

Narrative in action: The daily practice of acknowledgment

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Writing this paper has given us an opportunity to pull together strands from various domains of and times in our lives, giving us the pleasure both of coming full circle and honoring Michael White at the center of the circle we have formed. We believe that we have assembled stories he would have enjoyed.

I (KW) first heard about Michael in 1986 in Cambridge, MA where I was teaching with Sallyann Roth at the Family Institute of Cambridge. She called me one morning to tell me that a visiting family therapist from Australia would be spending a few days in Boston and did I think my children would like to accompany Michael to the Museum of Science? Mind you, the invitation was for my children, our daughter, Miranda, age seven and our son, Ben, age ten: it did not include me. They were thrilled to go, Sallyann reassured me about him, and the outing went off without a hitch.

Subsequently, of course, I learned how much Michael enjoyed time with children, how much he missed his daughter Penni when he travelled, and how much fun children had spending casual time with him. They felt appreciated and returned from time spent with him a little more confident than when they left. Michael walked around in the world noticing opportunities to be acknowledging of people, young and old, and it is this quality – acknowledgment in the course of daily life – on which we focus.

Types of acknowledgment

Michael wrote a great deal about practices of acknowledgment during definitional ceremonies (White, 2007), often contrasting it with practices of acknowledgment in daily life. These, he said, might well include “congratulating, giving affirmations, advising, and so on...” but, he underscored, in the context of therapeutic work, these are “unlikely to contribute to rich story development and may even promote thin conclusions

about life” (p. 188). Rather, he proposed, outsider witnesses can learn to respond to clients’ life stories by remarking on particular aspects they notice, about the associations these evoke, the resonances that are set off and the effects the connections may have on the therapist’s life.

While Michael wrote about these two practices as if one were reserved for the office, in fact he conducted himself as if his office were everywhere. Many colleagues have had the experience of spending time with Michael and finding that, over breakfast or a cup of tea, he casually remarked upon a quality of theirs that they soon realised was a valued, but hitherto invisible, way of being in the world. I had this experience with Michael both in and out of the office and it was precisely my habit of *blending* these two kinds of acknowledgments, forming a hybrid between the two, upon which he remarked.

I went to Adelaide in 1997, my first trip away from my children for a length of time in what I saw as weaning myself from them to prepare for their living a distance from me.

In an interview with Michael and seven others in the training, I commented that I had spent the last two decades intensively caring for others, both at work and at home, and I saw a horizon opening for me when I might be able to focus more attention on myself. Yet, I lamented, I didn’t want to give up the gratifications that come from assisting others. I was sad, I told Michael in front of the reflecting team, that while becoming more self-focused I might diminish a part of myself that gave so much meaning to my life.

Michael listened intently and with great stillness, as he could do. He began asking questions, using an approach that was partly about discovery and partly about navigation. I believe that he frequently asked questions of two sorts: questions not knowing where

the answers would lead and also ones in the hope of bringing a person to an understanding he foresaw. With me, his questions directed my attention to a characteristic he had noted for years: “I don’t think it’s an either/or. Helping seems pretty integral to how you routinely conduct yourself”.

He wanted me to see that I had constructed a false choice, that I could care for myself and help others, which I was already doing. This interview led me to scrutinise my practices of helping others more closely. I saw that, like Michael, I was not leaving these skills in the office at 6pm because they emanated from an attitude that was stitched into the fibre of my being.

I have since written about many aspects of these practices of helping in daily life. In a book about witnessing, combining bystander theory and trauma theory, I describe the myriad opportunities we have to turn the passive witnessing of violence and violation into effective action (Weingarten, 2003). I have written about accompaniment (Weingarten, 2004) and doing hope together (Weingarten, 2000; 2007). All of these are daily practices.

Acknowledgment is, also. I think I know this in my bones because my mother was consummate at it. Like the pick-up-sticks master she was, she could disentangle an attribute or a behavior or an interaction from the flow of life and reflect back to you that she had noted and appreciated it. She practiced a hybrid, as I have come to do, and as Miranda, now age thirty and a graduate student in epidemiology and human rights, has come to do as well.

Acknowledgment is something many of us desire, some might say crave. When it occurs, it is likely that we will feel confirmed, or attended to or seen. An acknowledgment that stems from an incontrovertible observation or an unassailable fact can usually not be deflected by the person whose quality



Miranda in Nepal

or behavior is being remarked on. These sorts of acknowledgments have a greater chance of touching a person, helping them take stock of and reflect on what they have meant to someone else. Whereas in the reflecting team practices of acknowledgment the outsider witness usually speaks for a few minutes, weaving a tight connection between the story she has heard and her own life experience, in the form of hybrid acknowledgment about which we are writing, there may be only a casual or implicit reference to the self. The focus is on making explicit an observation of the other person that might not be visible to the person. These forms of acknowledgment generally elicit a sense in the other person of having been appreciated, which in turn appreciates!

The power of acknowledgment in daily life

The other day, I had a remarkable experience that focused my attention on the power of acknowledgment. I had lost an earring that I had bought in 1993. It wasn't expensive, but it was versatile and so I wore it all the time. I went back to the store where I had bought it, but they had nothing comparable. I went next door and there was the very woman, a Tibetan, who had sold me the earring I sought to replace. Delighted, I showed her the earring, told her I was looking for another black earring, but that it didn't have to be all-black, since I had taken to heart what she had told me at the time, *"Plain black looks better set off by something contrasting"*.

The woman looked at me with wide, dark eyes as she knelt to take a pair of earrings from a low shelf.

"Thank you for telling me that."

"Well, it's true. Actually, I remember everything you have said to me over the years". And I had. She had sold me two other pieces of jewellery at the other store.

She got up from where she was bending and faced me. *"I was trafficked here."*

"Excuse me?"

"I know this is very hard to hear. But I was trafficked here."

I thanked her for telling me and told her a little bit about myself. She too shared more over the next few minutes. She then told me that she gave 20% of the profits from her store to New England's first shelter for battered women. She showed me a pair of earrings and I said, *"Whatever you give me, I accept. I'll remember this conversation for the rest of my life"*.

She came over and hugged me and kissed me on the cheek.

"It was karma that brought you here."

I may have another interpretive schema for understanding my presence in her store. But I believe we share a similar understanding of the power of acknowledgement. My telling her that I had remembered what she had told me years ago established me as a person who could be trusted as a reliable witness to a profoundly significant part of her life's journey. The woman who stood before me had already become other than the woman who had been trafficked, but to be seen more completely, she wanted me to know this part of her history too.

I wrote her an e-mail telling her about myself and about Miranda's work on the trafficking of girls and women in Nepal. I concluded by telling her how amazing it is that we can overcome great suffering and use its imprint in service of helping others. I wrote, *"You have obviously turned your incredible eye and aesthetic judgment into political good. It makes me happy to think that all purchases benefit Transition House. Thank you for helping me today and in the past. I will always remember our conversation when I wear these earrings"*.

I called Miranda immediately to tell her about this encounter.

An acknowledgment of a former girl soldier

(KW) My mother's phone call could not have come at a more opportune time.

I was wrestling with understanding why a particular interaction that I had while working in northern Uganda had stood out to me and why, when I was asked to present a paper at a conference, I kept coming back to that moment. On the surface, there did not appear to be much out of the ordinary to the story, but I felt that it deserved more exploration. The answer to why it had seemed so important came through thinking about the threads of the story my mother has just recounted.

Since 2005, I have been part of a multi-year participatory action research study working to learn about and facilitate the successful reintegration of girls and young women who were child soldiers and who had children during the course of civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda (McKay *et al.*, 2006)¹. As part of my role in the project, I have travelled to almost twenty communities in these three countries and met hundreds of young mothers and their children. The interaction that I kept thinking about happened at the end of my first trip to northern Uganda. It was towards the beginning of the project and it was the first time that a colleague and I were meeting with young mothers in one of the communities where our project would take place. As we had already done in more than half a dozen communities in northern Uganda, we planned to meet with a group of young mothers who had been mobilised by one of our partners, a child protection agency that would be working with these girls and women for the next few years.

When we arrived in the village, a group of about thirty young mothers and their children were waiting for us outside a school. We brought out benches from an empty classroom and set them up in a circle in the shade of a tree. Through an interpreter, my colleague and I began to explain more about the project. *“Many people have tried to help girls and young women who were child soldiers”,* we told them, *“but most of the programs have not actually helped them or their children. With this project, we are taking a new approach: you are the experts and we want to support you to think together about what might help you and your children and help you implement your ideas”.*

We spent over an hour answering questions and helping the girls in this



Kaethe Weingarten

group think outside of the normal aid-beneficiary relationship, where an aid organisation comes with a specific package to give to the beneficiary. We encouraged them to think about the resources and knowledge they had among them and in their community, wanting to help them think of themselves as people with important ideas.

After our formal meeting, we all stood up and began moving the benches back into the schoolhouse. One young mother with a very serious look on her face came over to me. She reached for my hand and, in halting English, said: *“I had no idea that you cared about me. You live so far away and your life has not been touched by this conflict. Why do you care about me?”* Holding her hand, and looking her in the eye, I told her that I cared about

her because I thought her life was as important as anyone else’s life, and that she had a right to a better experience. I could tell that she was not just speaking about the two of us concretely, but also existentially – someone like her and someone like me. I told her that I thought that every person in the world deserved an opportunity to thrive, that we all have a right to a decent life. She looked at me as though I had said something profound and said, *“Thank you”.*

Four months later, we had an annual meeting in Kampala, Uganda for people who work on the project in all three countries. Eight young mothers who were participants in the project were selected by their peers in Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda to represent them at the meeting. The young woman who

had spoken with me that day was among those selected. When we first saw each other in Kampala, she smiled broadly, clearly proud of being at an important international meeting. She called out my name and asked, “Do you remember me?” I told her that I would never forget her.

In the first day of the meeting, she described how working in a group with the other mothers impacted her life: she felt cared for and supported, feelings she had not felt from her family in many years. On the third day, she and the other young mother representatives addressed the conference and asked for more attention and support for their communities. They sought assurance that if they attained a high school degree that they would be supported at university. They wanted funds to educate their children, better medical care, gardening tools, and costumes to enhance their cultural performances. Clearly, this young woman’s sense of herself as a person who mattered, both to her peers and to an outsider like me and the other people working on the project had had a transformative effect. She was able to resist internalising the pejorative labels that others in her community used to describe her because she felt recognised as deserving of care by others. The support from mothers like her and the acknowledgment and support from those outside of her community mutually reinforced one another and laid the groundwork for her effective participation at the conference, and her work to alter her situation back in her community.

Enriching our own lives

As I was talking with my mother about this story, and she was telling me about her experience buying new earrings, we

realised that what had happened in these two interactions was parallel. Although the contexts were quite different, we had been able to acknowledge the women we were interacting with in ways that were significant to them. Yet, what we each had said was comfortably within our daily repertoire of responses to people. The two women had felt acknowledged by us; their letting us know this meant that we felt acknowledged also. This mutual acknowledgement had come in the midst of “everyday” experience, but the experience stood out as deeply meaningful for us all.

We take from this that there are no end of opportunities in daily life – at work, in casual encounters – to reflect back to people in what ways their actions or experience stand out for us and positively enrich our lives. While the people in the vignettes we have described are women, we do not believe that these are gender-based practices. In fact, we know they are not. I (KW) had a remarkable exchange with a taxi driver the day after *Slumdog Millionaire* won the Oscar. In the course of our exchange, I learned that he was writing a novel about his experiences during the war in Sierra Leone. His descriptions of diminished troubling symptoms, following episodes of writing, was straight out of the research paradigm of James Pennebaker (1997)! My parting acknowledgment was hearty and heartfelt; his warm reply equally firm.

We see our use of acknowledgment as a practice that enriches *our* daily lives. It does so by making more visible to us the efforts and accomplishments, qualities and contributions of those with whom we interact, casually and intimately, occasionally and repeatedly. That people appreciate our acknowledgments, even

feel empowered by them, is an additional strong incentive to use acknowledgment.

We live in perilous times in which it can seem impossible to have an impact on the problems that undermine the environment in which we live and the values to which we are committed. Believing that the small is not trivial, that gestures ripple out, that one person we touch is linked in ways we can never predict to others far removed from us, we find merit in daily acts of acknowledgment.

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“I (KW) was attracted to narrative therapy by the elegance with which it addresses issues of social justice and the dynamics of power. I appreciated the story metaphor and its fit with a hermeneutic, postmodern tradition. The specific techniques of narrative have never been as interesting to me as its vision; I am drawn to creating wider circles of appreciation, acknowledgment, witnessing and support. Without a doubt, Michael White and David Epston have been the main narrative influences on my work. Miranda is not formally trained as a narrative therapist but, having lived with one for so long, she is as good as many.”