

THE CORNER RE-IMAGINING NARRATIVE THERAPY: A HISTORY FOR THE FUTURE

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Michael White wrote *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) to distill his practice and for the time being to externalize his *oeuvre*, which translates into English as his *works*. I am using *externalize*, not in Michael's sense but in the very different sense proposed by Jerome Bruner, who speaks of the benefits of doing so in the following terms:

The benefits of "externalizing" such joint products into *oeuvres* have too long been overlooked. First on the list, obviously, is that collective *oeuvres* produce and sustain group solidarity. They help "make" a community. Works and works-in-progress create "shared" and "negotiable" ways of thinking in a group. The French historians of the so-called *Annales* school refer to these shared and negotiable forms of thought as "mentalities," styles of thinking that characterize different groups in different periods living under various circumstances. . . . I can see another benefit from externalizing mental work into a more palpable *oeuvre*. Externalization produces a "record" of our mental efforts, one that is outside us" rather than vaguely "in memory." It embodies our thoughts and intentions in a form more accessible to reflective efforts. Externalizing, in a word, rescues cognitive activity from implicitness, making it more public, negotiable and "solidary." At the same time, it makes it more accessible to subsequent reflection and meta-cognition. (1996, pp. 22–24)

From my own experience of having completed something similar in 2004 (Maisel, Epston, & Borden, 2004), though even more complicated by virtue of the fact that it was a collective and collaborative project involving 200 to 300 contributors, I appreciated that when such a text was "outside" me, I was relieved of the effort required constantly to circulate the *oeuvre* either within my own mind or that of my colleagues and coauthors. I believe that Michael felt the same about his project, *Maps*, which was a distillation, a concentrated essence of some of his practice that

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he had set out on mid-1981 and had systematically evolved ever since. I would like to make a point here that so extensive were his practice and his thinking that they could never ever possibly have been contained within a single text and its two book covers. Writing *Maps* for Michael—or anyone else writing a book trying to condense such a magnitude—is an act of love as well as an act of hate-loving what one could express along with hating what you had to expunge from the text. Either it did not fit in or, if it could, it would require an entirely distinctive “map”—and you were nearing the page limit your publisher had granted you. Reading *Maps* for me was like tasting the jam of a master jam maker who stood over the stove, allowing the thin syrup of the fruits’ juices to finally thicken into a luscious jam. As with any accomplished jam maker, this took immense patience, diligence, and time.

One of the proudest moments in my life was having the honor of launching *Maps* at the International Conference of Narrative Therapy and Community Work held at Kristiansand, Norway in June 2007. Below are some excerpted passages from that launch:

For that reason as much as anything else, it was with great anticipation when I heard, perhaps again by rumour, that a book had gone to press and would soon be released. How long would we have to wait for this? We ordered ours long in advance of its release date and more or less forgot about it until one day early in the morning, a courier arrived with a box of said books. I can’t tell you excited I was to return home from work to set about reading it. I commenced around 8 pm or so and I found myself riveted to the text. What a page-turner it was! Dark by now, my partner, Ann, first kindly hinted: “What time is it?” Then, some time later: “When are you going to turn the lights out?” Then some time later: “For God’s sake, put the lights out! I can’t sleep!” I remained insensitive to her plight as I turned one page after another. Finally, I told her I couldn’t put Michael’s book down. She immediately understood and fell deeply asleep.

In this book, Michael does his darnedest to bequeath to us, his readers, his practice and the scholarship that infused it. For me, that is what makes this book of such significance. He uses “maps” to reveal which way he is going and why he might head in this or that direction. At the same time, he warns us that there are so many directions he might have headed in. Or that you might head in. This is no manual . . . no McDonaldization. This is an artist disclosing in the most congenial manner his mastery and his craft. At the same time, he promises that one’s craft precedes and makes possible the originality of the reader’s eventual artistry. Twenty-five years later, I feel there is something almost as inescapable to conclude about *Maps of Narrative Practice* as I did long ago in Adelaide at the conference I mentioned: that narrative therapy has grown up into a most elegant, considered, and moving practice. My wish is for this book to be read far and wide and between its lines, to be hotly debated, and to be referenced outside its own “community” I am convinced that this work is worthy of much wider and deeper consideration outside its community than it has so far received. And that I pin my hopes on *Maps of Narrative Practice* to serve such a purpose.

Both Michael and I were determined after the completion of our respective projects, (both W.W. Norton publications) to, as we put it, “start all over again.” Because

of the circumstances of Michael's life at the time and his extensive traveling, we kept having to set the date ahead. Neither of us was too bothered, as we believed it was just a matter of time and circumstance before we would begin. We kept telling one another that we couldn't wait. I began to load up Michael's computer with PDFs, which was simpler than photocopying books and articles and either carrying them in my bags on my regular visits to Adelaide (1981–1993) or posting them. In the last conversation we had, he told me he was longing to start reading them but hadn't had the time yet. What were those PDFs? They were papers by Gary Saul Morson, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin and a translator and scholar of the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Morson's paper on "narrativeness" (2003) and what he referred to as an atypical narrative form, "sideshadowing" (which was "the realm of possibility" and lay in the "shadows" of "foreshadowing narratives" that were typical say of psychoanalysis, where events "could have been" or "still might be") haunted me, as he seemed to be referring to something so similar to narrative therapy practice. In fact, Michael often used the same metaphor: the alternative story lay in the shadows of the dominant story. We finally agreed on a date that we both were sure would not be deferred. We were both beside ourselves with anticipation.

We didn't want to start until we started, but Michael did hint at what he had in mind. In speaking aloud of this, I do not believe I am breaching any confidentiality, as it was our express intention to merely *reculer pour mieux sauter* or retreat backwards in order to better leap forwards and publish prolifically. That is how we imagined edging towards our respective dotages. But perhaps now we would have much more time to sit down and talk, think, read, exchange notes, and so on, rather than hurriedly catching up in the midst of conferences, at workshops where we were already fully engaged or at times overwhelmed with responsibilities. We weren't thinking of a sinecure, but just more time.

I have gone over and over in my mind trying to iron out those hints I referred to above, hoping I might make more out of them than I did at the time. After all, it was a matter of months or weeks when we could speak at our leisure about matters of concern. I left his hints as that, more or less headings on separate pages of an imaginary notebook. I don't know if it was Michael or me who came up with the proposal, "let's start all over again," but that sentence guided me in my preparation for an event that never eventuated, given Michael's untimely death 3 weeks before our first confirmed meeting date.

But back to what I am calling "Michael's hints." One was his desire to go back to some of the original texts that were sources of narrative therapy as he felt they had not been fully exploited. I will refer to that prospect as a history for the future. There was more to be made of them, he assured me. He was probably right, but it is my nature to be always looking for other books to read and I rarely backtrack. I will refer to this as re-imagining narrative therapy. But I appreciated that was what was so complementary about us—the way each of us read, and the thoughts our respective reading styles led us to consider. He also saw an immense project ahead,

elaborating on the as-yet fairly singular concept of “the absent but implicit.” He suspected that if he had the time to “typologize” (my term) a number of varieties of practice it would have led him to discerning any number of particularities of each—I suspect, much like his methodology in “The Process of Questioning: A Therapy of Literary Merit?” (1988), a paper I have always considered one of his most significant. I saw a glint in his eye when he spoke of this project and I foresaw another “mapping” of something as yet “unmapped.”

Michael also spoke of his concern when he posed these rhetorical questions: “What are we doing wrong? Why aren’t the next generations coming up with novel ideas/practices?” I admitted at the time that this was a concern of mine as well. I vividly recall one such conversation because of Michael’s comic irony. He spoke of how often he was criticized that narrative therapists were “zealots.” He said, “I think zealotry has got such a bad reputation. I am happy narrative therapists have so much zeal” and, bemused, went on to wonder how we might sponsor more zeal.

At the same time, he had an outline in mind, at least metaphorically, of another kind of training one might pursue after graduating from that which *Maps* would provide. This was apparent in his classic conversation with Salvador Minuchin at the 2005 Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in Anaheim, California. I wrote about it in my Introduction to Michael’s *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversation* (2011), edited by David Denborough, and I will include it here but append some further comments.

Improvisation. Michael, you never cared to look over your genius but I would like to consider your genius in improvisation. In your scintillating and respectful conversation with Salvador Minuchin at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in 2005, Sal kindly insisted that there was so much more to your practice than the ideas you pinned it on. You accepted this in principle by introducing the metaphor of jazz improvisation but locating that in the craft of musicianship. You insisted that that comes first. Could we take this metaphor seriously? And if so, aren’t we going to have to consider pedagogies relevant to improvisation, once a person has mastery of their craft? Why don’t we read Sudnow (2001), *Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account* together? This is an autoethnography in which Sudnow painstakingly describes how he becomes a jazz musician. And then why don’t we talk to our friends who are engaged with narrative therapy and jazz.

Maps of Narrative Practice has no reference to improvisation, but I wholeheartedly agree with what you said: everyone has to first learn how to play and only then can they improvise. (pp. xxxiii–xxxiv)

Since writing the above, I transcribed the recorded conversation between Michael and Sal. He described what I take to be a metaphorical description of what Donald Schön (1983) refers to as “the artistry of practice,” distinguishing this from “rational technology.” Michael said: “This is about skills development. I have always been in awe of jazz improvisation. When I see these musicians improvise, it looks

so spontaneous. But it is a meticulous development of certain skills. It is and it isn't spontaneity. There is no contradiction. Those musicians who seem the most spontaneous are founded on the most practice."

It is now almost seven years since Michael's untimely death. Like many, I placed in my mind a kind of moratorium on *Maps* and any projects we had considered as an homage to him. For me, it was almost as if *Maps* was now inviolate and should stand as a memorial to him. Perhaps I wasn't thinking very carefully when I, with the wisdom of hindsight, confused the last published words he wrote when he was alive as his final words. Not a word should be changed, nor should I even annotate my copy of the book. It should remain as it was without discussion, debate, or generativity. And that it should or could stand on its own, without any reference to his myriad earlier publications. I know for a fact that Michael never had any idea of the finalizing of *Narrative Therapy*. And he did not intend *Maps* as the final word but rather as a designated halfway point along the way to bring everything up to date so that he could once again set out afresh. As mentioned above, it was our avowed intention—and we both so anticipated getting to “start all over again”—and that was certainly in the cards.

My homage and moratorium were quite contrary to what I knew of Michael's intentions for this book. In fact, it finally dawned on me this was as far from what I knew of Michael's intentions as you could possibly get. Michael had had to circumscribe his thinking for some time to collate *Maps* and distill them down to manageable, teachable, and doable forms for practitioners. He was determined to write an accessible book, as his prose style had been criticized as opaque and hard going. As for me, I thought if there was any hard going, it was more than worth it. Re-reading *Maps* last week, I reached the same conclusion I had on my first reading—that *Maps* was a masterpiece of such an ambition. However, Michael knew that of necessity it left out or glosses over a great deal what narrative therapy and community work does in its various contexts and circumstances. I think there is one reference to co-research and it does not get a mention in the bibliography. He does mention that he asks families what works and what doesn't, but that is hardly an adequate description of the exquisite “thick description” and practice of elevating the knowing of another (J. Florian, personal communication, 2013) that is so characteristic of what Bruno Latour refers to as “studying up,” rather than the conventional “studying down.” He rarely mentions story, except in referencing “suspense” and “engaging the imagination,” yet again only providing references to a few proto-questions. Still, you can imply that the question, “what is a good story,” was central to him in his regard for locating what was precious or held precious as the crux of it, or in Michael's terms, a “rich description” or “rich story development.” And although there is the inference that the only means to this end is through “the absent but implicit,” I am sure there are far more ways to arrive at such a conclusion than that; otherwise, we would have very few good novels or short stories. This is by no means a criticism of Michael's maps. The text was

packed to the gunnels. The point I am trying to make here is that there was just so much more to Michael than its 304 pages allowed for.

Let me reiterate that it was his/our intention to find ways to insert innovation/creativity into the everyday practice of narrative therapy. To my way of thinking (and I never discussed this with Michael), “maps” are not by a long stretch the territory of narrative therapy practice. In fact, I would suggest quite the opposite. Pursuing Michael’s metaphor of maps, I would also like to consider mapping a practice I think Michael had been engaged in for so long he took it for granted. He had a gift for systematizing practice, which I always considered one of his greatest gifts and one of the best things I got from our collegueship over the years. As he mentioned, it requires meticulous care, and that is a virtue that does not come naturally to me. If the “maps” are not the territory, what relationship do they have to such a territory? My suggestion would be this—that the “maps” take you to unmapped territories and enable you to find your way there expeditiously. However, should you travel beyond where the “maps” go, you have some responsibility when you return to report back on where you went and what you found so others can travel in the same direction. And sooner or later (hopefully sooner), a mapper will map such a territory, allowing so many more to travel there and enlarge the *terra cognita* of narrative therapy practice. I would suspect such maps may be far more modest and travel far less distances than the maps of 2007.

Any representation of the world manifests its power through its foreclosure of worlds not represented—that is, the world is always larger than its maps. When cartographers employ the official mode of geographical representation, they reduce reader cognizance of alternative ways of “knowing” the topography. (Kincheloe, 1997, p. 67)

I might also suggest, as Kincheloe proposes above, that other modes of “geographical representation” might flourish as well, and I believe Michael would never have asserted that there need be any “official mode of geographical representation” and that his mapping in *Maps* should assume such hegemony. Why do I suggest this? Michael aspired to live by the Foucaultian notion of “movement of thought.” Rabinow and Rose (2003) described this methodology of Foucault as “an anti-methodology” or what they called a “practice of criticism”:

Thus the practice of criticism which we learn from Foucault would not be a methodology. It would be a movement of thought that invents, makes use of, and modifies conceptual tools as they are set in relation with specific practices and problems that they themselves form in new ways. When they have done this work, without regret, they can be recycled or even discarded. (p. 27)

This is in sharp contrast to other notions of methodology, for example, how to do things as primarily to be ruled and regulated by canons. By that I mean “a principle or criterion to be applied in a branch of learning or art” (*Collins Concise English Dictionary*, 1991). Why do I suggest an “anti-methodology” to those methodolo-

gies that may stem from freezing *Maps* as a memorial to Michael's memory? That would be an irony considering that narrative therapy from its outset has always had a mild disdain for the authoritative and as a consequence has been a dissentient arm of the professionalized world of healing and care.

I believe that Michael would enjoin us to "map the unmapped" and to continually extend the known territory of narrative therapy practice but to do so with the requisite meticulous diligence and rigor that informed his own practice. I think this is what he asks of us, and yes, it is a lot. Michael and I were by no means identical twins, but we were complementary, and each of us stimulated the other to think his own thoughts and develop his own practices and then bring them back to one another to merge them where and when possible and at regular intervals. Michael had a favorite saying that perhaps will remind you of a former piano teacher or athletics coach remonstrating when you turned up for a lesson or game without adequate preparation. Michael would say, "Practice, practice, practice." Also, a quotation Michael consistently referred to over the years was one he borrowed from Lionel Trilling. It had to do with his conviction that "copying originates." I have no doubt that Michael's copying was a kind of origination as that was his purpose in scrutinizing his practice. He always was looking to inaugurate the new. For that reason, I would want to add what Michael took for granted—copying originates only if that is your express intention. That is, to look for those random and chance events that are brought about by novel circumstances, to cherish them and elaborate upon them next chance you get.

But I am going to argue that he did so much more than reiteration. In fact, he was perhaps one of the most reflective practitioners I have ever known. He borrowed a phrase from Myerhoff and more recently spoke of "reflecting surfaces" and the requirement for them if you were intending to enhance your practice. Let me just replace his more erudite terminology with the mirror as a commonplace example of a reflecting surface. Time and time again, Michael subjected his practice to a ruthless "seeing again" by never shying away from recording his meetings and taking the time to review the tapes on a regular basis; he also often transcribed his tapes. And I also recall that at the end of my visits, he would devote some time to asking me: "What did you see me doing differently?" That was my clue to review not only his practice but my own. And I became just as dedicated and diligent about "re-seeing" (or researching) my practice, not by way of some sort of assessment but rather by asking myself the questions I believe Michael was asking of himself: "How did what happened here happen?" "What did I do that was implicated in what happened?" He used, as I do, his transcribed questions and their particularities as the representation in text of his practice. These were the traces his presence left behind in the interview and its transcription. Michael saw himself, as I do, embodied in the questions. He meticulously observed how one thing led to another between his questions and the respondents' replies. and then to the sequences of his questions and the sequences of their replies. With hindsight, you could say he was mapping his practice, and as far as I am concerned, he had been doing this since 1980 when

I first met him. For that reason, although I had never heard him use the term before, “maps” was very unsurprising to me as an apt analogy to describe his reflective practice. A map, in the simplest sense of the word, is the means by which one finds their way from one place to another. And over time, the elegance and economy of how such conversations went from here to there became mystifying, so much so that many watching were bewildered and, I suspect, began to wonder if they had seen magic or a trick of magic. Michael resented such imputations about his practice, knowing as I did just how much he had practiced, practiced, and practiced, but always by way of reflection on his practice. Michael was entirely unsatisfied with his practice as “tacit knowledge.” According to Donald Schön,

Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action. (1983, p. 49)

Michael’s reflective practice refused to leave his knowing in the action; he insisted upon a map to guide his future practice, no matter how hard it was, how long it took, or how many ended up trashed and replaced by more suitable revisions. But again and again, he subjected his practice to the same style of mapping as before. He never gave up doing so, as if he was “finished.” I witnessed continuous revisions as one map succeeded another, each one almost always more elegant and at the same time more economical. By economical, I mean taking less time/effort to go from one place to the other so that at times it appeared as if he and his conversational partner had leapt as if by magic. You had every right to marvel and ask yourself how did he/they get from where the conversation you were observing began to where it ended up? To answer that question, you would have needed to travel the same distance by the same series of maps that had preceded the current one. There was another advantage to his mapping that could not have happened if he had not mapped. He would be as interested in finding those junctures between where the conversation/inquiry had set out and where it went astray or got bogged down or dead-ended. Here again, he would meticulously and zealously apply himself to see if he could imagine a way to make this transition less troublesome and persevere until he had something up his sleeve. To do so, he might rehearse any number of possibilities to try out a different enquiry or sequence of enquiries the next time a conversation seemed to be following this map and heading toward this selfsame dead end. I believe that such problematic points inspired him to invent the new as a kind of bridge over the juncture where you, watching, strongly suspected you would have lost your way and been required to backtrack.

What such a reflective practice or mapping, to use Michael’s term, requires is some form of externalization of the conversation, first a recording and then its translation into a transcript—or to produce reflecting surfaces in letters or working online, on which you can instantaneously see your practice, reflect on it, and edit

yourself as well. It is through any of these means that the conversation can readily be discerned, and you can see your practice in the mirror and consider it against your intentions and hopes for the conversation.

What lies ahead for narrative therapy and community work? I anticipate many histories for the future to emerge from a contemporary and closer rereading of Michael's legacy in text and by DVD. There were periods when Michael was so creative that he could not possibly have taken up each and every invention and pursued it in his typical meticulous fashion until it had been mapped to his satisfaction. At the same time, I foresee a re-imagining of narrative therapy and community work, especially as they begin to travel far and wide. Marcela Polanco's proposal to indigenize narrative therapy in the Americas is one such initiative. I am sure other such "translations" could be fostered elsewhere. I believe Michael would expect nothing short of the jazz improvisation he so fondly referred to.

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