

Chapter 11

Anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia: bearing witness

David Epston

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UP OVER

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 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 their 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 fight back 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 insignificantly 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:

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 vocation 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 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?

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 I! 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 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 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.
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 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 which now allows for much more ready access to these materials (go to www.narrativeapproaches.com/anti_anorexia_index.htm).

2. I use the term 'insider' to stand for those who have suffered and have become knowledged (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

I would like to thank all my co-authors, co-leagues and co-researchers for the very obvious parts they played in thinking up much of what got into text in this book and more importantly, living it out. For it has been the ways in which any of the inventions have been lived out by those who subscribed to them that substantiated such innovations as practice.

I would also like to thank Barry Bowen for thinking up this project in the first place. And then he took the idea up with the Association for Family Therapy (United Kingdom) and after some time, this book has come about. It is as much his as mine in that he has played a far greater role than an editor. He was an intimate partner in the project from the beginning and I know for a fact that if it wasn't for him, it could easily have been dropped by my wayside. Despite my disappearances for months at a time from the project, he calmly just took the lead and waited for me to catch up to him. I am extremely grateful to Barry for this book.

David Epston
(2008)