

PUBLIC PRACTICES

Posting by Emma

I am really interested in the idea of linking experience with people I do not necessarily know. Meaning is relational and gets renegotiated with all of our interactions...I believe it is important to break through isolated borders of individual experience to feel connected and supported – to realize it is not taboo to be heard through our struggles, and to recognize that the struggles are just one part of the rich stories of our lives. Connecting to Nicole’s story is something that seems, given my prior understanding of therapy, a new and uncharted feeling of freedom in the domain of helping professions.

Teaching narrative therapy offers opportunities to build on the ethic of circulation and innovative public practices that narrative therapists use to incorporate audiences into the therapy process (Lobovitz, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995). In this chapter, I offer stories to illustrate how I design teaching contexts to circulate insider knowledge in which unexpected opportunities, potential solutions, and creative ideas unfold. Archiving online reflections is a highly effective approach to capture what students learn directly from guest speakers, recorded interviews, and story-telling. I provide classroom and online examples of how letters, reflecting teams, and archived websites provide public contexts for people to speak with knowledgeable voices about life-shaping experiences in ways that significantly inform the lives of everyone involved.

Students glean a great deal from hearing service seekers speak with conviction about their relationships with professional helpers. After learning “at the feet of parents” about their experiences of parenting a child who is different, students interact online about their most memorable impressions. I also share students’ reflections of their in-class opportunities to witness such insider accounts as living through and “unsuffering²⁹” themselves from psychiatric crisis, severe depression, and sexual abuse.

By augmenting classroom teaching with an interactive course website, I structure numerous contexts to give students access to a wide range of input and social support. A course website offers particular possibilities for circulation practices based on social interdependency and a diminished hierarchy. Students gain immeasurably from the experience of expressing, sharing and witnessing - rather than evaluating - each others’ work. They also gain a great deal from being able to link and consult with each other and with outside consultants around shared themes. We become partners in learning, as students intently listen to insider accounts of journeys of self-discovery in overcoming complex problems, aided and abetted by communities of support that include human service practitioners.

Safeguarding Confidences

Just as narrative therapy challenges assumptions about the absolute privacy of the client-therapist relationship, teaching with technology poses challenges to the academic tradition of prioritizing individual learning experience over community sharing. Access to a course website is password protected, restricted to either registered users or people to whom I give a “guest pass” – only after the students’ clearance for the request. In designing the course site, the privacy of the students’ postings is still operative unless the students decide otherwise; any forum can readily be set up to be either public or private. However, there is a key difference here from live discussion: all participants must understand that there is no real guarantee that online conversations will remain private, since any electronic posting or private email can of course be copied and sent to others. In my opinion, the benefits of the online medium far outweigh the risk of one’s online communications becoming public. I seek to build a culture of trust and confidentiality to limit the likelihood that online communications will be disclosed to others than those granted permission to participate in them.

I create several online contexts in which to ask students what is acceptable to them. I ask them a number of related questions: “Is it okay for me to give out the guest pass to other teachers of narrative therapy?” “Is it okay if I include your assignments and/or posts in this article?” “Would you prefer to be anonymous?” “Have I given you enough freedom to say no for whatever the reason?”

It is important not to presume or to take liberties based on earlier requests when no objections were given. Students rarely object, but regardless, I think they want to be included in these decisions.

I also guarantee that I will share with them any reflections I hear back relevant to their work. It is important that I follow through on this promise.

AN ETHIC OF CIRCULATION

Upon reflection, we find that the use of audiences has sharpened our focus on social interdependency. Unexpected solutions to problems may be found as we access a wider range of input and social support for change. We are no longer burdened by feeling as if we are the sole source of support and knowledge for clients. We have become more conscious of how privileged we are to interact with clients and witness their journeys of change. We gain from a greatly enriched fund of creative ideas as well as stories of pain and hope, to inform us and to share with other clients (Lobovits et al., 1995), (pp. 254-255).

More than ten years ago, Dean Lobovits and his colleagues introduced the term “an ethic of circulation” to describe practices that provide audiences for preferred accounts of self and identity. Storytelling involves both a storyteller and an audience, with everyone engaged as an active collaborator in a personal process of

meaning-making (Bruner, 1990). Rather than instruct or provide expert knowledge for clients, the therapist's role is "to enter the social space where meaning is shaped and support the development of alternative meanings to oppressive stories" (Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995, p. 224).

Lobovitz, Maisel and Freeman (1995) discern two kinds of audiences, both with relevance to teaching narrative therapy. "Known audiences" include family, friends, teachers, human service providers, and/or significant persons living or dead, who interact with and influence a person's unfolding story. An "introduced audience" is drawn from the community of people who have insider knowledge about a particular problem and its social context, yet who are not necessarily personally acquainted with the person. A good example is the anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia "Archive of Resistance," an online forum that "introduces the reader to a wider community of those who have struggled to resist anorexia and bulimia, who understand its social context and who are dealing with the problem successfully" (Lobovits & Epston, 2007) (p. 225).

I share the delight expressed by Lobovits and his colleagues of no longer considering myself to be the sole source of support and knowledge, but rather reveling in the privilege to witness, interact with, and learn from students' journeys as adult learners. "According to an African proverb, it takes a village to raise a child. Similarly, it may take an audience to solve a problem. A community of those who have experience with a problem will contain just what is needed. So let us sow the seeds of belonging with stories of pain and hope and harvest liberation" (p. 255).

Protecting Confidentiality

The "ethic of circulation" that characterizes narrative practice challenges our traditional assumptions about the need for absolute privacy in psychotherapy. In the words of Lobovits, Maisel, and Freeman (1995), "Ethical and effective psychotherapy is commonly thought to depend on a unique relationship that unfolds in a private and protected sphere." They propose an interesting thesis: "the need for privacy increases when people's experience of problems is viewed in terms of illness/pathology or other problem-saturated descriptions" (p. 224).

The ethic of circulation does not in any way exclude an ethic of confidentiality.³⁰ When working this way with families, the service provider thinks carefully about ways to link lives while protecting privacy. Circulation practices are always offered with the option to say no.

I feel deeply grateful to the people who give me permission to share their stories with students. Their generosity conveys a trust in me and my ethical stance. My code of ethics as a psychologist keeps me very sensitive to not being exploitative in any way. In addition, I carry a strong sense of responsibility to safeguard confidences and protect privacy. I continuously check in to align with what works best for the person with insider knowledge.

NICOLE

I chose a story about “Nicole” to illustrate the potency of public practices in teaching. Nicole is a young woman who in the course of our work together experienced six hospitalizations in her struggle to overcome anorexia, self-harm, and depression. Nicole has generously allowed me to share aspects of her story in my teaching, including journal entries, poems and letters. Throughout this chapter, I illustrate public practices in teaching with accounts of tellings and retellings of Nicole’s story that rippled into students’ lives, connecting their own stories with hers.

Each time I present aspects of Nicole’s story, supplemented by her writing, I ask her for permission. In preparation for a workshop in New Zealand, Nicole responded, “I am absolutely fine with you sharing my story. There isn’t anything in particular I would, or wouldn’t, want you to share...just the truth as you see it, I suppose.” A few months later, when I asked again for permission to share, Nicole had begun speaking publicly about her story to help others understand some of the challenges she has encountered. She volunteered to come into my class as a guest visitor, presenting her writing – an unforgettable experience for us all, which I further describe in Chapter Ten. I subsequently asked Nicole, who is a talented writer, if she would like to work with me to include some of her story in this book. She responded, “I would be honored to work on the writing with you. Continuing to write will give me something to hold on to.”³¹

This retelling relies on her generosity in giving permission to intimately share her story with others. I include here several transcribed excerpts from the in-class interview as well as pieces I have read aloud in class. Here is how Nicole introduced herself to students:

In the spring of my senior year of college, I started to feel bad. It wasn’t really the first time; it was always kind of there. I just pushed it away with academics and that kind of thing. But it started to get to the point where it was affecting my work. I was having a lot of eating issues – restricting...also a sort of bingeing and purging. Right after I graduated I went to Romania to volunteer for the summer. I was okay at first, and then...I don’t know how to describe it. I felt a sense of futility. I was working with children, orphans with AIDS who had nothing to eat and were cold. It was so incredibly overwhelming. I remember one night when I really thought that I would just kill myself and it would all be over. From then on, things just seemed to get worse. I started cutting that year...it wasn’t really too bad, it was no big deal and it was actually a great sense of release. Then I started...it became this thing that grew on its own sort of inertia. It got to the point where I needed stitches.

By the following summer, self-harm had begun to threaten Nicole’s life. Over the next year, she had several in-patient hospital experiences for bodily harm, anorexia, and depression. In this journal entry, she looks back on the history of her struggle with self-harm:

It’s raining. I’ve turned the music off so I can listen to the thunder. Looking down at the scars on my arm as I type, I wonder whether or not I should

cover them with long sleeves. How does the shame of hiding compare to the shame of exposure? Why, not at all. If you could have seen the look on the check-out woman's face today as she handed me my change, not really sure if she was seeing what she thought she was seeing, you would know what I mean. Perhaps one of her friends has done it, perhaps she has toyed with the idea a time or two, or maybe she's just wondering how to make it home without stopping at the liquor store. Maybe she's just repulsed. Regardless, my cheeks redden from a smoldering voice telling me I should have known better than to wear short sleeves in public. I should have used the other hand to accept my change. You piece of shit, begging for attention again; my own voice betrays me.

If I hide, I have the shame of a secret. This shame occasionally pokes me in the side if I turn the wrong way; a dull ache I can soothe with my own reassurances. So why suffer? The answer is, I don't know. I only know that I'll die a little today if I pull a shade over my pain. Without air it will feed on itself and grow into something uglier, something devastating. Bringing pain visibly out into the world diminishes its power over us because it's suddenly in a context; it is no longer its only reality. I don't think anything will ever take the shame away. If I must feel this shame, I want it to be a testimony to my story; the story of how I cut to save my life for a day, how I starved to save my life for a little longer, and how I realized I must stop cutting and starving in order to save my life forever.

It's difficult to say where I am now. Three months ago I lay in a hospital bed wishing I were dead, furious at those around me who insisted on keeping me alive. I cursed myself for not taking enough of the meds I had taken a few days before to actually kill me. I went to bed at night praying to God, the Goddess, the Higher Power, whatever, that I would die in my sleep. Two months before that, I stood naked and freezing in a paper gown at five a.m. every morning for five weeks while a nurse weighed me and watched me pee. There were two times before that in Vermont hospitals and before that, a hospital in Chicago. And now, I'm in my apartment, sitting in front of the window watching the lightning, willing myself to live. Willing myself to live a little longer, just to see. Just to see if there's something else that makes my coexistence with depression worth enduring.

So many stand on the opposite shore beckoning, each battered by his own struggle. I have to believe they see a horizon that I cannot, and perhaps by reaching the shore I can offer my hands to those still in the water.

A few months prior, Nicole wrote the following after hearing that a dear friend had overdosed:

Something has shifted inside me, and more than ever, I feel the sensation of "no going back." I do not feel a forward impulse, however. I just know there's no going back to where I came from.

Shelly overdosed. She got too tired. Abandoned AGAIN. I pray to all the spirits of this world that this will be the last time for her. She won't survive it again. And I won't blame her when she decides it's time to rest. There is a certain kind of fury I feel now toward those who have persecuted her... My dearest friend in the hospital because of someone's horrible manipulation of her, and the story of that manipulation seems too unbelievable. That just couldn't have happened. But it DID happen. This world is capable of making it happen; so why shouldn't I believe my stories? Even if there is a component of these stories that is constructed, that's my experience. Peggy asked me what it would be like to forgive myself for being human. What would it be like to be allowed to have my experience, my terror, my stories? Can I have my stories and all the ones I can't remember?

It did happen, and Shelly almost died. Just as much as I believe people are capable of good, I believe them equally capable of evil, so why shouldn't I believe my stories?

I even feel guilty just for writing these words, but I'm trying to secure whatever has shifted inside me so I can live in peace and the embrace of my chosen family. I have to believe something, or I'm going to die; and death is an indulgence I believe myself capable of falling for. And even the curiosity of whether or not I'm capable of such a thing pushes me toward exploring it.

To live in postured confidence, within a whole, peaceful when I shut my eyes, bedded down in the security of my chosen family, LIVING MINDFULLY AND GENTLY; that's what I wish for. I wish to live mindfully and gently, please don't forget, mindfully and gently, mindfully and gently, mindfully and gently, mindfully and gently.

To Be of Service

Throughout her young adult life, Nicole has aspired to be of service to others through her work and friendships³². Witnessing children's desperation in Romania re-stimulated her own childhood experiences of trauma. I share with students the following journal entry that Nicole wrote in response to my question, "What are you learning about how to balance this desire to be there for others with taking-care-of-yourself skills? I think what you have to say here could really be of value, not only to yourself, but to others." Here, Nicole shares what feels good to her about using her experience to help others.

Nicole responded:

My desire to care for others came partly from a deep self-hatred. Though lacking any sense of self-preservation, I still retained the desire to love and be loved. Since it was, and often still is, my perception that I could never be lovable, what I had left was the option to give love. And no one could deprive me of that; except depression, and those were some of my darkest moments.

*Living as the “hated” within my own body, betraying my own self as vile and revolting, the only way I could survive was to honor the humanity in others. It was a way of giving thanks for what I knew must be extraordinary and beautiful about creation, about nature, about the capacity for life; life with a big “L.” Not just eating, breathing, and sleeping, but the potential for **experience**.*

Selfish? Yes, though I doubt anyone can truly say that he does not thrive a little on the intrinsic satisfaction of sustaining his brother or sister. And why shouldn't he? Why shouldn't he be allowed to love himself? Won't his connection with others be richer, more meaningful if he understands the value of the self?

And I love people. With that comes the desire to alleviate their suffering, but more importantly to bear witness to their experiences. For now, I keep myself alive because to think of leaving people who I've met and have yet to meet alone in their suffering is almost too painful. At the very least I can say, “I see you, I honor your struggle, and in recognizing and loving your humanity, I honor myself; as part of you, as part of the greater community, as worthy.”

I asked Nicole for any suggestions for practitioners working in different settings with people who are suicidal and dealing with life-threatening situations, such as self-harm and anorexia. She responded:

What's helpful for me is when I have a doctor or counselor who...doesn't immediately jump to ask, “Where are the razors? We have to get rid of them right now;” or “You have to eat right now.” Or “We have to get you somewhere before you hurt yourself or kill yourself.” I want to work with people who don't try to remedy the situation immediately with whatever they think will work. I always appreciate someone who sits with me and recognizes my pain and my experience in that moment and who acknowledges that it's my experience. I always am frustrated when someone I'm around starts pathologizing everything that comes out of my mouth. So if I say something that has a lot of meaning for me and someone says, “Oh that's just because you're depressed right now; you won't feel this later,” I can't stand that because this is me – my experience – and this is how I feel. When someone says something like that, it devalues what you're going through at the moment. It just makes me more frustrated. My friends sort of still see me in my sick place. I have told them, if I say I don't want to do something, I really appreciate being recognized for my preferences rather than as acting through depression.

Circulating Nicole's Story

With Nicole's permission, I have shared a shortened version of some of what I have learned in our work together in classrooms and workshops in places as varied as Vermont, New Zealand³³, Cuba³⁴, and Boston³⁵. I tell students and workshop participants stories of Nicole's struggles to overcome urges to anorexia/bulimia,

self-harm and suicide, how she has responded to her challenges, what is working for her now, and what continues to trouble her. I read aloud some of her compelling journal entries and poems. Becoming witnesses to Nicole's life deeply moves people to link their lives to hers across wide distances of geography, language, work, and life experiences. People have written letters and posted online reflections in response to listening intently to these accounts. Each time, I bring back to Nicole evidence of a growing community of support. One participant sang her a song that I recorded on my digital camera. Hearing letters, online postings and video recordings, Nicole cannot deny the impact of her story on others.

Letters to Nicole

After telling the class this account of the current challenges that Nicole faces, I invited the students to write her letters. With only about 20 minutes of writing time, students wrote articulate and well-crafted letters, responsive to Nicole, sharing their own resonance with her story. I only wish I could include all eighteen of the original letters here.

I sealed each letter in its own envelope and wrote Nicole's name on the front. I showed her a class photo and gave her the stack of letters in the hope that she could add these letters to her growing stash of things to draw from when she finds herself alone fighting self-hating urges.

Sandra's Letter

Dear Nicole,

First, I want to say thank you for allowing Peggy to share a bit of your story with our class. I felt I could relate to many of the beliefs Peggy told us you hold. For example:

- knowing what you're talking about is real
- it is okay to feel bad (especially in relation to your parents)
- you have decided on "no more secrets"
- you have a right to your own experience and healing
- things can be different for you in your home despite the memories contained there
- you want to bring people into your life
- you love your job
- you want to instill a sense of self-worth that will be long-lasting
- you want to not hate your body so much
- you recognize the value of one more day, one more hour
- your life and your healing stem from your choice to hold out continued hope for improvement/contentment.

Had I more time, I would try to help you understand how powerful your story was for me. As it is, I want you to at least know these things.

I found comfort in hearing that you have questioned reality as I, too, have often felt unclear about my memories of past abuse. Your story reminded me to honor the truth I know in my soul.

I have, and continue to, struggle with wanting something different, more affirming, in my relationships with my parents. Despite the pain and anxiety I felt in unlocking family secrets, and despite the guilt my family has attempted to instill in me for breaking the silence, I have now come out the other side and feel so much better about myself because I'm honoring my truth.

I feel/felt I have spent far too much of my life passively living for others. My decision to come to graduate school was my first major departure from that pattern. This was my choice, and as difficult as the journey has been at times, I feel that following my own path was the scariest, but best, gift I could offer myself. You are now part of that gift!

So, thank you, thank you, thank you. Keep striving to move through the next day and the next hour. I will be thinking of you as my journey also continues. Cheers, Sandra

Katy's Letter

Dear Nicole,

Thank you for allowing Peggy to share some of your story with us. Although we have never met, I feel as though I can sense who you are based on Peggy's words: a strong, brave, quiet presence. One image that resonated with me was the idea of you returning to a home that held some hard memories for you, but knowing you could transform it into a room of your own. I too had that feeling when I returned to live in a city that was filled with painful memories for me. I felt scared and worried I would not be able to find joy and create a life that I desired. Nicole, I was able to find happiness there. It took some time, and there were days I cried and thought to leave but I stayed on, creating a new, different experience for myself. I imagine you too can do this.

Soon I will graduate from this program at Smith and again decide on a new place to be. I will be asked again to create a room of my own, and like you, I will. Together we can each fill our space with community, friends, plants, books, walks, laughter, love. Perhaps we can think of one another on our journeys and help each other transform the scary unknown into a welcoming home. I will think of your brave spirit, learning to feel feelings good and bad and share them in your group and with your family. I will draw on your strengths, an inspiration to help me venture out again and create a new home. Thank you. Warmly, Katy

I asked Nicole to share with me what these letters meant to her and requested her permission to share her reply in subsequent classes and workshops. Nicole's response was a powerful testament to the impact of letter-writing on the recipient.

Eighteen letters, soft with wear. Eighteen letters, always in my pocketbook. Eighteen letters, from people validating an experience they have only heard about through storytelling. My eighteen letters, my eighteen flickers of hope.

I have eighteen letters I keep by my side at all times from people who don't know me. Wrapped tightly in a rubber band, they are tucked into my bag, my jacket, and their rectangular pressure against my side helps me take one more step forward, even if that literally means putting one foot in front of the other. I've even slept with them under my pillow. At times, it's the only way to fall asleep; by holding onto something of this world, something real, something of kindness and love. They create my silk thread that leads me back time and again to my chosen family, to a life that must be lived because there are others; others who have broken off small pieces of themselves and with those pieces, fortified a small glimmer of hope inside me.

Eighteen people wrote to me, some sharing their pain, some reflecting on the human condition, some offering their light, all of them giving me something so genuine I protect them as one would a velvet bag of diamonds. Rare, but there, and a great privilege to hold in my hands, they gently push me in the direction of life or at the very least, they whisper they'll go with me no matter the direction I choose. They are too genuine to destroy, and so they will follow me, always at my side.

I have eighteen letters that help keep me alive.

While Nicole thanked me for sharing her story, she could not see the power of her personal contribution to students.

I don't know if this is helpful...I couldn't quite remember what you needed, so I just wrote the first few paragraphs that came to me. Let me know if there is something else I can do to help, or if you need me to write something different.

I have shared Nicole's "18 Letters" reflection at subsequent teaching commitments. A New Zealand workshop participant wrote:

Tess's Letter

Dear Nicole,

Thank you for allowing Peggy to tell some of your story. It has touched my heart immensely. I hear your struggle loud and clear. I also hear your determination and will to live. I am in awe of your strength in remaining alive as I have struggled with depression and other demons in the past. I know that people can live in very dark places in this world sometimes.

I was touched hearing about the eighteen letters that are precious to you, and I noticed many people in the room were too...I wanted to connect with you in this special way too; it felt so therapeutic for me to hear about this sharing of hope and compassion amongst strangers.

When I think about it this way, “strangers” seems the wrong word. Perhaps when people link like this, they become allies and unknown friends instead? It gives room for thought.

That you have generously given me the experience of having heard your story means a lot to me. It speaks of your compassionate nature in caring for others, and it will influence the way I experience people in the work I do. I feel grateful that you care enough about people to extend this to me. And all the way over in New Zealand!!! Such a random connection, but so meaningful.

I am happy you have dreams of being a therapist. I had dreams of being a therapist too, even in my darkest depths of despair and sadness. I thought that if I could make a difference for one person the way my counsellor had done for me it would all be worth it. I now think, “Why stop at one!”

Nicole, I think as a therapist you would have a unique understanding of other women who might be facing the struggles you have faced, and are facing. And the reason I believe it is because I know I have things to offer those who have faced struggles similar to my own. There is nothing like being properly, really understood; people like you and me... have that gift to offer.

In the dark times, I used to tell myself that when it rained, no matter how hard, eventually the sun would come out again...I hope that the glimmer of hope you have from your eighteen letters, eighteen reasons to live, brightens into warm rays of sunshine that nourish your soul. I hope that today you will have nineteen reasons to live. I hope that others will get to benefit from your struggle and your wisdom and that it makes the world a lighter place for them. We really need people like you in this world.

I dearly wish this for you and send you lots of appreciation, hope, and sunshine today, and every day. Best wishes, Tess

Online Reflections

The course website provides space for students to reflect on the experience and the ripple effects in their own lives. I am often awed by how students use what might seem a very impersonal medium-electronic text-in such deeply personal and open expressions of their thoughts and lives.

Posting by Heidi

Oftentimes I go about my daily life suppressing my emotions just so that I can get through the day and then move on to the next. I was really inspired by Nicole’s honesty. I felt as though she was speaking to my soul, just like when I have these dreams about my dad, who is now deceased, and he is reminding me to live every moment like it’s my last. This interaction stirs up all my emotions to the point where my entire body aches with pain and I awaken with tears in my eyes. The pain is good to feel on occasion, as it reminds me that I’m real, and that this life is real. Yet, I still go back to a

place of numbness, as the pain is simply too much for me to bear on a regular basis. Nicole's honesty about her experience gives me hope that I too can be honest with others about my experiences, that it is okay for others to witness my pain. Thanks to Nicole's sharing, I have realized that the more I conceal my thoughts and feelings the more harm I may be doing to others by perhaps suggesting that my life experiences have been easy to deal with. I do not want others to feel shameful of the thoughts and emotions that their experiences evoke, so I will challenge myself to be more open with others. Thank you Nicole.

Posting by Laura

I used to write a lot; that was my way of dealing with things. But at some point I started writing less and less and I started denying certain feelings even to myself. Recently I started writing again. Hearing Nicole's writings was particularly helpful to me because she showed me that it is okay to "be real" and that there is no reason to deny myself or call into question the legitimacy of what I am feeling. Even if no one else believes it, it is real for me.

Many students start their postings by expressing appreciation for their classmates, "to everyone so far who has shared so honestly and personally about how the experience of hearing Nicole's and Peggy's interview and the process of witnessing and reflecting this experience have effected them and transformed them." Over and over again, they share how moved they are, feeling challenged to put words to their experience. Laura expressed appreciation for being part of the live interview with Nicole and being part of the reflecting team. "While I was very nervous about participating, I am really glad that I had the opportunity to have this connection with Nicole and witness her story, which is helping me to come to terms with my own. I would like to thank everyone for being open and receptive in creating spaces like this, where I feel comfortable being open with all of you."

Finally, Kerry2 wondered if Nicole recognizes her own courage, stamina, and the impact she is having on the world. "I know she mentioned a few times that she feels she 'tricks' people, including a 'room full of students.' If I've been tricked, then I'm all the better for it. And I'll bet the people in her life, specifically her chosen family, feel the same way."

REFLECTIONS

These public teaching practices – interviewing someone in front of the class or sharing a video of a session and then writing letters and sharing reflections – go beyond an artificially constructed demonstration of narrative skills. In my view, genuine participation in an ethic of circulation provides a lived experience that extends much further than one-way accounts of therapy and in teaching. When I share students' letters with people who have shared their stories with them and students share their writing online with each other, the walls of isolation and privacy break down. This clears the way for lives to connect and influence each

other, often well beyond the classroom. Furthermore, participating in the four-part narrative interview with Nicole gave us all a unique and powerful learning opportunity – as I further illustrate in the next chapter.

Postscript

Nicole has taken significant steps in taking her life back from depression, self-harm, and anorexia. Every step along the way has taken steadfast effort and leaps of faith. Sometimes it feels like two steps forward and then one step back. We take nothing for granted. For Nicole, the definition of family is ambiguous. Her therapeutic support team – that includes me as her primary therapist- is part of her “chosen family,” which she defined here:

My family carefully watches me consider two fruits, one healthy and one poisonous, though I know not which is the better fruit. They teach me what they know about these choices and reassure me that my own thoughts on the matter are valuable. I grow frustrated with indecision. They say they cannot choose for me. They urge me forward, “go on” they say, “we’re here.”

My family doesn’t know how to speak the word ‘failure’ because such a thing doesn’t exist; should I choose the poisonous fruit, I will each time thereafter know how to distinguish the benevolent juices from the belly ache of their brother’s, and that, in and of itself, is a success.

My family doesn’t make me pay for my choice, but celebrates the right by giving it to me, almost as a gift, and finding beauty in the furrow of my brow as I decide what to do with it. My family doesn’t punish my choice and promises only to use their fists to pick me up off the ground should I fall ill from the bad fruit. My family doesn’t judge my choice, doesn’t kick dirt in my eyes to shame their mistake. Rather, they praise the discretion of my heart for having instincts, for its lack of indifference, for doing the best it could with what it had.

My family says, “let’s drink to the beauty in all of us, give what there is to give, work for the rest, love recklessly, bless the body, and praise the gift of choice and all the diverse and wonderful manifestations of greatness it provides.” This is my definition of family.

Recently, Nicole reminded me of a question I asked her about the effects of depression’s loosening its grip on her connections with the cherished people in her life. “What’s it like for you now to give and receive love?” In the following excerpt, she responds to that question, having come to the conclusion that love is really what compelled her to put her trust in her recovery, chosen family, and therapeutic support team.

Giving and receiving love; I can hardly believe how much the acid of depression can dissolve one’s ability to volley emotions. Now that I, with much help, have pried the fingers of depression from around my throat, I can

allow the freshness of the air to revitalize me, to remind me what it is to feel, what it is to be alive in a world full of “alive” things. It’s almost disorienting to be suddenly bombarded by the emotional inflections of the world.

Imagine the absence of feeling one must experience in order for her to drag a razorblade across her skin; she feels nothing, and because she feels nothing, she pushes harder and depression helps itself to her life force as it runs from her body, licking her wounds, demanding just a little more. And she gives it. She gives it because she feels nothing and can’t remember what it’s like to receive a kiss upon her cheek from warm lips, can’t remember what it’s like to have a friend caress the trouble from her brow, can’t remember why it’s worth it to fight for her own life. She feels nothing and therefore, believes there’s no incentive for her to stay. There’s no emotional currency bargaining for her life. And so it’s easy, when depression complains of thirst, for her to tilt its head back and empty herself into its jaws. It is this numbness that is depression’s greatest weapon. In my darkest hour I felt no one’s love for me, and I had no love to give.

But now...now I feel depression loosening its grip, and the more fresh air I breathe in, the weaker it becomes. The more I feel, the more love I’m able to receive, the more I value my own life, and if I believe myself worth saving, depression will never win. When I feel someone’s love now, I’m no longer scared, as I once was. I don’t fear the consequences of that love (attachment, obligation, pleasure, and pain) because I don’t have to dig a razor into my arm or starve myself to feel them anymore. They are finally guests at my table and they have come just as they are, in all their original splendor, mine to experience. And so it is, I’m able to receive love, the love that has saved my life.

I will close the chapter with one more reflection by Nicole, which she sent to me after reviewing this manuscript:

Peggy, thank you so much for sending me the chapters. What an interesting experience it is to read them now after some time has passed. Has all of this really happened? It’s weird, as I was reading the chapters, I suddenly had this image of myself from a few years ago. I was sitting alone on the beach in a foreign country, freezing and starving. God, I was so hungry. All I could think about was my weight, and I remember wishing I could just enjoy the sea. But the tyranny was unbearable, it literally ruined every part of my day. So much has happened since then and I never ever want to go back to that. Our writing helped remind me that we have really been working toward something, haven’t we?