






Down Under and Up Over – Travels with Narrative Therapy



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Taming the Terrier

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Ronny came into my premises somewhat reluctantly and shamefaced. I guess he knew something was up, something he preferred not to come up. His mother and father were somewhat more resolute but his mother, Sarah, looked uneasy in my presence. I introduced myself and sought for them to introduce themselves. Ronny was nine according to his birth certificate, but when asked, 'What age do you want me to think of you as – nine, ten or eleven?' he preferred to be thought of as a ten year old and that I ask him ten year old questions. I didn't proceed from here in the conventional manner. Instead, I proposed the following to Ronny: 'If I were you, I wouldn't want to meet a middle-aged stranger like myself through a Problem. Do you mind if I get to know you through what your mum and dad think is wonderful about you?' He looked perplexed but at the same time happily consented to this arrangement. I turned to his parents adding, 'If we know what is so wonderful about Ronny, we will have some idea what he might put against the Problem, whatever the Problem may turn out to be.' I suspect his parents hadn't prepared themselves for such a line of enquiry and quite understandably were tongue-tied. I turned to Sarah and added, 'What wonderful things are there about Ronny that indicate to you that you are the good mother you seek to be?' Turning to his father, Jim, I asked something along the same lines.

We all learned that Ronny possessed 'a wonderful sense of humour' that was both 'somewhat original' and 'some copied' like knock-knock jokes. I asserted that to be able to amuse adults, a person Ronny's age would have to have 'a way with words'. They both nodded in agreement and went on to tell me that 'he is very thoughtful with words' and gave me some clever examples of 'double entendres' that resided in their family history. We explored further the nature of his 'wit' and it extended to 'repartee' and his capacity to 'hang out with his parents' and enjoy the company of adults. And they had more to add about his 'way with words'. 'He is sharp with words. Subtle and dry but he can also be farcical.'

That led me to further enquiries around, 'how does Ronny's mind operate?' They described his mind as 'enquiring'. He was curious about a great many things ... and his interests could come out of the 'left-field' and surprise them. When I explored the 'genealogy' of this way he used his mind, it turned out to be a good match 'for our style of interaction'. Jim was a researcher in his professional life and at home Ronny joined him in 'researching' various of their shared interests.

Quite apart from the workings of his wit and mind, both parents spoke with considerable pride that 'he is passionate about sport and in particular cricket. They laughed aloud remembering that the first word he spoke was 'ball'. But what impressed them most about Ronny was the fact that in soccer he was renowned for his 'tenacious tackling'. Even though he was slight in build, he 'has no fear of the size of the person'. Furthermore, I was informed that Ronny would become even more determined when an opponent out-tricked him and got past him. This would inflame his determination to catch his opponent up. In fact, he had won an award in his club for this aspect of his play. When I asked if he had a 'nick-name' in his club, we all laughed when Jim told me 'Foxy', after the persistence of a fox

terrier. By now, everyone, including myself, was looking a lot more comfortable in what for them were strange surroundings and an endeavour (therapy) they had never undertaken before.

I turned full-face to Ronny and asked him what he might like to put his wit, his 'way with words' and his fierce determination not to be outdone to. He pinpointed his 'temper'. We all joined in a discussion as to whether this 'temper' was 'a justifiable moral outrage at some injustices in his life' or was it more like 'tantrumming'. Ronny took the lead in proposing it was more like tantrumming and his parents strongly supported this. We all canvassed a few recent episodes of his 'temper'. They were instances where Sarah had requested him to either do something like 'clean his room' or desist from something like 'pestering his sister (aged five)'. When I asked Ronny if this tantrumming was something he wanted to stick with, he assured me that this was not the case. Further enquiries as to the effects of the tantrumming on his estimate of his maturity (determined by age) clearly indicated that the tantrumming was 'growing him down' and his tantrums were now almost three years behind his 'wit', 'way with words' and his 'passionate sportsmanship'. To my questions as to the 'fairness' and 'rightness' of tantrumming 'growing him down', he strongly disapproved of this and argued that it was 'fading'. Sarah joined the conversation here and disagreed. In fact, she now seemed able to assert her concerns that she was beginning to fear for the future, given she expected his tantrumming to increase as he got 'bigger and stronger'.

Jim said, although he didn't have the same problems with tantrumming, he was there to support Sarah. In discussion, this might just have been the luck of the draw because Jim couldn't be certain that if he had to require Ronny to clean his room and wash the dishes, he might well have found himself on the wrong side of a tantrum. Enquiries to Sarah around the effects of the tantrumming on her and their mother-son relationship spelled out quite a rift.

Sarah was starting to 'walk on egg shells' and 'pussy-foot' around Ronny. To my question, 'Is the tantrumming starting to drive a wedge between you and Ronny, and between the kind of mother/son relationship you desire?' she ruefully acknowledged that such a process was in place. Ronny hadn't been aware of this and said that his preference was for a 'close son/mother relationship', one in which they could be at their ease with one another and be loving rather than 'stand offish' or 'keeping their distance'. Just to be sure, I checked with Ronny: 'Can you see any disadvantages for you if your tantrumming stopped and never happened again?' He took this seriously, if his pondering meant anything. I proposed a few matters for him to consider - such as 'your mother may not pussyfoot around you anymore?' and 'fear may no longer have her shy away from making requests of you?' Ronny, on balance, considered cessation of the tantrumming worthwhile.

'Ronny', I said, 'I would be willing to give your mum and dad a double your money back guarantee if you were willing to trust me enough to consent to a 'temper tantrum approach' of mine. I went over to my book shelf and took down a copy of *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Epston &

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White, 1992), and referred them to the outcome study in the chapter *Temper tantrum parties: losing face, going off your face or saving face*. Since the study included many other therapists, I mentioned my own outcomes as one hundred per cent successful (1), although admitting that Ronny might be the first to fail in 'taming his temper'. Ronny didn't look too worried by that. Jim joined the conversation and said that from his experience of Ronny, he would always want to know ahead of time what he was in for. 'Ronny is just that kind of kid!' I admitted that this would be the first time, but I accepted this about Ronny and would wait until everything was disclosed to him before seeking his consent.

Everyone then turned to me to proceed. 'First of all, Ronny, if you were going to have a party and you could only have one kind of food, would it be a sweet or a savoury?' Ronny was taken aback by where this was all going so I added a few possibilities, 'Damon, who was twelve at the time, chose a chocolate cake? Isobel, who was fifteen, chose pumpkin pie. Jason, who was thirteen, wanted cornish pasties'. To my surprise, Ronny selected sushi as his food of choice. I turned to his parents and asked if Ronny was a 'foodie' too in addition to some of his other virtues. 'Secondly, Ronny, when you are playing soccer, does the tantrumming ever take you over at a practice or during a match?' He looked bemused by such a question and dismissed it out of hand, 'Of course not!' I responded enthusiastically, assuring everyone that I would be now willing to extend my money back guarantee to a 'triple' rather than a 'double'.

I asked Sarah if she thought she could sense a temper tantrum coming on. She didn't contemplate any difficulties with that. 'Sarah and Jim, could you prepare some cards, one set that you carry on your person and another set that you keep in a handy place like the mantle-piece or on the fridge. The first card should read in large writing, 'Ronny, I think you have a temper tantrum coming on!' I then proposed that should she detect the beginnings of a tantrumming, she should merely hand Ronny the first card, turn her back and depart and return to a safe place, timing sixty seconds on her watch. She should then check to see if the tantrumming was proceeding as usual or if Ronny had 'tamed' it. If it was the latter, she was to congratulate him for this and to take some notes to tell Jim when he returned home from work that night. However, if the tantrumming was proceeding as usual, she was to hand him the second card which would read, 'Pre-recording Warning 1', turn her back and depart and return after another minute had elapsed and once again check. Congrats and note-taking was in order if Ronny had 'tamed' the tantrum even at this stage. However, if the tantrumming was proceeding as usual, she was to hand him Card Three which would read, 'Prerecording No. 2' and do what she had done before, once again returning in a minute to review the situation. Congrats and note-taking if Ronny had 'tamed' the tantrumming. If not, there would be handing over of the fourth and final card which would read, 'Final Warning - Recording will start in 60 second's time!' This time she should go and prepare the audio tape recorder they had on hand (or a video-camera if they had access to that), keep a safe distance and just record the tantrum.

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I then proceeded, 'Who are your three best soccer mates, Ronny?' 'Tim, Terry and Derrick!' he told me proudly. Directing my comments to everyone, I said, 'Thirdly, go home tonight and Ronny, it would be far more convincing if you wrote the letter yourself but if you find it too difficult, your parents could do it for you. The letter might read something like this:

Dear Tim, Terry or Derrick,

I would like to invite you to my home on .. (leave a blank because you very likely won't have to fill it) at .. (leave a blank because you very likely won't have to decide what time the party begins) .. to a Sushi and Temper Tantrum Party. You may not know this but my tantrumming has been growing me down at home to a seven year old level. I have consulted David Epston, a narrative therapist, along with my mum and dad and it seems that adults can't help me. But I know you can because when we are team-mates both in training and during a match, my temper never takes me over, even when we get goals scored against us. So I know that when you see or hear the tantrumming, you will come up with some good ideas to help me 'tame' it. I know I can depend on you the same way you can depend on me to tackle like a fox terrier and never let the team down.

Your friend, Ronny

Ronny's and my eyes met. He took a deep breath and said unequivocally, 'This will work!' Well, I know Ronny had a reputation for his wit, but I wonder if he and his parents and a relative stranger had ever laughed quite so loudly or for so long before. 'Ronny, in that case, would you might doing something for me and any other young person whose tantrumming was growing them down?' Before he agreed, he wanted to know all the details. 'Well, Ronny, of all the other young men and women who 'tamed' their tempers, none of them to my knowledge were researchers.' Jim mentioned at this point that in fact Ronny had experience as an unpaid 'researcher' in a study. I asked Ronny if he might be willing to watch his 'tantrumming' in the very act of 'taming' it, and either really remember it or take down some notes. As our time was up, I just wanted to say that his research could play a part in assisting other young men and women to 'grow up' to their age, and even past their age, if they were anything like Ronny. I agreed to send him some research questions by post. We agreed to meet back in a month's time to audio tape his 'temper tantrum knowledge' for others to learn from.

Below is the letter with the research questions I forwarded to him by post:

Dear Ronny,

I really liked meeting you the other evening. You really reminded me of myself as I was called something similar to a 'fox terrier' when I played sports. Like you, I refused to give up, even if someone got past me. In fact, that would make me more determined. Do you find that? Since I have never had the good fortune to meet a

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young person your age who had experience as a research assistant, the 'temper tantrum party' idea, although successful over the years, has never been researched. I was wondering if you might consider some of the following 'research questions', while you grow yourself out of the Problem. After all, I thought it was unfair that a Problem would grow you down to seven when in fact everything else about you suggested you were more ten or eleven.

So here goes:

- 1) RONNY, WHEN THE TEMPER STARTED COMING ON AND YOUR MOTHER GAVE YOU THE FIRST CARD, WHAT DID YOU DO IN YOUR MIND TO STOP IT FROM TAKING YOU OVER AND HUMILIATING YOU?*
- 2) RONNY, THE SECOND TIME YOUR TEMPER STARTED COMING ON AND ANY FURTHER TIMES, DID YOU FIND IT EASIER TO DO WHATEVER IT WAS YOU DID IN THE FIRST PLACE?*
- 3) RONNY, DO YOU THINK IT WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE TO DO WHAT YOU DID IN THE FIRST PLACE IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE THE PROSPECT OF THE 'SUSHI AND TEMPER TANTRUM PARTY' IN YOUR MIND?*
- 4) RONNY, WHY WAS IT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO DECLARE IN FRONT OF YOUR MUM AND DAD THAT YOU KNEW 'THAT WOULD WORK'? WHAT MADE YOU SO SURE?*
- 5) RONNY, THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TAME YOUR TEMPER JUST LIKE THAT, HAS THAT MADE YOU FEEL YOUR AGE OR EVEN MORE GROWN UP THAN YOUR AGE FOR EXAMPLE, A TEN OR ELEVEN YEAR OLD NINE YEAR OLD?*
- 6) RONNY, IF AN EIGHT OR NINE YEAR OLD BOY CAME TO YOU AND SAID, 'RONNY, HELP ME! I CANNOT CONTROL MY TEMPER! I HATE IT? BUT THERE IS NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT .. IT JUST HAPPENS!' WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE HIM?*
- 7) RONNY, IN GENERAL, WHAT IS YOUR OPINION NOW OF 'TEMPER TANTRUMMING'?*

Ronny, I thank you so much for your help. After all, would you believe about fifteen per cent of the young people I meet are being 'grown down' by their temper tantrumming?

*Yours in co-research,
David Epston, Visiting Professor,
School of Community Studies, Unitec Institute of Technology*

Ronny returned with his mother in a month's time, despite the fact that he was suffering a cold and was a little lacklustre. Still, he was determined to report on his research. With great pleasure, Sarah announced a 'one hundred per cent improvement' and related that to there being 'more of his willingness to listen' and her conviction that 'he is taking control'. Ronny thought there had been a fifty to sixty per cent improvement, and it was all because 'I didn't want that (the sushi and temper tantrum party) to happen.' Although that had only been three first cards, Sarah had observed on every occasion that 'he was composed and

there was no grimacing'. What reassured her most about his capability to 'tame his temper' was watching his response to being issued the very first card. 'The first time I could see him take control of himself. It was amazing . . . such a huge relief. I was very proud of him and proud of ourselves that we did something about it.' Apparently they had been thinking about a referral over the past year.

Ronny wasn't 'really proud but I don't think it was nothing'. When I asked if he thought the 'party' idea would have worked as well when he was eight rather than nine, he told me that 'I think so but I'm not one hundred per cent sure'. Ronny thought that his temper may very well have come under his control without the 'party' proposal but it would have taken another two years' time.

His mother reported 'sixty per cent more co-operation' and how such co-operation benefited their mother-son relationship: 'It is easier for me to ask him to do things when I know he isn't going to be unhappy to do it ... I no longer have any fear (of escalating conflict)'. She mentioned since he tamed his temper, 'We have more time to negotiate and bargain and he doesn't get so indignant. And he sticks to his side of any bargain'.

Ronny assured me that he had 'grown himself' not only back to his age but ahead to that of an eleven year old. When I enquired as to why he had done this he said 'I like it. It just makes me feel more grown up'. And Sarah agreed that now they were able to have 'more grown-up conversations' in 'an improved atmosphere'. When I asked Ronny to consult to another young boy, he produced laughter all round yet again by his remark, 'I would ask him what his favourite food was'. Ronny did express concern that his temper could make a come-back but his mother thought that was very unlikely. He summed it all up: 'If you try, you can stop it!'

Note

(1) RESULTS (p 68)
Never Occurred Again 60 45
Dramatically Diminished 56 42
Substantially Diminished 10 8
Diminished 2 2
No Change 2 2
Increased 1 1

Reference

Epston, D. 'Temper tantrum parties: saving face, losing face, or going off your face!' in Epston D and White M (1992) *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide, pp 37-74.