

A story illustrating narrative therapy in a cross-cultural conversation with someone approaching death

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Abstract

The following story uses ethnographic fiction to explore and illustrate the Narrative Therapy practices I might engage with when meeting with a Māori woman who has a life-threatening illness. Ethnographic fiction blends truth and imagination to create a story that seeks to engage the reader in a situation that is both authentic and instructive, while respecting the limits of confidentiality. In this story I seek to illustrate how a Pākehā counsellor committed to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi might go about a therapeutic conversation with a Māori woman for whom marginalising discourses and the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand have had a key role in shaping her experience of cancer.¹

Keywords: Narrative Therapy, Māori, cross-cultural, palliative care, cancer

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It was a busy morning at the hospice. I made my way into the community team's office and was greeted with a buzz of activity. One of the nurses called me, and I turned to greet her. "Sasha, I was wondering if you would see this woman for counselling? Her name is Louise. She has advanced lung cancer." In the nurse's hand was a referral. "This letter came from the hospital. Louise is refusing all treatment. It seems someone thought she was 'in denial' but I saw her yesterday and she told me she's not having any chemo because she doesn't think she's worth it. Louise is Māori, but she's refused cultural support."

"You'll have to see her at home, as she's too sick to drive. Could you see her?" she repeated. "Of course," I replied, disturbed by the thought that Louise didn't feel she was worth treatment, but grateful the nurse had looked beyond the judgement that Louise was "in denial" (see Pilkington, 2017). Before I could say any more, the nurse was summoned to the phone and, with a smile, I left to call Louise.

A few days later I pulled up in a beautiful driveway. Plants nourished by an attentive hand surrounded the large house in front of me. As I got out of the car I saw a slight woman emerge into the sunlight. Her dark hair gleamed as the rays of sun caught it and as I came closer I saw she was smiling. Louise welcomed me warmly and, after I had removed my shoes, guided me into the house with a heavy step. We sat down at the kitchen table. Nearby stood a large kete filled with driftwood, each piece carefully placed to reveal a story. Woven mats hung on the walls, and outside I could see clusters of red berries hanging below the fronds of a nikau palm. Artistry was evident in creating this home and I looked around with admiration.

After some further introductions and talk of the garden, Louise eased herself back in her chair and looked at me expectantly.

"Would it be OK to begin, maybe, with me asking you a bit about yourself..."

so that I might know a little of who you are and what matters to you? I find people are so much more than their current situation.” I didn’t name the illness as I didn’t know what language she preferred to use or how she might want to speak of her experience.

Louise responded immediately: “Sure! I’m married to Pete and we have three children. They’re all really supportive, in and out of the house every day...” While Louise continued to share some stories of her day-to-day life I listened attentively, occasionally asking her questions so that I learnt more of what was important to her. She shared with me details of her family and work life, and I quickly learnt she was a hard worker and a committed parent.

When Louise had finished what she was telling me, she reached across the table and picked up a piece of paper. “Well it’s lucky you’ve come to see me on your own. I don’t like groups because I lie in them. I’m a liar,” she stated in a forthright tone, waving what I now realised was a support-group invitation.

Struck by her honesty and trust in me, a stranger, I replied, “Would it be OK to ask what you mean when you say you lie?” In my mind was an awareness that some truths are more easily spoken than others, and for some people it was unsafe to voice or live their truth.

Louise responded, speaking in rapid, buoyant tones, “Oh, I say what I think I should in groups...but then later I discover it would have been all right if I’d said what I really thought.”

Infusing my tone with as much respect as I could, I replied, “What is your understanding of why you say what you think you should?”

Immediately Louise explained, “Oh, I tell a story to fit in.”

Tentatively I responded, “What is important to you about fitting in, do you think?” I reflected that people usually have good reasons for what they do.

Louise sat back in her chair, looking thoughtful. “I like to fit in. When I’m in a community I’m proud of it. I like belonging in clubs. I wasn’t brought up to do any sport or anything, so it means I can choose. I’m not tied to one thing.”

“Would you mind my asking... How do you go about this fitting in?”

Louise paused. “I don’t know, but I’m really good at it,” she told me.

“Are you a flexible kind of a person?” I offered.

“Sure am.” Louise nodded.

“Which kind of communities or clubs do you like to fit in with?” I continued.

“I take the best of what’s around. People are good to me, kind,” Louise answered, as if she couldn’t quite believe her good fortune.

“Would you say you are someone who both accepts and appreciates the generosity and care of others?” I asked, noticing her gratitude.

Louise began to tell me how she appreciated homemade gifts as opposed to bought ones. She elaborated on the care and effort in the presents people made and gave to her. Homemade fudge was so much better than a box of chocolates, she explained.

“Do you see the intention behind the gift, the love maybe?” I asked. Louise nodded as if this was obvious to her.

“What do you give to people in return when you accept their gifts, noticing the care and effort that has gone into making them?”

“They must feel the magic, because I do,” Louise answered matter-of-factly. “People are kind,” she reiterated. “I have lung cancer. It’s an ugly cancer. I was so happy when they included me in the make-up day for women with cancer. I didn’t think they would, what with me having a dirty cancer and them all having the pretty pink kind.”

Taken aback, I responded, “Would it be OK if I asked what you mean when you talk about your cancer as being dirty and theirs as a pretty pink kind?”

“My cancer is dirty because it’s a smoker’s cancer. It’s my own fault,” Louise answered, lowering her head.

Infusing as much respect into my voice as I could, I asked her in a quieter tone: “Do you mind me asking how you began to smoke?” I reflected on how hard it would be to be a smoker with cancer and not afforded the support that other people living with cancer are offered. I tried to imagine being shamed at one of the worst moments in life, not allowed to feel sad or angry but being repeatedly blamed and admonished both vocally and silently.

“It was the ‘in thing’ to smoke,” Louise explained. I nodded. Louise and I both came from a time when many people smoked.

“When I was 10, 11, 12 years old I pinched my mother’s cigarettes for a naughty

puff,” she told me with a mischievous glint in her eye, evoking glimpses of childish fun away from the surveillance of adult eyes.

“When you were 10, 11, 12 years old, do you think it was possible for you to realise the full implications of the naughty puffs?” I inquired, hoping to lessen the harsh judgement she extended towards herself alone.

“No. I didn’t realise in my teens either. It wasn’t till much later when I came to live around people who didn’t smoke,” she told me.

“How do 10-, 11-, 12-year-olds come to smoke, do you think? How do they come to think it’s a good thing?” I asked Louise.

“It’s the way I was brought up. It was a hard life. It wasn’t till I started playing sport that I realised there were different ways of living, that kids had a bed each and enough to eat. My parents were hard people. They smoked and drank and gambled,” Louise conveyed with distaste.

“What is your understanding of how they came to be like that?”

“Maybe it’s ’cos they grew up in the Depression. It was a hard life, and they worked hard and partied hard. Yeah, they were hard people,” she repeated.

“Hard lives can have people turning to cigarettes and drink to ease things, especially when there is pain that comes with it,” I commented. “What do you make of there being cigarettes for sale when we all know they kill people?”

We pursued this line of questioning for a bit longer, with me seeking to broaden the responsibility for smoking into our societal context so that Louise wasn’t left to shoulder it entirely on her own. However, I noticed myself beginning to labour a little in the conversation and started to wonder if I might be more interested in this than Louise. I listened harder for what was important to her.

“Yeah, well...” Louise pondered. “I left home at 13 to get away from it all. I knew I had to get out. The beatings, the life... My fault I smoked... Miracle I survived this far. The shame of it has been with me since I’ve had children.”

“What was important to you that you knew you had to get out?” I wondered.

“I wanted to get away from the cigarettes and the booze...” Louise elaborated.

“Do you know what it was that was important to you that you wanted more from life, that you didn’t just accept the cigarettes and booze?”

“I wanted a better life and to live it,” Louise explained.

“May I ask what sort of better life you wanted?”

Louise told me how she wanted a home and security. “I wanted a bed of my own and to know where I was sleeping each night,” she explained.

“What steps did you take towards getting a better life?” I inquired.

“I went white.” The words hung in the air, heightening my awareness that I, a privileged Pākehā, sat at her table. I found myself wondering how I was selling her short. Louise continued, “I knew I had to leave if I was to survive, so I hung around with my white friends. When I left, I got away from a lot. Not just the cigarettes. I made sure I fitted in, and it was my ticket out.”

“Would you say fitting-in saved your life?” I asked her.

“Definitely, I had to get away from the other lot.”

She watched me, seeming to wait to see how I would respond. I reflected on her calling her own people “the other lot.” I could hear the racist discourse ringing in my ears, inviting the harshness to be because they were Māori, rather than due to poverty and the devastating effects of colonisation on generations of Māori people. “May I ask what you mean when you say ‘the other lot?’” I inquired.

“Māori,” she replied, sounding like she was repeating something rather than truly believing it.

Louise waited, her body tense and alert.

“Colonisation has been very hard on the Māori people,” I said. “Do you think that the drinking and smoking and what you went through was because they were Māori, or do you think it could have been because of the hardness of life and what it did to the family?”

Louise’s shoulders dropped and she was quiet for a moment. “I’ve forgotten who I am,” she rasped sadly.

Before I could respond, she ploughed on, seeming to contradict herself: “I do all the old stuff: knitting, cooking, sewing, carpet-making. I paint.”

“Are you a creative person?” I asked her, smiling; “And the garden?” Louise enthused about her garden.

“Are there threads of who you are in the old arts?” I asked her.

Louise considered. “Yes, I think there are.” She seemed to meditate on this for a moment, then looked me in the eye. The corners of her mouth crinkled up as a

smile formed. “But then I forget,” she added, looking shamefaced again.

“Colonisation can do that to people...get in the way of being connected to who you are... Not surprising when there were laws trying to do just that,” I said sadly.² “There can be a cost when you are forced to turn ‘white’ to survive. Would it be OK to ask if there has been a cost for you?”

I thought about what it would be like to forget who I was. Emotion stirred in my belly.

“I don’t have a belonging,” Louise confided. “I feel I’m a betrayer.” Deep sadness leaked into the air around us. It hovered, seeming to draw us together.

Louise gradually seemed to recover, and in a bright voice she said: “You know I’m Scottish. I identify as Scottish.” I looked into her beautiful brown face, with its broad nose and dark brown eyes framed by the sweep of almost-black hair.

I responded then, not as I would to a Pākehā with a question, but in the way of the Māori (Lacey, Huria, Beckert, Gillies, & Pitama, 2011), who connect through the people and the land they come from, *whanaungatanga*.³ I adjusted my phrasing according to shades of *tikanga* Māori and said, “The people I come from are Scottish. They are the clan of Callum. They come from the highlands of Scotland.” My intention was to tell her we were connected, and in telling her this and in the way I phrased it, I wanted to say, “I also acknowledge your Māori side and it is beautiful too,” though this was implicit.

Louise reacted immediately. Laughing, she jumped out of her chair and rushed off to gather photos of all her grandparents who had died long ago. She introduced me to her Scottish grandmother, whom she loved dearly. Louise told me that what she learned from the Pākehā world was hard work, being provided for and being able to be home for her children because she could afford it. “Were you a willing learner?” I asked her. “Yes, I took in what I wanted and spat out what I didn’t.” Louise elaborated further. She understood money, security and time to be part of the Pākehā world only. I considered asking her about this understanding but decided to take another tack for now.

“May I ask what you appreciate about your Māori side?” I ventured.

“White people don’t understand love,” she told me confidently. “Māori love fully and unconditionally, no questions asked, no grudges.”

“How do *you* love?” I asked.

She proudly announced: “I love like a Māori!” Warmly, I responded, “Can you tell me some stories of how you show that knowledge of loving?” Louise was off, taking centre stage. I listened, grinning, delighted by her rich and lengthy stories of such loving.

“Who in your life knows that you have this knowledge and way of expressing yourself?” I wanted to know.

“All my friends!” Louise responded enthusiastically.

“Could it be that you have captured the best of both worlds with your fitting-in ability?” I asked after a moment’s reflection.

Louise embraced this possibility seemingly for the first time. Her enthusiasm bubbled. We went over her mothering and loving of her children, with Louise adding details such as “...but the car is warranted.”

“Could it be you are not a betrayer then if you’ve made the best of both your Māori and Pākehā sides?” I slipped in the word Pākehā, the Māori word for non-Māori, to give weight to Māori knowledge. “You’re right, I’m not,” she told me. Then, as she thought about it, her voice firmed. “No. I have been clever, I haven’t got off-side with anyone. I have danced down the middle of the fence.” Louise smiled fully at me. It was a beautiful sight.

Smiling back, I continued, “If you were to think of yourself as a person who can dance down the middle of the fence, what difference might that make to how you are living your life?”

“Well, just everything,” she exclaimed exuberantly.

“If this ability you have to dance between two worlds was one that you kept in your mind, what might it keep you in touch with that is important to you?”

“That I’m OK. Sasha, it’s going to change my life!” Louise’s joy once again spilled over. I was overwhelmed. How generous she is, I thought.

“Do you think it will make a difference to how you live with cancer?” I asked.

A little later I reminded her of how we started the conversation and the point we had reached. Together, we summarised what we had talked about, and remembered that fitting in had saved her life. I started to draw the conversation to an end, mindful that we still had more to talk about.

“Sasha, I like this talking,” Louise exclaimed with bouncing joy. “Today I

discovered I'm not a liar!"

I drove back to the hospice with sadness stuck to me rather than her happiness. All I could think of was Louise... a Māori in a sea of Pākehā. I thought of the times when I have felt apart, out of step, disconnected and the only one. I tried to take myself there, but I knew it was not the same. When I arrived back at the hospice, I wondered what I might have missed, what I didn't ask. Later, as I reflected with Niwa, my Māori colleague and friend, I was reminded of the bridges that friendship, love and respect can provide.

A few days later, I heard from the nurses that Louise had decided to have treatment for her cancer. Louise later explained to me, "I felt worth it after we talked."

When Niwa and I met with Louise and her family a few weeks later, we heard the good news—she was improving. A short time of respite from the cancer beckoned.

As Louise began reconnecting with Māori culture in the last phase of her life, she met with 'Niwa. One day we saw each other in the hallway of the hospice. After we had greeted each other, she remarked, "I still have my fitting-in ability, but now I prefer to speak my mind." I returned her smile. It would be the last time I saw her.

Author's comment on methodology

This story uses ethnographic fiction as a methodology to illustrate some of the Narrative Therapy practices (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Monk, Winslade, Epston, & Crocket, 1997; White & Epston, 1990) I might engage with in a cross-cultural conversation. Ethnographic fiction blends truth and imagination to create a story that seeks to engage the reader in a situation that is both authentic and instructive (Bruce, 2014; Epston, Heath, Ingamells, & Pilkington, 2016). As a methodology it provides a window into practice by transporting the reader into the counselling room.

Ethnographic fiction is often a weaving of numerous therapeutic conversations with the author's imagination to create a new narrative. Exactly how the story is written will depend on the author, the story, and the area of practice. The stories I write (see Pilkington, 2014; 2016; 2017) may be an intertwining of various therapeutic conversations or be inspired by a particular therapeutic context but populated by people I have created to generate a new narrative. I write myself

into my stories to provide transparency that the story represents my practice and thinking. Regardless of how I write each individual story, the confidentiality of both the people I draw inspiration from and my colleagues will be maintained.

Ethnographic fiction provides a powerful adjunct to more traditional methods of teaching. However, it is not intended to replace the use of transcripts, videos, reading, and practising, as there are some limitations. While many nuances of practice can be captured, there is still much that may not be represented when compared to a video. For example, tone of voice, the pace of the conversation, and nonverbal communication can be lost, thus potentially misleading the reader. What might appear to be a battery of questions may have been softly spoken or pacing the banter of the person with whom the counsellor is meeting. Minimal encouragers such as “Mm” are usually left out and the long speeches of the person the counsellor is meeting with are sometimes shortened due to word count restraints and a need for narrative drive. When I compare my transcripts with a story, the speech of the people I am meeting with is significantly longer in the transcripts. Regardless of the limitations, ethnographic fiction provides access to important examples of practice, especially when it is not possible for learning counsellors to observe such conversations.

This story illustrates one way a counsellor might respond. It is not the only way to respond. I carry the knowledge that I have many blind spots, especially in conversations that are cross-cultural. I am also aware that I am a recipient of the generosity and understanding of those with whom I meet. The story does not represent a “right way” to practise but rather is a response to a question I ask myself: “What does my commitment to bi-culturalism and Te Tiriti o Waitangi look like in practice?”

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Huia Swann who generously read and discussed with me the cultural issues in this story. Her knowledge was invaluable. I would also like to thank David Epston and Catherine Cook for their guidance.
2. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, statutes were passed that, for example, suppressed Māori cultural practices and forbade children to speak te reo Māori in school (Crocket, 2013).
3. Whanaungatanga is the practice of including, fostering, nurturing and developing a sense of belonging in family relationships. I understand whanaungatanga to be the honouring

of a person's connections, that of family and social relationships in the broadest sense. This includes both people who are living and those who have died. Whanaungatanga stands in contrast to Western ideas of individualism.

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