

**Up Over...**



# 7

## **Will you put pressure on yourself to put pressure on your bladder? An approach to intractable bed-wetting problems**

David Epston

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Angela's bed-wetting problem appeared to be at the very heart of the Morris family's life. Her mother, Jan, aged 39, was the most ruffled but denied any inconvenience to her of the daily routine of sheet washing because 'Angela can't help it'. Her father, Jim, aged 44, was more disconcerted by the social consequences for Angela of her bed-wetting. Her older sisters, Sharon, aged 13, and Carol, aged 15, fretted over her too. The family, indeed, had 'tried everything possible'. Two hospital admissions confirmed the adequacy of her functional bladder capacity. Two drug trials had been attempted – one had no effect and the other led to 'a personality change' and a relapse on its withdrawal. Angela had successfully slept through all her bed buzzers which roused everyone else.

Everyone seemed so zealous in offering Angela service, advice and commiseration. Angela, aged 11-and-a-half, by comparison, seemed insouciant and unconvinced that the problem belonged to her. She certainly was the least concerned person in the room. When asked what influence the problem was having over Angela's life, her parents and sisters hit upon 50-60%. They had other worries about Angela: 'She likes to be at home all the time . . . she can't cope with being her age . . . she lacks confidence, etc.' In fact, Angela agreed when asked that she had a strong preference for 'youngness' because that would ensure 'my happiness'. Her father reported considerable evidence for her choosing 'youngness'. She played with age-inappropriate toys, rarely left home, didn't want to advance in school and only sought out her parents for company. However, all this was put down to her bed-wetting. Angela, on the other hand, asserted that she had had such a good childhood that she would be sad to leave it behind. Everyone acknowledged that Angela was 'under age for her age'. They explained that their fear of making her 'feel insecure about herself' accounted for their reluctance to bring this to her attention.

The following summary was read to everyone and then sent to them in the form of a letter:

*Dear Jan, Jim, Carol, Sharon and Angela,*

*It's good to discover that Angela has the physical wherewithal – that is, functional bladder capacity – so that she could, with appropriate training and parental coaching, get the better of her bladder over time to make it the same age as she is on the outside. Jim, we agreed with you that such problems as bed-wetting can degrade a young person and stall their growing up. As you mentioned, this seems to be the case for Angela – e.g. preferring children much younger than herself, playing with toys her age-mates have left behind and becoming bound to home and parents.*

*However, she has made such a good job of a bad lot that we wonder if she hasn't settled for bed-wetting. She appears uncertain whether she should take her growing up to the next stage and for this reason, it came as no surprise to us that she is very reluctant to go to Intermediate School. Understandably, her problem has elicited from her parents and sisters a great deal of caring and concern. We wondered if Angela hadn't become, in a manner of speaking, addicted to a very high dosage of care and*

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*is afraid to break from the habit. She may worry that growing up, on a lower dosage, isn't worth bed-wetting plus a high dosage. She seems very satisfied with her lot in life, even though the rest of her family believe she is living less than half the life she might. The sad and difficult thing for parents is that they cannot solve such a problem for their beloved children. Their children must do it for themselves, although that is not to say you cannot provide coaching.*

*In summary, we are sorry to say that we don't think that Angela is ready to put pressure on herself to put pressure on her bladder. Sadly, we are like you, Jan and Jim – we cannot do her bladder training for her. Only she can! Although she is 'able' in terms of her functional bladder capacity, is she ready????*

*Angela, it's up to you to make up your mind about growing up. It's a big decision and one that shouldn't be taken lightly. Growing up, admittedly, is both scary and exciting. Staying grown down is neither, as you already know everything there is to know about it. You are 11½, a time when many girls and boys decided to start becoming men and women. You appear to be enjoying your childhood so much that you don't want to leave it behind. We can well understand that because we know if you grow up, you tend to go out and stay at friends' homes; you don't hang around your parents so much; you insist the problem doesn't elicit quite such a high dosage of care and concern; and you stand on your own two feet more. This is a big decision – you need to think carefully about it. We ask you to discuss this with your sisters. They know about it because they have just gotten into their maturity.*

*When you have made up your mind, phone me and let me know what you have decided. On the other hand, you may just decide to let nature take its course, whenever that is, and by doing so hold on to your childhood for as long as you can.*

*Yours sincerely,  
David Epston*

Angela looked relieved by the 'no treatment' option whereas the Morris family assured me that 'we will be back'.

I rang a year later. Mrs Morris was delighted to hear from me as by chance, Angela, three weeks earlier, had decided she wanted to tackle her bed-wetting problem. Mrs Morris advised her to phone me because, as she put it, 'I'm keeping out of it'. I commended her for the confidence she had in Angela and advised her to tell Angela that she was now very likely 'ready'! Angela contacted me that night and sounded very enthusiastic about proceeding against the problem.

We met soon after. Mrs Morris, with a flourish, removed her chair from the circle I had arranged, seating herself at a distance from Angela. She accounted for this by her categorical – 'this is not my problem anymore!' I knew at a glance Angela had done a fair bit of growing up both by her appearance and her manner. There was a lot to support my impression. But despite what we referred to as her 'grow-back', she was still 100% wet by night. However, when I questioned Angela about her new-found friendships and her active participation with her peers, I

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introduced the 'winning away and losing at home' contradiction. I highlighted the fact that Angela had been dry 100% of the time by night on the twenty-plus occasions she had slept overnight at her girl-friends' homes. In fact, Mr Morris mused that she was hard to keep at home these days.

'How is it that you win away and lose at home when it is well known that most teams win twice as often and lose away about twice as often?'

'Why is that teams, playing before their parents and friends and workmates, not only excel but often surpass themselves?'

'What is it about spectators that encourage their 'team' to play so well?'

'Why do you think it is teams can be so lacklustre and even play beneath their capability when their parents, friends etc., aren't there to cheer them on?'

'What would happen if you invited your girl friends to move in with you and sleep in your room? Do you think you would win against your problem more or less?'

(To parents) 'If she is right about her conviction that she wouldn't wet her bed if her girl friends moved into her room, do you think you might see if her girlfriends' parents would allow you to adopt them? Or do you think it would be simpler for Angela to bring her solution back home?'

I admitted my own curiosity about this state of affairs and by doing so, invited theirs. 'How do you understand this?' I enquired of Jan, Carol, Sharon, Jim and Angela. No one could make any immediate sense of this anomaly and everyone had to admit they were puzzled. Regardless, questions were asked of Angela to specify the measures she had taken, the 'knowledges' she had learned the 'hard way', and the practices she had developed to effect such a 'twenty plus night in a row winning streak'. She was hard put to find any answers, but when we persisted she found she knew a lot more than she had known before the conversation began. I then asked her if she would be willing to consider bringing her 'winning ways back home'. After all, everyone was in agreement that the adoption (of her girlfriends) was out of the question but that bringing her winning ways home would certainly be welcome.

All notions of some sort of 'fixed' physiological and/or psychological causation became untenable in the face of the problem's context-boundedness and Angela's forthright problem-solving know-how that had contributed to her successes 'away' from home. Everyone seemed literally freed to proceed against the problem – Angela as the player and her family as her supporters – as the matter became further ironical by detailed discussion that followed. Angela concluded that she was indeed 'both ready and able'. The only advice Angela was given was to apply her 'away tactics' at home, which she had disclosed to her family who now had been enrolled as her fans and supporters.

I phoned two months later to find that Angela had made no headway whatsoever. Jan had just been discharged from hospital with what she told me were 'unspecified psychosomatic complaints'. She said this had been 'a wake-up call' and she was determined to do things differently from now on. I enquired if she thought Angela was prepared to take extreme measures to put pressure

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on herself to put pressure on the problem. She said she had to. Apparently Jan's sister had insisted she do something about what she referred to as 'your guilt'. I enquired if such guilt led her to torture her body and soul and we came up with quite a catalogue. I asked in jest: 'How much torture would guilt inflict on you if Angela were to wash her own sheets?' She said that 'would be tough and hard on my conscience' but then hit upon the idea of phoning her sister. She said in jest: 'That would be far more of a torture' than anything guilt could inflict on her. I then found out that Angela would turn thirteen in a matter of five or six weeks.

I phoned Angela and commiserated with her and asked her: 'Would you be willing to put pressure on yourself to pressurise the problem?' She declared she was prepared to do anything that had to be done. I asked her how much money she had in her bank account. Conveniently, her life savings came to \$35.00. She agreed to surrender that amount to her mother who consented to spend \$1 'madly' each day Angela wet her bed from now on. However, if Angela were to 'win at home', her mother was to return the \$1 to her.

I then asked to speak to her mother who was standing by. We conferred and Jan decided that if she found herself at risk of being overcome by 'guilt', she would phone her sister for what she referred to as 'a de-guilting session'.

Much to everyone's surprise, Angela only surrendered around 25% of her life's savings, a small price to pay for starting to 'win at home'. Six months later, Angela contacted me to let me know that she hadn't wet her bed for over a month. We were able to conclude that she was now 'a winner everywhere' and that her problem 'had lost its place in her life' and that should she wet her bed again, that would be considered an accident rather than a 'problem'.

The 'no treatment today' inspired much of what follows in an approach I have developed more recently for intractable bed-wetters. All had previously undergone conventional medical investigations, drug trials, and behavioural interventions without any enduring relief. Child sexual abuse had been excluded. The young people concerned were in the age range of 9-15 years of age. Some of the parents informed me that they themselves or siblings didn't go dry until late adolescence. In fact, no young person I met in this sample was 'older' than the average age adults of his/her parents' generation 'went dry'. Not surprisingly, their parents were particularly anxious that their child's life was not blighted in the same way theirs or their siblings had been. Other parents expressed a great reluctance to show any response to the problem whatsoever and one had even sought therapy to mute his feelings of disapproval. There was a concern that should they express any disapproval, this could be productive of a 'neurosis; or 'insecurity'.

Either way, these parents were inclined to 'cover over' the problem and quite unwittingly, made it their own by keeping it from their children. 'Guilt', of course, can have the same effect of transferring the problem to the 'guilty' parent. Incidents of bed-wetting then incite self-recriminations and self-reproach. As the parents became more organised around their child's problem, those interventions

that are believed to be innocent of the attribution of blame such as medical, surgical or chemotherapeutic or are parent-organised, e.g. behavioural, are readily embraced. Such interventions can have the effect of keeping the cover on the 'cover over'. Such 'cover-overs' extend to entering into secret agreements with their child's friends, their family and family friends to overlook bed-wetting and associated malodours. Family life can increasingly revolve around the problem of bed-wetting, a problem for which the parents assume increasing responsibility and of which the young person can become increasingly oblivious, aside from the obvious discomfort and inconvenience.

Most of the problem's 'pressure' is borne by mothers, many of whom when we embarked upon detailed calculations, had washed over 15,000 sheets, given that in these families there is often more than one practising bed-wetter. Mother-blaming, that widespread explanation for many, if not most, children's problems in professional literatures and folk psychologies can add further 'guilt' to their burdens. And I am guessing that each treatment failure, by implication, makes mother-blame more likely.

The other inspiration for this approach resulted from the serendipitous findings associated with 'externalising conversations' and 'consulting your consultants'. My preference is to think of an 'externalising conversation' as an 'anti-language', a counter-cultural set of discursive practices rather than a technique, tactic or strategy. I have observed for some time now an association between an 'externalised problem' and a sense of personal agency. In the linguistic space 'opened up' between the person/family and the problem, 'insider knowledges' can be found by a method of enquiry that White and I have likened to an archaeology of capabilities and problem-solving 'know-how'. And it is our experience that young people's 'knowledges' are very close to the historical surface and are easily exposed by the 'digging around' of the enquiries. In saying that, it must be noted that the very enquiries 'co-construct' the 'knowledge'. They do not pre-exist such enquiries. But for these 'knowledges' to be experienced as in their possession, some connection must be made between the problem-solving 'know-how' *per se* and a sense of themselves as 'knowledgeable' for an effect to be experienced. Introducing a lexicon of candidate vocabulary such as will-(power), motives such as determination, causes such as pride or 'being your age' is often necessary at this point for such a connection to be made.

I have been exploring for some time now the capability of young people to produce their own problem-solving practices and knowledges. Accordingly, the therapist's task is to assist in the articulation of these knowledges and by doing so, render the young person 'knowledgeable' about his/her own 'knowledgeableness'. How often have young people said, in surprise at themselves – 'I didn't know that I knew!' For those adults committed to the view that children's problems are best resolved by the transfer of adult 'expert' knowledge, this notion of knowledge-generating capabilities may sound strangely romanticising of young people. In response to this, I advance two unrelated propositions: firstly, taking young

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people seriously is hard for those adults who expect young persons to take them seriously and secondly, much of what I take to be hypnotic phenomena can be considered to be children's play, a play they have prudently learned to keep to themselves or their playmates for fear of ridicule.

In my practice with young people and their problems, some sort of 'capability' is taken for granted and the young person's history of having had some influence on the problem is then staked out for an 'archaeology'. In intractable bed-wetting, the solution is often at most an exquisite elaboration or refinement of 'winning away', even if there has merely been one 'win' in a life-time. With Luke, aged 13, the only incident had occurred when his parents, to their shame, had forgotten to bring along his plastic sheet when their family stayed over as his Uncle and Aunt's home for the weekend. Further enquiry revealed Luke's embryonic capability and negated their understanding of the event as mere chance. This is often represented to the young person and his/her family by way of an audio-taped 'story'. This practice is merely the translation of 'letters as narrative' to another medium that is far more convenient for young people and can managed on their own without required adult accompaniment and at night.

However, 'readiness' determines whether s/he will deploy their 'know-how'. 'Un-readiness' is conceived of as restraining the young person and their family from making their opposition known to the problem. As for the resolution of bed-wetting problems, 'readiness' is vested in those practices associated with agency such as determination, will-(power), or motive. When motives (e.g. 'I want to sleep over at my friend's house') is aligned with a practice (e.g. 'I did it because I didn't want to be embarrassed when I woke up in the morning') both the family and the young person can promote 'readiness' by 'putting pressure on yourself so you can put pressure on the problem'. However, to do so, everyone must be convinced that the young person has the requisite capability. This contradicts all those 'covering over' tactics that have inadvertently removed all the pressure off the bed-wetter and put it on their parents.

By the end of the first session, those families who had been organised around the bed-wetting problem rapidly regroup around the discovered part-solutions and the avowed intention of the young person to take the problem over at home as well as away. The externalising conversation seems to have the effect of separating the young person, their newfound abilities and their 'grownupness' from the inappropriateness of their 'undergrown' bladder. The young person is divided between their capability, their purposes and intentions and the problem which now pertains to 'only a little bit of you'. This allows these families to discharge themselves from the position of a family -with-an-intractable problem to one of encouraging and promoting their young person's acknowledged discoveries. Both the problem and part-solution rest with the young person and all parties to the conversation seemed to enjoy such an outcome.

However, in this approach, the young person designs for and dictates to themselves their own preferred forms of 'pressure'. This exempts the parents or

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concerned others from supervising the problem. I have found that by this stage most of the young people are rather vengeful and their retribution takes the form of bringing their winning ways home. However, the therapist must have some suggestions 'up their sleeve' from their stock of clinical lore as I doubt if many young people would spontaneously come up with them, if left to their own devices. It is important to keep a 'catalogue' of how other young people have 'pressurised' themselves to 'pressurise' the problem: 'Well, Abby who was 15 and was just 'sick to death' of the problem and thought it would be curtains for her relationship with her new boyfriend surrendered to her mother one item from her make-up collection for each wet bed and that an 80% dry/wet ratio per month would lead to the return of the items her mother was holding in trust for her. Judy, aged nine, slept on the floor in her sleeping bag the next night after she wet the bed to 'put pressure on herself to put pressure back on the problem'. Jimmy, aged 11, said he was so scared he would be found out when they had to change for physical education that he 'put pressure on himself to put pressure on the problem' by running two kilometres every time he wet the bed. As Jimmy said, 'there is nothing I hate more in this world than running'.

The first meeting is usually concluded by my question: 'What did you learn about yourself that came as a surprise to you?' The following is a sample of replies: 'Finding out I could solve this problem by myself' (14-year-old); 'I am a wizard' (11 year old); 'I knew if I could do it at someone else's place, I could do it at home. I didn't link it up. It didn't occur to me' (12-year-old); and 'I just decided that I had been wetting my bed for ten years and that was too long. I've got to stop. I'm on my side now' (11-year-old).

Forewarnings are given that progress is best measured in terms of percentage of dry to wet beds rather than 'winning streaks'. The reason for this is that often young people initiate a lengthy winning streak after the session, one that everyone then tends to use as a base-line for success. 'Complacency' is also discussed and predicted. Parents are asked to come up with a synonym for 'complacency' and come up with 'resting on his laurels', 'overconfidence', 'making it a low priority', 'laid back', etc. I regularly ask for percentage scores to be left on my answer phone daily and if matters are going badly, will suggest another meeting to review the situation. Otherwise, I usually post a 'complacency letter' to the young person when I guess that might be appropriate when 'complacency is very likely to strike': Remember developing 'dryness' will take at least a period of six months, although we discuss the criterion of 21 days in a row as a criterion of 'dryness', although of course that does not rule out the odd accident.

My letter to Abby (aged 14) is an example of such a letter:

*Dear Abby,*

*I thought I had better write you and warn you that it is very likely that about any time now, you will have a little slip-up. This just about happens to everyone so I want to reassure you that it is nothing to worry about. What a slip-up means is that it is*

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*time to meet together and review your knowledge, all the better to make it stronger and put it to good use once again.*

*If I am wrong about this, I am very sorry. However, from my experience, you are due or even overdue for a slip. If I am right, I am very sorry but it means I will at least get to meet up with you again. And I think I can guarantee you that it will be for the very last time. There always seems to be one slip up just about now or a little while ago.*

*No matter what, I would like to hear from you one way or another.*

*Yours Against Complacency,*

*David*

The following is an audio-tape prepared for Hannah, aged 12, who went from dryness on those occasions girl-friends stayed overnight or the family was planning to leave early in the morning for weekends away to full-time dryness over a period of six months. This tape was made after our second meeting:

*Hi, Hannah, David speaking. I must confess to having liked you a lot when we met the other day. After we met, I got to thinking how unfair it was that your problem should play such a large part in your life. So I could easily understand what "a pain" it was for you to have such a problem. It must worry you so much when you are going to sleep over at friends and how much it must be on your mind when you are trying to have fun at slumber parties. And I didn't see any reason for you not to have all the fun your 'fun side' wishes to have. That is why when we first got talking, I was getting perturbed to learn about this until you told me what you told me. And that gave me more than hope; it gave me confidence in you. And I guess that is what I need if I am going to make this particular tape. So I want you to know that I understand fully that when you are under 'a bit of pressure' of some kind or other, you told me you were a '97% winner'. And 97% winning to me is about as much winning as anyone would want. I don't think you have to do any more than that. There must be a little bit of room for the odd slip-up, don't you think?*

*And we considered how odd it was – as did your mother and your brother, Jason – how you are a winner away from home and a loser at home. So that gave me the idea of you bringing your winning home. Why not? Why not? There seems to be no reason, to my way of thinking, that you can't. If you want to . . . if you really want to get the better of this problem. You've already won a fair few times away. So, if that is your opinion too, continue to listen to this tape. If it isn't, don't listen to this tape anymore. Just turn it off. After all, sooner or later, say when you are fourteen or fifteen, you probably will stop wetting the bed naturally. It will just happen as you grow up and your body matures. So you don't really have to put pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem if you don't want to.*

*However, you convinced me that you were ready and that your twelfth birthday which is just around the corner would tell you that you were ready and able. And I know you can. And you know you can. That is not to say that it doesn't require you to undergo some pressure because it does.*

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*So, if you do want to go dry, keep listening. Now, Hannah, my guess is that it's dark; you've got the light out, even if you are reading with a torch under your blankets. So if you are, that's fine but if you are wishing to go to sleep, that is the very best time to do what I am going to suggest you do.*

*I suggest you find a really cosy place in your bed . . . find a place where you feel cuddly and warm and your head fits just right into a little place in your pillow. And I hope it is a very comfortable pillow. Are you ready to head off to sleep? Well, before you do, you have something to think about . . . something to put into your mind. All you have to do is put in and on your mind those things that you do when you 'win'. You are a winner. The problem loses when you are away from home or have to get away early the next morning with your family.*

*Now what you told me I found very, very interesting and even inspiring. That is you were able to find reasons for not wetting the bed. You have three separate reasons. One was that when you go away to friends or are at slumber parties, the second was when you have friends to stay and third, the day before you go to the cottage because you want to be thoughtful of your mum and don't want her to have to rush and wash your sheets before your departure. That is very, very thoughtful of you. But I wonder if you want to be thoughtful of your growing up. And if you do, you will use your own ideas to discipline and grow your bladder up to your age.*

*It's a problem, Hannah, of your bladder being a little bit undergrown . . . not as grown up as you are because I found it very easy to accept that you were twelve and I could even have thought of you as 13. And I know you aren't quite twelve according to your birthday. So in every other way, you are a twelve year old twelve year old. But your bladder is undergrown and you thought more like a five-year-old twelve-year-old bladder.*

*So it's your job to grow it up to your age. And to do that you already have many ideas. All you have to do is try a bit harder to train it to do what you want it to do rather than what it wants to do . . . to take instructions from you rather than it just going whenever it wants to go all over the place.*

*Now, Hannah, what you said to me when I asked – and I was very interested to learn what you had to say – is that when you are at your girl friends' places or at a slumber party, you "have it on my mind . . . I think about it". And that led me to ask – "What do you think about? What are your power thoughts?" Because on these occasions, your problem does not go whenever it feels like it. And this is what you told me – "I think over and over again to myself- I can't wet the bed! I can't do it! I can't wet my bed!" and then you tell yourself your reasons – "My friends are going to think I am a baby!" Now, that is probably true because our friends don't know that just one tiny bit of you – your bladder – is a bit undergrown. But they may judge you by the age of your bladder and that would be very unfair. And what else you think that seems to help you keep it on your mind and put thoughts into your mind and makes you try harder is – "I don't want them to find out because they might tell each other and spread it!" And you know as well as I do that girls your age can be quite mean gossiping. So I can understand your concern here. And you also start wondering if 'teasing' could become a possibility if they find out.*

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*And this is what you do and this is what you can do and this is what you do that you know works. It works 97% of the time which is as perfect as anyone wants to be. And this is what you say so listen carefully to yourself. I am only putting your words into my words but they are your ideas, your power ideas, and they work: "I tell myself to wake up just before I go to sleep" or "if I wake up in the middle of the night, I always wake up and go to the toilet because I don't want them to find out". So, Hannah, this is all you need to do but you need to do it!*

*When I asked if you were ready to take this on, I thought you were but who am I? I don't know you as well as some others do. So I asked your mum if she thought you were ready and this is what she had to say: "She has already started to grow up". And when I asked your mum in what ways your growing up had shown itself, she said it had to do with "a more mature attitude . . . more philosophical . . . she can think things through". Also she thought you can even "recognise feelings within herself and discuss them with me". And I thought that was a very, very good sign of maturity. And also much to my interest, your mum thought you were "starting to be original".*

*And when I asked what your dad would say if he were here, you thought he would say that he too had noticed that you were starting to grow up. And the proof for him would have been that you are starting to save your money instead of spending it all on sweets, like younger people often do. You had got quite serious wanting a bike and you saved up for it and then approached your parents and they matched your contribution. But wasn't that a grown up thing to do? No one could deny that. I certainly was convinced!*

*However, what really clinched it for me was your brother, Stuart. He's only nine but he was clear that you are certainly growing ahead of him. He said you now had a "different attitude" towards your life. And the evidence for him was that you were reading more and that when he would ask you to play a game, you would say that you would like to but you had your home-work to do. So even Stuart noticed that you are getting more serious. And when I asked Stuart, "Well, do you think she's ready?"; he said: "I think she's ready! She's old enough . . . strong enough . . . she's confident!" And then your mum told me something that perhaps I could have guessed but wouldn't have dared ask. And this is what she said: "When the chips are down and she has to do it, she will." And I said, "Like what?" And your mum gave me the examples of your swimming and your ballet and your school-work. So, Hannah, it is clear to me and I hope as clear to you that when you really have to do something – and you want to do something – you will do it.*

*Now you don't have to solve this problem but do you want to? No-one can make you do it. But, by all accounts, you are ready and able to do this should you decide to put yourself under your own pressure to grow your bladder up to your age. And I know that everyone who knows you would be proud of you if you did, even though they are already proud of you.*

*When we thought of this idea of how you try harder when the chips are down, we came up with some ideas to put the chips down on you to help you but only if you*

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want to. You don't have to do this . . . it will go away but who knows when . . . 13, 14, 15, 16 . . . the oldest person I know was 23.

Now, Stuart thought he had a "silly idea" but from my point of view, it wasn't so silly. I think you agreed with me. His idea was that the first time you wet your bed, you give 50 cents to your youngest brother, the next 50 cents to him and after that, to each of your best girlfriends. And we thought you might like to add a note such as this:

*Dear friend,*

*Would you please accept this 50 cents to help me put myself under a bit of pressure to solve a problem I've got. I don't choose to tell you what it is but I will tell you when I solve it. Just accept this money and spend it and have a good time. Thank you very much for helping me.*

*Your friend, Hannah.*

Now, Stuart said something which I thought showed he was a very concerned and thoughtful brother. He said he would return 50% of your 'gift money' after you go dry.

There undoubtedly will be slip-ups along the way. When you play basketball, for example, you would expect the other team to score the odd basket, wouldn't you?

In conclusion, I just want to remind you what you said near the end of our meeting. Hannah, you said this: "I saw there were more ways I could overcome it". Yes, you have enough ways to overcome it, should you strongly desire to do so. And if so, you will try as hard as you need to.

So, Hannah, it is time to go to sleep now, knowing you are ready and able to do what you need to do. You are ready to have those powerful thoughts in your mind that will tell you what to do when you need to do it. You need only listen to yourself and take your own advice. Your own advice is good advice . . . but just right now, you can let yourself go to sleep because you are ready and able to watch over your bladder during the night. You have had a lot of fun today because everyone thinks you are a 'fun-loving' person. Fun is fun but it sure can make you feel tired and sleepy. But you can feel reassured that you will try as hard as you need to. So my guess is that you can fall asleep and have a good sleep and wake up when you need to and do what you need to do. Until then, sweet dreams!

### Summary

This is an approach to seemingly refractory bed-wetting problems that derives both from clinical experience and the conviction that young persons can develop knowledges of their own, even though they may well be revisions of adult advice. The approach depends on the distinction that can be drawn from the practice of this 'knowledge' when the young person is 'away' and dependence on other's knowledge(s) when 'at home'. The parental 'cover over' which has been instituted to take the pressure off the young person is replaced by the young person willingly putting pressure on themselves to put pressure on the problem (see also: Epston, 2006). Further meetings are organised, if necessary, around the predicted

## **WILL YOU PUT PRESSURE ON YOURSELF TO PUT PRESSURE ON YOUR BLADDER?**

hazard of 'complacency' and the review of 'forgotten' knowledges. Audio-taped accounts are made available to the young person to summarise their knowledges and their motives for and intentions to employ them so that the young person can take 'their knowledge' home with them and deploy it at night or at will.

### Reference

Epston, D. (2006) Putting pressure on yourself to put pressure on the problem, *Context*, 85, 2-5.



# 8

## **Rangi's story of honesty**

David Epston & Rangi

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Restorative justice now commands considerable interest here in New Zealand as well as elsewhere by way of mediation, conferencing, sentencing circles and community panels. The main focus here in New Zealand is on 'doing victims justice'.

This approach to shop-lifting focuses on the redeeming of one's reputation. This might be thought of as 'doing justice to one's moral identity' as an 'honest person'.

The following proceeds through 1) the avowal of honesty, 2) tests of hazard, 3) recruitment of an 'audience' to referee the moral significance of the undertaking of such tests, and 4) the preparation of the letter to the court.

Unlike many letters prepared for courts, this is not a psychological apology but rather something akin to a statement of Rangī's intentions and evidence to support it. The report is written with the clear intention that Rangī can be brought to the attention of the court for examination and cross-examination. I will review this matter in the conclusion of this chapter.

I answered the phone but no one replied to my 'Hello, David Epston speaking'. I hesitated before I hung up sensing there was someone there. 'Hello . . . hello', I repeated and then repeated myself again. In the background, on the other end, I could hear whispered encouragements that over time became strongly-worded exhortations. Finally, my caller reticently spoke aloud: 'My name is Rangī and you helped my friend, Mere, with her stealing'. 'Are you a friend of Mere?' I interjected to relieve her of the burden of the conversation. 'Yes, she is my foster sister'. I once again took the initiative: 'Well, any friend of Mere is a friend of mine!' Rangī replied, 'I didn't know there were people like you who could help people who were stealing'. 'You're right . . . they aren't too many of us around. Why don't we meet for honesty's sake! What do you say?' She agreed, but from some of the background commentary that I could overhear, her decision was not entirely voluntary.

We met soon after. Rangī was a 25-year-old Maori woman and a mother of two pre-schoolers. She was accompanied by her brother who made it quite clear that his role was merely supervisory by immediately falling asleep, or giving that appearance. 'Tell me', I asked, 'Are you all dishonest or do you have any honesty left?' She said she was 70% dishonest and 30% honest. She assured me that she could be honest 'sometimes'. 'What makes you want to go honest?' She went on to tell me that the previous week she had stolen from an auntie. 'What was different about that?' She informed me that this time she felt guilt whereas in the past, 'I felt good . . . and if I take from a shop, I feel no guilt'. 'How do you understand your guiltiness? What made it happen when it hadn't happened for some time now?' She said in reply: 'She was family and what I stole belonged to her daughter. My auntie won't trust me in her house again. They might think I am like my auntie Michelle who steals off everyone. They rubbish her. She has a no good future and is having a tough time'. 'What's different between you and your auntie Michelle?' Rangī replied: 'My mom helps me. Whenever she says not to do something, I don't

do it. Whenever she says anything, it seems to happen. A lot of people believe what she says.' I asked: 'What does your mother think about your stealing?' She replied, 'She's told me to stop and when she says things like that, we do it.' I then asked: 'Look before you go any further can you tell me the history of your stealing career?'

I will leave it until later for Rangi to tell her own story, but it is important to know at this point that the stealing incident mentioned in the above occurred soon after her fifth shop-lifting offence. She was given periodic detention after her fourth but had now become concerned that she would be sentenced to jail, something she had not seriously considered before. When I asked her who would be upset the most if she were to be jailed, number one on her list of thirteen relatives and friends was 'Dad'. 'He's an ex-thief who went to jail. He always told us not to do it. He doesn't know I have any offences. He'd get really angry if he did'. I enquired as to how each person listed might express their concern if she gave them the opportunity. I also learned that at one time, she had stopped stealing and although that was 'harder' than stealing, 'it's not impossible'.

'Does anything tell you that you may be ready to regain your honesty, an honesty you lost when you were 15 but regained for a period of time when you were eighteen and nineteen?' She thought long and hard and then became quite animated. 'What is it?' I enquired. 'I think everyone is watching me. The last time I got caught, someone was watching me. I got a lot more to think about now . . . my kids. I can go to jail! We investigated this in some detail. I learned that she had formed the conviction that 'if I pinch something, it will bulge out of my jacket or bag. Before I couldn't care less, but now it's written on my face and my eyes are looking all around. I am trying hard to look innocent but looking guilty instead'. Further exploration led us to discover that she was 'sweating, feeling flushed, nervous, fidgeting hands, playing with my fingers and shaking slightly'. The investigation was so detailed, with me at times proposing these possibilities and at other times Rangi spontaneously came up with her own descriptions of her 'guiltiness'. I concluded with the question: 'Do you think your honesty is getting stronger than it was?' She assured me it had. 'Do you want to test your honesty further?' She again reassured me that she did.

She agreed to the following test, summarised in the letter I provided for her to take to the manager of the supermarket where she had recently offended. It was addressed to the manager whom she knew only too well from her apprehension.

*Dear Mr Brown,*

*You may recall that this young woman was apprehended by you last Thursday and made a statement of her guilt at the Rochdale Police Station. As you may know, this is her fifth conviction. However, until now, she has regarded herself as invulnerable and always believed she would get off lightly. She now is becoming aware that this is no longer the case. Recently, she has been experiencing all the symptoms of guilt which is novel. She now believes that everyone is watching her. She is starting to contemplate*

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*her future and that of her two young children if she is sentenced to jail. She now is becoming concerned that if she did steal, it would show e.g. bulge out of her jacket or bag, whereas in the past, she "didn't care". She is becoming increasingly concerned that "it's written on my face . . . I'm looking guilty, sweating, feeling flushed, nervous, my hands are fidgeting, playing with my fingers, and slightly shaking".*

*By my way of thinking, these are all signs of her guilt operating. She has come to me with a concern for her future and with the knowledge that I have successfully developed approaches to stealing problems. I am requesting your co-operation for this young woman to fully experience those sensations in the setting that seemed to have evoked them.*

*If you were willing to assist her, I would propose the following:*

- 1)** *that you come to an agreement that she be allowed to shop at your store.*
- 2)** *that you agree to a specified time for her to be in attendance at your store.*
- 3)** *that she put up an agreed upon bond of money, which you will return to her at the end of a trial week.*
- 4)** *that she will submit to being searched before leaving your premises.*
- 5)** *that she agrees to pay for any stolen goods and will contribute that sum of money to your Staff Social Fund.*

*I believe that Rangi is really committed to break her stealing habit and I am afraid the best place to start is at the last place she offended. It is my experience that your co-operation in the above would provide some of the circumstances to allow her to challenge the direction her life is heading – a criminal career.*

*Feel free to phone me if the above needs further explanation.*

*Yours sincerely,  
David Epston*

We met a week later. She had phoned Mr Brown and asked if she could deliver a letter to him. He told her that 'there was no point'. Rangi then remonstrated with him: 'You've got a negative attitude towards me. Why don't you at least read the letter and see how you feel after reading it'. He then agreed to do so. Reflecting on this, she told me that 'taking the letter to the supermarket was the big thing . . . I was too ashamed . . . could I do it?. . . but I just walked in'. She showed the manager the letter but he said he could not agree to it without seeking his supervisor's consent. She then rang me and we both decided against further action.

Still, Rangi told me that she 'felt better when I walked out. All the girls were staring at me. They knew about me'. She turned to them saying: 'Thank you very much!' and left. Her mother had accompanied her and Rangi turned to her outside the door concluding: 'Now, I can say I am not a thief! I am determined not to be a thief!' I asked: 'What has determined your determination to go honest?' She told me: 'Being honest to you and mum!'

However, her mother had gone even further recommending 'this is so good, let's do some more'. She then insisted she accompany Rangi to several other shops 'where I used to pinch'. Despite such tests of hazard, she told me: 'I was tempted

but I never touched. This is the first time in two and half years. I felt neat paying for everything. I admit to being tempted by small things though'. She had tested herself under her mother's supervision at a supermarket, a toy shop and a dairy. Summarising these tests, she proudly announced: 'The temptation is there but I think about what would happen to me. Straight to jail. That's what's stopping me'.

I asked if she was ready and able to further her honesty testing. She willingly agreed to send letters to the thirteen people concerned about her future, including her father. I provided her with a sample letter:

*Dear Dad/Sister/Brother/Cousin/Auntie/Uncle, etc.:*

*You may not know that I have been stealing since I was fifteen years old. I have been arrested and convicted four times and recently, I was arrested for my fifth offence. For the first time in my life, I have started to seriously consider that I might get sentenced to jail and have to leave my children behind.*

*I have also started stealing from our very own family, much like Auntie Michelle, which told me that stealing was getting the better of me. I have decided to do something about it and have gone so far as to seek help from an anti-stealing professional.*

*I have started to feel guilt whereas before I thought stealing was a joke. I have been testing my honesty with my mother's help and have passed so far. There are more tests to go before I think I can say that I am an honest person and that you can return your trust to me. I will let you know when that time has come for me to declare myself an honest person in front of my whanau. (1)*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Rangi*

We met a month later. We reviewed all her 'temptations' and how she had resisted them. On one occasion, she had gone so far as to 'pick up a little puzzle book and folded it and went to walk out. There was no one there. But instead I stopped. I don't know what made me do that but I stopped. I unfolded it and paid'. On another occasion there was another close call. 'I saw a little mirror at the chemists and picked it up and sort of hid it. I tucked it in my sleeve. But I just pulled it out and put it back on the shelf. When I did that, I told my girl-friend and she slapped my hand. That felt good. I don't pinch anymore. I even told one of the shop assistants – 'I almost pinched that little mirror but I put it back. I told her about coming to see you.' She said in reply: 'That was great! I just felt great. I tell everyone.'

We agreed that honesty was coming back in full force. I asked if she thought that three more months of honesty testing would be sufficient preparation for her to make her declaration. I had found out that her whanau customarily held a New Year's Eve party attended by over a hundred people. 'Would this be an appropriate occasion?' She thought so, although she would need her parents' permission. When she applied to them for their consent, they agreed that January 1st would be a good time for Rangi's announcement.

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I was requested to write a court report. I submitted the following to Rangī to read and forward to her Probation Officer.

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*I met Ms Rangī Arawa on three occasions (2/10, 10/10 and 21/11) in regard to her stealing career. It is my understanding that this is her fifth offence. I was interested to note that although Rangī thought it would be "hard" to stop stealing, she did not think it was "impossible". In fact, she reported, from my point of view, some extremely positive experiences: "I now think everyone is watching me. When I got caught, someone was watching me. I've got a lot more to think about . . . my kids . . . going to jail. Now if I pinch something, it will bulge out of my jacket or bag . . . before I didn't care. It's written on my face". She reported that she thought she was working so hard at looking innocent that she was looking guilty; she was sweating; she was flushed, fidgeting, playing with her fingers, and experiencing a slight tremor.*

*As is my custom, I asked her willingness to submit herself to some testing. I consider each test to have been quite demanding. Their tests were as follows: 1) she listed those people (13) who were concerned about her becoming a convicted criminal and then agreed to inform them all that she had decided to break her stealing habit; 2) She was to return to the site of her most recent offence carrying a letter I provided (see copy). I requested that a Mr Brown assist Ms Arawa in breaking her stealing habit by doing the following – i) that they make an agreement between them that she be allowed to shop at his store for one week, ii) that he agree on a specified time for her to be in attendance in his store, iii) that she put up an agreed upon bond of money which would be returned to her at the end the trial week, iv) that she would submit to his scrutiny before leaving the premises, and v) that she agreed to pay for any stolen goods plus donating the same sum of money to his Staff's Social Fund. Ms Arawa alleged that she rang him up and asked to deliver my letter to him. He finally agreed to read it. She said: "That was the big thing . . . I was too ashamed . . . could I do it?... I just walked in . . . I showed him the letter . . . He said he couldn't agree to do it because he would have to go to a higher authority". She then phoned and discussed it with me and we decided to take no further action. From my point of view, the purpose of the test had been served. Ms Arawa described the experience as follows – "I felt better when I walked out . . . all the girls staring at me . . . they knew about me. I said: 'Thank you very much!' and walked out".*

*Such responses from a person with a stealing history are, in my experience, extremely promising. Each response indicates firstly that they may have taken responsibility for their actions and secondly, that they wish to redeem their reputation.*

*On the 21/11, Rangī was now able to test herself against temptation. She reported several incidents to me. She was tempted in a toy shop in Southern Park: "I saw a little book . . . a puzzle book. I picked it up and folded it and went to walk out – there was no one there. But instead I stopped . . . I don't know what made me stop but I stopped . . . I unfolded it and paid". She also was tempted at a chemist shop where she placed a prescription: "I saw a little mirror . . . I picked it up, hid it sort of . . . tucked it up my*

sleeve. I just pulled it out and put it back on the shelf". She reported that she felt "good" in the first incident. In regard to the second, she alleged that she told one of the shop assistants: "I almost pinched the little mirror. I put it back. I told her about coming to see you. She said: 'That was great!' I just felt great. I tell everybody".

She then agreed that it would be three months of honesty on New Year's Eve and I asked if she would be willing to make her announcement of her habit breaking to her family at their gathering. This was to be audio-taped. I had hoped this would be available for her court appearance but apparently this was accidentally erased by another family member. I believe it would be of interest to the Court to call one of those who were in attendance to testify to this.

I have worked with 50 plus stealers in my career and I base my impressions on that. It is my opinion that Ms Arawa has made a determined effort to break her stealing habit and has called upon her own and her family's resources to do so. Ms Arawa herself, however, has argued that the Court was "letting me off" in regard to her earlier offences. I would urge the Court not to be so lenient; on the other hand, I also request the Court take into account the efforts she has taken on her own behalf. To do so, she has had to face up to herself, her victims (Mr Brown and staff) and her family. If the verbatims of the meetings are sincere, which I believe them to be, it is my opinion that she has embarked upon a career of honesty although, of course, time will tell. I found Ms Arawa concerned about her future and she appears to me to have taken action(s) to ensure she has one.

Yours sincerely,  
David Epston

She appeared in court and was given a sentence of Community Care for six months. To my amazement, the presiding judge sentenced her to 'do' her Community Care meeting with me. Rangi and I discussed this and decided that she write up the story of her stealing career and how she redeemed her reputation for honesty. She agreed that I would ask her questions and she would provide answers and together we would 'knit' her story out of this. It was agreed that this story could be distributed by either of us to anyone either working with those who were into stealing or stealers themselves. Rangi chose the title.

### **My stealing career**

*How did I take up my career? I watched other people do it. Gee, they got that for nothing. Then you copy. I could have done it though without copying anyone. Either way, I could have done it if I had run out of money. When I was 15, all I thought of was – "I like that . . . I'll try and steal it!" I saw a jacket I liked and got caught. I got a fine. The next time I started pinching was when things got rough for me four years later. I was separating from my husband. We were still together but he was spending all his money on drink. I had to pinch food. But I got greedy as far as clothes are concerned. But then I didn't need to do it anymore but I just kept going on. I liked nice things so I would steal them. Most times, I would make special trips to go out shop-lifting and it*

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*got so that I was getting stuff I didn't really need. I would go out to steal anything, even if it was little. One time, I was even satisfied if I pinched a rubber from Woolworths. I was aware that it was becoming a habit but I didn't want to do anything about it because all I could think about was what I could get for nothing. I started to show off to other people, to add it all up to see what I had got away with but only to people I thieved with. When I was twenty, almost twenty-one, I was organising shop-lifting trips and doing deals with others. I used to even get baby-sitters or take the kids with me. That was what I mainly did with my life – shop-lifting. I'd go out especially to do a deal but it became greed. I thought I was neat because I got away with it or almost got caught. My attitude to shop-lifting was that it was neat to go out and do it and that you were in with everyone else and what you could make if you sold your stolen goods. When I got caught, I was scared until the Court case. But I kept getting fines and I thought I was being let off. I might have stopped sooner if I had Periodic Detention but I can't say for sure. I'm helping myself now.*

*It was a big step asking Mere for David's phone number. I wasn't sure what to do or how to react. When I first came to see him, I thought I was going to lie to him. I didn't; I couldn't. It was this feeling I had. I felt relaxed – I couldn't lie. I opened up. I had big ideas of lying: "I'll lie to him that I wasn't going to pinch anymore". It was the tone of his voice – I felt relaxed. He joked and that but he was serious. He's not tense. He tells stories to help explain things better. I rang him after watching Mere. She told me how it had helped her. I didn't think there were people around who could help thieves. I didn't want to ask Mere for his phone number because I didn't want her to know about me.*

*I thought the tests were good. Otherwise I would not have done them. I had to face up to Mr Brown again which I didn't like doing. Not only that, the girls there wanted to tell me to get out. I thought it was a good idea because of the testing – it was only seven days after being in Court. Mr Brown couldn't do it unless he went to higher authorities. I then rang David. I think making the effort was the biggest thing.*

*I wrote letters to everyone – thirteen. David provided me with a sample letter. It talked about how I used to be a thief and I'm not now. The letter said would they like to come on New Year's Eve for me to announce I wasn't a thief anymore. At the party, everyone was drunk. Dan then told everyone that I had something to say. Some turned around then and said: "I didn't know you were a thief. I'm glad you don't pinch anymore. What about your kids? You'd go to jail!". They kept talking about it when they were sober. Even now, I still talk about it. I don't feel embarrassed because the majority of them knew. I even told my ex-husband's family. Most of them didn't know. When I told my brother-in-law, he said: "I think that it's really good you're honest about it". They were a bit shocked but thought it was good I was being honest. I felt good telling everyone I had given up. You know how you get called up on the stage-you get shy – everyone is waiting for you to say something. It just came out; I was not telling them I was a thief but that I wasn't a thief. You feel sort of happy and excited when they say – "Good one!" "You're doing it for the kids!" You know they care about you by the remarks they make. My brother Jimmy said "Good one!" – and he's really close to me.*

*I just told Dad. He was shocked. He had not known about my stealing. He got wild and angry. He asked: "Why didn't you tell me?" "I was scared of your reaction", I told him. He was glad when he found out I was meeting David. My father had been in trouble and he didn't want me to go through all that. I was scared of getting a whack. He only talked to me about it though. He was worried about what was going to happen to my kids; he's a family-type man. But once he says things, then the subject is closed. And then you start to think about it.*

I don't think I ever had any doubts about Rangi, but six months later, she referred her friend, Marama. I asked Marama if she had attended the New Year's Party when Rangi made her declaration. She told me about it in some detail: 'Everything went dead quiet. Rangi said that a light in her life had gone on and it was going to stay on. And she was going to do good for herself and her two children. She said that there were some words that really got to her and that these words had come true'. Marama also told me that Rangi had arranged to make similar claims to the identity as an honest person at a number of *maraes* (2) to which either her family or her ex-husband's family were genealogically connected.

By chance, I met Mere some many months later. She caught me up with Rangi and her new life, her remarriage and her moving to another city and she reassured me of her continuing honesty.

### **Conclusion**

Some years later I was contacted on the same day by three agents of the Department of Criminal Justice, who had remembered Rangi and her shop-lifting. It seems that Dorothy had been shop-lifting for over 50 years but was now facing, after yet another conviction, like Rangi, a jail term. Given what this could have meant to her recent reconnection with her children and grand-children, who had severed their relationship with her for some years, she was ready to end her life. That explained the concern of the Department. The very first thing we did on meeting was read aloud Rangi's story. From that moment on, Dorothy abandoned the prospect of suicide for redeeming her reputation as an honest woman.

I am including the following 'letter to the court' by way of a conclusion to this chapter, as it perhaps is a significantly different genre for preparing such reports and needs to be highlighted. The report is admissible evidence, in this instance the moving audio-tapes with Dorothy providing a moment-by-moment account of her tests of hazard. Once again, this led to Dorothy being sentenced to community service.

#### *To Whom It May Concern*

*I was referred Dorothy Dickinson by several representatives of the justice system. However, as is my practice, I insisted that Dorothy ring me and arrange her own appointment. I did not wish for her to be mandated. Admittedly, it took her some time and when she rang, she sounded very hesitant and extremely embarrassed at*

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*disclosing her stealing to me. I was to find out that this was, in and of itself, something of a moral achievement on her part. We have met on two occasions – June 23 and July 25th; however, if you listen to the tape-recording which I have suggested her legal representative submit to the court for review, you will be aware that, in a manner of speaking, Dorothy decided “to take you shopping with me, David”.*

*When we first met, I asked Dorothy this question (a question I was to learn later had a kind of psychological shock): “What are your thoughts and feelings about stealing?” At the time, she informed me that “I am unhappy about it...I hate it”. But contrast that with “It never used to worry me..I never thought about it much. I didn’t care about the consequences. It (stealing) may have started when I was about seven or eight. I can’t remember. I had no fear. I had no respect”.*

*When I enquired as to why she should start considering her stealing, and in addition worrying about it, she told me that she has been estranged from her children for the past five or six years (Nicola, now aged 36, James, now aged 35, and Rachel, now aged 33). This estrangement had to do with her leaving their father for another partner. Any reconciliation was complicated by her ex-husband’s terminal illness and consequent death. It seems that Dorothy took the opportunity of the Millennium to initiate further attempts at reconciliation with each and every one of her children. She wrote them saying to the effect that “this is a new century...life goes on...I would still like to be your mother and friend”. To her delight, she has been able to reconstitute her relationships with her adult children and initiate a grandmother relationship with a treasured grand-daughter.*

*Dorothy, it seems, now had a reason to fear for her reputation – “If they ever found out, I would lose them for good”. In addition to that, what appears to be behind this ‘change of heart’ is Dorothy’s commitment to herself “to win back my self-respect and be able to look at myself in the mirror”. This recent offence and the likelihood of the disclosure of her offending to her adult children had the effect of “I’ve got a problem... It’s something that I’ve got to stop...I am suicidal. If I am going to be like that, I would be better off dead”.*

*It was at this point a probation officer contacted me to see if I was willing to meet with Dorothy. As you can see from the other document I suggested her legal representative present to the court (which is a chapter I am preparing for publication, as I have an interest in shop-lifting and stealing more generally – see Seymour, F. & Epston, D., *An approach to childhood stealing with an evaluation of 45 cases in Epston, D., & White, M. (1992) Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination*).*

*In fact, in discussion, Dorothy alleged that “I have stopped, but I’m not sure...” I could understand her uncertainty as her means to her cessation of stealing was not a very practicable one, e.g. no longer shopping. In addition, she did tell me that after our phone conversation proceeding our first meeting, she did return to a shop from which she had periodically stolen and “as soon as I saw the shop sign, I said to myself: ‘danger, stay away’. My stomach started turning over. I felt like I was having palpitations. I was sweating around my hairline and my hands were fidgety”. For me,*

these are the signs of 'guilt' or in other words a 'conscience.' I asked her if she could consider the happiness she might feel if she were "to prove to yourself that you are an honest woman, honest grandmother and honest friend?" She concluded – "I have to do it or kill myself. I'd rather go to jail than worry about it (further stealing)". Recall that in the past Dorothy had no sensations that she could recall of worry, shame or guilt whatsoever. She could also recall an incident some three months ago where "I took some sweets and put them in my handbag and went to check out my groceries. I paid for it. I said to myself, 'you've got sweets in your purse – you are stealing'. I got them out and placed them with the rest of my stuff. I paid for them. I felt really good about it. I was able to take it out of my purse and walk out of the supermarket for the first time in years with everything I paid for". She acknowledged that to do so required 'conscious awareness' on her part.

I then enquired if she was prepared to take the next step. She assured me that "I am ready to do anything...I have to...I am sick of feeling sick". The next step was outlined in a letter to her and that was for her to have an 'honesty guard' (I suggested her friend, Jeanette) and she was to shop as usual and bring her 'conscious awareness' to bear and resist the by now well-engrained 50 year long temptation to steal. I suggested she take along with her photos of her granddaughter and before entering a shop to 'speak' to these photos. She should tell the photos of her granddaughter what contribution she wanted to make to her life as she grows up and that she could not do this "if I would be nervous about them finding out that I had a number of convictions for stealing, and that I had been stealing for so long that I couldn't really remember when it began and that I am unable to look at myself in the mirror".

The last paragraph of my first letter read as follows: "Dorothy, let me reassure you that I take this matter seriously and accept that it is a matter of life-or-death!"

Dorothy rang me acknowledging that she did not feel able to enlist Jeanette in this project, but requested that she metaphorically take me along and proposed the following: That she should go shopping with me as her 'security guard' and she would record her thoughts on audio-tape and bring them to me so I could listen to them. I accepted this as a reasonable alternative proposal. I guess there are grounds here for concern on the Court's part as she now wasn't having a 'friendly witness'. I will leave that up to the court to decide by listening to the audio-tape recorded during the various shopping 'trials of moral purpose'.

We met again recently (July 25th) at which time I listened to the tape. If Dorothy's accounts are reliable, she would appear to have 'broken' the stealing habit. In addition, she spoke of the significance of my enquiry – "How do you feel about your stealing?" She told me that "You were the first person who ever said that...It was a shock...I've never used the word 'stealing'...It's a bad, bad word...shop-lifting was OK. It made me realise I'm a bad person, not just a petty shop-lifter. I've never admitted to anyone before I'm a stealer. It has to be stopped. It has to be healed. Previously I thought it was like speeding tickets. I should respect the Law".

Admittedly, the evidence you have before you has not been witnessed. However, I hope you will cross-examine her about the content of the audio-tape. Here she

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*asserts the following: 1) "I am now able to pick something up and put it down again"; 2) "I have bought things I have never bought before"; and 3) "I don't like stealing". She proposes some accounts indicative of honesty: 1) "I haven't stolen anything for three weeks... I can't remember the last time I went three weeks"; 2) "I feel guilty... It (honesty) now matters. I need to be able to hold my head up and look at people at eye level. I need to make some dramatic changes in my total being before I destroy myself"; 3) and most significantly, Dorothy reported that she went shopping in the company of her eldest daughter, Nicola, despite the fact that "I feared that I would shoplift regardless"; and 4) she told of making amends by apologising to each shop saying, "I'm sorry... I will never do that (stealing) again".*

*What are we to believe here? I ask myself that question and I know that if Dorothy fabricated the tape, then in doing so she is betraying our relationship, one in which I have trusted her to tell me the truth with me as her witness. I base my trust in the conviction I have placed in Dorothy to become honest. In addition, Dorothy has discussed with me her willingness to go to jail, thinking that is what she deserves.*

*I leave it up to the court, which has more experience than I do to discern when the truth is being told and when it is not. If you listen to the audio-tape, I want you to know that it was specifically my request that it be entered as evidence and this was only discussed 'after' the fact of its production. I swear to that.*

*Yours sincerely,  
David Epston*

### Reference

Seymour, F., & Epston, D. An approach to childhood stealing with an evaluation of 45 cases, in Epston, D. & White, M. (1992), *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination – selected papers of David Epston & Michael White 1989-1991*, Dulwich Centre Publications

### Notes

1. Whanau is a Maori word meaning 'extended family'.
2. Maraes is a Maori word meaning 'a culturally sacred space'.

# 9

## **Community approaches – real and virtual – to stealing**

David Epston and Fred Seymour

### Genealogical source for this approach

My approach to the problem of childhood stealing owes a great deal to the intriguing ingenuity of my father and how he contrived the means for me to substantiate my claim as an honest young person. In addition, I had the added bonus of a conviction that endures to this day that I have a talent for finding lost objects.

I stole fifty cents from my father one day when I was about eight. Not too long afterwards, he came to me and said: 'Son, I've lost fifty cents. Would you help me find it?' I said nervously: 'Oh, yeh, yeh, I'll help you but how?' He advised me: 'Right, well, you go into the laundry room and look there and I'll go into my work shop and look there and then we will meet back in the kitchen and see if either of us has found the lost fifty cents.' So I followed his advice – of course unsuccessful in my search for the lost money – and returning from his quest, he asked: 'Did you find it?' I replied: 'No! Did you find it?' I was really hoping he would turn up some fifty cents or other and save me from admitting my theft. 'No,' he said and before I could confess, he eagerly proposed the next step: 'Right, okay, well you go and look around the back yard and I'll go and look in the front yard and we'll meet back in the kitchen.' Perhaps he noticed my dismay because he added: 'Don't worry. One of us has to find it somewhere!' So I went out to the back yard, dutifully searched and he went to the front and we met back in the kitchen with no better results than last time. He said: 'Right, well, you go to your bedroom and I'll go look in your mother's and mine and we'll meet back in the kitchen.' There nestled dead centre on my pillow was what looked like the very same coins adding up to the fifty cents that I had stolen. I was bewildered but immediately returned to the kitchen. He came back and asked: 'Did you find it?' I said with relief: 'Yeh, I did!' He accepted it appreciatively and thanked me more than once for finding the lost money.

The very next day, he came up to me and said: 'Hey, you won't believe this! I've done it again. I've lost some more money. Would you help me find it?' We went through the same sequence until finally he searched his bedroom and I was directed to my bedroom. Again fifty cents lay on my pillow. Returning to our meeting place, I proudly proclaimed: 'Look, I've found it!' He kindly replied: 'Look, you are getting so good at finding lost things, why don't you keep the money?' I replied: 'Well, thanks ... thanks.' This happened every day for the rest of the week as he seemed more and more upset with himself for his carelessness at the same time as more appreciative of me for my new-found talent at finding things. (1)

Perhaps what follows lacks some of the benefits of my father's approach to my childhood stealing, in that many who undergo it never gain the sense that I did that I was good at finding things. However, it did provide me with a prototype from which to fashion a 'community approach' that would not require from the parents concerned my father's humility and generosity of spirit. Many had run out of such sentiments by the time we met, having been 'robbed' on many occasions despite the chastisements, humiliations, recriminations, etc. they had instigated in order to have their children desist from stealing from them and others.

What I was searching for was some form of a 'ritual of re-grading' (2), by which a young person could undertake a purposeful act of moral redefinition that would repair the damage done to his/her identity by their stealing. Most families find it morally reprehensible to be robbed by their own children or to be known in their neighbourhood or school community as the parent of a 'stealer'. I was unconcerned with any kind of 'ritual of degradation' (Garfinkel, 1956), the purpose of which would be to first establish the young person's blameworthiness, to define him as the 'guilty party' and alter one's identity as a 'lower type or grade' of person. A judicial trial would be the prototype for such a ritual. On the other hand, I was unconvinced by the then prevalent psychoanalytic view that young people were 'stealing love'. If one followed the logic of such a premise, one would necessarily be required to respond by loving their stealer. I considered this far too much to ask those parents who had been robbed by their children.

In addition, I was concerned that this should take place before members of his/her community who had been convened for such a moral purpose. Here these young people could seek by specified means to re-identify themselves as competent members of their moral community. Recalling my father's 'finding tests', I conceived of 'honesty tests' as the means for the young person to publicly lay claim to a moral decision between two available identities e.g. an honest or a dishonest/stealing person. Secondly, as a result of asserting such a claim, the young person volunteers to engage in 'honesty tests' fully aware that they are putting themselves in moral jeopardy but not knowing exactly how.

The volunteering of the young person is premised on what I think of as 'understandings' that are agreed upon by all the parties to it before we proceed any further. Firstly, how the young person contends with such trials and tribulations e.g. honesty tests, constitutes a durable statement of who s/he is and can be e.g. an honest person. Secondly, the publication of the results of the 'tests' stands at the same time as a disavowal of his 'reputation' as a stealer, thief, or more generally, a dishonest and untrustworthy person.

This approach does not formally concern itself with the establishment of stealing or not although, in many instances, that had been established by the young person being 'caught red handed' either by the family, shop keeper, neighbour, school teacher, etc. Rather it settles for a far different concern: whether you are stealing or not, do people believe you are a stealer? Whether you are stealing or not, have you now got a reputation as a stealer? This by-passes at this point any requirement the young person might feel to defend their innocence and any requirement others/the therapist might feel to establish the young person's guilt. A community-wide moral dilemma is substituted for any quasi-legal concern for his/her guilt or innocence.

This approach as described in the following was contrived for referrals from the Youth Aid section of the New Zealand Police and as such these young people had 'long' records of stealing and had come to the notice of the police. An abridged approach was then developed for young people referred by their families for stealing which was often restricted (as far as the family knew) to themselves.

### **The moral dilemma**

*Are you interested in providing evidence to one and all that you not only can be but are an honest person or would you rather become known as a stealer?*

The effects of both proposed moral statuses can now be surveyed without getting caught up in a debate of 'you did it' versus 'no, I didn't' nor any kind of pastoral (moral) care e.g. preaching. The effects on other relationships can be surveyed, especially those who allege they have been robbed by the stealer e.g. parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, friends, class-mates, team-mates, neighbours, shop keepers, etc. Such questions can be addressed to absentees either indirectly or by means of internalised other enquiries (3).

### **Direct enquiries**

- *If you become known as a stealer, do you see that having any effect on your son-father relationship? Son-mother relationship?*
- *Do you now find your mother watching out for you more than loving you?*
- *Have you found that your father no longer turns his back on you?*
- *Have your parents started keeping their valuables under lock and key in their own home?*
- *Do you think they have lost their sense of security when you are around?*
- *If you bankrupt your mother, are you concerned that you might bankrupt your son-mother relationship?*

### **Indirect or internalised other enquiries**

- *(Indirect) Do you think Mr Jones (next door neighbour) still welcomes you to watch rugby at his place now that you robbed him of his DVD player?*
- *(Internalised Other) If Mr Jones were here today and I asked him this question: 'Is Johnny still welcome to watch rugby at your place now that he robbed you of your dvd player?', what do you guess he might say?*
- *(Indirect) Do you think your granny and grandpa are as willing to have you around and sleep over at their place as much now that they believe you are a stealer?*
- *(Internalised Other) If your granny was sitting right there (pointing to an untenanted chair) and I asked her this question: 'Is your grandson still welcome to sleep over at your and his grandpa's since you became convinced he is a stealer?', what do you guess she might say?*

### **The injustice of being known as a stealer**

Inserted into this set of enquiries is what has turned out to be a very significant question, one which almost all stealers have answered strongly in the affirmative, even if they have seemed indifferent to any of the above mentioned.

- *Have you ever been accused of stealing something you hadn't even seen or thought about stealing?*

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- *Does the fact that people believe you are a stealer give you a bad reputation? Stain your reputation?*
- *Are you finding that people don't want you to play with their kids, believing that about you?*
- *Do the neighbourhood shopkeepers not allow you on their premises, knowing your bad reputation?*

Similar enquiries can now forecast the 'injustice' of being known as a stealer for the young person's future:

- *Do you think it will be easy as a well known thief to get the kind of girlfriend you want?*
- *Do you think as a well known robber you will be able to get any other job than either in a gang or in a prison?*

### **The creation of compassion all round**

Parents are most often and very obviously aggrieved, humiliated or outraged by public concern over their children's activities that have involved them with the police (Youth Aid) and a referral to a government or non-governmental agency. Such outrage is in addition to the insult they have often experienced to the moral integrity of their family by their child's stealing from them and others. It is hoped that the 'relative influence questions' structured around the effects of the problem (stealing) on the young person and the members of their family may have reunited them as sufferers rather than as perpetrator (stealer) and the victims (those who have been robbed). In a manner of speaking, they are on the 'same page'.

- *Ruth (mother), Jim (father) and Johnny, did you all find that it was hard to hold your head high at the Parent Teacher's Meeting?*
- *Ruth, Jim and Johnny, is it a concern to you at church that people will find out, if they haven't already, that your family is known as one that has a stealer within it?*
- *Ruth, Jim and Johnny, does it matter to you all what has happened to your family's reputation in the community?*

Another round of questions can further assist with this. These questions highlight the lure of ready cash and what it can be turned into and how this is a temptation for everyone, even if historically in the case of the parents.

### **To young person**

- *Do you find the temptation of money sitting around just too hard to resist?*
- *Do you find that you can readily turn money into all the sweets you want? All the music downloads you can possibly listen to on your Ipod?*
- *Do you find that when you share out the stuff that the money buys you get the impression you have a lot more friends than you thought you had?*

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- *Can money buy friends for very long? Or will you have to keep stealing to buy them? By the way, how much does a friend cost these days?*

### **To parents**

- *When you were ten or eleven, did you ever give into the temptation to steal money from your parents, especially as it was just sitting there in your mother's purse or your father's pant's pockets?*

If either parent is willing to disclose any episodes of childhood stealing (after all, how many of us didn't steal something as a young child), this can lead to discussions around their histories of the moral evolution of their 'honesty'.

- *What made you turn away from the temptations of stealing – after all wasn't robbing your granny easy money?*
- *What did it matter to you that you and your parents were called into the headmaster's office and you owned up to having stolen Sally's lunch money, and not only returned that to her but went around to her home with your mum holding one hand and your dad holding the other and apologised to her and her parents?*

Another tactic I often follow in any instance of a parent or parents minimising the stealing e.g. 'it was only coins!', 'what does it matter, we share everything in our family', 'it was only twenty dollars! What's twenty dollars?' etc. I try to introduce the fiduciary advantages of the young person's thefts. How I go about this is to enquire as to the young person's allowance or weekly income. And then I ask an estimate of the family's weekly income. Say the young person receives \$5.00 per week in an allowance and his family's weekly income \$1,000.00 per week, I then suggest the real income of their child's thefts might well be considered as a factor of 200x. Here in the instance of the above mentioned \$20.00, the child would have realised a relative weekly income of \$4,000.00. When the parents consider the relativity of their incomes and their child's 'income', they often appreciate how significant such a theft might be to the financial well-being of such a young person.

### **The proposal for restoration of a moral reputation: a good versus a bad reputation:**

*I have an idea that has worked 60 or 70 times before today . . . after I tell you about it, your mother and father might like to ring up some other parents of young people who 'turned honest' so they can check this 'honesty approach' out in case they have any concerns or doubts about it.*

I regularly recruit family members, after their child's reputation as an honest person has been restored, as consultants (Epston and White, 1992) to other parents 'who will come after you and perhaps feel as desperate as you did four or five months ago about Billy's future'. I have never known a family who did not willingly offer their services in anticipation to another family.

**To the young person:**

*I can't give you the phone numbers of people your age yet. Why? They undoubtedly will tell you about the 'honesty tests' that you will have to pass to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you not only can be but are an honest person. That would mean you weren't being tested. A bit like a test at school where the teacher gives you the test questions a week before. That wouldn't prove anything, would it? Now if you are still interested, I will provide you with some names and phone numbers after your honesty party celebration if you want to compare notes with them.*

*But let me assure you of this – I have a way that will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that either you are a stealer or that you now have proved to one and all that you can be and are an honest person.*

Here, if the interview has avoided so far the contentiousness of an adversarial discussion premised on parental blame and young person denial and at the same time created some compassion for all concerned, the next stage flows naturally.

*Do you trust me on that one? If you do, please indicate that in front of everyone by shaking my hand and giving me consent to go on.*

I then formally have the young person say after me, breaking the 'consent' up into easily remembered sections:

*I, Johnny Hopewell, hereby give consent to David Epston to provide my parents with information as to how they might 'honesty test' me. I do not expect to know how they will test me; otherwise, it wouldn't be a test and it wouldn't prove anything to anybody.*

I offer a last minute confession but without any concern if the young person demurs.

*Now that you have decided to prove to one and all that you can be and are honest, are there any accusations of your stealing that you would like to admit to so you can get it off your chest?*

Often at this point, the young person will take advantage of this opportunity to admit to contested incidents. This is always very encouraging of a very favourable outcome.

**Community honesty meetings**

The first matter of concern is who should be invited. A guest list is reached by interviewing parents, siblings, or anyone else in attendance e.g. police officer, along with the honesty candidate around this enquiry:

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- *Who cares whether you become a stealer or an honest person?* (to the young person)
- *Who cares whether your son/this young man proves to them he is a stealer or an honest person?* (to parents, siblings or Youth Aid police officer)

The most obvious candidates are as follows:

- (1) Siblings, grand parents, aunts/uncles, cousins, and other extended family;
- (2) Neighbours and family friends;
- (3) School-teachers/class mate;
- (4) Soccer coach/team-mates; and
- (5) Boy scout leader/girl guide leader/fellow guides/cubs/scouts;

The least likely candidates but equally significant are as follows: victims of the young person's thefts, which of course could be any of the above, but in particular shop keepers. Often here, the young person or family members are reluctant to issue such invitations to shop keepers e.g. 'I am too embarrassed...I wouldn't know what to say', that I will offer to issue invitations to such people on their behalf. I secure a pretty good attendance from aggrieved shop keepers, who often relish such an opportunity to confront those who have robbed them under such circumstances.

The meeting place is a matter for discussion e.g. family home, grand parent's home, church or community centre hall or agency depending on the number of attendees and the family's preferences.

### Invitations

Invitations are collectively prepared and written but most typically I interview the young person and write down his/her responses. Obviously I will change the pronouns. For example, Johnny replies to my enquiry: 'Johnny, are you sick and tired of having a reputation of being a stealer?' Johnny replied: 'Yah, I am sick and tired of having a reputation as a stealer.' I write down his words while uttering them aloud. I would revise that to: 'John is sick and tired of having a reputation as a stealer'. If I have a computer nearby, I type this up and read it back to Johnny asking – 'Do you confirm that, Johnny? Or do you want me to change anything to suit you better?'

Here is a facsimile invitation (I have inserted in brackets the questions that produced the text of the letter):

*As you may well know* (Do you think many people know about your stealing reputation, John?) *I have got a very bad reputation* (What is your reputation, John?) *over the last year* (How long has it taken for you to receive such a reputation?) *as a stealer.* (Do you know what people call you? Has anyone said it out loud to your face?)

*Now people are even accusing me of things I have never done which isn't fair.* (John, you mentioned that people are accusing you of stealing things you haven't stolen.

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Do you think that is fair or not?). *But when I think about it, I don't blame you.* (John, if you were to think about it, would you blame them for having the idea that you are a stealer?) *Also I am sad that I cannot play at some of my friends' homes.* (John, your mother mentioned that your friends' parents won't allow you to sleep over there or play there any more. Do you care about that or would you rather not have friends like Jimmy any more?) *Grandpa, I am sorry that you won't take me out fishing with you on your boat anymore after I robbed your wallet.* (John, is it a good thing or a bad thing from your point of view that your granddad won't take you out fishing anymore? Why is it a bad thing?)

*David Epston, a family therapist, has told me that it is possible for me to prove to you I am and can be honest.* (How does that sound to you, John? Do you want to add anything or take anything away from that?) *I do not expect you to believe me if I just say I will not steal anymore.* (John, have you found that most people don't believe what you say anymore?) *I am willing to go through the 'honesty tests' that my parents will set for me with David's help.* (John, are you willing for your parents to honesty test you? Do you give me consent to tell them how to do it?)

*I and my parents wish to invite you to join us at (time/place) for my honesty meeting. I know some of you still care and love me, even though I have robbed you.* (John, of those who you have robbed, who do you guess still love you and care about your future?) *Those of you I have robbed that don't know me so well, I want to prove to you that I deserve to get my reputation as an honest person back.* (What do you want to prove to those whom you robbed but who don't really know you that well as a person?) *I am hoping that then I can buy stuff in your shops again?* (Why do you want them to know you are an honest person?)

This document is then produced and the young person signs the following postscript:

*All the words in this letter are mine and they were the answers to questions David asked me. And he typed them up into this letter.*

*Signed by:*

*Witnessed by: Both parents formally sign*

*at The Family Therapy Centre on the day of 2007 in Auckland, New Zealand....*

In some cases, I request that the parents take this document to a lawyer and have Johnny swear it as an oath and sign an Affidavit to indicate the seriousness of the matter and its legal significance.

Although his parents go along with him to the Post Office, he is expected to post all the letters himself. If it is more convenient, contact is made by telephone or email, although here parents closely supervise the phone calls or emails. It is commonplace for such young people to quite quickly receive encouraging and congratulatory replies from family and family friends.

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### **From an older brother and sister:**

*We would like to come to your Honesty Party. It is nice to see that you are grown up enough to be able to determine which is right and wrong, as a lot of people find this very hard to do. We both think that if you try hard enough, you will be able to pass your honesty tests with ease, but remember, you still have to work hard. (Epston, 1989, p. 106)*

### **From a family friend:**

*Thank you for your letter. It is really good to hear of someone like you, trying to make a big step forward in their life. Some people seem to have it easy – they never seem to get into trouble, and everyone likes them, and they seem happy with themselves. Other people go through big struggles within themselves, and feel that nobody likes them – but when they win the struggle they turn out to be the best people of all. So I'm pleased to hear that you're sensible enough and grown-up enough to struggle with dishonesty. I look forward to hearing how you get on; and hope to be able to come to your Honesty Party (Ibid, p.106)*

## **Honesty Community Meetings: Real or Virtual**

### **a) Real Community Meetings**

Seating arrangements:

The young person and I sit at the centre of a circle and we merely rotate in our chairs to face each of the attendees as they speak.

Two rounds of enquiries

Starting with his most intimate relationships, e.g. parents, grandparents, caretakers and then passing from person to person who are encircling us, this question is asked in some form or other:

*What will you feel/think/do if John keeps stealing? If his stealing is contested? What will you feel/think/do if John keeps his reputation as a stealer?*

John, is requested to face each speaker, although admittedly it is difficult at times for him to look the speaker in the eye. In this round, the tone of voice of the speakers is often gloomy and their comments are dismal as you might expect. The young person is often visibly upset and will cry. There is no attempt to console him at this point.

Straightaway, the next round is initiated following the same route around the circle.

*What will you do/think/feel if John passes his honesty tests with flying colours and proves to one and all that not only can he be honest but that he is honest?*

Not surprisingly, the mood lifts as those most concerned people e.g parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, etc. prophesy about how they will respond to

him after he substantiates his claim to be an honest person. It is often the case that some of the victims of the young person's stealing spontaneously propose some 'restorative justice' projects. For example, a neighbour as well as close family friends might suggest:

*Johnny, if you pass all those honesty tests, you might like to give me a hand on some concreting work and some other jobs I've got planned. And since the dvd you stole was worth about \$200.00 and I think you are well worth \$10.00 an hour, if you work twenty hours, I figure you and I are quits. And then you can come over and watch All Black Tests at my place like you used to with your dad. How does that sound to you, son?*

### **Honesty Tests and Testing**

I explain only in principle the honesty tests to this young man's moral community informing them why I cannot tell them the specific details, e.g.. *If he knew any more than merely agreeing to risk being honesty tested, it couldn't or wouldn't be a test at all. For example, if a young person at school knew all the answers to tests at school and passed with an A average, it wouldn't prove anything at all about how much they had learned so far.*

### **Re-performance of the Consent Procedure**

John and I stand before his moral community and re-perform the consent procedure:

*We keep a firm handshake (John, do you trust me enough to tell your parents how to set the tests which will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt whether you are a stealer or an honest person?)*

If he consents to this, I ask him to repeat after me:

*I, John Hopewell, give David Epston consent to tell my parents how to set honesty tests without me knowing how they are going to do it. If I knew when and how I was going to be tested, it wouldn't be a test at all and you wouldn't believe I deserve to be known as an honest person when I pass them.*

Before I and his parents go off together in order to inform them how to set the tests, all the attendees are advised of the following:

*Each and every one of you will be informed either by letter, email or telephone call immediately after each test. If it is a letter/email or phone call, it will read or Johnny will inform you that – 'I passed or failed my honesty test today . . . Johnny'.*

The meeting is then ended by my assisting Johnny to thank everyone for coming along 'to help me prove to myself and to you that I not only can be but I am an honest person'. The parents reiterate their thanks to the attendees as they see fit.

Chairs are left vacant for those unable to attend, but who would have wished to have been there if their circumstances were different e.g. siblings overseas, grandparents out of city or on some occasions, if this is considered

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appropriate protocol, the deceased. We would have contacted these people ahead of time with the same two rounds of enquiries and Johnny's mother or father would be asked to be their proxy and read out their answers to the two enquiries. Still, John would be asked to 'face' the chair left for them. Or I would have interviewed the deceased in an internalised other format ahead of time (3):

*If Johnny's grandfather knew all about what has been going on over the last three years regarding how John has lost his reputation as an honest person, but on the other hand, he knew too that Johnny now wishes to regain it and is willing to undergo honesty testing, what do you guess Johnny's grandfather would say if we asked him the following questions?*

And here I would go through the two enquiries and record his putative answers in writing and have, say, his daughter/Johnny's mother elaborate on his reasons for his opinions. I would then ask Johnny's mother if she would like to read his (her deceased father's) thoughts 'from beyond the grave' aloud or would she like someone else to do it for her.

### **Post-meeting Meeting with Parents**

Parents are provided with careful instructions immediately after the real community meeting regarding the setting of the tests. Specific examples are provided. And they are advised to set tests at as many sites of stealing as they can judiciously arrange. I would have got some information as to who believed Johnny had stolen from there and where. Most of the young people who warranted such a community approach had stolen from almost everyone they possibly could have e.g. parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, family friends, school teachers and classmates, shops and by breaking and entering neighbourhood homes.

### **Car and Groceries**

Here is an example I might use:

*Say you just got home from going to the supermarket and you had a car-full of bags of groceries. Count out a specific sum of change and leave it in that depression by the gear shift, knowing Johnny would have to see the money if he were to get the groceries. Lock the car so only Johnny and no one else possibly could have taken the money. Then give him the car keys requesting he bring in the groceries. The moment you observe all the groceries have been brought in, say: 'Johnny, you have been honesty tested! Let's go to the car and see if you passed or failed.'*

### **Staying Over at Grandmothers**

Here is another example:

*Can you arrange with your mother when Johnny stays over at her place to phone you at a convenient time. Tell her to leave a five dollar note right beside the telephone. Then tell her you will phone back in a few minutes. Your mother answers the phone and*

then goes to find Johnny to tell him you wish to speak with him. You talk to him about picking him up for a few minutes, knowing all the time he will be tempted by the five dollar note which is conspicuously right in front of him. When your mother hears the phone call end, she enters the room saying: 'Johnny, you have been honesty tested. Let's see if you passed or failed?' Then she is to phone you and put Johnny on to let you know the results of the honesty test. Any number of other examples are provided if the parents suspect they need detailed advice. However, most parents soon get the gist of an 'honesty test' and can contrive their own.

When they learn how scrupulously the tests are set and how rigorous they are, their opinion is sought as to the 'limits of the tests':

- (1) *How many tests do you think Johnny would need to pass before you could be convinced of his honesty?*
- (2) *And over what period of time?*

The usual conclusion of such discussions is ten tests over a three to six week period. Others then call for a kind of moral cease-fire for several more months to be sure and seek the right to spontaneously honesty test if they have any suspicions that their young person has reverted to stealing. All this is negotiable but the important thing is that their decisions are communicated clearly and fairly to Johnny (3). Accordingly, they now can propose a date for the honesty celebration/party and attendees are asked to put this into their social calendars in Johnny's first communication (e.g. phone, letter, email) to them announcing his pass/failure on his first test.

It is important that the moral jeopardy that the 'testing' implicates is fairly conducted. Care should also be taken that Johnny could be the only one to be tempted. That means that considerable care is taken in planning the test and that the test is decided almost immediately. In one family in whom I did not place full responsibility for administering the tests, when I rang to find out the results of a test, having gone over the setting of that particular test with them, they replied that they couldn't say as their daughter hadn't stolen the test yet. It seemed they were determined to leave it there long enough so she did. In some families, other siblings have either joined in the stealing or are stealing under the cover of their well known stealing sibling. This must be guarded against.

Parents have my phone number for emergency discussions if they run out of ideas for tests. This has rarely been called upon. People don't have too much trouble getting the idea and implementing it to their satisfaction.

### **Honesty Party/Celebration**

When the time comes as agreed with the family, this is organised with John at its centre. Once again, I assist Johnny in writing the invitations. This is done in a very similar fashion to the invitation letter to the honesty meeting.

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Dear x:

*Although I want you to know that I was tempted to steal on two or three occasions, I didn't. I was honest instead and left the money where it was. Mum and Dad say that I can now start thinking of myself as an honest person but that I still have to prove it to you because you weren't there at the tests.*

*I want you to hear my honesty speech at my honesty party at (time and place) and have a piece of my honesty cake that mum said she would teach me to bake. If you are interested, it will have chocolate icing and 'honesty is the best policy' ('honest as the day is long' or 'Johnny ... an honest person') on the top of it in silver balls.*

*There will be food and drinks so don't bring anything but yourself. This is my way and my parents' way to say thank you for helping me to prove I am honest to you. And for the fact that you were willing to give me a chance, even though I had robbed some of you.*

*Yours for Honesty,*

*Signed by:*

*Witnessed by: parents*

The Honesty Party is convened as a pleasant social gathering with its highlight the young person's honesty speech. Those who cannot attend often send letters that are read aloud by Johnny or other family members. At the appropriate time, all the party goers are called together for Johnny to read his honesty speech aloud. Once again, we (his parents and I) often get together to help him with this ahead of time, if he requests such assistance. But as often as not, although offered, this is turned down by the young person. The young person is happy to assume full responsibility for his/her speech-writing. Afterwards, many of the attendees pass their congratulations on to him through hugs or hand-shaking. Attending such meetings have been some of my most pleasant memories.

Here is a transcript of twelve year old Jimmy's honesty speech, which due to the fact that his revered grandparents were unable to attend, it was audio-taped so they could have their own copy:

*"You are all aware of what I did earlier in the year. I now realise what I did was not only stupid but selfish. And I am sorry for that. Since the incident occurred, my mum, dad, John (sibling) and I went to see Mr Epston, a family therapist who suggested I go on a programme of honesty testing which you all know about. I did this to prove to myself and my family that I could withstand the temptation of taking things that did not belong to me. I have now successfully completed the tests which have led to this gathering. I'd like to thank you all for your support which has certainly made me realise what I did was wrong. And in the future, I will be earning my money and not taking it." (Freeman et al., 1997, p. 142)*

### **b) Virtual Community Meeting**

I regularly convene virtual meetings in instances of minor stealing, especially where the stealing has remained within the family – as far as they know. In fact,

the vast majority of the meetings, apart from referrals from Youth Aid/Auckland Police where the incidence of stealing was widespread and had come to the notice of the Police, are virtual. The real community meetings are rare and exceptional. The meeting is still conducted as in the above but with family members in attendance only, much like a typical family therapy meeting. As you can imagine, it would be impossible to ensure attendances at community meetings if people knew that the parents' eight year old daughter had stolen ten dollars from her mother's purse or her father's pants' pockets. In virtual meetings, we still make up the list of 'all those who care if you become a stealer or an honest person' and may proceed through the same set of enquiries but here by way of internalised other enquiry.

*If Mrs Staples, your school teacher who said in your last school report that you she loves teaching you, were with us now and I asked her this question (insert question such as – 'What would you think if you knew Julie was stealing money from her mum and dad?' 'What do guess she would say?' 'If your sister, who is at University in Dunedin, were here and I asked her this question....., what do you guess she would say, etc.).*

In chapter one I describe in far less detail than in the above how I proceeded 'virtually' with Hayden's restoration of his moral identity as an honest person through the virtuality of his 'community' e.g. those people who loved him and cared about him so they were concerned whether he regained his reputation as an 'honest person' at the same time as disavowing his reputation as a stealer.

### **Failure**

I have had remarkable success with this approach and can recall only one young man, aged fifteen with very limited intellectual abilities, who ever failed a test. And I might add he successfully completed the rest of the nine tests. I suspect being required to contact each and every member of his virtual community to report his failure on his inaugural honesty test was a very salutary experience. However, in two notable instances, this approach was not taken up by the young person. Both were in their mid to late teens and were running professional stealing-on-commission rings. For example, you would apply with a request say for a certain brand of Ipod and an 'agent' on a commission would be assigned to steal it for you. Both young men were particularly brazen about their criminal prowess. They were running very successful financial operations with many part-time agents. In fact, they were more than satisfied with the reputation they had acquired in their school communities. Some parents have been unable to co-operate because of their illegal activities and for the fact that their young people were more or less black-mailing them. In either case, they felt too morally compromised to seek a moral community to oversee the honesty testing of their young person. However, in one instance, I was required to do a home visit early one evening by a family to find myself in a most unusual set of circumstances. The

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young person, aged thirteen, who had been caught 'red handed' stealing from his mother's purse sat between his parents in their living room. In every corner of the room stood a very sinister, brawny man with his arms crossed across his chest with the most intimidating demeanor. Strangely, they were never introduced to me but they remained on guard throughout our meeting. I proceeded as normally as did the young man and his family. He passed his honesty tests with flying colours. I always wondered about this and my curiosity was only satisfied some years later when I was teaching a workshop on this approach to stealing to a special training day for Youth Aid/Police people. In conversation, I was to learn that this family was a notorious criminal family and had been so for several generations. Nonetheless, they obviously could not countenance a young person stealing from his family.

### Research

In the mid to late 1980s, this approach, or discrete elements of it, were researched, providing evaluation support for its efficacy. Certainly at the time, there were surprisingly few studies of clinical procedures reported in the literature. The two research studies were developed and conducted at The Leslie Centre, then a family counselling agency sponsored by the Presbyterian Social Services Association in Auckland, New Zealand. In 1984, almost 5% of the families seen had nominated stealing among the presenting problems. Indeed, the incidence of stealing, as discovered in community surveys, is surprisingly high – between 4% and 10% (MacFarlane, Allen & Hozick, 1962). A further concern, according to Patterson (1982) was that the parents of stealers were the most difficult to engage in treatment, seldom carried out their assignments and furthermore, had a high drop out rate.

The Leslie Centre approach, an evaluation of 45 cases of reported stealing over a three year period, was based on many of the ideas in this chapter, most significantly the 'regrading' to an honest person with a good reputation (p. 188). For almost half the children, stealing was the sole presenting problem. For others, presenting problems typically included oppositional behaviours such as aggression and non-compliance with family rules. For half, parents reported the stealing having persisted for two years or longer. Parents' detection of stealing was estimated as being daily for a small number, and for 42% detection occurred at least weekly. 80% of the young people were under the age of 13.

Therapist reports indicated that the vast majority of families (84%) were successfully engaged in therapy, which lasted an average of 3.3 sessions, which would have also included therapeutic letters and progress phone calls. At follow-up telephone calls six to twelve months later, 81% of the 45 children were reported by parents to not be stealing at all, or that stealing was 'substantially reduced'. We believe that this re-grading approach as substantiated by 'honesty testing' led to a very high rate of engagement compared to researchers at the Oregon Social Learning Center (Patterson, 1982).

Fred Seymour supervised and was the therapist for Michael Hamilton's MA thesis (Auckland University), once again at Leslie Centre, in which the then Department of Social Welfare was approached for young people who were considered to be intractable stealers, several of whom were in care of the Department. A rigorous single case design involving four families, with more sophisticated and detailed measurement procedures, revealed similarly strong positive results. The follow-up measurements were as incontrovertible as could be imagined. Six months after the completion of the honesty testing, sums of money were displayed in the surrounds of the young person and rejected by him/her.

### Conclusion

This community approach to stealing, in both forms – complete and abridged – has been very successful in at least 40 occasions other than the 45 cases reviewed at Leslie Centre over the years. As far as I know, the only failures were those mentioned above. For a notoriously difficult problem to 'treat', the results, both researched and anecdotal, highly recommend such an approach.

### Footnotes

1. This is slightly altered from Epston, 1989, p. 117.
2. Ibid, p. 115.
3. Internalised other questioning is a format for enquiry developed in the first instance by David Epston and developed by Karl Tomm (Department of Psychiatry, University of Calgary). See references below.

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# 10

## **Your brother's/sister's keeper: an approach to intractable sibling conflicts**

David Epston

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I had been meeting with Judy, aged 35, over several months relating to an important career decision. Just before she had reached her conclusion, she asked if she could bring in to our conversations a matter of great concern to her – the disputatious and violent relationship between her sons, Justin, aged 13, and Adam, aged ten. Judy was parenting them on her own. She said her sons fought over absolutely everything and the fighting alternated between verbal abuse and physical violence. Absolutely everything was contested. The front seat of the car was one such bone of contention and most proposed outings had to be called off. Both sons resented the air the other breathed. I asked – ‘Do you suspect each would prefer the other to stop breathing altogether?’ She replied with horror – ‘Yes, I think you are right!’ I asked – ‘How do you experience witnessing your sons violate and abuse each other?’ Her reply was painful to hear: ‘It is like a knife being driven into my chest!’ She estimated that on a school day, they were spending approximately an hour a day strangling one another and that weekends were ‘far worse’.

In a vain attempt to initiate a discussion of any alternative ways of their relating, I asked if she could ever recall times of co-operation, play or even distant respect. If there was such a history, Judy’s despair blinded her to it. She could not remember them ever being in each other’s company without it leading to an inevitable fracas. To pursue such enquiries at this time could have seemed disrespectful, given Judy’s sobbing. She had consulted relatives, friends and professionals and the summary of their advice was that ‘brothers will be brothers!’ or ‘they will grow out of it!’ Such reassurances were now wearing very thin.

When I asked about her current approach, she told me she felt helpless to intervene and suspected that any attempts on her part to adjudicate their competing claims and accusations only made matters worse for everyone. I then asked Judy two pertinent questions: ‘If you learned that Adam or Justin was being subjected to the selfsame violation or verbal abuse at the hands of a class-mate, what would your reaction be?’ ‘If you chose to call a spade a spade, would what passes for their brotherhood more aptly be called hatred?’ She rallied from her despair in reaction to my first question, saying she would in no way permit this and would demand an urgent remedy. To my next question, she ruefully acknowledged that hatred was certainly a more apt description of their relationship than brotherhood.

She then requested I meet them the first chance I had. I suggested the following as a prelude to such a meeting where we could all discuss the kind of brotherhood her sons might prefer. I then asked if she was able to predict when her sons were warming up to blatant screaming or hitting. She laughed and assured me that that would be no problem whatsoever. I then asked if her sons had ever included weaponry in their disputes. She said this was not the case.

I then proposed the following ‘experiment in brotherhood’ and discussed it at length with Judy. In my own mind, I was thinking – how could either son choose any alternative way of relating without any experience of it? Wouldn’t it be folly to propose ‘good brotherhood’ to combatants? Couldn’t I assume that many

others had made a case for the moral virtue of brotherhood? After talking the 'experiment in brotherhood' through, Judy came to the conclusion that, if nothing else, it offered her some relief from refereeing their disputes and offered Adam and Justin a chance to 'try out' their brotherhood, admittedly under contrived and unusual circumstances.

By rendering this through an externalising conversation, the practice of the relationship ('the brotherhood') becomes elevated as an 'object' for everyone's consideration and metaphorically, 'pulls' all the participants (Judy, Adam, and Justin) back to a reflexive position. From here, each of them could reflect on the ways of practicing their relationship of 'brotherhood'. At the same time, it calls into question her sons' adversarial practices and her refereeing and replaces it with a dilemma – to salvage their brotherhood from hatred or knowingly practice hatred and violence against each other.

The 'experiment' was as follows. However, it is important to note that this is not issued prescriptively but constructed through conversation and questions, e.g. Does such an idea fit with what you consider right and proper? Would you feel comfortable undertaking this? etc. The intervention would probably more aptly be termed an invitation to intervene rather than an intervention proper.

'Go home tonight and tell your sons that you are sick and tired of refereeing their fights and no matter how hard you try, it only seems to make matters worse for them as well as for you. Instead, you have decided to retire from refereeing and substitute a 'family noise level' for that. Tell them that you will let them know when they are approaching the 'family noise level' by saying – 'Look, you guys, you are getting close to the 'family noise level' and leave them. Should they desist, which you tell me is unlikely, congratulate them for starting to win back their brotherhood from violence and hatred. However, if they persist as you expect they will, return and say only – 'You are now 'next' to the 'family noise level' and once again depart. But, if they keep it up as you expect, return and conclude: 'You have broken the 'family noise level' and I insist that you leave this house immediately by the side door'. I would imagine they will ask how or when they might regain entry. Say something to the effect – 'After you practise your brotherhood rather than hatefulness'. Undoubtedly, they will be curious as to how they might achieve this. Tell them that when both of them finds something to appreciate about the other and convinces you that they have done so 'sincerely', they can return home. You will probably have to suggest some ways of appreciating their brother. 'Look, you guys, I doubt if you will have any idea as to how to go about this, given hatred has featured so largely in your relationship for as long as I can remember. So let me give you an example or two. 'Adam, you might ask Justin what he did at school today that he is proud of and then you can try to convince me that you sincerely appreciate him for whatever it is he tells you about'. You might say something like this: 'Mum, Justin scored his team's first goal and he deserves to be proud of himself for that. And I am proud of him too because I am his brother!' Judy, you may like to use this opportunity to give them

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extra practice by saying: 'Why should you be proud of him for that? Why couldn't you say that even though he scored a goal, he is still a loser!' Then close the door, saying: 'You are getting closer to brother-appreciation!' When they knock on the door again, say: 'Well?' If Adam were to say something like – 'Justin should be proud of himself because he plays on defence and defensive players don't score many goals', acknowledge Adam for his appreciation of his brother. Judy, both sons must convince you of their appreciation of the other before they both can bring 'their brotherhood' back under your roof. If either complains, which is very likely, say: 'How can Justin learn to appreciate you if he cannot ask you appreciating questions. This is a matter for your brotherhood, not for you or for him alone!' And certainly not for me! So see you guys later! You are getting warm! Wish them – 'Good brotherhood!' and close the door behind you. When you are convinced of the sincerity of their mutual appreciation, thank them for starting to win back their relationship from violence and hatefulness and that you will no longer referee, except to save a limb or a life.

Several weeks later when we met for the first time, both the physical and verbal violence had abated and brother-appreciation was on the increase, thanks to the 'experiment in brotherhood'. In fact, Judy had not had any occasion to send them out of doors, although she had been prepared to do so rain or shine. Perhaps, the improvement was merely due to the parent/referee's reduced involvement in the 'life' of the problem. Adam and Justin could no longer press their charges against their brother without anyone to hear them and adjudicate. If only the parent experienced some temporary relief, that in and of itself would have been a satisfactory outcome. Here, however, Adam and Justin were relieved and this permitted me to ask them questions about their preferences in terms of hatred versus brotherhood and the practices associated with each of those competing versions. It also allows for the therapist to be excluded from a senior adjudicator role and to stand alongside the concerned parties comparing and contrasting different ways of relating and their respective effects.

The following is a summary faithful to the 'flow' of the interview. The sequence of therapist queries/family member replies will become very obvious to you. For example, 'It seems that your brotherhood has gotten pretty hateful and hurtful over the years' summarises their answers to questions relating to the history of a violent and hateful brotherhood and when it got 'pretty hateful and hurtful'. You will also notice that the therapist does not advocate for 'niceness' at this point or moralise. I was guessing that that had been tried 'ad nauseum'.

*Dear Justin and Adam:*

*I really enjoyed meeting you guys the other day. Here is the letter I promised to send you.*

*It seems that your brotherhood had gotten pretty hateful and hurtful over the years. Your mum described your brotherhood as if each of you was fighting to get more than your half of her. She talked about how she had to divide herself down the middle with each of you having 50% and forbidding the other to get 1% more.*

However, you both thought you might like to improve your brotherhood and here you two were for the very first time in history in strong agreement. Each of you thought you might like a 50% improvement in brotherhood. As of the other day, Justin, you thought you had a 15% good brotherhood and an 85% bad brotherhood; Adam, you thought you had a 20-ish % good brotherhood and an 80-ish% bad brotherhood. Your mum had this to say: "They are now getting along 30% of the time – 20% tolerance and 50% fighting".

When I asked you what the highlights of your brotherhood had been, Justin, you thought when you were living overseas. And that had something to do with separate bedrooms. Adam, you thought it was when you were younger: "I looked up to Justin when I was younger. He started leaving me out of things so I started hating him".

Both of you were of the opinion that when your mother no longer refereed your fights but instead, sent you outside to appreciate each other and not let you back in until you had proven to her satisfaction that you could appreciate each other was a good idea. Justin, when I asked what effects this was having on you, your mother and your brother, this is what you had to say:

"I was getting more attention from mum of a good kind. I am borrowing things from Adam. I get help from Adam with my spelling and he is good at solving some kinds of problems. And he is now shrieking less."

Adam, this is what you had to say:

"There is less thumping, shouting and abuse. I can play with his gameboy. We play together more and are starting to respect each other. We share things more. We can now be in the same room and not fight or shout."

I started wondering to myself that all this must be leading to something or other. And that either or both of you must be practising your brotherhood differently. And sure enough I was right! Justin, you said that "instead of giving Adam an order", you hit upon the idea of saying: "I think you might do something" instead of saying "you should do it". To my surprise, you found this quite easy to do, even though you had been doing the other for so long now. And Adam, you said that you don't "take orders from bossy people", although you said you could accept them from "caring people".

Justin and Adam, your brotherhood seems to be heading in a good brotherhood direction after all these years. And due to that, there is quite a bit of room for improvement. You each agreed on a 50% improvement.

Justin and Adam, do you think you have gone as far as you want to go with your 'brotherhood'?

Adam and Justin, do you think you will keep going in a good 'brotherhood' direction? Or do you think your mum should referee and have you fight over her?

Do you imagine a loving mother would appreciate being her sons' battleground?

I look forward to meeting you both again with your mum so I can learn what you have done to your brotherhood: pushed it in a good direction or let it slip back into hatred.

Yours sincerely,  
David

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We met two months later after the summer vacation. They had pursued the 'good direction' and increased the 'good brotherhood' by 20% at the expense of hatred. Justin had come up with the idea of 'nice weeks' and Adam had decided to go along with it, although it took him five days of careful consideration before he agreed to the plan. The former 'bone of contention' – sitting in the front seat – was resolved by her sons even before a car trip was planned. Judy had not known about this scheme until the meeting but considered it a 'nice surprise'. This assisted Judy to comprehend an incident earlier that week: 'When your cousin hit you, Adam, Justin hit him back to protect you. In the old days, Justin may have encouraged his cousin to thrash him.' Judy summed up the new state of affairs as 'a dramatic improvement – the fighting has gone way down . . . it's now 50% good stuff and only 20% fighting . . .'

Out of the generative excitement of this conversation, Judy came up with a new twist on the 'experiment': 'If you start fighting at McDonalds, I will walk off and leave you to it and say – 'Come over here when you have finished the game!' - or I will walk out of sight and tell you where to find me. That would mean I wouldn't get involved or embarrassed.' Adam thought that his mother would no longer 'feel like a referee or a battleground'. They both agreed to pursue this direction, concluding that 'life is better in general!'

I have used such 'experiments in brother/sisterhood' numerous times over the years with continuing success. It has never failed to make an appreciable difference. Most recently, a 12-year-old brother refused to allow his two younger brothers to speak in his presence because such 'noise gives me a headache'. His parents had accommodated to this until they rented a cottage over summer and invited many of their family friends to join them on site. However, each and every visitor decamped after a day or two because they could not bear the relationships between their friends' children. This gave the parents cause for reconsideration of the 'boys will be boys' conclusion they had reached. Of course, the eldest brother had to tolerate his brothers' speaking if he was to learn how to appreciate them. The parents were so concerned that they bought three camp-stretchers and a portable toilet for the garage as they expected their sons would spend a great deal of time outside the house. Once again, the portable toilet was returned unused to its vendor.

On only one occasion, the older of two sisters, aged 12, continued to declare a strong preference for hatred and her conviction that her ten-year-old sister should commit suicide. This was in spite of the cessation of bickering and taunting after the 'experiment' was instituted. However, now the parents refused to concede to this and came up with a range of ways to intervene.

### Genealogy

This approach owes everything to meeting early in my career with Jean and her two sons, Dean, aged 13 and Ronny, aged 15. Jean had first attended National Women's Hospital after her general practitioner had observed 'anorexia' or a

dramatic but sustained weight loss. The hospital then referred her family to me for reasons that were obvious as soon as I met everyone. From what Jean told me, her marriage to the boys' father had been 'a nightmare' because of his drinking. It had reached such a state that she had initiated a divorce six months earlier. Apparently Ronny's father had promised he would take him with him when he left as they had always had a very strong bond. Although this may have been his intention, he rarely showed up again and if he did, he was too inebriated for Ronny to wish to travel in his car. Ronny, however, was so disappointed that he went to the garage where his father sometimes worked as a panel beater and took a five pound hammer to his car such that it was beyond anyone's panel beating. In addition, the school had become concerned about Ronny's seemingly inexplicable rages that on one occasion led him to pull a door off its hinges, despite the staff's attempts to restrain him.

As Jean told me of the above, it fleshed out the skeleton of the tableau I saw before me. Dean sat up close to his mother, preening himself like a prince and chuckling at any mention of Ronny's misdemeanours. Ronny sat as far away as he could get from Dean with his legs astride with his head dropping towards his knees as if his team had just lost a major sporting event. The 'anorexia' got explained quickly. Apparently, Jean spent every night running from Ronny's room to which he was confined back to Dean's room where he had to be confined. These confinements were the only way she could contain the potential violence between them. Whenever she reached one son's room, the screaming from the other side of the house recalled her there and she would have to sprint from room to room until her sons' bedtimes gave her some relief. I had never witnessed two siblings so at odds with each other. I was young in my career and I was simply at a loss as to what to say or recommend. I am convinced that whatever I did do was utterly inconsequential to what happened.

I was hardly looking forward to meeting these two young men and their harried mother. To my amazement, the brothers entered the room alongside each other and Jean followed them beaming with pride. I wondered what in the world had happened and immediately set about finding out. And what I found out was the germ of an idea for the 'brothering intervention' I proposed in the above.

Although Jean didn't have a theory she was putting into practice, she did have a very cogent idea. If she could find a way to have them depend on each other (and not her and her father), they might find out that they could count on each other when the chips were down. Jean finally came up with an idea. She knew her sons wanted to go to the zoo, which was a good eight mile or so walk from their home. She suggested they do so but when the day arrived, she feigned illness but provided them with the time to catch the bus there and the time to catch it home. Purposefully, the time she gave them for the return ride was a half hour late for the last bus of the day from the zoo. However, she did give them a city map just in case they got lost. Well, apparently, they had to co-operate over the map-reading or they would have not been able to find their way home. It took some hours and

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to her delight, through their 'trials and tribulations', her sons had forged some sort of co-operative brotherhood. I can recall to this day the amazement I experienced hearing about this.

It was not long after that Bartholomew (Bart), aged 16, strode ahead of everyone else into my room. He had a large black eye. Aeneas, aged 17, followed in his footsteps with a matching black eye. Their parents, George and May, arrived a few moments later. They spoke of the constant fighting between their sons which was becoming violent. Bart then took the floor and looking towards his parents and away from Aeneas, declared that he was disowning his brother. Aeneas looked bewildered and wondered out loud: 'Why is he like this? I don't understand. I don't understand. I want to understand him'. May became sad and said all this must have to do with the fact that she hadn't been able to hold either of her sons when they were young. When I asked her how that had come about, she spoke of the needs of her eldest daughter, aged 23, who lived in a wheelchair and the demands of nursing their second son who died of leukaemia when he was ten. We talked at some length of these sad and difficult times.

Aeneas came alive when George and May spoke of their disappointments that Bart wished to leave school. Bart asserted his rights to lead his own life. Aeneas became visibly upset every time his parents and his brother reached an impasse in this heated debate and would reproach his brother. By the same token, the parents expressed concern that Aeneas was so driven to achieve at school that he 'was becoming a nervous wreck' and 'does nothing but study from morning to night'.

We discussed Aeneas' retirement from what everyone agreed was a 'loving mistake' he had made – the need he felt to 'parent' Bart at the same time as causing them no concern by being 'so good'. His parents discharged him from any further responsibility but in respect for his care and concern, that they hadn't quite realised, they proposed a two month winding down period before making his retirement official. Everyone felt it would take that long for Bart to be comfortable with Aeneas as his brother and the same was expected to be the case for Aeneas.

This was the first attempt at re-working Jean's great idea. I proposed a 'family noise level' and a similar set of warnings (see above). But what followed was a far more literal rendering of Jean's ingenious scheme.

'If they persist, order them out of your home in separate directions. Inform them that they need some brothing practice. When it is convenient to you as parents, provide them with this golden opportunity to rediscover their brothing. You can do this by taking them blindfolded by car to a place some distance away that they don't know. Provide them with a map. Divide their route back home or to a designated pick up point in half and give one half to each son. This means they will have to co-operate if they are to find there way back/or to the pick up point. During this journey, Bart, you will have plenty of opportunity to find out if Aeneas is your father or your brother. Aeneas, you will have plenty

of opportunity to find out who your brother really is and what he wants for his future.

We met a month later. George and May were not required to provide Bart and Aeneas with any brothering practice. In fact, there had not been any incidents whatsoever. Aeneas said they 'had words' on two occasions but he had 'just walked away'. Bart and his parents had negotiated a settlement for his future that satisfied everyone, i.e. an accountancy cadetship. Aeneas too had decided on future, i.e. surveying. Bart had been taking Aeneas out and 'showing me how to have a good time'. He was discovering that Bart was 'a very good brother to me'.

### **Sibling Crisis Intervention**

Meeting the Crummer family was to leave an indelible impression on me relating to siblings. I suppose if you were to think about it, the circumstances leading to the addition of children to their family were so unusual as to almost predict the dire outcome. The circumstances were as follows – Jill and Jim were in their late and early thirties. They had discovered their infertility soon after they were married some nine years previously. They decided to pursue adoption along with fertility treatments. They had to wait five very long years before they were able to adopt Nathan several days after his birth. From their accounts, Nathan was a 'beautiful baby' and had certainly retained that winsomeness when I met him, aged three and a half. He had such an appealing look that only the hard-hearted could turn down a request from him. Although they had put in an application for another adoption, they had been warned that this was very, very unlikely. For that reason, they had put their application out of their minds accepting Nathan as their only child.

However, two-and-a-half years after they had lodged their application, they were taken aback by a phone call from the then Department of Social Welfare advising them that an adoption had broken down after two months and if they wished, they could have another son. The only catch was that they had to make up their minds within seven days. According to Jill and Jim, they were confused by the offer but on the sixth day, they came to the conclusion to adopt. They wondered about the consequences for their relationship with Nathan at the time but felt that if they turned down this opportunity, they would never have another.

They breathed a sigh of relief when Nathan took little notice of his newly adopted brother. But that was not to last for long. When Jason started to make his way beyond his cradle or his parents' arms, Nathan would attack him – hitting, scratching and biting. He showed no restraint whatsoever. When Jason started to walk and was very unsteady on his feet, Nathan now posed the gravest risk to him, charging him on every occasion and knocking him over. Jill had to mount constant surveillance of her two sons and despite this, the only safe place for Jason was behind closed doors. They hoped time would heal but Nathan's fury increased the more Jason was making his impression on the 'world'. Despite her admonitions never to touch Jason while she was bathing him, on one occasion

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when Jill left momentarily to get some safety pins, she returned to find Nathan holding his brother's head under water. This was more than she could bear and she consulted her family doctor who prescribed tranquilisers. She now really had to struggle to be as vigilant as was required by the risk to Jason's well-being.

I remember meeting Jim and Jill. Jim was apologetic he couldn't make a stronger contribution to Nathan's surveillance but he had just started up as an electrical contractor and had to work long hours to make ends meet. The summer holidays were coming up with the the Crummers planning to join their extended family camping at a beach. Jill's desperation was palpable. I had to come up with something to tide them over. They considered the matter to be if not life-threatening at least limb-threatening for Jason. Having observed Nathan's unconcealable hatred, I couldn't help but agree with them.

This is the letter I wrote them prior to their departure for their month-long summer holidays. What I tried to do in the following was firstly to develop a set of alternative descriptions (big boy(s) in contrast to little boy(s)) and the behaviours that distinguished one from the other and secondly, to assist Nathan to describe himself as 'big boy', thirdly, to distinguish himself from Jason by enacting 'big boyness' and fourthly, to contrive circumstances for 'big boyness' to be exhibited alongside the display of 'little boyness' and fifthly, to signify 'big boyness' as the absence of competitive displays followed by 'scaffolded' exhibitions of Nathan's helping, caring, or mentoring of Jason. By 'scaffolded' exhibitions, the parents were required to actively shape and coach such activities.

Here is the sequence I provided for the Crummer family just before my/their holidays.

### Sequence

- 1) Jim and Jill, can you sit down together and decide on and define 'what big boys do'.**  
*For example, 'big boys play outside . . . big boys play with their friends'. Stress either what concerns you about Nathan or what defines Jason's behaviour as 'what little boys do'. For example, 'big boys run outside and play: little boys like Jason have to stay inside and crawl!'*
- 2) Educate Nathan by defining, if he is not presently doing so, how you are seeking for him to behave or better yet, acknowledging his current behaviours as 'big boy'.**  
*Do so in contrast to Jason's actions. Encourage him to repeat 'what big boys do' and have him distinguish that from 'what little boys like Jason do'. Every time he identifies what he has done as 'big boyness', give him a star to affix to his 'big boy's chart'. Place this chart on the refrigerator. Jim, on returning home from your work, ask Jill and Nathan – 'Have you been a big boy today? Jill, has Nathan been a big boy today?' After which, you all retire to scrutinise his 'big boy' chart which should decide the matter. Jim, you might like to encourage Nathan to describe to you any instances of 'big boyness', once again contrasting them to 'little boyness = Jason'. Be generous in your approbation of his 'big boyness'. Feel free to make a fuss over Nathan's 'bigness'. For the first few days, you may have to help him get some stars*

to provide him with a 'taste' for 'big boyness'. Jill: 'Jim, Nathan just about played by himself when I had to feed Jason. He really is getting 'big'. I think he should get a star. What do you think?' Jim: 'Well, how 'big' do you think you were Nathan?' Seek for Nathan to advocate for his own 'bigness'.

- 3) Be on the lookout for any signs of 'big boyness'. Every time, you notice such a sign, state as clearly as you can how your description of 'big boyness' was related to an action he took (or refrained from taking). Before he affixes the star to his chart, have him reiterate his claim to 'big boyness'. For example, what did you do again that makes you a 'big boy'? Was giving Jason some cake 'big boy' or 'little boy'? Do you like being a 'big boy'? Do you think Jason likes being a 'little boy'?
- 4) After two weeks, initiate separate playtimes. For example, Jill, announce you are planning a 'little boy's playtime' with Jason, say for five minutes. Jim, draw this to Nathan's attention just before you take him off for some rewarding 'big boy' pursuit, e.g. going to the shops, playing ball outside. Later on in the day, reverse with Jill engaging in a 'big boy's playtime' with Jim taking Jason off so he cannot intrude. Jim and Jill, do everything you can to draw Nathan's attention to the reverse.
- 5) After another week, add a 'family playtime'. Monitor Nathan's behaviour in relation to Justin closely, approving what you consider to distinguish him as 'being a big boy' and what doesn't as 'not being a big boy'. Feel free to make a fuss over any instances of what you perceive to be 'big boyness'.
- 6) After another week, time out (two minutes in the bathroom) for any aggressive act against Jason. Say: 'you are having a time out. Hitting Jason is not 'being a big boy'. We like it when you are a 'big boy' and he is a 'little boy'. You might expect a struggle here.

This could succeed much quicker if you can enlist the co-operation of your extended family. Try to explain to them the problem and your 'programme' of distinguishing 'big boyness' from 'little boyness'. Please don't shield them from your concerns. Although Nathan's problem is very common, it has certainly been aggravated by Jason's unanticipated arrival which provided no time for anyone to prepare for it, least of all, Nathan.

Yours sincerely,  
David

We met soon after we all returned from our summer holidays. With Nathan standing by, Jill considered the results 'amazing really because even before the Christmas holidays, it had started to get better. 'Nathan's really a big boy now; he helps little boys now; he even plays nicely with them outside. He lets Jason play with his blocks sometimes, don't you? And some of your toys.' He plays really nicely now. That 'big boy' idea took about a month, but it really worked. It took away the competition. And it wasn't hard to do; it was a lot easier to do than other things we had been trying to do. It wasn't only him, we, especially me, had to take a really hard look at ourselves. Then it was hard for me to realise that I had been giving in to him. I've only just been able to admit that to myself but he had

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twisted me round his little finger and I can see that now. However, to start with, it was really hard because the problem was still really bad but as things went on and as we did more things, it sort of came all of a sudden!

This was just in the nick of time because over Christmas Jim and Jill learned they were pregnant. I thought I might hear from them again in some months time but I didn't. I phoned them about the time they were expecting the birth and everyone was very excited and ready for a newcomer to their family. In fact, Nathan was so excited about this prospect that he had taken to asking if he could look down his mother's throat to see the baby.

### Summary

I have used this intervention on many occasions over the years with immediate and positive results. In saying that, I am not proposing that all rancour immediately abates. Rather, an alternative to sibling-hatred is established as a prospect for everyone's consideration. Of course, there may have to be special considerations when arms or implements are taken up in course of these disputes. The hatred engendered by such disputes can be very dangerous.

# 11

## **Anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia: bearing witness**

David Epston

*Based on the Plenary Address to the Australian & New Zealand Academy  
of Eating Disorders, Adelaide, 20th October 2006*

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Let me begin by telling the most remarkable anti-anorexic story I have ever heard, although I have heard my fair share.

I first met Larissa after anorexia had denied her the capacity to read while in early secondary school. This of course baffled her family and the professional specialists they consulted. This finally meant that she had no other option but to leave school behind when she turned 15. Given her seeming inability to read, beauty college seemed a career option where that might go unnoticed.

I first met her around this time and when we got talking, it seemed anorexia had entered her life when she was merely six, at the time her father abandoned her mother for another partner with three children and her soon to be born brother in a foreign country. Their circumstances were such that her mother had to apply for welfare for them to survive. Sophie was determined to be good, which soon turned into being Perfect as good never seemed good enough.

On graduation from beauty college, Larissa went overseas herself and to her surprise, she became very distinguished in her craft while still in her teens. In fact, she was even assisting making up such luminaries as super-model Naomi Campbell. She emailed me with a revelation – that she has seen through Perfection because she, in fact, was the very agent of its fabrication. And because of this knowledge, she found it hard to believe in Perfection any longer. I replied with considerable interest and enquired if she had ever met a happy model. In fact, aside from one whom she had met on her very first day ‘at work’, she spoke of their despair and wretchedness.

She fled back to New Zealand determined to abandon such a life, but had to turn away the blandishments and financial inducements of agents from movie productions flown out to lure her back overseas. Instead she decided to lead a life of her own design, earning her living waitressing.

I can’t recall how long it was before she travelled to Europe, but this time with quite a different mission than her first overseas trip. She had determined to become a pilgrim and walk the two thousand kilometres long ‘camino’ to Santiago de Compostella in north west Spain. Pilgrims from all over Europe had walked this route, from France over the Pyrenees, since the ninth century to the tomb of St. James at the church there. In fact, by the tenth century, 25% of the then population of Europe would have made this pilgrimage at least once in their life-time.

Larissa proposed to be such a wayfarer, like so many before her, travelling on her own with only that which she could carry for the necessary two to three months. As not too long before anorexia had tried to take her life, I am sure her loved ones were concerned for her well-being as she passed along the camino to her destination.

Now twenty-two, Larissa sent me this email some time after she returned to New Zealand, after first circulating it around the Anti-Anorexia League. (1)

*Yes, I had many interesting experiences on the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage. It is as if one lives a whole life in two thousand kilometres. One day, about a week to the end, I decided to take a detour. I went into the Valley of ‘Silencio’ (silence). It was a*

*very lonely and difficult route, but incredibly beautiful involving lots of mountains and very unclear paths. So I spent almost two days in silence.*

*It was when I was climbing the last big ascent for the day that anorexia appeared. It has always felt like a voice within me but this time it wasn't. It was the same voice but this time it was outside of me, so completely foreign. At first, I felt afraid. I remember stopping, sitting down and thinking: "My gosh, what's going on?" But anorexia was talking such complete nonsense that it actually made me laugh.*

*It was as if along the road, I had faced so much and seen so much beauty and kindness. Indeed, I had seen all aspects – the wonderful and not so wonderful things about myself and others that somehow I had changed. There was a deep sense of peace about who I am and was. So when anorexia tried the usual one-sided conversation, I couldn't quite understand it. It was as if it were speaking a foreign language. It was as if all its support had been stripped away. Surrounded by no one and miles of nature, I could see it for what it is. It really looked ridiculous out there on a mountain top surrounded by scenery that stops you for its sheer beauty! I think I finally had evidence from my own experiences of the pilgrimage that had made any claim by anorexia discountable. To be free of the world, especially the one that anorexia inhabits, helps one to see clearly. It was as if I was actually seeing for the first time!*

You will recall how anorexia had denied Larissa her ability to read which had obliged her to leave high school when she turned fifteen. Now she applied for a provisional admission to a BSc programme at a New Zealand university, was accepted and completed her first year with a straight A average. At that time, I enquired:

'Larissa, do you have any idea how your pilgrimage turned anorexia, in a manner of speaking, from the inside out?' She replied: 'I think the pilgrimage didn't so much turn anorexia from the inside out; more I think I had filled myself up with me so that anorexia's echo couldn't make it seem that it came from inside me. I feel as though the world is so full of noise and confusion that we miss the original voice of anorexia and are just unlucky that we are empty enough to hear that echo reverberate inside us as if it were part of us.'

I couldn't refrain from asking: 'Has anorexia ever tried to reinstitute itself inside your life and disrupt what you refer to as your 'deep sense of peace'?' She answered: 'Yes, being in the world means that there are always times when anorexia reappears. I guess over time I have just grown more and more aware of that and now know what works for me to move past such moments.'

Several months ago (2007), Larissa emailed to inform me she had graduated on an accelerated academic programme with such distinction that she had been offered the very generous national scholarship for two years' study towards her further studies.

Does this make you wonder as much it intrigued me ever since? How a young woman, almost at the end of such a venerable moral ordeal, should confront

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anorexia, which had demoralised her and 'caused me to feel that I wanted to die' for so long, and find that it spoke a foreign language? Or had Larissa taught herself another language of the self by which 'I was fully, intensely and wholeheartedly engaging in my life'? What relevance did reading her story and then enquiring about it have on me? It told me where I should stand – as a witness. I will have a great deal more to say about that as this chapter unfolds.

### Introduction

When I was first informed of the grievous suffering exacted by anorexia on the lives of insiders (2) through their own utterances, I committed myself to find ways to adequately recognise and acknowledge this. And by the same token, how could I find ways for them to speak the unspeakable as a 'knowledge' that there suffering had endowed them with? And that in the same breath could testify as a kind of 'witnessing text'?

Let me explain 'witnessing text' with reference to the writing of an Australian literary scholar, Ross Chambers: *Untimely Interventions: Aids Writing, Testimonial and the Rhetoric of Haunting'* (2004). The title had caught my eye for its juxtaposition of 'testimonial' and 'haunting'. Why you might ask? For so long, I have felt myself to be a haunted man, haunted by the suffering through torture and other degradations I have been informed of by insiders.

Here are some comments of Rachel, aged 19, to my colleague, Rick Maisel, in Berkeley, California in 1994:

*It's like a concentration camp and you kind of stumble in to it and you don't know and all of a sudden you're in there. It's hard. When you realise you're really there and when you actually realise you don't want to be in there and you want to get out, you don't need someone telling you – 'Rachel, you are too skinny...you can't dance!' It makes you feel worse. It just takes so much to finally try and get out of something like that. (Maisel, 1994)*

I have heard time and time again statements from eleven and twelve-year-old school girls referencing anorexia as evil or the devil himself. You will agree, I'm sure, that neither are commonplace terms of reference in school girl culture.

Back to Rachel and Rick:

Rick: *One thing that would be helpful to me would be to know what role, if any, I played in facilitating your fightback against anorexia?*

Rachel: *You played a big role. Before, I kept thinking about it as my problem. It was my fault. It was something I did. But the way you talk about it as it being something outside my body, like almost another being that kind of comes over you and takes control of your life. It's a lot easier to deal with that way because you can then stop blaming yourself...*

Rick: *When you stop blaming yourself, what do you start doing?*

Rachel: *You can see it. Everything kind of gets clearer. You can actually look at it for what it really is.*

Rick: *What is your understanding of what anorexia is?*

Rachel: *It's like the devil...it's this controlling...murdering thing. It just wants to kill.*

In the same way, Rachel stumbled in to the concentration camp of anorexia, I stumbled upon so many others who had similarly stumbled in to the same abominable predicament.

As far as I know, the first known insider account of the experience of anorexia was that of the pseudonymous Ellen West, some of whose comments were included in Ludwig Binswanger's clinical treatise first published in 1944 in Berlin, Germany (Binswanger, 1944). Let us listen carefully to her words:

*I don't understand myself at all. It is terrible not to understand yourself. I confront myself as a strange person. I am afraid of myself; I am afraid of the feelings to which I am defencelessly delivered over to every minute. That is the horrible part of my life; I am filled with dread. Existence is only torture. Life has become a prison camp. I long to be violated. And indeed I do violence to myself every hour of the day.*

If she could have spoken anti-anorexically, she may well have proclaimed her conscientious objection to anorexia rather than such a confession of her supposed offences:

*Anorexia, would I regain understanding myself – and those feelings of fear and dread – if I could link you and the anti-semitism of the emerging Third Reich? Are you inciting my torture with its violations and violence as a prelude to my genocide in the Holocaust which is to come? If I were to do so, would I be risking my life in your regime?*

Naomi Wolf, another Jewish insider, writes without any apparent reference to Ellen West's disparaging testimony fifty years or more later. But in *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1991) she locates the cultural circumstances that foster anorexia:

*Anorexia is a prison camp. One fifth of well-educated American young women are inmates. To be anorexic or bulimic is to be a political prisoner. Women must claim anorexia as political damage done to us by a social order that considers our destruction insignificant because of what we are – less. We should identify it as Jews identify the Death Camps, as homosexuals identify AIDS, as a disgrace that is not our own but that of an inhumane social order.*

Let's go back to Ross Chambers:

In responding to what he refers to as 'cultural obscenities' (p. 32), he asks the very serious question which resonated with my concerns over the past fifteen years or more:

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*How can one 'point' to an X that the culture's conventional means of representation are powerless, or at least inadequate, to reference, precisely because it lies at a point of supposedly distant extremity with respect to what the culture regards as its normal concerns (xv).*

He replies to his own query:

*Witnessing is an ethical practice that seeks to inculcate a sense of shared responsibility that it is only too easy – for other cultural reasons – to deny (xix).*

He makes the case for a 'discourse of extremity' (viii) which will speak in what he refers to as 'a voice that awakens and falls to the bottom of our spirit....that comes from regions remote from everyday experience. And it is for this reason it penetrates and persists.' (xx)

I conspired to turn my anti-anorexic practice into a kind of 'witnessing text' that would make us all consider 'that we had been transported there to the scene of the extremity, when we had not' (xix) and for those who were already there to know the moral injustice of their circumstances, perhaps for the very first time. Why? Perhaps up until then anorexia has co-opted the existing discourses (professional and lay) and successfully either deceived or blinded them in part through these means.

Julie, aged 45, writes:

*I experienced a pressure (from anorexia) that I was meant to relinquish the living of my life as the best apology and therefore any signs of (my continuing to live my) life could be seen as a punishable deviation. It (anorexia) tried to convince me that my own execution was the only moral act of which I was capable and that this was inevitable even though I had managed to evade it to some extent until that time ... It had me believe that I would be relieving the world of a significant quantity of 'badness'.*

*Everything I tried seemed so inadequate to counter or question anorexia's moral judgement ... I didn't really question anorexia's monopoly on moral judgement until a day only a few years ago when it struck me suddenly (and I remember exactly where I was when it happened) that I had a dictator inside my mind. At first it horrified me but then I was mobilised to do something ... When I had the realisation of the 'dictator', I did wonder how it had happened but I STILL had no answers. I just knew I couldn't trust my own thought processes, as if they weren't entirely my own; in some ways a disconcerting concept, although I came to discover it was also a liberating concept ... I remember at the time I was studying Hamlet at university and also had a brief introduction to some of the ideas of Foucault. I ended up writing an essay about Hamlet. I was quite affected by the death of Ophelia in the play, who had apparently gone 'mad' and drowned. I remember her obligatory obedience to her father and the State. I think subjects at that time were considered part of the actual body of the State. When asked what she thought, she responded: "I do not know, my Lord. What should I*

*think?" And "I shall obey, my Lord." Viewing her voice as somehow being appropriated by the voice of a higher authority helped me think about thinking in relation to authorities which direct our lives, which allowed me to question anorexia's moral authority. (3)*

I have turned to the papers of Arthur Kleinman, the Harvard psychiatrist/ anthropologist such as 'Pain and Resistance: The Legitimation and Delegitimation of Local Worlds" (Kleinman, 1995). He speaks especially in reference to post traumatic stress disorder but also more generally 'how the clinician reworks the patient's perspective into disease categories which distort the moral world of the patient and community'. And how this 'ends up deligitimating the patient's suffering's moral commentary and political performance'. That this 're-creates human suffering as inhuman disease'.

But he casts his concerned gaze over my first profession – anthropology. This meant I was unable to breathe a sigh of relief and exempt myself from such a critique. And perhaps this is why I would return so often to these papers.

Let Kleinman speak for himself:

*She or he (the anthropologist) can engage in professional discourse every bit as dehumanising as that of colleagues who unreflectively draw upon the tropes of biomedicine or behaviourism to create their subject matter ... an experience – rich and near-human subject can be converted into a dehumanised object, a caricature of experience (97).*

He concludes:

- 1) *We, each of us, injure the humanity of our fellow sufferers each time we fail to privilege their voices, their experiences.*
- 2) *The professionalisation of human problems as psychiatric disorders causes sufferers (and their communities) to lose a world, the local context that organises experience through moral reverberation and reinforcement of popular cultural categories about what life means and what is at stake in living ... Experts are far along in the process of inauthenticating social worlds, of making illegitimate the defeats and victories, the desperation and aspiration of individuals and groups that could perhaps be more humanly rendered, not as representation of some other reality (one that we a experts possess special power over) but rather as the evocation of experience that stands for itself (117).*

Early on, Judy, then 30, explained matters by appeal to Bob Dylan's 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues' – She (anorexia) *takes your voice and leaves you howling at the moon*. I determined as best I could to find the means to allow these women to regain their moral voice and speak through that to the sources of their suffering. And that I was justified in joining as a chorus, as a co-league – that they would never be alone again.

### **Morality and Counter-Morality**

In a manner of speaking (4), anorexia claims that it possesses the moral authority to decide the fate of a person – whether they are a ‘somebody’ or a ‘no body’; whether they are in fact ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy’ of life itself. Anorexia, then amongst other matters, is a distinctly perverse morality of personhood, intending to deceive and catch people up in their benevolent intentions, their aspirations and their vulnerabilities. Often anorexia appropriates both the secular and the sacred in its moralising by promising these young woman what Liz Eckermann refers to as a ‘secular sainthood’. (Eckermann, 1997).

Although anorexia represents itself as a forum for moral reflection on the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of absolutely every aspect of one’s conduct, it soon blurs the distinction between right and wrong with normative measures – e.g. grades, scores, marks, weights and any other form of the assessments and objectifications of a person our culture has so far contrived. These norms by no means transcend the culture but rather are mirror-like reflections of it. How moralities of personhood and measures of the good have merged cannot be discussed here as it would take us into a long excursion into the theorising of Michel Foucault and the feminist scholars who have appropriated it for their own scholarly and political purposes. (5) Suffice to say, such considerations are critical to an anti-anorexic practice.

But more to our point, how does anorexia authorise itself to ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ a candidate for a contemporary personhood? Who or what has warranted it to do so? If it has arrogated to itself such momentous powers, what are its grounds for determining a successful candidate? And if one considers such tests and their criteria insupportable, how does one appeal and to whom?

Why the right of appeal is so important to consider is that when anorexia fails a candidate, such a person is rejected from the human fold and exiled into such obscurity that their own death is often preferred to such a ‘living death’ as some have referred to it. The ‘living deaths’ are dedicated to a purgatory to measure up to measures that continually shift out of their reach. They are not told that this is merely the antechamber of Hell.

It seems that once a candidate is taken in by anorexia, anorexia assesses them relentlessly as ‘bad’, ‘unworthy’, ‘undeserving’ and the only way out is their death. Anorexia sets a myriad of tests of perfection and ironically, only their death can now ensure their success e.g. ‘the perfect failure’. A family reported the cry of their daughter – Perfection or Death! – as she attempted to jump from their roof to her death.

Anorexia turns any of our conventional moralities on their heads. Here ‘bad’ becomes ‘good’ and ‘good’ becomes ‘bad’. Here junk food is transformed into all food is junk and then converts a young woman into being junk. How else can we comprehend how young women, still in the thrall of anorexia, often refer to their zealous pursuit of anorexia’s onerous requirements of them as a form of ‘goodening’. Anyone else looking on would consider this a kind of enslavement these women are labouring under. What criteria does anorexia use to ‘measure’ a

person 'up' for the very status of a person? And how does anorexia conceal from a candidate this immorality- and its fundamentalist distinctions between good/bad and right/wrong and instead dress them up as moral virtues? Why do these young people so rarely doubt or even quibble about its moral authority over them? And how does this morality operate so that once the candidate accepts its promises and devotes herself to meeting its prerequisites, she experiences herself in a maze and loses her hold on her moral agency. Getting out of this maze is like extricating oneself from quicksand – the more effort you put into your escape, the deeper down you sink.

How does anorexia purport to improve the morals of its candidates? What remains so sinister to an observer is that it appeals to the very high-mindedness of such women and before they know it, they find themselves accused by anorexia of crimes, convicted without knowing the specific nature of their wrong-doing or having any defence. Soon after, they are found guilty and beyond redemption. By what sleight of cunning does anorexia transform itself into censure, then criminal charges and finally a conviction for which punishment and torture immediately commence?

From now on, all their rights as citizens are stripped from them. All joys and pleasures, including smiling save fake smiling, are forbidden. The 'concentration camp' of everyday life is now instituted and they enter it, utterly convinced unlike on those on their admission to Auschwitz, that 'arbeit mach frie' (work, or here perfection, will set you free).

Judy wrote:

*I told you I felt all these years like a silent Jew, forsaken by God, everyone and everything. You asked if I regarded anorexia and bulimia as sinister forms of power comparable to the naked tyranny that destroyed the Jewry in the Holocaust. Whereas they knew evil was being done to them – and they didn't deserve it, anorexia gets people to go to the torture chamber smiling; grateful even. I became grateful to my abuser. (Judy, 1994)*

Anti-anorexia seeks to undo the cunning by which anorexia distills from this culture what Chambers might call one of the most compelling and lethal 'obscenities' of our time. Anorexia turns cultural images of a person, especially of a woman, to its own ends. Despite these images being contradictory, anorexia denies those very contradictions for a 'good and successful woman'. Moral measures e.g. selflessness, niceness, being a relief to others, self-abnegation, etc are merged with the requirements of a 'ruthless individualism' determined by scores, marks, weights and other objective assessments of those norms which promise entry into the world of a 'successful person', especially that of men. Such contradictions form the cross to which anorexia fixes these young women.

Because anorexia's prosecution takes place within the domain of its own moral jurisdiction, a viable defence can only be mounted within the domain of a

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counter-morality. Such a rival morality often takes shape by way of controverting anorexia or building bridges back to local moral orders that have been overridden by anorexia, such as various spiritualities that help women clarify and adhere to such values/virtues. Anti-anorexia as a style of living is not fixed to any particular pre-existing psychological code.

Such a rival or counter-morality allows anorexia's declarations of what is good or bad and who is a good or bad person to be first interrogated and then disputed. In the absence of such a rival, breaches of anorexia's dogma can only be interpreted within the very terms of anorexia's perverse morality as heresy or sin. Such a sin cannot be redeemed through penance but only expiated through torture and recantation. Without a counter-morality, freedom from anorexia's moral jurisdiction is virtually impossible.

Anti-anorexia provides the grounds for a counter-morality to rival that of anorexia's hegemony. It attempts to do so by turning anorexia against itself. Anorexia's arguments are found, under such scrutiny, to intend to deceive rather than uplift. Its reasoning is unveiled as misleading or fallacious. Furthermore, under such inspection, anorexia doesn't merely fail to improve their morals but manifests the very evil to which these young women are so opposed.

This moral disputation asks such questions as:

Is good done by evil? Would you grant evil to distinguish between who is 'good' and who is 'bad'? What is 'right' or what is 'wrong'? Should anti-anorexia convene with you and others to decide this matter? If so, would it make available a counter-morality in which one's benevolent intentions can be acted upon to serve benevolent ends? Is this something you might consider taking up with your goodness? Should such a counter-morality turn anorexia's sinister deceit on its head? Might an anti-anorexic counter-morality generate love of self and others, goodwill towards oneself and others and confirm the innocence and tragedy of those seduced, betrayed and murdered by anorexia?

Do You Think There Is Some Injustice Here?

This video-taped interview took place in the mid-90s in the paediatric wards of a hospital in an unspecified country in Europe. I had been leading a workshop not surprisingly to do with anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia. Over the course of the day, I observed my colleague and director of an eating disorders ward becoming more and more distressed, answering what seemed to be persistent phone calls. She approached me at afternoon coffee break and told me of an emergency in her ward. It seemed that the nursing staff intended to go on strike the next day if she did not order Monica (6), aged 18, out of the children's hospital into an adult psychiatric unit. It seemed that for some time now Monica had been screaming in anguish for much of any day while hitting her head against brick walls and tearing her hair out by the roots. Her life had been in peril for many months now. The nursing staff referred to this as 'tantrumming'. They could not tolerate this

any longer, so concerned were they about the effect this was having on younger in-patients. What could I do under the circumstances? I agreed to meet Monica several hours later after the day's teaching was over. My colleague was able to invite along her mother, Franziska, who lived nearby. By the time we met, Monica looked kempt and had obviously recovered some of her equanimity. This is no way diminished in my mind the nursing staff's concerns.

The following is a somewhat abbreviated version of the first half hour of this interview:

David: *How does anorexia talk you into torturing yourself? What does it tell you that gets you to violate your body and pull out your hair and make you seem a lot younger than you really are? What is it telling you?*

Monica: *That I don't have the right to be happy.*

David: *Why do you think anorexia has forbidden you to have life, liberty, freedom and happiness? Do you know the Declaration of Independence in the United States? Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's denying you your human rights. Why do you think it's doing this? Have you committed some crimes?*

Monica: *I don't know.*

David: *Have you murdered anyone?*

Monica: *No.*

David: *On what grounds is it denying you your freedom?*

Monica: *I don't know. I can't figure it out.*

David: *Say you were walking down the street in your city and the police came and threw you in jail and said: "You can't have any freedoms!" What would you do? Would you say: "What are the charges against me?" Would you say you wanted a lawyer? Do you believe justice should operate in your country?*

Monica: *Yes!*

David: *Do you think this is just? You are being punished and tortured and you don't know what you've done wrong. To me that doesn't sound like a democracy. Do you believe in democracy?*

Monica: *Yes, I do! But anorexia says I've done something wrong but I don't know what it is.*

David: *Where do you think anorexia got that idea from?*

Monica: *I don't know.*

David: *Do you think you've had a fair trial? In my country, and I think in your country, you're told what you did wrong. Then there is a judge or jury. And then you defend yourself?*

Monica: *She (anorexia) never tells me. I ask but she won't say.*

David: *This is even worse. This could drive anyone crazy.*

Monica: *Yes, I feel like that sometimes.*

David: *Why do you think she (anorexia) would play such an insidious and cunning trick on a young woman? What purpose would she have in doing this? (to her mother) Would you consider Monica a nice daughter or a nice person?*

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Mother: *She has been nice to me .... too nice to me.*

David: *Why do you think anorexia would take advantage of a very nice young woman?*

Monica: *I don't know.*

David: *I don't think the answer is easy. I'm wondering why?*

Monica: *I've asked myself that question many times and I haven't found the answer.*

David: *Maybe there isn't a simple answer. If you ask yourself why is there injustice, you may never find the answer but you may find a revolution to put things right.*

Monica: *Mmm.*

David: *Do you think there is some injustice here?*

Monica: (with emphasis) *Yes, I do!*

David: *Well, I've got to tell you – so do !! Why do you think there is some injustice being done to you by anorexia? What's the nature of it? When did you realise anorexia was immoral? Did she tell you she was good or serving a good cause?*

Monica: *Yes.....*

In this abstract from an interview, anorexia's morality was called into question rather than allowing it to condemn Monica. Conversations that inspect anorexia's morality from the perspective of a counter-morality can challenge anorexia/bulimia as the arbiter of the 'good'. Moreover, in time, these inquiries often reveal the perversity and malevolence not only of the judgements but the principles upon which these judgements are based. Under such anti-anorexic/anti-bulimic scrutiny, anorexia/bulimia is defrocked. It is no longer viewed as the only means to improve a person's morals but, rather, as a manifestation of the evil and one of the very violences these women oppose" (Maisel, Epston & Borden (2004) pp. 151-2).

### **David Bears Witness**

David, aged 12, fulminated against anorexia, demanding reparation by writing an apology on anorexia's behalf.

#### ***Apology from Anorexia to Myself***

*I am writing this apology to myself because I know that even though I may dream about it. Even though I thoroughly deserve it. Even though you have stolen every pleasure that I had in my life. I know that you are so heartless, so shallow and so ruthless that you would never have the compassion or decency to ever make the apology that you have for so long owed me.*

*Here it is:*

*I am sorry that I have stolen your life away from you. I am sorry for turning every pleasure you once had in your joyful life into an unbearable torture, from your*

*pleasure in eating to your pleasure in good company and sport. I made you hate yourself and see fault in everything that you were and did. I took away all your happiness and turned everything you found into a horrible ordeal. I sapped all your strength, turning you into a lifeless body without a soul. I deprived you of all the tastes you enjoyed and stole from you x kilograms, turning you into an unhappy skeleton. I lied to you, telling you that I would make you happy and an overall better person. When you did what I said, I was ruthless and pushed your face into the mud, making you hate yourself and blame yourself for things that I had forced and tortured you into doing.*

*It is obvious that it would be impossible to fix what I have done. There is no way that I can take back what I have done because I terribly scarred and mutilated you. All I can do is apologise and leave you and your family alone forever. I know I cannot make up for what I have done to you but I will do all I can to fix what I have done. I am sorry for what I have done and you deserve this apology and more.*

*Yours truly sorry,  
Anorexia (March 26, 2006)*

### **Judy Bears Witness**

Judy, aged 30, by identifying anorexia as 'evil' secures her own innocence. She is no longer wrong but wronged:

*For some reason, I couldn't listen to the audio-tapes of our meetings at all, no matter how hard I tried or well-intentioned I was. When eventually I got to hear them, I felt cheated, realising patently that it was anorexia which had prevented me all along. All sorts of indications from the feeling someone was using my body to speak to you from the chair I sat. While you took the side of hope, frustrating her designs, anorexia insisted on being well-practiced in taking the side of despair. You said at one point that anorexia might not come in to your office but if it did, we would get rid of it quickly.*

*Listening to our conversation, I felt I could see it attempting to come in, or be there dominant, at every point. With some incredulity, I listened to a tortured, twisted logic. A voice through which my experience was being structured and through which it developed – degraded. I did feel the whole force of The League behind your attempts to evict it from my body or the room. But at the same time, even such a force of resistance did not make me feel entirely comfortable. In fact, I became scared for you and maybe me, when I realised what you were confronting there.*

*As I listened another time – nothing! No bulimia, not able to seduce me away. When I heard anorexia speaking to you from my chair, I was reminded of everything I had witnessed. Everything that was anti-life condensed into this voice. I could see and even sympathise with my own weaknesses, that it was the coils of a serpent that suffocated me, that had its hold on me and wouldn't let go. I realised then what was being done to me WAS EVIL! That first you and then me were up against evil. This was a revelation to me – to confront evil was immediately to detach from it.*

*You asked me if I thought anorexia rendered a person heartless? Does it take control of your mind and erase your heart and soul? The short answer is 'Yes' but it also produces resistance to it. In a way, the first time I self-consciously took the side of outrage and perhaps self-consciously did anything at all was when I listened to the audio-tapes and in some way, anorexia was exposed.*

*Since then anorexia has become an object of amazement to me. Amazement because it feels as I have been lived by something unbelievably bad and ridiculous. It made me uncomfortable as I learned more about her because I had never imagined anything quite so bad. I would say now, I never really knew existence of evil. That is ironic coming from someone almost consumed by guilt, but it is true. I don't share the same moral universe as this thing anorexia. It's hatred of me and life generally is beyond comprehension. (31/6/1993)*

### **David Bears Witness on behalf of The League**

Mary, aged 17, had pulled herself out of the quicksands of anorexia over 1997 and 1998 for the time being. It was painstaking for her parents, Warren and Sharon, as well as myself. However, faced with her final secondary school examinations late that year, we all feared that every freedom she had reclaimed would be forfeited and she would perish. Warren, usually a strong contributor to any anti-anorexic discussion, sat with his head bowed, tears running down his cheeks and pooling on his shirt collar. Sharon, also a thoughtful commentator, seemed frozen into a glacial silence. It seemed as if Mary had come to say her final farewell to me. I found this unbearable and wrote from the very 'heart' of the archives.

*Dear Mary:*

*I wanted to write you after our meeting on Thursday. I strongly felt anorexia, once again, pulling you away from us and down, insinuating that there was no other 'world' for you than his Hell, where he promises you will sit beside him as his Queen. It was unnerving for me and judging from Warren's helpless tears of frustration, it is for us all. Before I had time to put my fingers to my keyboard, your mother rang to reassure me that you were able to come back to us a bit. That was a great relief to me and I know it was to Sharon and Warren. However, it did delay my response.*

*Mary, I am writing to you in defiance of anorexia and all that it stands for. I swear to you – and all those murdered by anorexia are my witnesses – that nothing will prevent the League from keeping a 'place' open for you – a place to stand and take a stand for your life and entitlements to happiness, peace and fulfillment. Admittedly, such a Resistance must at times go into hiding underground and at other times strike fiercely. And we do sustain losses. But such losses are trivial compared to the suffering at anorexia's hands. After all it will even "eat your smile for dessert!" What kind of life is it that anorexia promises? To be a well-dressed Barbie-puppet, looking pretty? What do you make of Barbie smiling as she goes about measuring herself up to Perfection and torture?*

*What does Anti-Anorexia promise? Nothing but a place to stand and hold up a mirror for you to see anorexia without its mask of benevolent solicitude. It is a longstanding tradition in the annals of punishment and torture that the executioner keeps his face well hidden, is it not? From an anti-anorexic point of view, anorexia can no longer blindfold you or keep you in the dark. Now can you see what there is to see? Can you speak out against anorexia because you now have the language to do so? Can anorexia conceal its intentions from you any longer? Are its promises turning to dusty betrayals?*

*If my experience in the League over the past ten years is anything to go by, there will be a struggle but I suspect in and out of these very struggles, you will forge your 'self' for yourself. I can assure you there will be fun and celebration along the way. And one day you will decide for yourself to put your arms down. However, will you ever set your vigilance aside? After all, anorexia is nowhere and everywhere; anti-anorexia is merely somewhere.*

*Mary, we remain your sisters, your brothers, your comrades and your friends. We remain where we are, even if sometimes we go underground but we never surrender. If I am any judge of Sharon and Warren, I believe that they would never surrender either. Never!!!! To be one of us, there are no measurements, no examination and no assessments. Your suffering, which is so evident to all of us, is your welcome.*

*Welcome back even if you have to jump the hurdle of your examination. We want you to know we abhor examinations. You are more than enough for Anti-Anorexia. I look forward to catching up with you next week.*

*David Epston*

*On behalf of the Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia League. (7)*

### **Ann Bears Witness**

Ann Epston writes to Emma, aged 13 and her parents Sandra and Brian after their first meeting together. Emma's life is in peril and a hospitalisation is imminent:

*Dear Emma, Sandra, and Brian,*

*It was good to meet you all last night and make a start on getting to know you. Thank you, Emma, for your frankness and bravery in talking and in answering so many questions asked by a stranger.*

*I woke up at midnight and couldn't get back to sleep for hours; my mind was boiling with a furious anger against anorexia. I thought, "Here we go again, anorexia! So you've sneaked into the life of yet another innocent young girl, pretending to befriend her at a time of big changes. How cunning of you to detect Emma's uneasiness with her developing body, and how unscrupulous of you to offer her an 'easy' solution – dieting! How neatly you insinuated yourself into her uncertainty, her longing for friends and boyfriends, promising her that thinness would ensure attractiveness and popularity, would win her admiration and make her the envy of all who know her. Anorexia, did you tell her the price she'd have to*

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*pay? Did you warn her you'd eventually steal even her soul in exchange? I heard you actually convinced Emma she's your only victim, in a school of 1200 girls!*

*You vampire, anorexia, haven't you taken enough already? Aren't you satisfied with the stream of young girls you've preyed upon, stealing their fat, then their flesh, their strength, their energy, their enthusiasm, their sparkle, their humour, opinions, sports, games, friendships, social times, confidence, trust, creativity, originality, individuality – their very lives?*

*I suppose Emma was an attractive choice: intelligent, friendly, humorous, a lover of animals, responsible, ambitious, prepared to study hard and train to be a vet. What a delightful tall poppy to cut down at the threshold of adolescence! What pleasure you must be taking in draining her energy, blurring her concentration, and alienating her from her own body.*

*How did you do it, anorexia? How did you train Emma to criticise and reject her body instead of loving herself? How did you make her believe that some imaginary schoolboy's opinion was worth starvation? What vulnerabilities did you seize upon to convince her that thin weak conformists are more desirable than strong individuals?*

*I suppose you have lots of help: the movies, magazines, TV soaps, advertising, schoolgirl culture – they all tell the same story, that less is best for girls' bodies and minds. Did you use your usual trick of comparing? Making Emma compare herself against friends and declare herself the loser, then offer your services in consolation, the perfect solution? Did you use the old drug dealers' trick of just a little bit at first? Did you slip smoothly from the oh-so-reasonable 'no junk food' to gradually defining all food as junk? Did you use secrecy and the pretence of 'specialness' to isolate Emma in subtle ways from the loving concern of family and friends? And of course I know you used fear, that despicable technique favoured by tyrants and bullies the world over. Yes, you terrorised this 13-year-old into accepting your lie – that you offer 'control' and without you, Emma will lose all control and her hunger will be insatiable.*

*If it weren't so vicious and evil it would be laughable, your threat that a healthy, active young woman will become the size of a whale just by the simple fact of eating ordinary nourishing food. This fear has tormented and tortured countless thousands upon thousands of young women into submitting to your hateful rule.*

*But, anorexia, we will not stand for it. Emma has wise and loving parents who will not allow you to prey upon their beloved daughter. They have chosen me as their anti-anorexic therapist, and with the help of Dr \_\_\_\_\_ and her dietitian and everyone who cares about Emma, we will fight anorexia and fear and drive you out of this family's life. We do this because we are perfectly clear about what is right and what is wrong. Take notice, anorexia, we will do everything in our power to free Emma from the spell you have cast over her. We are guided by two principles: unwavering support and love for Emma and unwavering hatred for anorexia and the harm it does."*

*Yours anti-anorexically,*

*Ann Epston (8)*

## Conclusion

I have come to consider 'anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia' as much as anything else a moral endeavour. How could it be otherwise if we reach the conclusion that anorexia is a perverse morality or worse yet, an immorality tricked up as an assemblage of moral virtues? I have known of so many disheartened and disheartening treatments. I am asking us to consider remoralising (Frank, 2004) our vision of our practice in order to assist these young people to remoralise the living of their lives. To do so may have us seriously question how we might conduct ourselves with that in mind. For me, to do otherwise would now make me wittingly complicit with anorexia – a bystander pretending not much is going on here but whatever it is it should be rendered solely through the extant professional discourses. I do not consider them adequate to such a moral task. After all, I have been told time and time again that 'I became anorexic for the hospital' or even on behalf of a particular professional person. Here I am reminded of Michel Foucault's quote: People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does (8) (Foucault cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, 187).

I believe that as much as anything else we are in need of counter-moralities to those anorexia would have these young women pay homage to and tell their lives accordingly. Here I am thinking of some of the most enduring and moral political rhetorics we have at our disposal:

- 1) Fighting for your life and the lives of your 'sisters' and against your murdered and the murderer of your 'sisters',
- 2) Fighting for justice to be done in your life and the lives of your sisters and in principle and against injustice in your life and the lives of your sisters and in principle.

This is in line with Helen Gremillions' metaphor for such women – 'the canaries in the mines'. (10) Canaries were kept in mines until not so long ago to detect the odourless and invisible toxic gases that aside from mine cave-ins were the greatest risk to miners' lives. For when a canary, who stood guard in their cages on behalf of the miners and did so by their indefatigable singing vigils, fell silent through their own asphyxiation, miners immediately would flee to safety. To this day in many mines, their empty cages remain as testament to the innocent songbirds that perished on the miner's behalf. Shouldn't we listen to the innocent songs of these young women which brings to my mind such sorrowfulness and seek that they along with us become worldly-wise. And that they be reidentified as competent members of their moral communities and in doing so enable the further expression of their goodness.

## Addendum

During the conference, I met Warren Ward, Director of the Eating Disorders Service at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital. He told me of Kylie, aged nineteen, who had been declared a 'hopeless case' following numerous

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hospitalisations and out-patient care since she was eleven years old. But on her mother and herself reading *Biting the Hand that Starves You* (Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004) she was subsequently declared in recovery. He agreed to ask her if I might be in email contact with her to discuss this matter. She happily consented and the following is the entire email record of our conversations, except for the removal of my queries for her document, headed 'Dear David and Rick'. This conversation took place between October, 2006 and January, 2007.

*Dear David*

*In Adelaide I spoke to you about Kylie, one of our 'hopeless cases' who really turned around thanks to she and her mother reading your book. I had my last appointment with her last week as she is moving interstate. She is now well and truly in recovery. I told her you had expressed an interest in contacting her and she would really like that.*

*Regards  
Warren*

*Warren Ward  
Director  
Eating Disorders Service  
Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital*

*Dear Kylie:*

*Thank you for allowing Warren to pass on your email address to me. As you may know, I met him very recently in Adelaide at the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Eating Disorders Conference. He attended the pre-conference day long workshop I did which gave me a chance to have some discussions with him. He mentioned in confidence how 'Biting the Hand that Starves You' had played some part in you proceeding to recovery. As you may realise from having read the book that this work – anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia – has been very central to the 'work' of my life for over fifteen years now. And the book itself was the culmination of an eight-year-long collaboration with Rick Maisel (in Berkeley, California). Thank God for computers and email!*

*I know it was a hope of both Rick and myself that this book might 'reach out' beyond a professional readership to both 'insiders' and their families/partners/friends. In fact, although we may have started out with the intention to inform our professional colleagues, as the book progressed, we gave more and more significance to our other hoped for readerships e.g. insiders/families/etc. For this reason, I am taking every opportunity that comes my way (e.g. through colleagues or through the website) to discuss how 'Biting the Hand' works. Obviously with regard to professionals, you can read book reviews that tell you how your colleagues view the book and 'anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia'.*

*Would you (and perhaps your mum) be willing to have an email conversation with me so I could find out if Rick's and my hopes have been realised, if only with*

*one insider and one family? I would be really grateful if you would join me in such a conversation. And don't worry as you probably know from the book, I am 'full' of questions and curiosity.*

*Yours anti-anorexically,  
David*

*Hi David and Rick:*

*Thank you so much for your email. It is really exciting to be talking to the person who has written 'Biting the Hand'. And if it is of any interest, it all started when I borrowed the book from the library while I was looking for weight loss books. So yes, you can speak to me and my mum if you would like. I stumbled on to it in the 'health and diet' section. It stood out amongst the books on depression and other eating disorder books. It wasn't the cover that stood out but the title. And it was that it was bigger than the others, which were very brief and this book seemed more in depth. What caught my interest about the title was because 'Biting the Hand That Starves You' is like something is doing it to you; you are not doing it to yourself!*

*When I first looked at it, I thought it was your typical symptoms and basic eating disorder book. But when I started reading it, it was different altogether. It was as though I was writing it word for word myself. What the book was saying was what I was (and still) think. But now it was as if my mind was written on paper. At first, I felt I was ... well ... being made fun of ... rather like this book was trying to make out it 'knows'. After all, I thought this was my secret and at first I was angry that this book had got into my life.*

*I had borrowed many such books before and had never been able to read them. When I borrowed 'Biting the Hand', I just did it because it was an eating disorder book and I could flip through and that would be that. You asked me if anorexia tried to have me put 'Biting the Hand' down. I think so but I am not really sure for I was in a daze. I couldn't really read it. The words stood out on the page and this time I wanted to read them. So I got my mum to read a bit to me. But then my mum started reading it and began to treat me differently. She began to read some of it to me and I began to feel differently. Mum started talking to the anorexia and getting it angry. For example, she would ask – "Is the anorexia stopping you from eating that?" She told me what she was doing but we did fight a lot over it. My mother is amazing. She is real; she tells it how it is. I have told her every thought that goes on in my head. She knows me and anorexia very well. She is great and knows how to talk to 'me'. But at first, I felt like mum didn't get it. But what she said would sit in my mind and later I would keep thinking about it. Then slowly it was – "Why am I eating that? Why can't I eat that etc.?" It took ages and I still go back to it now and again.*

*But I have been telling everyone about 'Biting the Hand'. I still want to be thin and they ask me why. And I don't really know. So I am starting to question that. The fighting continued. It was about my mum not leaving anorexia alone. And her thinking she knew what I was going through. But really at that stage, my mum probably knew more than I did about anorexia. She certainly knew anorexia wasn't me.*

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Kylie's mum: *My first reaction from flipping through 'Biting the Hand' was the girls' stories catching my eye. They sounded so similar to what my daughter had been telling me, both through her words and feelings. Those girls in the book were saying exactly the same things!*

Kylie: *What thoughts ran through my mind? I was scared. I had never been scared like this before. I was scared that the whole 'you have an illness – anorexia' could be true. I was afraid that others and this book might be right and that I was really sick.*

*But, this was when for the first time I was out of my self... that might sound weird... I was in a book. I felt separate from myself. At the same time, I felt I had betrayed myself. I still didn't think anorexia was entirely separate from me. I had always thought that anorexia was me! When I first got the idea it was anorexia, I denied it. I still wouldn't really let myself believe it. Then I felt very angry for quite a while and then (and I am still) a bit hurt.*

*I had believed I did deserve the torturing anorexia was doing to me. I wasn't good enough and I thought I should be in pain. I was (and still am a bit) very hurt and feel so back stabbed by my so-called 'friend' who was supposed to be looking after and protecting me from bad things. It took me months to realise this. My mind had been so taken over by anorexia that it took a while to start to hear myself. But I did take my anger out on anorexia by trying to take control away from it and do what it would not want me to do.*

*Yes, I am still very, very angry! You asked what would have come of me if I hadn't chanced on to 'Biting the Hand'. Ahhhhhh I don't want to even think about that. This book was my turning point. I think to be honest I would be dead by now. Anorexia would have taken my life. To be truly honest, the saving of my life was this book. Without 'Biting the Hand', I am convinced that I would not be here alive. I have had this illness for eight years and had a lot of therapy. But not once had anything ever hit me like the words in 'Biting the Hand'. It pulled me out of Hell. I'm still a work in progress but I have come so far.*

*Finding myself in a book between two covers, I realised that finally someone understood. I had never ever felt understood before. Thank God for this book! Almost all of the many professionals I had met didn't really know anything. They just didn't understand. But reading the book felt good. It was like anorexia was diagnosed and it had symptoms and it was not just a matter of me losing my mind.*

*Nothing like this had ever happened before in my life. And it remains unique to this day.*

*David, this is what happened to me last week. I went to my cousin's wedding and had a three course meal of baked ricotta, potato mash with pesto oil dressing and cashews, then mousse and cream with strawberries in syrup for dessert plus two dinner rolls with butter. And you know what? For the first time in forever, there was nothing – silence, not a voice to be heard except the happy chatter of my family and friends. Anorexia was nowhere to be seen or heard. I had the best time.*

*To me this doesn't happen very often but such days are happening more and more – even on an average day. Well, yes anorexia speaks to me but the words are now*

*spoken, not yelling or coercive but spoken in a small, timid and unsure voice. I have to go back a long way in my life to remember when anorexia didn't scream or rant at me. David, it felt so good to hear nothing but my family speak and my own thoughts thinking the food was lovely and nothing else. And that's when my voice is bigger and louder. I win a lot of the time. I am eating well. I am resting when I feel like it. I am thinking about other things. Deep down I do love myself and like what I am. I'm not quite all me yet but anorexia is getting smaller and weaker by the day. And it is a dream come true! I just wanted to share this with you!*

*David, if I can help in any way please let me know. You have helped me so much. Thank you. And I would like to help other girls in any way I can. 'Biting the Hand' really did save my life. Mum wants to thank you too. She is of the firm belief that this book saved my life above all else.*

### Footnotes

1. When I first began to learn of the desperate solitariness of these young women, I investigated how it was that they had become so confined, standing so alone in their 'cells', crying out but no one seeming to be able to understand their torment. At times, their cries were read as 'acts of control' or 'manipulation' and they were regarded as prima donnas at best and spoiled brats at worst. I heard desperate silences, only relieved by self-accusations, self-condemnations and confessions of the guilty. The clinical wisdom at the time was that 'anorexics shouldn't speak to each other' which justified even more solitary confinements. I viewed these young women, much like Gremillion, as 'canaries in the mine', but who would care to listen once they had been confined to psychiatric versions of themselves. My first thought was –'other canaries' which led to next query – how might they inform each other of their impending fate to which anorexia had doomed them?

I immediately began to contrive any form of association I could think of, many of which were contrary to the orthodoxy of professional-client relationships, so that concerned parties could 'convene'. I circulated, with careful consent, forms of documentation e.g. 'letters', stories, transcripts of interviews, the interviews themselves recorded on audio or video-tape, and consultations in which 'insider knowledges' were both constructed and shared. I began to develop ad hoc 'communities of concern', although soon learned how anorexia could both inform and pervert their very 'community'. Anorexia would have league members compete against each other to be the 'best' anorexic ('Look at Bridget ... now she is a real anorexic and you're not even in her league!) or failing that, the 'best' anti-anorexic (Look at Rhonda ... now she is a real anti-anorexic person and you're not even in her league!). I realised how important it was for me to mediate these relationships to anorexia-proof them to the extent that we were able to do so. There was also a risk of such women selflessly dedicating themselves to the anti-anorexic causes of others, almost as if they were bequeathing what remained of their short lives to inspire their survivors.

I conceived of a 'community' that was flexible and fleet enough to side-step such anorexic coups. Perhaps the name 'league' itself came from my notion of 'being in league' with others against anorexia and 'its effects on you, on another league member and women in general'. Or was it a taking apart of co-league to stand for how we all might stand together in solidarity. A league then merely became a kind of compact to prosecute common concerns e.g. the unmasking of anorexia and the development of counter-practices, and I have always imagined leagues as taking any number of associational forms. The most modest being an association between two young women and their families to something as elaborate as the Vancouver Anti-anorexia, anti-bulimia League,

a non-taxable charity (Grieves, 1997). Obviously the latter had a much larger programme and more considered purposes than the 'ad hoc' arrangements I was regularly instituting through my practice. These ad hoc arrangements and the circulation of documentation soon reached the point of an extensive archive that I administered for some years by means of xeroxing copies and posting them off to their recipients. However, the scale of such an anti-anorexic operation was circumscribed by its very means. The Archives of Resistance: Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia were put up on [www.narrativeapproaches.com](http://www.narrativeapproaches.com) which now allows for much more ready access to these materials (go to [www.narrativeapproaches.com/anti\\_anorexia\\_index.htm](http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/anti_anorexia_index.htm)).

2. I use the term 'insider' to stand for those who have suffered and have become knowledgeable (10) through their suffering. The composite – 'insider knowledges' is intended to distinguish 'insider knowledges' from the far more prestigious and established 'outsider knowledges' associated with the disciplines and the professions. Reading the literature of narrative therapy, 'insider knowledges' can be considered as synonymous with previous usages as 'alternative' or 'local knowledges'. (White & Epston, 1990).
3. Julie King. 2007. From unpublished correspondence.
4. See *Manners of Speaking*. In Maisel, R., Epston, D. & Borden, A. 2004. W.W. Norton, New York. pp. 75-89.
5. See Lock *et al.*, Relevant Works on Anorexia, Feminism and Foucault, in Maisel *et al.* pp. 303-304.
6. Monica is a professional practitioner and has requested her anonymity and that of her country be protected.
7. See Epston, 1999, (pp. 137-157)
8. See A. Epston in Maisel *et al.*, 2004, (pp. 160-162).
9. See Dreyfus, H.L. & Rabinow, P. 1983, (p. 187).
10. Gremillion, H. 2003.
11. This is a neologism of Michael White which I recall first hearing him use around 2000.

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### **Afterword**

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David Epston  
(2008)