, what they hope will or won’t happen next, what their actions say about their character, and so on. Earlier, we described asking people how they do things as a way of storying agentive... questions only come to embody personal agency when people enter the landscape of consciousness and make meaning of them.

In order to explore the landscape of consciousness, we ask what we (Freedman & Combs, 1993) call meaning questions. These are questions that invite people to step back from the landscape of action and reflect on the wishes, motivations, values, beliefs, learning, implications, and so forth that lead to and flow from the actions they have recounted.

In the second meeting with Jessica, I asked what it meant that she had accomplished so much already in her life in spite of the abuse. Jessica replied, after some thought, that it meant that she was smart and tough. We believe that Jessica had not previously linked the personal attributes of smartness and toughness so directly to the actions of getting a nursing degree, doing well at a difficult job, and establishing a nice home for herself in spite of the abuse. Even if she had, both the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness became more real, more vivid, and more memorable as she reflected on the story she constructed.

Again, when I asked Jessica what her grandmother recognized in her and most appreciated about her, we were trafficking in the landscape of consciousness. The meaning question I asked this time was from the grandmother’s point of view. Jessica replied that her grandmother recognized and appreciated that she was lovable. She went on to explain that being lovable meant many things: it meant she was a good person; it meant she was smart; it meant she was fun; it meant she was normal, may, playful, and receptive; it meant she recognized good things in others. In the therapy conversation, even if they had never been linked before in her experience, this rich and wonderful complex of meanings became linked for Jessica to the memory of sitting in her grandmother's lap and teaching her a song. And together, the meanings and the actions made a narrative that was detailed, vivid, and experientially involving.

In co-authoring stories, we move between the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness, weaving the two back and forth again and again.

Hypothetical or Speculative Experiences

Fiction has taught us that truth can be found in descriptions of events that never occurred. After all, as Edward Bruner (1986a, p. 18) re-minds us,

... stories serve as meaning-generating interpretive devices which frame the present within a hypothetical past and an anticipated future.

Consider the speculative history that Jessica developed of how her life might have been “starting with when she was very little and coming all the way up to how things might be different for her now if she had grown up living with her grandmother.” To us, it seems more appropriate for that history to speak of Jessica’s identity. It speaks of the identity she prefers and has been working hard for years to construct. The one that had to do with being fearful to enter public spaces in her own house because of years of abusive treatment was never her preferred identity, it was a “ruse” perpetrated by the abuse.

Isolated sparkling moments can easily be lost. Once they emerge, using them as a basis to speculate about how things might have been or could be is one more way to keep them alive and storied. A hypothetical story can become the basis for actual present and future events.
DEVELOPING A "HISTORY
OF THE PRESENT"

Michael White (White & Epston, 1990, p. 9) writes:

Social scientists became interested in the text analogy following observations that, although a piece of behavior occurs in time in such a way that it no longer exists in the present by the time it is attended to, the meaning that is inscribed into the behavior survives across time. . . . In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them.

In rendering such accounts, once a preferred event has been identified, we want to link that event to other preferred events across time, so that their meanings survive, and so that the events and their meanings can thicken a person’s narrative in preferred ways. Therefore, once a preferred event is identified and storied we ask questions that might link it to other events in the past and the future.

Before we adopted a narrative map, we worked to help people identify “resources” from non-problematic life contexts and to use those resources in problematic contexts. It was quite common for us to search through past experiences for these resources. However, we thought of the re-sources as states of consciousness and used past experiences only as a way to help people access resourceful states. We made little effort to connect experiences and states into a narrative that could persist through time. Now, we think of such experiences as important life events that, through performance of meaning and connection with other such events, can alter problematic narratives in satisfying ways. This leads us to de-vote much of our time and energy to re-viewing, re-experiencing, and linking together the antecedents of present unique outcomes. Michael White (1993) calls the kind of story that results from this process a "history of the present."

In working with Jessica, her accomplishments in spite of the abuse stood out as unique outcomes. In asking who would have predicted that she would stand up to the effects of the abuse (as shown through her accomplishments), I was inviting Jessica to co-construct a history of the present with me. This history included more details than we have re-corded in the written narrative. It included a number of people who would have predicted that Jessica could stand up to the abuse and the stories of a number of events they witnessed at different times in her life.

We storied each of these events as a precursor to standing up to the above. Together they constituted a history of her present accomplishments.

EXTENDING THE STORY
INTO THE FUTURE

We can also ask how the emerging new story influences a person’s ideas about the future. As people free more and more of their pasts from the grip of problem-dominated stories, they are able to envision, expect, and plan toward less problematic futures.

In our second meeting, when I asked Jessica, “If we look back over the years at how you have used your strength and intelligence to take charge of your life—you got an education, became a nurse, and found ways to limit the effects of the abuse—is this readiness to get married you are talking about the next step?,” I was recounting a history of the present and asking her to extend the story into the future. In responding to my question, Jessica began to imagine herself having warm and tender feelings and connecting with another person. She could now really believe that it was possible for her to move into the realm of romantic relationships, something that had seemed only a fantasy before.

When Jessica returned four years later, we could see her beginning to realize the future she had begun to author in our work together.

A PRACTICE FORMAT
FOR STORY DEVELOPMENT

We offer you this practice format as a tool for learning, not a prescription or a recipe. It outlines an idealized shape for a therapy conversation that puts together many of the ideas we have talked about in this chapter. In our actual work, things rarely follow the shape we describe here. As with any interesting conversation, there are digressions, recapitulations, and changes of order.

1. **Begin with a unique outcome.** Even when people are describing problem-saturated stories, they often mention or imply experiences that do not fit with these stories. Ask about such events.

   You've said that, even though moods of hopelessness often lead you to suicidal thoughts, you know that you don't really want to die. When was the last time this knowledge helped you turn suicidal thoughts away?
You've said that your son woke you up four nights last week. What happened on the other three nights?
If such events are not alluded to, ask about times or places they might have occurred.
Has there been a time when the arguing could have taken over, but it didn't?
When was the last time your son got himself to school?

2. Make sure the unique outcome represents a preferred experience. Ask people to evaluate the unique outcome.
Was that a good experience or a bad one?
Do you want more of this kind of interaction in your relationship?

3. Plot the story in the landscape of action.
How did you prepare yourself to take this step?
What do you think was the turning point in your relationship that led to this being possible?
What exactly did you do?
Were you guided by an image or something you said to yourself?
Did you have a plan?
Was it a decision you made on your own or did other people play a part?
What exactly did your partner say when you told him? What was the look on his face?

4. Plot the story in the landscape of consciousness.
What does it say about you as a person that you would do this?
What personal characteristics does it show?
What do you see in your relationship when you look at this event?
Is there something you learned in that conversation with your aunt that might be important in other areas of your life?
What went into doing this at this point in your life?
What does this show about your goals for your life?

Note that questions from points 3 and 4 can be woven back and forth:
How did you prepare yourself to take this step? What does it say about you as a person that you would do this? What personal characteristics does it show? Knowing that about yourself, did that have something to do with how you did it? Were you guided by an image or something you said to yourself? Did you have a plan? What went into your doing it at this point in your life? What do you think the turning point in your relationship was that led to this being possible? What do you see in your relationship when you look at this event?

5. Ask about a past time that has something in common with the unique outcome or the meaning of the unique outcome.
Were there times when you've done this kind of thing before? What example are you thinking of?
Who would have predicted this event? What have they seen you do before that would have led them to believe you would have done this?
Now that you recognize this quality in your partner do memories come to mind of times where you have experienced this quality in him before?
What time in your life best illustrates your perseverance? What incident stands out for you from that time?

6. Plot the story of the past event in the landscape of action. (as in 3)
7. Plot the story of the past event in the landscape of consciousness. (as in 4)
8. Ask questions to link the past episode with the present.
Now that I understand its foundation in your past, do you see how this recent development in your relationship makes even more sense to me?
If I could ask the you back then what she thinks of these recent developments, what would she say?
When you think about that past time, does it put the experience that you had last week in a different light?

9. Ask questions to extend the story into the future.
If we look at these events that we've been talking about as a trend in your life, what do you expect the next step will be? Does looking at these events today have an impact on what you see in your future?

Steps 5 through 8 serve to facilitate developing a history of the present. They can be repeated with a number of events.
We offer the following transcript so that you can get a feel for how we put the ideas we have explicated in this chapter into action moment-by-moment in a single therapy conversation.

I (GC) am talking with Emma, who first came to see me when she was nearly immobilized by depression. She had lost her job as production manager in a large plant when the company “downsized.” When she was unable to find another job like her old one, she went to work for her younger brother, who was a real “wheeler-dealer.” He soon had her working two jobs: managing a diner he had won in a poker game and keeping the books for his real estate company. For this, he was paying her half the salary she had earned as a production manager.

As you will read, Emma had grown up with many responsibilities and little support. At the point I met her, fear that standing up to her brother would alienate her other siblings and cause a family uproar had immobilized her. This led her to characterize herself as having no voice and no spine.

Just before the meeting prior to this one, Emma had “told her brother off.” He had given her a “ton of paperwork” to do late on a Friday afternoon, expecting her to do it before she left for the day, and she rebelled, yelling at him and storming out. We spent most of the meeting before this one developing the story of that incident.

At the start of the meeting from which the transcript is taken, Emma told me she had been job hunting for the first time in a long time, and that she had found a job! She thought she had handled the interview for this job superbly. We developed the story of the interview. Then I learned that she had had another confrontation with her brother, Ray. This time she had handled herself calmly and with strength, saying that she would be resigning soon and that she expected him to give her two weeks of paid vacation when she left!

So you said that your big fear was talking to Ray.

EMMA Uh-huh.

GENE And you said the stuff you had to say calmly, and from strength...

EMMA Uh-huh.

(In these first few questions, I have identified a unique outcome which was quite clearly a preferred one for Emma, and reviewed some of the developments she had already described in the landscape of action.)

GENE Well, what does that say to you about yourself? What kind of a person does that say to you that you are, that you’ve been able to do that now?

(I now inquire about the landscape of consciousness, and Emma becomes involved in a very substantial answer.)

EMMA Hmm...well... (under her breath, to herself) what kind of person am I? (addressing Gene again) Well, it made me realize that I had been taken advantage of and that angered me. But, I don’t know. I guess it goes back to that, what I said before, that I’m a lot stronger than I thought I was. My self-worth is a lot more than I thought it was. A lot more. I’m finding out that I’m a pretty good person. I’m starting to lose that insecurity and that self...self... I don’t know. Is “deprivation” the right word? I don’t put myself down as much verbally — I never thought out loud to myself “You’re stupid! You’re bad!”—I just had this feeling. I was “adequate,” and not really good. Ray reinforced that feeling in me over the past year, I’ve come to realize, that I was adequate, or I’m expendable, or I was one that could just be walked all over, and he pushed me aside. And that’s one thing I said to him on Wednesday when we were having this heated discussion. I said to him, “Ray, I was always your safety net. I was always there for you. You could treat me however you wanted.” And I said, “You can’t do that anymore.” And “It’s rotten that you’re doing it.” And I’m wondering if you even realize you’re doing it to me, but you are doing it to me, and it will not be tolerated.” I mean, I feel bad for him, he’s so caught up in himself. And you wouldn’t have to say some stuff, but you felt like you had to.
he said to me, "We sat in Jack's office," that's his partner, 'and we never discussed this first month's salary."

I said, 'No, we sat in your living room and discussed it. You, me, and your wife."

And he said, "Well, that's another thing. Reba doesn't re-member that conversation either."

And I said, "Really? If I call her up and ask her, is she going to remember? She doesn't even know that you owe me this money, does she? She doesn't even know about it."

And he goes, "No she doesn't." He hasn't even been truthful with her.

GENE If you think of people that knew you when you were a kid EMMA

Uh-huh.

GENE . . . friends, family, teachers—who from back then would be least surprised to see you taking the stand that you've taken with Ray, or to see you being the way you were in that job interview?

(Here I ask Emma to begin thinking about past events that have some-thing in common with the present unique outcome.)

EMMA Who would be least surprised?

GENE Yeah. Who would say, "I knew she had it in her."

EMMA Well, my Uncle Patrick. Hmm . . .

EMMA Yeah? . . .

EMMA Yeah. I have an uncle. . . . Now he would read it—he's the one person in my life who would read it—as, "I knew she had it in her. Good for her." The others in my life wouldn't have been surprised that I did what I did, but they would have read it as, "She's just a pushy bitch! Always has been, always will be."

GENE But what was it that your Uncle Patrick saw as different about you?

(Emma has identified a person from the past who would appreciate the sparkling event in her present life. I invite her to explore the meaning of her life from Uncle Patrick's viewpoint. When she takes up my invitation, she experiences a flood of memories. She tells several stories about past experiences. These stories are rich in detail and she spontaneously develops them in both the landscape of consciousness and the landscape of action. On her own, she introduces another key character, Aunt Joan.)
And she just started laughing. And it was shortly after that, my parents lost their house to foreclosure. And I had all this responsibility on me.

She always called me once every other week. Just to see how I was. I didn’t have anybody else. And to this day, we talk at least once a month. And when they come to town, they stay with me. It’s just a given.

I had talked to her a couple weeks ago, and told her about the awful fight I had with Ray, and how awful it was.

And she’s going, “Get out of there. You just get out of there. Get another job.”

So Sunday, I came back from church. What I usually do on Sunday morning, I read the newspaper. I turn on the stereo. You know, I just have some quiet time. I was thinking to ... not going to wait for her to call me. I’m going to call her.” I literally got up from my chair and went to get my phone book. My phone rang. It was her. And I screamed.

I went, “I can’t believe this.”


And I went, “Aunt Joan, I was just picking the phone up to call you. Literally, just picking the phone up.”

And she starts to giggle. She goes, “I’ve been thinking about you all morning.”

I said, “All morning? If it’s 9 o’clock here it can only be 7 o’clock there.” (You know, because they’re in Vegas.)

And she said, “I was up really early.” And she said, “Some-thing good?”

And I went, “Well, maybe.”

She goes, “Do you have a smile on your face?”

I went, “Yeah. It’s about as wide as the Mississippi. I think I got the job!”

She goes, “Good.”

You know? But it was so strange. It was so strange ... yeah.

We had a long time. ... They came and stayed with me right after my mother passed away. My uncle was in the other room. He’s an alcoholic, and he was just drinking. And I told her about my mom and dad always making me feel or telling me that I was adequate, “But that was fine because it was the best you can do. But, you’re not as good as so and so.”

And I can remember seeing the fire in her eyes. She was so furious. And it was the first time ... .

GENE Now when was that?

EMMA This was four years ago.

GENE Uh-huh.

EMMA My mom will be dead four years this May. It was the first time that I can vividly remember thinking to myself, “Geez, maybe it’s not true. Maybe those feelings aren’t true. Maybe I am pretty good at what I do.”

GENE Now, what was it about that interaction that made it possible for you to think that?

EMMA Because of her instant reaction to the statement that I made. That, you know, they made me feel like . . . they told me I was adequate at best. And you know how you can see in some-body’s look on their face like they were shocked? That that was the last thing they expected to hear?

GENE Yeah.

EMMA When I saw her initial reaction. . . . Of course after her initial reaction, then came the typical aunt accolades and, "No. No. You’re wonderful. You’ve done a lot for your family." And . . .

GENE But it was more the reaction than the words?

EMMA It was more the reaction that got through to me.

GENE Yeah.

EMMA People’s reactions get through to me faster than words I’ve come to. . . . They do, because words mean nothing. Most of the time.

GENE Now . . . so she knew something about you for a long, long, time....

EMMA Uh-huh.

GENE . . . that that adequate stuff just didn’t fit with at all. It just made her blood boil.

EMMA Yeah. It did! Instantly.

GENE So, what do you think you would see if you were able to look at you when you were a kid through your Aunt Joan’s eyes, and see that kid the way Aunt Joan saw that kid? What do you think she saw back then? What do you think you would see?

EMMA Well, through my young adolescent years, she wasn’t around. She was out on the West Coast.
GENE But if we go back to when she did... 
EMMA Before that?
GENE Yeah... what do you think she saw that maybe nobody else except maybe your Uncle Patrick saw? What did she notice in you?
EMMA I don’t know. I think that... 
GENE Well, what would be your guess? Best as you can imagine, kind of crawling inside her body... 
EMMA That here is a kid that has overcome what for some people would be insurmountable odds. I think.
GENE So if I were able to go back and interview her, back then, at that time, and I’d say, “What insurmountable odds? What are you talking about? What is it that she’s overcome?” What do you think she would say?
EMMA “Taking care of her family during really rough times. Keeping them together.” Because that’s what I did. I did do that. At a very young age. I did do that. She would have seen a girl that had a lot of potential but wasn’t able to develop then because she wasn’t given the opportunity.
GENE And if I said to her, back then, if I somehow could do that, “You say potential. Potential for what? What kind of potential do you see in this girl?”
EMMA Hmm... Aunt Joan’s response would be, “She should get a better education to reach whatever she would want to be. Be it a doctor or lawyer or an artist or an author, whatever it would be.”
GENE So she saw somebody that had a lot of... 
EMMA Yeah... yeah.
GENE lot of stuff.
EMMA Yeah. Aunt Joan’s kids are all real educated except for her oldest son. They all went on to... you know, it’s her daughter that’s the Ph.D. in physics. She has another daughter that’s a dancer. And she has another son that’s... She has a daughter that’s a social worker and another son that’s a very successful businessman. And then she’s got two that are a little goofy, but you know, out of seven kids she did pretty well.
She always told me later... That week that they stayed with me, after my mom died, she and I did a lot of talking.
And she said, ‘It used to always anger me that you kids weren’t given the opportunities that you should have been given.’
GENE What difference did it make for you to hear that from her?
EMMA Back then it made me feel real sad and real forlorn, like, “Gosh, I was cheated. I was cheated.”
Now I feel that it’s time to stop blaming other people and just go on with it, and stop dwelling on the past. Which I don’t think I was doing consciously, but subconsciously I think I was. I had a lot of years of garbage to get out of myself. You know?
GENE Yeah.
EMMA After my mother passed away, when it came up to my dad’s birthday time, and I couldn’t stop crying, which made me go in to see a therapist back then, he very kindly said to me, “Oh, and you miss your mom and dad, don’t you?”
And I looked around and went, “No. I’m sorry but I don’t. They weren’t nice people to me.’
They weren’t nice people. I mean, if you sat down and met them, you would have enjoyed their company. They weren’t nice people to me. I don’t think. So no.
I was mourning. I don’t know what I was mourning but it wasn’t their passing. I was mourning probably their living, instead of their passing. I think that’s what I was mourning all those years. All these past four years.
And now it’s like, “Okay, so you did the best you could do.” You know, they danced as fast as they could, and God bless them. And you just...
GENE And now you’re in a position where you can realize some of that potential that Aunt Joan always saw in you?
EMMA Yeah. That’s what I’m seeing this job... 
GENE Yeah. So, if you sit there for a second, and you think back over everything you’ve said here today... 
EMMA Uh-huh?
GENE What stands out for you? What pieces of that are... If you kind of think of yourself as somebody that’s been sitting here off to the side (gesturing to an area in a corner of the room) listening to Emma over there, (gesturing towards Emma) what stands out?
EMMA What stands out... well, I think I was a lot better person. Much better than I realized. At a much younger age. But I’m just coming to realize it now, I think.
GENE What difference does it make to be . . . not just realize that you're a good person now, but to realize that you've been a good person all along? That you were a much better person than you realized at a much younger age? What difference does it make to come to that realization now?

(Here I am inviting Emma to connect the meaning of the past experiences she has been relating to the context of her present life. She goes me one better by extending the past and present meaning into the future.)

EMMA My feelings won't get hurt as easily as they have in the past. So I will be a lot stronger. I will feel a lot stronger within so people won't walk all over me. It's been almost like a vicious circle. You know? My feelings get hurt because somebody walks all over me, and somebody walks all over me because I let them hurt my feelings. And it's like, suddenly I feel like this circle is going to be ending. You know?

GENE Yeah. Cause the possibility for . . .

EMMA Expansion.

GENE Yeah, who knows what .. .

EMMA Yeah, I know. I know. I remember last week we said something about . . . I said, "God, you know, if I just didn't have all that stuff happen to me when I was a kid, what could I have been?"

And I remember you saying, "What? Is it too late now?"

And I thought, "Yeah." But now I think, "No, it's not. Who knows what I'm going to be?" I mean who knows? Who knows?

Questions

Every time we ask a question, we're generating a possible version of a life.

— David Epston in Cowley and Springer, 1995, p. 74

There are some questions that linger in the minds of clients for weeks, months, and occasionally years, and continue to have an effect.

— Karl Tomm, 1988, p. 14

We've all been asking questions for almost as long as we've been talking. However, as narrative therapists we think about questions, compose them, and use them differently than we did before. The biggest difference is that we ask questions to generate experience rather than to gather information. When they generate experience of preferred realities, questions can be therapeutic in and of themselves. While many people (e.g., Campbell, Draper, & Huffington, 1988; de Shazer, 1994; Fleuridas, Nelson, & Rosenthal, 1986; Freedman & Combs, 1993; Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Penn, 1985; Tomm, 1987a, 1987b, 1988; White, 1988a) have written about this idea, it may have been expressed first by the Milan team (Selvini Palazzoli et al., 1980) when they wondered whether change could occur solely through their interviewing process (which consisted largely of circular questions) without any final intervention.

We first began thinking about how questions can generate experience a number of years ago, when we were using ideas primarily from strategic therapy.1 At that time we saw a family who came to therapy because

1We have described this experience elsewhere (Freedman & Combs, 1993). Because it was a turning point in our own stories of ourselves as therapists, we describe it again here.
Kathy, the 12-year-old daughter, wouldn't go to school. She didn't like it that some of her classmates at the girls school she attended were showing increasing interest in boys, alcohol, and drugs. She had the idea that if she started thinking about any of these particular classmates when she was involved in an activity, she would somehow become like them. The fear led to some problematic behaviors. For example, if a thought about one of the classmates came into her mind while she was putting on a shoe, she took it off and put it on again. She would repeat this behavior until she was positive that she had completed it with none of her class-mates in mind. She approached opening and closing doors, turning on and off lights, and an ever-increasing number of other activities in the same way. Because her classmates surrounded her when she was in the classroom, Kathy had to contend not only with her thoughts but also with the possibility of actually hearing their voices or seeing one of them while she was opening her desk or changing into gym shoes. Because of this, she found it intolerable to be in the classroom, and refused to go to school.

By the time we had met with Kathy and her parents five times, the situation had not changed. When they let us know that the two older children were coming home from school for a winter break, we arranged for the whole family to come in. We split the group for the first part of the meeting, with one of us (JF) seeing the siblings and one of us (GC) seeing the parents.

In conversation with the siblings I (JF) learned that the parents both smoked heavily and that all the children, especially Kathy, were very worried about the effects of the smoking on their parents' health. Kathy was terrified that they would die.

Kathy seemed more actively involved in the discussion about her parents' smoking than she had been at any other point in therapy, so I wanted to utilize this interest if I could. I asked her, "Who would be in greater danger—your parents if they continue smoking or you if you go to school?"

When she answered "Mom and Dad," I began to wonder if Kathy would be willing to make a bargain, going to school in return for her parents' quitting smoking.

To test my idea, I inquired further: "Are you the kind of person who will take a risk for the welfare of someone you care about?"

She said that she was, and her brother and sister agreed, citing an incident in which she had rescued a neighbor's toddler from a locked bathroom through a small second-floor window.

"Would it help you to do something that seemed dangerous if you knew that it was really benefiting someone important to you?" She said that it would.

I asked, "How would it help?" and she answered that the benefit to another person would put things in perspective. She would have a compelling reason for facing the danger.

I asked, "Could you go to school if you knew it might save your parents' lives?"

She unhesitatingly answered, "Yes.

I asked, "What would you do if you looked at someone and thought you might become like them?"

She answered, "Just concentrate on the work and on being there."

I asked, "Even if it is really difficult, if you agree to do something are you a person of your word?"

She said she was.

During a break we (GC and JF) conferred and agreed that, since the parents had repeatedly committed themselves to doing whatever it would take to get Kathy back in school, they would certainly be willing to give up smoking. When we met together with the whole family, we stated that everyone knew how important the parents thought it was that Kathy go to school. They had already put a lot of time and energy into this, first trying to handle the situation on their own, then meeting with school officials, and finally coming to therapy. We said that we had just discovered how important it was to Kathy that her parents quit smoking, and that she was willing to put time and energy into making that happen. We then proposed the trade, asking Kathy if she would go to school if her parents would quit smoking. Beaming, she said she would. We asked the parents if they would quit smoking if Kathy went to school. They, too, agreed.

When we met again two weeks later, we were shocked to learn what had happened. Both parents were still smoking, but Kathy had gone to school every day since our meeting! From that point on, Kathy continued going to school and her parents continued smoking. Although she still wanted them to quit smoking, Kathy never even threatened to stop going to school. The repetitive behavior seemed to just disappear. We found this extremely puzzling.

It wasn't until about six months later that we found a way of thinking about what had happened that made sense to us. We began wondering if in the mental search involved in answering my (JF) questions, Kathy had experienced a different way of being. That is, when I asked, "What would you do if you looked at someone and thought you might become like them?" might Kathy have vividly imagined herself in the context of school, concentrating on the work without fear taking over her experience? Her answer, "Just concentrate on the work and being there," implied just such an experience. She must have experienced herself as someone who could take risks and handle being in dangerous situations by
ocussing on the task at hand rather than letting the danger terrify her. In answering the questions, she must have entered a different reality than the one she usually inhabited. She must have experienced herself as someone who could go to school. So she did.

We wondered what would have happened if we hadn't been so certain of the parents' willingness to do whatever it took to help Kathy go back to school. If we had asked them questions similar to the ones we asked Kathy, might they have entered into a different experience of themselves, one in which they were already nonsmokers?

This incident was a turning point in our way of thinking about and practicing therapy. Our background in Ericksonian approaches had grounded us in the importance of associational searches, experiential learning, and alternative realities (Dolan, 1985; Erickson & Rossi, 1979, 1981; Erickson, Rossi, & Rossi, 1976; Gilligan, 1987; Rossi, 1980a, 1980b; Zeig, 1980, 1985). However, we thought of lived experience as being stored "inside" of people. We knew that by asking questions we could help people access and relive "resourceful" experiences. For example, we might ask someone, "What time in your life did you feel most comfortable?" with the hope that he would access and relive an actual experience of comfort (or a representative sample of such an experience) and feel comfortable in the present.

The experience we had with Kathy did not fit that way of thinking. For one thing, it was clear from previous conversations that Kathy had not thought of herself as a risk-taker. The example her brother and sister provided of her rescuing a toddler from a locked bathroom may have originally meant to her that she was obedient (if someone had suggested that she do it), or small and agile (since she could fit through the window), or perhaps caring. But it was only in relation to my question that the past event began to take on the new meaning of taking a risk. "Taking a risk" was not stored inside Kathy. She constituted herself, perhaps for the first time ever, as a risk-taking person when she stepped into the new reality that my questions brought forth.

Up to this time, we had thoughts of experience as simply what happens, and we thought all experiences were stored as they happened and were retrievable through memory. We now think that experience is colored and shaped by the meaning people make of it and that it is attended to or not as it seems relevant to the stores people are living. Therefore, when we ask questions, rather than believing that people can retrieve particular experiences with particular pre-determined meanings, we are very aware of how our questions co-author experience. (Anderson &

Goolishian, 1990b; Penn, 1982; Tomm, 1988). They put a spin on the experiences that they call up; they suggest beginnings and endings for those experiences; they highlight portions of experience while dimming or excluding others.

Our questions don't access experience. They generate it (Campbell, Draper, & Huffington, 1988; Freedman & Combs, 1993; Penn & Sheinberg, 1991). We are reminded of this each time one of our questions is met by a long pause, after which a person says, "I never thought of this before . . . " or "I didn't know this until you asked that question." We think it is not just that the person did not know it; we think it had never been so until the question and person came together to constitute it that way.

A therapist's values shape the questions that she asks. So do her experiences that they call up; they suggest beginnings and endings for those experiences; they highlight portions of experience while dimming or excluding others.

Part of what we are trying to express in this critique of our own work is that we are part of the dominant power/knowledge domain. We cannot be completely outside of dominant practices, but we can take responsibility for working to see through dominant cultural stories. This requires that we deconstruct our practices and situate our ideas in our experience.
How is it helpful?” We modify our questions in response to the answers. We also ask questions about our questions, such as, “Were there particular questions that seemed more helpful and others that you didn’t find helpful? Why?” and again, we pay attention to the answers.

Even though we recognize the influence of questions in specifying the domain of “appropriate” answers, we think that interacting mainly through questions helps us privilege the knowledge of the people we work with. As Karl Tomm (1988, p. 2) writes,

In general, statements set forth issues, positions, or views, whereas questions call forth issues, positions, or views. In other words, questions tend to call for answers and statements tend to provide them.

In another place, Karl Tomm (1987a, pp. 4-5) reminds us that, although we may have a particular idea in mind when we ask a question, the person who answers it determines the direction it will take. He writes,

... the actual effect of any particular intervention with a client is always determined by the client, not the therapist. The intentions and consequent actions of the therapist only trigger a response; they never determine it.

As we have described in Chapter 3, we strive to work from what Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson call a “not-knowing” position. We endeavor not to ask questions that we think we know the answers to, or ones that we want particular answers to. That is, we are not asking questions from a position of pre-understanding (Andersen, 1991a; Weingarten, 1992).

Even though we value a position of curiosity and not-knowing, we do have intentions or purposes. We think that all therapists follow some sort of intentionality, even if the purpose is a very general one, such as “opening space.” Our intentions are specific. We hope to engage people in deconstructing problematic stories, identifying preferred directions, and developing alternative stories that support these preferred directions. The narrative metaphor shapes our curiosity, but doesn’t stifle it.

Even though we have dedicated this chapter to offering examples of and a structure for thinking about “types” of questions, we can think of several reasons not to give these examples or that structure. First, the examples will be out of context. Each question we ask in therapy comes from what has just been said in the conversation. When, as here, we focus on particular types of questions, rather than on a living conversa-
for example, both open space and lead to the construction of new meaning. Also, a therapist could intend for a question to invite someone to state a preference and that person could nevertheless respond with an answer that began to develop an alternative story. The categories we give refer to the therapist’s intentions in asking questions. They are meant to help therapists think clearly about the process of narrative therapy. While the order in which we list these examples does follow a certain linear logic, we do not follow a strict order when we ask questions in actual conversations. We will offer some thoughts about what to ask when toward the end of the chapter.

DECONSTRUCTION QUESTIONS

Deconstruction questions help people unpack their stories or see them from different perspectives, so that how they have been constructed becomes apparent. Many deconstruction questions encourage people to situate their narratives in larger systems and through time. In bringing forth the history, context, and effects of people’s narratives, we are broadening their scope, depicting entire landscapes that support problems. Within these broader landscapes, more (and more varied) "sparkling events" can be brought forth.

Bringing Forth Problematic Beliefs, Practices, Feelings, and Attitudes

Almost all of the deconstructive questioning we do takes place within externalizing conversations. Although our intention is to deconstruct problematic narratives, no particular question is aimed at an entire narrative. Instead, each question addresses something that is part of a problem-saturated story or that maintains a problematic narrative. Generally, as we listen to problematic narratives we hear about beliefs, practices, feelings, and attitudes, and these are what a particular deconstruction question addresses. If, in a person’s telling of his story, we do not learn about beliefs, practices, feelings, and attitudes, we can ask questions to constitute them or bring them forth. Such questions might include:

- What conclusions about your relationship have you drawn because of this problem?
- What behaviors have you found yourself resorting to in relationship to the situation that you have described?
- Does this situation that you describe encourage particular feelings in your life?

What attitudes do you think must be there to justify the behaviors that you have described?
What gets in the way of developing the kinds of relationships you would like to have?

As these questions help people to distinguish particular beliefs, practices, feelings, and attitudes, we ask about:

1. the history of a person's relationship with the belief, practice, feeling, or attitude,
2. contextual influences on the belief, practice, feeling, or attitude,
3. the effects or results of the belief, practice, feeling, or attitude,
4. the interrelationship with other beliefs, practices, feelings, or attitudes, and
5. the tactics or strategies of the belief, practice, feeling, or attitude.

We ask all these questions within the context of an externalizing conversation. Can you see how each of these types of questions presupposes that the belief, practice, feeling, or attitude is separate from the person, and would thus serve to externalize it further? As you know, we generally use externalizing language whenever our intention is to deconstruct problem-saturated narratives. It is such an important part of deconstruction that we often compose questions with the sole intention of engaging in an externalizing conversation. Most of the questions that we compose with a "pure" externalizing intent inadvertently ask about at least one of the other areas we’ve identified as well. Conversely, all the questions in the other areas serve the purpose of externalization, whether a therapist consciously intends it or not.

The above five categories of deconstruction questions are not the only kinds of questions that could be used to deconstruct narratives. Rather, they represent types of questions we use often in our work. We ask numerous questions of this sort, not a single question, in inviting the deconstruction of a narrative. A question about one belief, feeling, practice, or attitude leads to another belief, feeling, practice, or attitude. So we then ask about that one, as this short excerpt from a therapy conversation illustrates.

I (JF) was working with Louise, who had landed a new job and was preparing for the change. "Several people at work came up to me and

5As we look at some of these questions in black-and-white, we see that they may sound like we engage in heavy duty confrontation. This is not the case. Our use of externalizing language makes it possible to engage with people in mutual puzzling about the answers to these questions.
told me not to tell the people at my new job that I'm half African-American," she told me.

"What do you think about that idea?" I asked.

"I think they're right," she declared. "It won't do me any good. People will consider me black and be biased against me, and since I don't look black, the blacks won't accept me anyway."

"I'm at a disadvantage here... I can't know what your experience is like. Can I ask you a little bit more about this?"

"Sure."

"Well, what beliefs or attitudes do you think a person must have in order to suggest that you shouldn't let people know that you are biracial?"

"The people who said this to me were black, and I agree with them. Black people are more rude and mean."

"I haven't found that myself, but can I ask you about another part of this? What do you think the effect on your life will be of keeping your heritage secret?"

"I'm not ashamed of who I am. I mean, I didn't have to tell people at my last job."

"Yeah, and I'm not telling you what to do at all. I don't really know. I'm just wondering, if you do keep it secret, what will that do to you?"

"Probably keep me from being close to people. Maybe make me feel worse about being black. I used to like to be black."

Keeping in mind that we use a number of these questions together, as the excerpt begins to demonstrate, let's look at each of our five categories of deconstruction questions one at a time.

**History of Relationship.** In addition to enlarging the landscape within which the problem exists, asking about the history of a person's relationship with a belief, practice, feeling, or attitude may expose the role of dominant cultural practices or knowledges in supporting the problem. As Lynn Hoffman (1992, p. 14), writing about Foucault, notes,

> "How were you recruited into this way of thinking?"

> How did you learn of them?

> What were you taught to do with this belief?

> What have you done with this belief?

> How has this belief affected your life?

> How has this belief affected your family?

> If you were to step further into this way of being, how would that affect your future?

Once people subscribe to a given discourse — a religious discourse, a psychological discourse, or a discourse around gender — they promote certain definitions about which persons or what topics are most important or have legitimacy. However, they themselves are not always aware of these embedded definitions.

"History of relationship questions" can reveal taken-for-granted or embedded practices or knowledges.

**Questions**

- How were you recruited into this way of thinking?
- Where did you witness these ways of responding to problems?
- What experiences did you have in the past that encouraged these feelings of guilt?
- Has solitude always been your best friend?
- When in history did these sorts of ideas gain prominence? How were they used? How did you learn of them?

**Contextual Influences.** These questions are aimed at depicting the ongoing contexts that serve as support systems for problematic stories. "Contextual influence questions" may also expose the role of cultural practices or knowledges.

- In what situations would you most expect these kinds of ideas to be advocated?
- Are there places where it is more likely you'll be pulled into drinking?
- Who in your life supports anger taking over?
- Who benefits from this way of doing things?

**Effects or Results.** These questions broaden the domain of the problematic story by showing the impact of the problem in people's lives and relationships. Seeing the real effects of a belief, practice, feeling, or attitude can put it in a different light.

- What are the effects on your life of this belief that you are not a good person?
- What has self-doubt talked you into doing in your relationships with people at work?
- How has this pattern influenced other family members?
- How has pessimism affected your relationship with yourself?
- If you were to step further into this way of being, how would that affect your future?
- What has the idea of self-reliance promoted in relationships?

**Interrelationship.** "Interrelationship questions" can help deconstruct the web of beliefs, practices, feelings, and attitudes that constitute the life of a problem.6

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6 See Rick Maisel’s paper (1994) on "Engaging men in a re-evaluation of practices and definitions of masculinity" for an excellent discussion on helping men attend to contradictions between intentions and effects and between ideas (and their effects) and relationship preferences.
Are there other problems that anorexia teams up with? Some people have told me that they think self-blame and isolation are partners with anorexia. What do you think?

Does the belief that things should be this way encourage anger taking over or leave more room for other feelings?

What does this idea have you doing?

What conclusions have you drawn about your relationship because of all this fighting?

What ideas, habits, and feelings feed the problem?

If we look at the effects of this attitude, does it match your hopes for your relationship?

_Tactics or Strategies._ Since we treat problematic beliefs, practices, feelings, and attitudes as externalized entities, we can think about them as having plans and preferred ways of working. Unmasking these tactics and strategies can have a powerful deconstructive effect.

How does the anger worm its way between the two of you?

If I were going to be the fear in your life, what would I do to make my presence known? How would I make things worse? What times would I pick?

What does the voice of depression whisper in your ear? How does it manage to be so convincing?

Which does the bulimia do first, flash the pictures of whole sheet cakes in front of your eyes or give you that certain taste in your mouth?

What ways of life does racism ride piggy-back on?

**OPENING SPACE QUESTIONS**

Once the landscape of the problem has been broadened through de-construction questions, there are numerous vantage points from which unique outcomes or sparkling events — those experiences that lie outside of the problem-saturated narrative and would not be predicted by it — might be brought forth. We use opening space questions to construct unique outcomes.

Because this is a chapter on questions, we are emphasizing the questions we use in constituting unique outcomes with people. In practice, though, people are likely to mention unique outcomes or demonstrate them spontaneously. In such situations, rather than asking any opening space questions we can simply respond to what a person has mentioned, most likely with a preference question or a construction question.

If we don't observe openings to alternative stories or if the people we work with don't tell us about them, we can co-construct them by asking:

1. questions about _unique outcomes_ that have occurred.
2. Or, we can ask about unique outcomes in the realm of imagination through _hypothetical experience questions_,
3. _questions that ask about different points of view_, and
4. _future oriented questions_.

We group these different types of unique outcome questions together under the name "opening space" because each inquires about the possible presence of an opening that, if taken, may lead to an alternative story.

_Unique Outcomes_
Inviting a search for exceptions to the problematic story is the most straightforward way to contribute to constructing an opening:

- Has there ever been a time when the arguing could have taken control of your relationship, but it didn't?
- Have the two of you ever stood up to some of these cultural prescriptions and decided to do something your own way instead?
- In what situations do you make decisions easily?

A unique outcome does not have to be a triumph over the problem. A thought at odds with the problematic story, doing something differently in response to the problematic story (even if the problem eventually dominates), or making preparations to have a different relationship with the problem can all be unique outcomes. When asking questions along these lines it's often useful to acknowledge the hold of the problem so that people know that its presence and influence are understood. Often this frees them to describe the instances in which it doesn't have a hold:

- Even though the bulimia convinced you it was too dangerous to go out to eat with other people, did you hold out against its arguments longer than you had at other times?
- I understand that the fears are still keeping your life very narrow and confined, but do you have a sense that you are working up to changing that? Can you tell me what's giving you that sense?
- So in the last two weeks the conflict continued, but were there any points at which, even for a moment, you felt hopeful?
When direct inquiry about unique outcomes fails to open space, we try other types of questions.

**Hypothetical Experience Questions**

If people have difficulty locating exceptions to dominant stories in their lived experience, "hypothetical experience questions" may help them imagine those experiences (Penn, 1985; Penn & Sheinberg, 1991). In the first story we told in this chapter, Kathy’s answers to hypothetical experience questions created an opening for an alternative story. Once Kathy imagined herself doing something that was at odds with the dominant story—going to school—she and other family members could see her past in light of that imagined experience. She entered an alternative story that supported the imagined-but-experientially-real experience.

Here are some hypothetical experience questions:

- If one of your children had been born with a serious illness, do you think you would have pulled together to face the crisis? . . . And how do you think you would have functioned as a team?
- What would happen if you didn’t take all the responsibility for child care? For example, if you didn’t get up when your son couldn’t sleep, what would happen?
- If you were to discover with certainty that your mother works over-time not to avoid your Little League games, but to provide the things you want for your future, how would that knowledge change things for you?

We have a colleague who has more referrals than she can see. She sometimes asks us if we have time to see a person or family who has been referred to her. We have discovered that, if we are very interested in working with the people she describes, although she originally set out to refer them, by the end of the conversation she decides to see them herself. The way we make sense of this experience is that she has entered our point of view. If we are interested or excited about working with the particular family or person, she begins to see the individuals involved as we do, to notice what is interesting or exciting to us about them. Even though she is short on time, she does not want to lose the opportunity.

Similarly, when a person is living a problem-saturated story, the problems sometimes blind her to unique outcomes, as time constraints blind our colleague to what might be interesting. Since she is living a particular story, she tends to see all of her experience in line with that story. People outside of the story are more free to make different meaning of the events she experiences. As the person considers the meaning from some-one else’s perspective, she can adopt the meaning as her own (or at least try it on). It may provide an opening to an alternative storyline.

Questions such as these ask about other points of view:

- What would your grandmother say about how you’re coping with this dilemma?
- Can you understand how from my point of view you are ready to take on this responsibility? What do you think I’ve noticed that makes me think so?
- What do you think your daughter is learning as she sees your husband making almost all of the decisions for the family? Is that what you want for her? What would you prefer her to see? Have there been times she has seen what you describe?
- Are there certain friends who influence you more when it comes to taking drugs? Do you have other friends and associates who are more of an influence to do otherwise? What is the difference in how those two groups experience you? What characteristics does one group see that the other doesn’t?
- What are you aware of about yourself that the fighting has blinded your family to?

**Different Contexts**

If someone is living a story dominated by helplessness he probably thinks of himself as a helpless person. Even though people have been countless events in his life that don’t fit with his story, these events may not be part of what he thinks of as his life. Since people are living stories, not simply reporting them, problematic stories often blind them to the significance of contexts other than the problem-saturated one. In other words, problems often stand between people and their knowledge of themselves in such a way that they lose preferred aspects of their identities. Since problems are constructed in and supported by particular con-texts, unique outcomes can often be constituted by asking about other contexts.

- I understand that anger has really come between the two of you as you work on building a business together and has caused you to say things that are not representative of how you most want to be. But I’m

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1Linda Bailey-Martiniere (personal communication, 1995) has suggested asking questions from a grandmother’s point of view.
wondering if there are other situations where you are able to keep anger in its place?

- Has laziness affected all the areas of your life or only school?
- I think I understand something about how self-doubt is robbing you of confidence at school. When we were just getting to know each other a little bit at the beginning, I got a different picture of you when you talked about playing basketball. Do you see how I got a different picture? (This question is also a point of view question.)

**Different Time Frames**

From my (JF) point of view, my grandfather had a glorious life. At the age of 16 he escaped the pogroms of Eastern Europe to arrive in this country with little money but close family connections. He was successful in his business endeavors, he had a wonderful 63-year marriage, he traveled extensively, he was self-educated and politically active, he had close relationships with family and friends and lived to see his children and grandchildren realize dreams that he helped them build. However, he spent the final years of his life in a nursing home, after losing his health and being afflicted by painful confusion about what was real, surrounded by strangers, bereft of almost all personal possessions. When I visited him in those last years, images of his earlier life would bombard me, torturing me with the comparison. I remember trying to explain to one of his attendants that the man in the nursing home wasn't really him. To her, though, the man I described wasn't really him. I don't know what was real for my grandfather at that time, but I hope that when he made meaning of his life, he drew on all the wonderful years of satisfaction, relationships, and accomplishments. Those are certainly the times that speak to me of who he was.

In asking questions to develop unique outcomes, we hold close the knowledge that the problematic stories that drive people to consult with us do not represent the entirety of their lives, even if they seem to fill the present. The following questions are examples of unique outcome questions about different times in people’s lives:

- I hear that you experience this as a lifelong problem, but if you compare different times in your life, was there a time when desperation played a lesser role?
- At what time in your life did you feel most secure?
- During which period in your life were you least susceptible to panic? Was there a particular incident from that time that you thought of when I asked the question? Could you tell me about that incident?

In Chapter 6 we include a transcript of a therapy meeting that illustrates deconstruction and opening space questions. You may want to read it before moving on to other kinds of questions.

**PREFERENCE QUESTIONS**

Since we co-construct alternative stories a bit at a time from experiences that do not fit with dominant, problematic stories, it is important that therapists check frequently to be sure that the direction or meaning of these experiences is preferred to that of problematic stories. This point may seem academic but we, at least, are not always right about what different people actually prefer.

For example, I (JF) recently saw a family that was referred to me by a colleague who had seen them for some time but was getting ready to move away from Chicago. As I caught up on the work they had done with my colleague, I discovered that 45-year-old Glenn was engaged in what he described as a lifelong struggle with severe depression. Family members told me about the effects of the depression on their lives and on the life of the family. They shared with me the knowledge they had gained about the depression—signs that it was beginning, what its boundaries were, and so on.

What stood out to me from this description was that, if the depression began at times, then it must also end. If it had boundaries, there were places outside of it. I began to ask about those aspects of their experience. I was quite interested in hearing about these depression-free times.

Family members, though, and particularly Glenn, seemed somewhat reluctant to enter wholeheartedly into this conversation. I asked, “Is this what you want to be talking about or is there something else?”

Glenn answered, “There are times when the depression isn’t present in my life, and I think all of us agree that there are very good things about those times. But focusing on them has not been especially helpful.”

“I think it’s scary,” added 13-year-old Karin.

I thought this was a curious comment, so I asked more about it and discovered that the ideas that Glenn instead of the depression could be in charge of his life and that family members could have a part in making that happen were not ideas that family members preferred and in fact were ideas they considered to be dangerous. When they had tried these

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"We are indebted to David Epston and Sallyann Roth (1994) for the name "preference questions." Previously, we were calling these questions "suitability questions" as they invite people to evaluate suitability, but we much prefer "preference."
ideas out in the past, the depression had taken Glenn and the family by surprise. No matter how strongly they believed it was a thing of the past, it would always rear up again.

Their experience told them that what worked best was to have a different relationship with depression. They didn’t think that they could kick it out of their lives, but they did believe that they could coexist with it. They learned the early signs of its return and a number of things they could do to keep it at a “low level.” It no longer took over completely but it had a place in their lives that required watchfulness and quick responses. “Sort of like a roach problem,” explained Margaret, Glenn’s partner. “It doesn’t go away, but if you do something when you notice more of it, it doesn’t get very bad.”

Experiences such as these have taught us the importance of asking people what they prefer instead of assuming that we know. We ask preference questions throughout our interviews to make sure we are moving in people’s preferred directions.

However, this is not just a simple matter of providing an occasion for people to make their preferences known. To choose a preference out loud is to commit oneself to a direction in life. Many of our questions such as, “Do you think dishonesty suits you best as a way of life or would you prefer a life of honesty?” ask that people pick between two possibilities. When we pose these questions we are constructing particular dilemmas. People do occasionally tell us that neither possibility is preferred, but we suspect that much of the time people approach the two possibilities offered as though they really are the only two available choices and stretch to align themselves with one or the other.

As Karl Tomm (1993, p. 67) notes, “These kinds of questions, which juxtapose two contrasting options ... and invite the client to state a preference, are obviously ‘loaded.’ ” Tomm calls these “bifurcation questions” and believes that they are helpful in mobilizing and aligning a person’s emotional responses. He writes that they create a bifurcation or branching alternative meanings and alternative directions. When a person chooses one, different sets of emotion become oriented to each branch. Presumably, if a person stated that honesty suited her, not dishonesty, her negative emotions would become oriented to dishonesty, which could help her fight against it, and her positive emotions would become oriented toward honesty, helping her align with it.

At times, one of the branches is only implied. When we ask, “Do you

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consider this type of thinking to be helpful?” we are implying, “Or not helpful?”

Earlier, we did a lot of work with hypnosis and saw a great many people who wanted to stop smoking. When we asked them what was most helpful in stopping smoking, many people told us that making the commitment to stop was by far the most important element. In asking preference questions, we create a context for the making of commitments.

We often ask “Why?” after people have stated a preference. This invites people to justify their choices and describe their motivation, and in the course of their explanations, people have the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on their preferred directions in life, identities, and values.

The following are some examples of preference questions:

- Do you think this reputation should speak for you or do you think it would be better for you to speak for yourself?
- Is that a useful practice? How? Why?
- Does this idea suit you? Why?
- Do you think it’s best for anger to run your life or for you to run your life? Why?
- Is this a good thing or a bad thing for you?

**STORY DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS**

Once space has opened enough to reveal a unique outcome or preferred development, we can ask questions to develop the story of it. All of the questions we talk about in this chapter are used to invite the re-authoring of stories. By referring to “story development questions” in this section we are referring to that part of re-authoring that makes events into a story in the usual sense. That is, story development questions invite people to relate the process and details of an experience and to connect it to a timeframe, to a particular context, and to other people. In this way an event is expanded in space and time, it is peopled, and it is re-experienced in a detailed way. It becomes a story! Such stories can be constructed either from actual events or from hypothetical ones.

Our hope when we ask story development questions is that people will come to experience their lives and themselves in new ways as they focus on previously neglected and unstoried aspects of their experience, aspects that lie outside the realm of the problematic stories they find themselves caught up in when they seek therapy. To that end, it seems to be important that these stories be developed in ways that are compelling and experientially vivid (Freedman & Combs, 1993).
Process

In asking questions about process, we invite people to slow an event down and notice what went into it. As a person works to retrieve the sequence of important elements involved in a unique outcome, he relives it. In this process, he has the opportunity to create a map that will then be available to follow during future challenges. Since they ask people to review their own actions, these questions almost always contribute to stories of personal agency.

- What were the steps you took in doing this? What did you do first? Then what?
- How did you prepare yourself to see things in this new way?
- As you look back at this accomplishment, what do you think were the turning points that made this possible?
- Were there particular things that you said to yourself that supported this new resolve?
- How did you do it?

Details

Details help make an event vivid. Questions about detail offer people the opportunity to remember aspects of events that may have been neglected or forgotten. Full, detailed descriptions foster an intensity of experiential involvement that generalized accounts do not. This is true even for hypothetical events. Also, some of the different details brought forth may play a more significant role in the re-authoring than those details that are most readily remembered.

- What was the look on his face when you told him you won the award?
- What particular things would I have noticed if I were there when you two experienced this breakthrough?
- What was it like to grasp that award in your hands? Did you hear the sound of the crowd or make out any particular faces?
- What was happening in the rest of the room while you were coming to that realization?
- What exactly did she say when you told her the news?

Time

Finding the historical antecedents of unique outcomes and preferred developments can lend particular significance and credence to the preferred self-identity stories that result from this work. Often, unique outcomes have historical roots to which problems have blinded people. "History questions" can help people identify and reclaim them.

- Who would have predicted that you would have made this shift in your understanding? What would have led them to make this prediction? Would they recall a particular memory or event?
- When in the past has your daughter shown this kind of courage before? Was this a new development or do you have a history of speaking out in difficult situations? What situation comes to mind?
- As you look back at this accomplishment, what do you think were the turning points that made this possible?
- Were there particular things that you said to yourself that supported this new resolve?
- How did you do it?

Asking future-oriented questions can extend alternative stories into the future, changing people's expectations about what is ahead for them and, as Peggy Penn (1985, p. 301) notes, they can "... cut into ideas of predetermination."

- What do you think your next step might be?
- Now that you've discovered these things about your relationship do you have a different vision of the future?
- Do these new developments inspire any predictions you might make about your son's future school career?
- Three months from now, who do you think will be most pleased by the consequences of this new understanding? What are the consequences that will please them so? (This question could also be listed under "people" on pp. 134-135.)

Questions that contrast the past and either the present or future emphasize the changes a story has taken over time. In answering these questions, people can notice many changes and differences that they had been tending to take for granted.

- How is this different from what you would have done before?
- Okay, so this time you didn’t let bulimia trick you into staying away from a social situation. How is that different from when bulimia controlled your life?
- You seem pretty pleased about the reports you’re getting from John’s teachers. What did it used to be like when you went to parent-teacher conferences? And now . . . ?

\(^{10}\) David Epston uses these kinds of questions quite extensively. As people contrast what is happening in the present or what they plan for the future with the past, they seem to become more committed to the new direction.
Questions that link the past, present, and future dramatize the time-span and directionality of a narrative and add relevance to the events in different time frames.

- If we link the self-confidence from your past with your current ideas, where do you think you might go along these lines in the future?
- You said that in high school you stood up for yourself on a number of occasions and that just recently you’ve been back in touch with that ability and told your best friend what was on your mind. If we think of these events as a kind of trend in your life, what do you expect might happen next?
- Who from your past would have predicted this new development in your life? Knowing what he does about your past, if he were in on this current development, what would he predict about your future?

Context

Stories develop within particular contexts. Problematic stories may be coached or supported by different sociocultural contexts than preferred stories. As people construct alternative stories, new contexts may become important. Some narratives are more highly dependent on context than others, but every story has a setting. Asking questions about context can anchor a story to a particular place and situation. Sometimes questions about context invite people to extend stories into new places and new situations. Context questions can also invite people to notice the role their culture plays in bringing forth and supporting preferred stories.

- Are there particular organizations or contexts that would support your new resolve?
- Where did this happen? What was going on at the time?
- Has your newly discovered competence shown itself more on the job or at home?
- Would you say the circumstances supported your doing this? How?
- Is this process you describe part of your culture? What is the knowledge from your culture about how one should meet these kinds of challenges?

People

Most any story has more than one character. "People questions" invite individuals to re-collect the cast of characters contributing to an emerg-

"The Just Therapy Team in Wellington, New Zealand have worked extensively in helping people reclaim cultural stories and knowledge. See Law (1994), Tamasese and Waldegrave (1993), Tapping et al. (1993), and Waldegrave (1990) for accounts of this process.

Hypothetical Event Questions

We can also construct a story that builds on a unique outcome by adding details, process, time, context, and people from the realm of imagination by asking about hypothetical events or circumstances. Future questions are always about hypothetical events, but they can be very important in constructing actual lives.

Diane Chisman, a member of the Evanston Family Therapy Center training team, pioneered a way to use hypothetical questions. After people make a distinction about themselves or their relationships that they find useful, Diane invites them to author a speculative history. For example, in a therapy conversation with Diane, Nadine and Hank realized that when they talked together about parenting they both were more confident about parenting. Because Renee had been born in Nadine’s previous marriage, dominant ideas of what it means to be a “real” father had kept Hank from expressing his ideas about parenting. Dominant ideas about the responsibilities of motherhood had convinced Nadine that Renee was her total responsibility. The two did not collaborate, although each of them often felt overwhelmed and alone. When they realized that they would both like to share ideas and negotiate about their parenting of Renee, Diane asked them hypothetical questions to develop a speculative history. These were questions such as, "If you had

"Besides the importance of people who are part of stories, we recognize the importance of recruiting audiences for stories; that is, letting people in on the development in a person’s life. See Chapter 9 for questions that can be used in this regard.

"See Roth and Chasin (1994) for a description of narrative work carried out primarily in the realm of imagination through dramatic enactment, rather than questions."
known how well you could share and negotiate parenting ideas and how much you would both like it back when you first were married, how would things regarding Renee have been different between then and now?" 

Once such a history is established, people can speculate on process, details, context, and people. These hypothetical pasts, once experienced, often have real effects on people's present lives.

The following are examples of "hypothetical event questions" that can be used in story development:

- If your mother had not died, how do you think growing up would have been different for you?
- If you were to take on such a project what would you do first?
- What do you imagine you would look like as a student? Would you change your style?

MEANING QUESTIONS

Through story development questions, people plot the action and content of their preferred stories. Through meaning questions, we invite people into a reflecting position from which they can regard different aspects of their stories, themselves, and their various relationships. These questions encourage people to consider and experience the implications of unique outcomes, preferred directions, and newly storied experiences. In naming the meanings of these experiences, they are constructing them. When Martha came to therapy she described the problem as a sense of not fitting in or being cared about. She thought this had to do with two very significant life experiences. First, her mother died when she was 14 and she believed her mother was the one person who really loved her. Second, she was biracial. Her ethnic heritage was not obvious from her appearance, a fact which led her frequently to wonder what difference it would make in people's perceptions of her if they knew. She often felt that she didn't fit into either of her parents' cultures. To deal with the feelings of not fitting in or being cared about, Martha routinely made accommodations to other people's ideas. She often stayed involved in unsatisfying relationships because she thought they were better than being alone.

At one point she surprised herself at a job interview by basing her answers on what she thought rather than on her predictions of what the interviewer might want to hear. I (GC) asked her a meaning question about this: "What does it say about what's important to you that you said what you thought at the interview instead of what the interviewer might want to hear?" She thought about my question for several mo-

ments and then said, "I guess I only want to be hired for myself, not to play somebody else."

This was a significant performance of meaning for Martha. She said that she would not have known this about herself if she hadn't reflected on the interview in the way that the question invited her to. This self knowledge allowed her to identify other experiences where she had stood behind herself, and these, too were significant to discover. Through these discoveries Martha introduced herself to a different side of herself. We do not mean to imply that this performance of meaning was all that was needed or was even a turning point in the therapy. It was, however, a significant experience that helped Martha recognize how, although dominant ideas and practices in the culture had excluded her experience and her identity, she could choose to stand behind her own thoughts and identity and that this choice was personally rewarding.

We ask meaning questions about the answers to "opening space," "preference," and "story development questions." We also ask "opening space," "preference," and "story development questions" in relation to the answers to "meaning questions." Meaning questions are woven in and out of these other kinds of questions, especially story development questions.

In addition to asking about the general meaning and implications of stories as they unfold, we also ask about personal qualities, relationship characteristics, motivation, hopes, goals, values, beliefs, knowledge, and learnings that people derive from their developing narratives.

Meaning and Implications

Questions about meaning and implications are the most open-ended kind of meaning question. The answers may well speak of personal characteristics or values or one of our other listed categories. Through these questions people make meaning in whatever way makes sense to them.

- What does it mean to you that your partner would do this?
- If you were to apply this knowledge in your life now, in what context would it make the most difference? What difference would it make?
- What does this new perspective tell you about yourself?
- What is the significance for you as a family that you are here together talking about this new development?

Characteristics and Qualities

In asking about characteristics and qualities of people and relationships, we are focusing meaning on self-image or "relationship-image."
These questions are very helpful in updating the identity of a person or relationship to fit with a developing alternative story.

- What does it say about you as a person that you would do this? What characteristics does it show?
- In the light of having accomplished this together, how would your partner describe the kind of relationship you have?
- What qualities are evident to you about your son now that you've heard the steps he has taken to put temper out of his life?

**Motivation, Hopes, and Goals**

Questions about motivation, hopes, and goals invite people to notice how particular developments reflect larger life projects. Constructing the two as related adds to the significance of these developments.

- What do you think motivated him to take that step?
- Do you think the way that you two stuck to the task is reflective of what you hope for yourselves as a couple?
- We've just listed a number of things that you went ahead and did on this project. Does reviewing this make your goals in this area clearer? What would you say your goals are?

**Values and Beliefs**

Questions about values and beliefs can invite people to look beyond specific events and reflect on their moral, ethical, or spiritual dimensions. I (JF) consulted with a family for one two-hour meeting and six weeks later heard from Elizabeth, the daughter. The members of the family were white, middle-class Catholics of Irish descent. When Elizabeth became engaged to Jared, a Muslim engineering student from Iran, fear captured the family. The fear seemed to be fueled by the movie, "Not Without My Daughter" about an Iranian man married to an American woman. The Iranian man in the movie seemed to be a loving husband when in this country, but became an abusive stranger when the family visited Iran. The American woman barely escaped with the couple's child. A second phenomenon stoking the fear was a flurry of calls from family and friends, all of whom knew people who knew other people in American-Iranian relationships that had turned out to be disastrous. Thirdly, the church would not recognize a marriage such as the one Elizabeth was contemplating.

For the purpose of this illustration, I'll limit my comments to a brief portion of our phone call six weeks after the consultation. Elizabeth called to report that her parents were actually getting to know Jared,

something they had not been interested in doing previously. I asked what she thought made the difference so that this could happen. She said that the most important thing was the way her parents answered a particular question. The question I asked was, "You've told me that you made up your mind to have nothing to do with this marriage; yet you're here, seeking a consultation. What do you value that has led you to seek therapy?"

"When they thought about that question, it was like they melted." Elizabeth said. "They had been frozen, turned against me for months, but when they heard that question, they started talking about how much they loved me, how they wanted to be part of my future, how they wanted the best for me, and it was like I had my parents back. After that, they began doing some things to actually get to know Jared. Now, Mom calls their house the United Nations."

With these questions we ask people how unique outcomes reflect their values and beliefs:

- Why does this new way of thinking suit you better than the old way?
- From what I've heard, what would I say you value in friendships?
- Now that we've reviewed what happened at your daughter's school, what do you think she must believe to have taken the stand she took?

**Knowledge and Learnings**

Since we often see therapy as an "insurrection of lost knowledges," we believe that it is important to bring forth people's specific local knowledge concerning unique outcomes and preferred directions in life. This is especially true when dominant cultural knowledge has played a hand in the constitution of their problem-saturated stories. Here are some questions we might ask to highlight learnings and knowledge that counter the problem:

- As you think back on that event, what did you know about your relationship then that somehow you have lost track of since?
- Is there something you can learn from this that might be important in other aspects of your life?
- When you see how far you've come what do you learn about yourself?
- As you reflect on this incident, what do you know as a result of it that "the friends of self-hatred" wouldn't want you to know?

**STORY CONSTRUCTION**

We could think of "story development questions" and "meaning questions" as our questions for story construction (rather than deconstruc-
tion or opening space). They build on unique outcomes, inviting people to use unique outcomes and preferred experiences as a basis for developing alternative stories and meanings.

Although we see the stories that develop in therapy as people's own, we have also thought about something that Karl Tomm (1993) points out in a discussion of Michael White’s work. He writes that White picks the events he invites people to story and that the picking powerfully determines the kind of stories that will be constructed. The questions therapists ask clearly play a part in which events, both lived and imagined, will become storied. The unique outcomes that become candidates for story development are chosen by therapists when they ask more questions about them, but they are also chosen by the people we work with when they name them as preferred developments in response to preference questions.

Our values, the narrative metaphor, and our experience influence both our choice of questions and our decisions about which “sparkling events” to focus on. Since our choices have a hand in shaping the kinds of stories that are constructed, it is important that we situate ourselves; making our values, ideas, and the experiences that they are based in clear enough that people can understand that they are not neutral (White, 1995). We offer our ideas as ideas based in particular experiences, not as truth claims. We also invite the people we work with to ask questions about our questions and our intentions as we work with them. (See Chapter 10 for a more detailed account of this process.)

In therapy, particular strands of narrative are selected and thickened by weaving back and forth between story development and meaning-making. That is, as someone begins to develop an alternative story, we ask questions that invite her to perform meaning on that story. We may then ask what story developments result from the meaning that emerges, and so on, so that a tapestry of story developments and their meanings is woven. In Chapter 6 we will offer a transcript that illustrates this weaving process.

We’d like to point out that our terms “story development questions” and “meaning questions” are different from those adopted by Michael White from Jerome Bruner (1986). White (1991, 1995), followed by many other therapists, uses the terms “landscape of action” where we use story development and “landscape of consciousness” where we use meaning. He also uses a third category, “experience of experience” for questions asking people to adopt another’s point of view. 14 Rather than putting these questions in a separate category, we have incorporated them under “story development questions” or “meaning questions” according to our purpose in asking them. That is, we call these questions either story development or meaning questions, depending on whether they develop the story or its meaning from another person’s point of view. For example, we would call the question, “If I had been there and seen you take that step, how do you think I would describe what had happened?” a story development question, and the question, “If I then were to tell someone what I saw in you that led you to take that step, what qualities do you think I would name?” a meaning question.

WHAT TO ASK WHEN

We worry that in presenting a list of types of questions in a particular sequence we might be giving the impression that these questions are meant to be asked in that sequence. It does seem to be helpful for some people to have a particular order in mind when learning and practicing how to use questions like these, and, as orders go, the order we have written them in is not bad. We want to emphasize, though, that other orders may work just fine.

We begin by getting to know people a bit as people, not in relation to their problems. As Vicki Dickerson and Jeff Zimmerman (1993, p. 229) point out, “This is an important step in understanding the family members as persons separate from the problem and as experts in their own lives.”

Then, we’ve found it useful and satisfying to follow people’s interests. Often, the conversation naturally moves to what brought them to therapy. If it doesn’t, we can inquire. We then usually listen to a description of the problem, 15 and as we listen we begin at some point to ask deconstruction questions.

Recently, when we were presenting a workshop with a number of colleagues (Adams-Westcott et al., 1994), 16 someone asked, “How many deconstruction questions should you ask?” Jeff Zimmerman answered, “As many as it takes.” We used to systematically ask deconstruction questions (especially “relative influence questions”), but now we are likely to start asking “story development questions” anytime there is an opening. We can always go back to deconstructive listening and questioning if the situation calls for it.

We may not use some types of questions at all in a particular inter-

14We have described using these questions earlier in this chapter under “point of view” when our intention is opening space.

15We discussed this under “deconstructive listening” in Chapter 3.

16our colleagues were Janet Adams-Westcott, Vicki Dickerson, John Neal, and Jeff Zimmerman.
view. We tend to use deconstruction and opening space questions in the early part of any conversation about a particular problem. We use preference questions throughout interviews, particularly in relation to unique outcomes. Once a preferred unique outcome is identified, we ask story development and meaning questions, often alternating between them or asking several story development questions and then a meaning question and then more story development questions. However, there are many exceptions to this generalized shape. For example, we sometimes omit preference questions, relying instead on voice tone, facial expression, and past statements of preferences for guidance.

If family members begin therapy by describing what they want and hope for, we usually respond to that as a unique outcome and begin inviting them to author that story—perhaps never listening to or deconstructing a problematic story. Alternatively, we might ask about a problematic story through story development questions that contrast the past with the present or future, so that the authoring of the alternative story and telling of the problematic story are interspersed throughout therapy.

Sometimes, we move between problematic stories and alternative stories in order to connect with people’s experience. Perhaps a person begins to live an alternative story and then something stops him. He feels blocked or pulled back. In that situation, we can either ask about the alternative story, which may be enough to reengage him in it, or we can listen and ask deconstructive questions about what is pulling him back. For some people, the second choice is more fitting. They seem to re-author a strand of story, then identify another problem, re-author that strand, and so on, until they are fully immersed in the alternative stories.

In Chapters 8 and 9 we discuss ideas for developing stories even further and for recruiting audiences for stories. Once these processes are all underway, it is not uncommon for people to begin to use therapy primarily as a context in which to tell their developing story. We continue to ask questions, but our role becomes more and more that of a listener and scribe—documenting, witnessing, and performing meaning on the preferred story as it develops.

As people become more and more involved in living alternative stories, they generally decide at some point that they can do just fine with-out therapy. Often, instead of making a single definitive decision to “terminate,” they want to leave the door open for an occasional consultation. Either way, since we negotiate one therapy meeting at a time at the end of each meeting, ending therapy is usually a “natural” and easy process.

In “final meetings” we usually ask people questions that invite them to review the story as it has developed—especially questions contrasting the present and past. We also ask future-oriented questions. And some-times we have a celebration!

"There are also many kinds of questions that we haven't referred to at all. "Internalized other questioning,” developed by David Epston and Karl Tomm (Epston, 1993b) and “Saying hullo again” questions, developed by Michael White (1988b) to use with people suffering from grief, are among them."