7

Supervision as
Re-authoring Conversation
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The power relation of supervision

Although ‘supervision’ is the title of this section, this is a term that provides an account of the relationship between the person seeking consultation about their work (here referred to as the therapist) and the person providing this consultation (here referred to as the consultant) that does not fit at all well with the practices that are described here. The term supervision is one that evokes a hierarchical relationship in which one party’s knowledges are assigned a ‘super’ vision status, and in which the other party is subject to this super-vision in matters of work and therapist identity.

The term co-vision has at times been proposed as an alternative to supervision. This term is proposed in the expectation that it will contribute to the structuring of practices that provide an antidote to the hierarchy of knowledge and the inflexible power relations that are associated with the concept of supervision. Co-vision does provide an egalitarian account of the relationship between therapists seeking consultation about their work and consultants who provide this consultation, one that challenges the hierarchy of knowledge that is associated with the notion of supervision. Nonetheless, there
are problems with the term co-vision when it is used to describe a relationship in which one person seeks consultation from another who has responsibility to provide this. This responsibility is one that is often formally sanctioned by an agency, by a professional association, or by an educational/training institution, or it is a responsibility that is observed more informally in professional networks. The status of the person who is sanctioned to provide this consultation may have been achieved by seniority, by credentials, by reputation, by organisational rank, by experience, and so on. As well, the person engaged to provide this consultation is usually financially rewarded for this. These and other factors speak to the privileged location of the person providing consultation. Thus, the term co-vision is problematic in that it obscures the power relation that is established by this privilege, a power relation that significantly influences the outcome of the consultation.

I believe the obscuring of such power relations to be perilous. Because of the fact of this power relation, the person providing the consultation has ethical responsibilities to the person seeking consultation that that person does not have to the person providing consultation - these are ethical responsibilities that are not reciprocated. If this power relation is obscured, it is less likely that the person providing the consultation will be able to observe these ethical responsibilities. It is less likely that the person providing consultation will engage in the monitoring of the real effects of the power relation on the work and the life of the person seeking consultation. If the power relation is rendered invisible, the options that are available for the person providing consultation to take responsibility to diminish the possible negative effects of this relation will be reduced. The consultant will find it more difficult to contribute to an exposé of the negative outcomes of this power relation, and to establish limits to its influence. The consultant will find it more difficult to initiate acts that are subverting of this power relation, acts that might render the context of supervision more egalitarian than it would otherwise be.

Not only does the visibility of this power relation open options for action for consultants, it also provides options for therapists. It makes it more possible for these persons to monitor their experience of the consultation, and to reference these experiences to the shared expectations and to the purposes that have been negotiated for the consultation. The visibility of this power relation also makes it possible for the persons seeking consultation to attend to, and
initiate conversations about, the real effects of this power relation in regard to matters of their work and their lives more generally. It is in this context that questions can be raised about these consultations that would not otherwise be addressed.

In discussing the options that the visibility of this power relation brings to the person seeking consultation - to monitor the real effects of this on their life and their work, and to raise questions in regard to this - I am not describing a context in which the consultant may be held directly and uniquely responsible for the outcome of the therapist’s actions in their work with the persons who consult them. As the therapist is responsible for the shaping of whatever it is that comes from the consultation, and for the unique expression of this in their life and work, the consultant’s responsibility is one that is more general and indirect.

In regard to the therapist’s responsibility for the real effects of the power relation that is structured by their therapeutic practice, there are many options available to them to build into their work processes that make this work accountable to the persons who consult them. However, these practices of accountability are not the subject of this present discussion - they have been explored in other sections of this book.

I would like to emphasise that, in talking here about the fact of these power relations, I am not celebrating the exercise of power, but emphasising the special ethical responsibilities that are implicated in the exercise of power. And I am speaking to the priority that can be given to drawing out some of the available options for the deconstruction of this power relation and the taken-for-granted privilege that is associated with it.

**A re-authoring conversation**

Therapists seek consultation on their work for many reasons. Perhaps this is a requirement of their employment, or of registration and accreditation. Perhaps this is an expression of a commitment to the ongoing development of their work. Perhaps this is to do with a general dissatisfaction with their work, or over particular difficulties experienced in their work. Or, perhaps this is provoked by new challenges that are being faced. Whatever the initial impetus for the seeking of consultation, much of what therapists bring into these contexts for discussion relates to concerns of one sort or another: things in their work not
turning out as they might have hoped, feelings of being stuck, personal doubts they are experiencing, difficult dilemmas they are facing around values and practice issues, and so on.

In relation to these and other concerns, therapists are not less vulnerable to engaging in internalising conversations than are the persons who consult them. In these internalising conversations, therapists frequently locate the source of difficulties in different sites of their own identity, and/or in sites of the identity of the persons who are consulting them. In my experience, with therapists who seek supervision from me, the first is more often the case - that is, it is more usual for the therapist to locate the difficulty in a site of their own identity, and to enter their lives into continuums of normality and abnormality - competence/incompetence, dependence/independence, and so on. Thin conclusions about personal failure or inadequacy are the outcome. This outcome is associated with an intensification of the modern practices of self-regulation, acts that lead to what I have elsewhere in this book referred to as the calculated management of the life of the therapist. All of this closes down space on options for action in the therapeutic arena, and undermines therapists’ experiences of being knowledged.

In mirroring the practices of narrative therapy, the narrative approach to consultation assists therapists to break from these internalising conversations, and from the practices of the self that are associated with these conversations. Through the introduction of externalising conversations (White 1988/89), it is the experience of the therapist seeking consultation that comes to occupy the centre of the conversation. It is in this space that therapists have the opportunity to express their experience of various events of their work, to speak of the meanings that have been attributed to these events, and to explore the real effects of these experiences and meanings in the shaping of their work and, more generally, on the shape of their lives. In the course of these conversations, the thin conclusions that therapists have about their work and their identity are deconstructed. In this way these thin conclusions become less specifying and capturing of therapists’ identities.

The deconstruction of these negative truths of identity provides possibilities for a renegotiation of meaning in regard to many of the events of therapy, a renegotiation that provides for alternative readings of these events. The deconstruction of these thin conclusions also frees therapists to engage in
the explorations of the ‘other’ events of therapy - events that have been neglected, events that contradict the thin conclusions that are the outcome of the negative truths of identity. These contradictions provide a point of entry to the alternative territories of the therapist’s work and life, and it is in these territories that traces of the therapist’s preferred knowledges and skills can be identified - traces that can be explored through lateral and longitudinal dimensions of life, knowledges and skills that can be more richly described through re-authoring conversations. This rich description presents options and proposals for therapist action in the therapeutic context and in life more generally, options that were not previously available to the them. And this can include options for the expression of these knowledges and skills in contexts that are otherwise discouraging of them.

It is not my plan to here describe the maps that guide these re-authoring conversations. I have provided details of these maps in various publications (White 1991, 1995; Epston & White 1992b), and elsewhere in this book. All of these maps, including those that relate to re-membering conversations and to definitional ceremonies, are as relevant to this context as they are to the contexts in which persons seek help from therapists. And those practices, like ‘taking it back’, that are informed by ethical considerations are also as relevant. In observing these considerations, consultants can take steps to acknowledge the two-way nature of these consultations by identifying how these conversations contribute to the shaping of their own work and life.

There are many options available to the consultant for engaging in ‘taking-it-back’ practices. For example, in joining with the therapist in the generation of rich descriptions of the knowledges and skills that they have to bring to this work, the consultant may become more aware of echoes of these knowledges and skills in their own work. These become more richly described for the consultant in the course of these consultations. Or, in joining the therapist in the explorations of the options for action that are informed by the therapist’s knowledges and skills, and in the shaping of these options into specific proposals, the consultant may become aware of options for action in his/her own work that would not otherwise have occurred to him/her. These experiences that provide opportunities for the knowledges and skills of the therapist to be more richly described, and that provide options for the consultant to think outside of what s/he might have thought, represent just a couple of the
many possible contributions that can be identified by the consultant and that might be a focus for ‘taking-it-back practices’. And these acts of taking it back further contribute to possibilities for consultants to be other than who they were at the outset of the consultation.

Supervision illustrated

Due to considerations of space, it is only possible to provide one example of narrative supervision here. In providing this example, I have decided to rely predominantly on the transcript of a conversation with Maria about some general concerns that she had about her experience of herself in her work. Another example of narrative supervision might begin with a focus on particular difficulties that a therapist is experiencing in their work with specific persons, or on explorations that have to do with specific problems that the therapist is being consulted about.

Maria

Maria is employed in a women’s health and counselling centre. Here she works with women who have been, and who are being, subject to abuse. She meets with these women in groups, and in individual counselling as well. Maria had chosen to work in this area because of her consciousness of the injustices perpetrated in the context of the power relations of gender, because of her awareness of the effects of these injustices on the lives of women and children, and because of a longstanding personal commitment to play a part in addressing these injustices. Although she has had an appreciation of the fact that it would only be reasonable for her to at times find herself quite distressed in this work with women who are subject to violence that is predominantly perpetrated by men, Maria was concerned about the fact that, of late, she seemed more vulnerable to despair, and felt that she was losing touch with something that was precious to her. That she was having this experience in an agency that was very supportive of her work, one that is well-known for its commitment to the values that Maria prioritises in her own life, was a further cause for her concern. And although there was the reality of insufficient funding of these services for women in the community, Maria believed that there was more to be understood
about her despair. It was this that she sought consultation over.

An outsider-witness group of women who work in health and counselling services for women, colleagues of Maria, were present for the duration of the conversation that the following transcript is drawn from.

Transcript

There are so many experiences that have ... touched off or evoked that sense of despair. An overwhelming sense of ‘How can I help this woman, what can I do?’ I must admit that this has been true in more recent times. I feel like I’m losing touch with something, you know ...

Losing touch with …?

Losing touch with my ability to keep believing that I am helping this woman, that it is making a difference ... to keep believing that even the smallest achievements are important. This is the sort of thing I talk to women about, and yet I am beginning to lose that myself. I feel really distressed about this. It’s not what I stand for. I don’t like it. It’s more than I don’t like it. It really distresses me. And yes, it has an effect on other areas of my life. This distress actually seeps through the other work that I do. At times when I go home I have it on my mind. You know, a sense focussing too much on negativity, on lots of stuff that I can’t do anything about. Things to do with a wider system that doesn’t seem to be supporting women who are experiencing violence. So, I have an idea of where I’d like it to be, but I feel that the gap between this and how it is is too big. And, at the same time, I know that women who come to see me do talk about how our connection has been useful when I check with them. But then there are the times when women will come to see me about situations that are so complicated, so desperate, and there is actually nothing more that I can do in a practical sense. I’ve done everything that I can do. I feel very distressed at the fact that there isn’t anything that I can do. I feel really bad, I feel like ...

But, what do you do?

What do I do?

Yes. You’re feeling like there is nothing that you can do, and at this time what are you doing?
I would spend a considerable amount of time with a woman talking about, or hearing her experience. And being very respectful about her experience, of her efforts in trying to keep her family together, or to keep things going, or in keeping her life together. I know that I focus a lot on that. I listen, and at times that’s all that I feel like I can do.

What is she experiencing from you in these conversations? What’s your guess? If I could interview one of these women that you thought you could do nothing for, what would she experience from you in the conversation itself?

My guess would be that she … or my hope would be, that she would say I was supportive of her. Listening, hearing what she was saying.

So, that you were a person who was able to listen, and a person who was able to be supportive?

And respectful.

Respectful of what? What would she say she had experienced you being respectful of?

Respectful of the fact that whatever choices she’d made … not judgemental of her as a person, as being a good or a bad person. That I’d be respectful of her efforts …

Being with her in respecting those efforts?

Yes. Not judging her for things that even she might identify as having done that were wrong. I don’t judge this, or not having done … what she believed she should have done.

If I was to ask her if that was an unusual experience for her, or a regular experience, to be with another person in another place in life and not to experience judgement, and to experience being respected in this way, what do you think she would say? That it was a usual thing, or an uncommon thing for her?

She would probably say it was uncommon. I think that this is what, in general, women would say.

Right. So …
But I don’t see that as being ... I see that only as a start, I don’t see that as being enough for a session. I...

Sure. I wasn’t hinting at that, but I was wanting to get some sense of what women experience in their conversations with you and what they would conclude about that. You were going to say something else?

I just said that I don’t see it as enough for a session, but I think that there were times when I used to see it as enough. At particular times, women would say, would identify to me, that this was what in fact what they wanted. They didn’t want to hear anything that was about suggestions, or solutions, or advice, or anything like that. Anything that would hint at giving suggestion, or even checking, ‘Have you tried such and such a thing?’ or, ‘Can I make a suggestion?’ even just checking, that for some women is not okay.

It’s a judgement for many, I guess, to hear that.

Yes. I’m just wondering that maybe that should be enough for a session. You know, that maybe that is enough ... at times. That’s part of what I’m not valuing any more, even that which I do. Just losing touch with that. Losing an appreciation of the effect that these conversations have on the women I work with.

Can I just share with you some thoughts about possible conversations? Is that okay?

Yes.

You’ve just been catching me up on where things have been going for you in the last couple of years, and some of this doesn’t really fit with where you want to be in this work. I thought about what you said at the beginning of the conversation about getting back a sense of connection, that this is what you really want in your work. I was thinking about maybe asking you some questions about connection, about what this means to you, and about how you actually go about those skills of connecting to people. I’ve also been thinking about what you said about keeping on believing that you’re helping, and about what forces are at play that actually block this appreciation of what you are doing. And then we’ve just been talking about how you are with women who consult you, about how you can be that way with these women. In ways that
don’t have you giving them advice when you know that this could be experienced as something that they could just fail, and so on. I am just wondering which of those conversations you would be most interested in us following up?

The point you made just previous to that. The one before that.

The one before that ... the second one? I mentioned a possible conversation around what it is that gets in the way of your belief that you’re helping, around what takes you away from that belief. That’s the one that you’d like to talk about most?

Yes.

So, would you like to start talking about that?

When I think about it, the first thing that comes to mind is a sense of self-monitoring that I’ve been trying to challenge for probably as long as I can remember.

Self-monitoring?

Yeah. Self-monitoring. It’s almost like a regular check as to whether what I’m doing is really worthwhile. In some ways I find with whatever is happening around me, in particular in my workplace, I tend to really focus on anything that could highlight my sense of perhaps not being quite capable enough, or not doing enough, or not doing it as efficiently as I could. Or that the term of counselling could be shortened, saving some of the workplace resources. I would really like to shut them off, but ... The whole thing about needing to be efficient - I would really like to shake that off, but ...

Is it like ... How would you describe it? Is it like a voice of efficiency, or is it ...? What would be a good name for this?

The voice of being effective?

The voice of effectiveness?

Yeah.

Okay. And this gives you a hard time?
Absolutely!

It has you monitoring yourself, checking on yourself, measuring yourself against some idea of how you should be? It has you asking questions about your capabilities and so on?

Yeah.

So, the voice of effectiveness. Is that a good name for it?

I think so. Yeah.

Okay. So, could you say more about how that voice speaks?

Well, it speaks in many different areas of my life. I was just thinking that it speaks on a personal level as well. Quite loudly actually. Yeah.

In terms of accusations or ... ?

Yeah. Even in terms of ... Actually, I have a child. He’s grown up, nearly twenty. I know that I’ve had that voice kind of run or rule my life for as long as I can remember, because even now I can reflect back on some aspects of my parenting approach. I think I always used to try and come from a position of being a really effective parent, or an efficient parent - that I could fit in lots and do it in a way that could be honoured and appreciated by other people. That I could make their connection with me worth their while, to be their friend or my child’s mother. It’s like whenever I’ve taken on a task that’s related to my work or in relation to my personal life, the voice of effectiveness speaks really loudly. It tells me that unless I’m ‘effective’, I’m not doing it right.

Not doing it right. Okay. And what else does it talk you into about yourself?

That others then can see it.

That ‘others can see through me’?

Yeah. And can see it too.

What would they see?

They would see my ineffectiveness.

‘My ineffectiveness’?
I think inadequacy comes into it as well. Like a sub-voice.

Okay. Inadequacy like a sub-voice: ‘They will see that I’m inadequate’. Is that right? So, it’s a pretty powerful voice.

It evokes a lot of fear ... fear of failing and not being good enough in what I’m doing. Sometimes there are two parts of me that fight about this. One part saying: ‘You know, you are doing a good job. You know that you are a valuable person and you’re doing really good work’. ‘And you know you’ve been a good parent’. Then there is this other part that insists on trying to come up with opposition, by saying things like: ‘But what about the times when you know you’ve failed?’ or, ‘What about the time when you didn’t do this thing according to how you’d want to do it?’ ‘What about the fact that you might not have as much skill or knowledge as someone else?’ And then the comparison comes up in a big way.

In my work situation what can precipitate these accusations are those times when I find that not only I, but other workers around me, are under other pressures. External pressures are placed upon us to go along with the restructuring of the organisation and other things. I know that I work in a really special place and I know that the other women there really care about each other and about me. And yet, at times I feel like people might be treating me slightly differently because of my ‘inadequacy’. And then I automatically identify in my own head, ‘Well, it must be because I am inadequate’ ... It’s not as though people ever come to me and say that, or even suggest that. But, it’s something that I find myself doing, and that’s the self-monitoring I was talking about. This happens particularly when it comes to doing my one-to-one work ...

My sessions tend to go longer than an hour ... Even that has for me a way of reinforcing that sense that I should be able to do it within an hour, and then I get stuck with that so that if somebody was to ask me in goodwill, ‘Oh, that was long session’ ... automatically I am thinking: ‘Oh gosh! They noticed my inadequacy. They noticed that I wasn’t able to have it ended that short’ ...

So, it can be quite a persuasive voice, and it somehow - this voice - sets itself up as an authority on your identity and in so many places in your life?

Yeah.

I have a few questions I would like to ask. But before I do that, I would like to
check with you to see how this conversation is going so far.

It’s good. I’m finding it helpful.

Why is that? What’s helpful about it?

Because I’m beginning to get clearer about just how powerful this voice is and how pervasive it is ... I am getting clearer that it is about the voice rather than the people. I’ve always known that but I felt really almost tricked by this whole thing. Although I feel like I know that, now I’m becoming clearer that it’s to do with the other voice being awakened again, or re-evoked or ...

It really does talk you into some pretty negative things about yourself generally, and has you treating yourself harshly at times. It has you treating yourself in dismissive ways? Or, what would you say? How does it have you treating yourself? I don’t want to impose a word here. Is dismissive ... ?

Yeah. Dismissively. That would fit.

This would fit? In terms of how this voice has you treating yourself?

What would be the opposite of appreciative?

Disqualifying?

Disqualifying. Yes.

It has you treating yourself in disqualifying ways?

Yeah.

Yes? Do you know what forces do stand with this voice, historically ... or when ... ?

Yes. Just as you were talking a minute ago, this particular incident kept coming to mind for me. I would have been probably not even ten years old, but I remember one particular day - this is back in Italy in the country town where I grew up - I remember that my class went on a small excursion. We were walking down the main street of the town and I remember my brother, who was then in high school ... he and a couple of other young friends of his used to just stand around in front of us, especially girls that were going past. So, they saw us just going past, and on that day - I used to have a close friend, but she was
away on that day - I was actually walking right at the end of the group and I was on my own. And I remember that it really hurt. [tearful] I remember my brother and his two friends were both just saying, ‘Oh, who would want to go with you anyway?’ I don’t even remember the exact words, all I remember is that pain. That ‘No wonder you don’t have any friends’, and they were just laughing about it. My brother was leading it and he was having the time of his life. My sense is that he didn’t really know how much it hurt me ... I know that when I feel really dismissive of myself or whatever, that has somehow come back. Not so much the picture, but that feeling that, ‘Well, there you go, you know, a group of people said that’.

So in a sense ...

It had its birth back when I was very young and people have been able to see that about me. Therefore there must be something there. I thought: ‘I am not good enough. Not worthy of having friends’. I ... it’s so powerful. I don’t even know why.

It is powerful though, isn’t it? It was probably at a time in your own life when you were quite vulnerable to ...

Yes, actually I was! I grew up just in a really small farmhouse away from town and that was actually the first year that I had gone to join the village school. I was feeling really intimidated and afraid. And I was actually feeling quite vulnerable. Yes. So ...

So, you grew up in a small farmhouse and this was the first time in the wider community for you?

For the first three years I had been going to just a local, very small school ... a home that had been turned into a small school, and it was really quite non-intimidating. I had to take the bus on my own and go to this other school and a whole new group of people to face. There was also this belief, or an attitude within that town, about country people, who were treated with lots of discrimination. It was very common for country people to be treated very differently ... with disrespect, or as a sub-human ... I certainly felt that. That there were sometimes comments that were made about country people being dumb, or being all kinds of things: uneducated, stupid, and all of that. So, yes, I
was feeling quite vulnerable at the time.

You had come from a school where you had connections with others, and they were good connections?

Yes. They were good. I had a really close friend who then didn’t come to that village school, but went to a different one, because they moved.

What was her name?

Maria (2).

Maria?

Yes. So, it was only my first year at the village school ... I had only managed to make a connection with the one girl who was away that day, and I remember feeling really alone. Very conscious of others not being interested in making friends with me. And then, of course, with my brother and his friends saying this, it had an incredibly painful impact on me ...

What would you call that? What would be a good word for what you experienced from your brother at that time when you were so vulnerable and feeling excluded and ... ?

I can’t be clear about a word, but I think it was really traumatic for me.

Really traumatic?

Yes. Really traumatic. It was an attack on me as a person, and I actually remember bringing that up when I went back home. I talked briefly to my mother about it. She is usually good at picking up things that are wrong that are happening in my life. At this particular time she did say, ‘Well, that was really wrong of them’, which was good to hear. But she also then said: ‘Well, that’s your brother, you know what he’s like. Just dismiss it’. And then of course I knew that would be the end of it. I couldn’t do anything about my brother, because he would just humiliate me even more. It was a humiliating attack.

So, that’s the word. ‘Humiliation’. What’s it like just to name that as humiliation? Is that important?
Yes. It is actually.

Why is that?

Because, it feels like it is something that he imposed on me rather than something that was really inside me that I took with me. The fact that I was feeling vulnerable, I can identify with that, and then he ... imposed this humiliating action. It’s had a really lasting effect ...

We are getting to hear a little more about the history of that voice and who was represented in that voice. And we had been talking about the voice of effectiveness that has you treating yourself in those dismissive ways.

What’s really a bit puzzling, though, at the moment, is that I am trying to think of my brother as he then developed as an adult. There have been changes ... Although we are not close, we do have a certain level of respect for each other, and we are acknowledging that we are respectful of each other.

Does that make it harder for you to speak to this in a way, because he has changed?

Yes. In a way. I guess I am also staying rather reserved about it. I am choosing not to have as much contact with him because of not wanting to be vulnerable. I am trying to avoid being in situations of feeling vulnerable again. So, I am guarding myself I think. I think that’s giving me a little bit of a sense of having got back some sense of power in his eyes, because I think he does respect who I am now. He has shown that in different ways in conversations with other people, but he’s never said it to me.

What if your friend Maria (2) told him that she had heard about this humiliation of you? What would she have said?

She would have been really shocked.

She would have been shocked and ... ?

[speaking for Maria (2)] ‘You don’t know the first thing about how she is as a friend ... Or, how ...’

‘You wouldn’t know the first thing about ... ?

Supervision as re-authoring conversation 163
'You wouldn’t know the first thing about who this girl is.'

About who this girl is? ‘I have chosen her as my friend because ... ’

‘Because she is caring and generous’. [tearful]

Chosen you as her friend because you are caring and generous and ... ?

‘Respectful.’

‘Caring, generous and respectful.’

‘Worthwhile.’ And that she was missing me.

‘I am missing her’?

Yes. She was missing me, I know. Maybe a few other things I can’t think of right now.

‘I would miss her if we couldn’t spend time together, because my life is different from having known Maria (1) in some ways.’ In what way would you say your life is a bit different for knowing Maria (2)? In what way would she say that her life was a bit different for knowing you?

I was someone she could talk to. She also had two brothers who were younger than she was, and parents who were always just not available to her. She used to be able to talk with me ...

So, ‘There are some things about myself that I can appreciate, that I wouldn’t otherwise be able to, that my connection with Maria (1) has put me in touch with’? What sort of things?

I think she felt like a valued human being, someone who had feelings. She used to say that to me. Whenever she tried to talk to her brothers, they would joke. So we shared that frustration. But also her parents were very dismissive of her needs and her requests and what have you. She didn’t have anyone to talk to. She would come and talk to me. We shared a lot of similarities. She told me once that ... she never did find another friend that she could quite talk to.

Wow! She never found another friend like you?

Yeah.
Friends like you were pretty rare?

*I guess she felt that. Yes.*

Could you speak a little to those tears that you are experiencing?

*A part of me feels like I don’t know where they are coming from, and another part feels, of course I do. I think they are about realising that I have been dismissing so many good things, you know.*

Yes. Yes.

*They are about sadness. A sadness that ... Whatever the force is of those voices that are always measuring me up against someone else, against a standard or ... I feel really cheated, you know.*

You’ve talked about a standard, the judgement, and how cheated you’ve been feeling about that?

*Yeah.*

So, Maria (2) could have set your brother straight. Even if he didn’t listen, she could have set him straight in some ways on this.

*She would have something to say all right. I haven’t caught up with her since I was twelve. She stayed in Italy when I came here. She would be a really assertive woman. She used to be really assertive. With my brothers, she used to tell them in no uncertain terms where to go. To behave themselves ...*

From the way that you are speaking it sounds to me that both you and Maria (2) had a consciousness about injustice. Would that be true? A consciousness that you both had back then?

*Yeah. I think so. We certainly were aware of the injustices perpetrated at least by our brothers.*

Even when your mother said to you, ‘You know what he’s like’, you didn’t buy that?

*No, I didn’t. I know that I wished that something else could have been done, but at the same time, I felt hopeless about that. I knew that if I told my father he may have talked to my brother, but there was already a big clash between them*
... I didn’t want to create even more problems by then him retaliating. It wasn’t so much about protecting him, but about keeping myself safe.

Keeping yourself safe?

Yeah.

And, when your mum said, ‘You know what he’s like’, that was somehow accepted by others too. But you didn’t allow that to dispossess you of this consciousness of the injustice, is that right? You kept true to that consciousness?

Yeah.

What’s happening for you right now?

I think that it’s a sense of injustice which ... Yes. I had other stuff happen as well. Just in my childhood, I know I have always tried somehow to incorporate into my life some ways in which I could address ... to try and do something about injustice when it was happening.

Is that part of the history of your involvement in the work that you’re doing?

Yeah.

So there is a long history of consciousness of injustice. I am wondering what it is that you’d actually be more free to appreciate about your work, what you bring to it, if you didn’t hear this voice that says what you’re doing doesn’t count, or it’s not enough?

‘Who would want to be involved with me anyway?’

What difference would it make to what you could appreciate about what you are doing if you didn’t hear that? What would you be more free to acknowledge?

I think I might be more focused or more aware of my efforts and the things that I do. Things like, for example in my work ... I wouldn’t be comparing.

Okay, so you would break from that.

Yeah. I would break from comparing. I would break from that self-monitoring. I would break from measuring the amount of what I do ...

So, you would break from that whole orientation of measuring by amounts.
You’d be free of that? I guess that this wasn’t the measure of your relationship with Maria (2). It was something else.

No. It never was measured in amounts. It was something else. I think that one of the other things I might break from is that automatic assumption that when someone says, ‘That was a long session’ or, ‘Is so-and-so still coming to see you?’ they are coming from a place of judgement. And perhaps I might be in another workplace, and if somebody was to say really inappropriate things to me, I can see that if that voice wasn’t affecting me I would be thinking, ‘Well nothing is bothering me’, and I would be able to be clear about people being inappropriate or being disrespectful. I wouldn’t just walk away feeling uncomfortable ... I would say, ‘Well, why do you think so?’ Whereas now things have a way of stopping me from doing this. The voice actually silences me ... I react, but I don’t make it heard.

So, you would be more likely to be saying ‘I am not sure whether you are measuring me against something, or whether your response is something else, perhaps to do with you acknowledging my skills’?

Yes. I would say something. I would ask what they actually meant by that.

How would it be to find yourself doing that?

I think that would feel ... it wouldn’t necessarily feel powerful, but somehow that word comes to mind. I feel like I would get a good balance of power back in me. Yeah.

There is so much to talk about in these conversations. I want to touch base with you about how this conversation is going for you.

It’s good. Very good.

Why do you say it’s good? Could you put me in touch with what you meant by that?

Yes, sure. When we started talking I felt like there was this incredible confusion. As I mentioned at the beginning of our session, I tried to prepare, I tried to think about it, but the more I thought about it, the more confused I was getting. But ... I now feel a lot clearer. I feel a lot clearer and I feel it’s a relief. I’m talking about an influence from a belief, rather than it’s something in me that ...
I’ve read about it before, but this is different because I’ve actually experienced it. Yeah.

It’s a good experience?

Absolutely. Yes. It is a very strong feeling of relief and a release as well. There is a totally different sort of feeling in here. I can breathe differently now. I have got a different perspective on how I could be doing things quite differently and challenging that voice, challenging those voices. And I might even, next time I see my brother, I’ll think about how I might prepare to talk to him ... I want the next time I meet with him to be different, to reflect some of this process ...

I have some idea of what it would be like to have Maria’s voice in your life more in this matter. Even to write a letter to your brother, a letter from Maria that you write. Perhaps: ‘It has come to my attention that you’ve really humiliated my best friend who’s really very important to me and this is really unacceptable. It is one of those injustices of the world that Maria and I stand against’, and ‘I want to put you straight on Maria and the things that you need to understand about her’. Not necessarily to send this to your brother, but to ...

I was just going to ask you about that ...

But maybe to keep it in your shirt-pocket over your heart. What would it be like to consult this on those occasions when this voice of effectiveness is starting to give you a hard time? What effect do you think it would have to privilege Maria’s voice more, to elevate her voice in that way?

I think it would have a strong effect. It would be a reminder of this very special process of today. It would be a reminder of who I want to stand for, of who I believe I do stand for. And, the fact that I am someone who is valuable to be with and who has contributed and is worthwhile. I could keep that with me.

I was just thinking about somebody asking you about having such a long session and you saying, ‘I’ve got some things to say to you, but I’ve got to read a letter first’.

[Laughter] Absolutely!

When I asked you what things would be like if the voice of judgement or the
voice of effectiveness wasn’t there, if you were free of that, what you would then be free to do, you seemed to know instantaneously. You didn’t say, ‘Well, I don’t know’. You knew exactly what you would say. You were very clear about those sorts of skills. How would you name those skills that had to do with addressing difficult things? What’s a good name for those sorts of skills?

What would I choose to call that? Umm ...

Like if you were free just to act in a way that fits with everything that Maria (2) knew about you.

Well ... it would be for me the ability to be able to be genuine about who and what I stand for ... true to what I stand for, but true isn’t necessarily ... about skills.

There is a know-how attached to that ... so, I would like to ask you more about this. But not now. Right now I want to know whether or not these are the sorts of things people go away from you experiencing. Like a stronger sense of what they stand for, or some options for taking action in their life that have to do with what they see as really genuine to them. And, not so much dictated to by other people’s expectations. Is that what people would go away, from their consultations with you, taking with them?

Yes. The interesting thing is that I never had any doubt about that. I’ve always known that people do go away with that, and yet that voice has always been so powerful, has always tried to convince me that ... But, no. That’s a lot clearer now. It means that what works for me also works for ... I can’t be another way. My belief is in justice and in treating people with respect, and that’s what I do. And I do that in all areas of my life and my work.

So, what we are talking about has to do with you including yourself, your own life, in expressions of those knowledges and skills? Of being free to do that?

Yes. And I can see myself liberating more of my creative ability or my artistic ability which I think has been dormant for a while. I think I can reawaken this. This conversation might open up more space for this as well. It’s just come to mind.

How did that come to mind?
Just looking at the colours. [pointing to a Mexican papier-mâché tray] Just thinking about how much I enjoy art-forms. I used to do some of that as a child. I used to paint. I’ve gone away from that over time. I feel that by becoming more free of that voice, and recognising it as something that is coming externally, I can have more space to bring that ability back into my life.

That’s great!

I used to draw fruit quite a lot. We never had much fruit, but I used to draw it a lot. [laughter] I hadn’t really thought of that for a long time. I can include some of that creativity in my work. Not necessarily painting, but being creative.

Postscript (authored by Maria Fiorito)

I remember that initially I felt somewhat apprehensive about being interviewed in the presence of my work colleagues. However, I soon became aware of shifting into another space, where it felt safe to journey back through my life, sharing self-doubts, self-criticisms and exposing ‘vulnerabilities’. This decision to share my life with others in this way was quickly reinforced. One of the first things that I became aware of in hearing my colleagues’ re-tellings was the ripple effects of this sharing - my colleagues had experienced aspects of themselves and their own work being affirmed.

I was also personally touched by my colleagues’ re-tellings. One of these colleagues, Monica, spoke of her deceased grandmother - about how important this grandmother’s voice was for Monica, about how in times of special need, this grandmother’s presence gave her strength and a sense of renewed commitment. Monica said that she thought her grandmother would think highly of me, and would be supportive of who I am and of my work. I felt extremely privileged to not only have received a special gift, but to have also fulfilled a wish. Because some time ago, when Monica first spoke to me about her beloved grandmother, I recall thinking how special she was and how I wished I could have known her. Through Monica’s re-telling, I’ve been given the opportunity to get to know her and experience her wisdom and love.

Lately I’ve been thinking about other ‘Marias’ (including those who are no longer alive) who play an important role in my life in valuing and affirming who I am, as well as bringing life-enriching qualities to my life. I’ve been
taking their presence with me into my work as well as into my personal life. I’ve become aware of a chain of acts of resistance in my life that have been present from a young age. The links in this chain have been kept strong by these people’s influence. In order to privilege their voices in my life I have recently designed, on their behalf, a statement of values, skills, and qualities. In my work, I’ve been bringing to women opportunities for them to re-member people in their past who either directly or indirectly influenced their lives in favourable ways, and to find ways in which they might privilege these people’s voices over the voices of people who devalued and dismissed them.

I’ve been reflecting on one of the possibilities that Michael suggested for a conversation, one that could have been shaped by the question about what connecting to people means to me, and about the skills involved in doing this. In the course of this reflection, it’s become clearer to me that what’s important about connecting to the women who consult me is that it renders my values and intentions visible. It is then possible for me to join with them, not only in affirming their experiences of struggle and resistance, but also in supporting them to achieve preferred changes in their lives. I believe that my experiences of discrimination and isolation have provided me with the ability to understand and empathise with others who are experiencing hardships in their lives.

I’ve been more appreciative of my ‘country values’ and of my ethnic and cultural background - realising that this is not only shaping but also enriching of my life. I am more likely to share this with others, including, when appropriate, the women who consult me. I’ve found that this often assists women to re-discover important values they had lost connection with, and to take these back into their lives. I’m more able to value the contribution I make to women who consult me, and I’ve been incorporating more creative tools in my work, which is an outcome of feeling re-connected with my childhood love of story-telling, drawing, painting, and being surrounded by colourful things.

Note

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