

Narrative-ating: Future dreams in present living jottings on an honouring theme

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"Time present and time past Are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past." Eliot T.S. Burnt Norton - Four Quartets.

A nine year old son woke up on the first day of his holiday looking excited with expectations of time with mother doing things that were fun. His mother informed him that she had planned to take him to see beautiful buildings and museums in the city. The mother fondly thought that cultural training and exposure to the beauties of history would be enjoyable for her son and contribute to his education. Over breakfast the son suddenly looked very serious and said, "Mother I have something to say to you. I am NOT interested in the past!!" Thus ended the mother's fond notion about what she and the child would enjoy that day. Instead he took her on a journey "into the future".

Early in their work Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo drew attention to the important, novel and for us, at the time, staggering theme that some of the most useful questions that could be asked in the therapeutic process were questions about the future. Hypothetical future questions, they said, created the greatest possibilities for change in a variety of ways. These questions, they also maintained, created more possibilities for change than any work that looked at the past, or than any work that looked at the coherence of the symptom in relation to the whole family system that one might be working with.

"... future questions challenge a family premise or advance a new one. Future questions evoke a different map of the family for the family. . . These questions such as 'When your daughter leaves for college, do you believe your sex life with your wife will improve or grow worse?' or 'If your mother were to talk more to you in the evening than to your brother, do you think your father would complain being alone so much' are transformative and can fit themselves to many family themes. Survival questions, separation questions, punishment questions, existential questions, can introduce an entirely new possibility for the family in the future." p 34 (Boscolo et al 1987)

The introduction of the novel notion that the future questions could do so much for people who came to therapy was tantalising and opened up for us new avenues of exploration and discovery. They gave us a future that has been rich and rewarding. For this future we salute Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin. After meeting them we asked questions about our own futures and began to explore new ways of working. We became hopeful about new possibilities in our therapeutic practice. We began to dream and to hope, totally unrealistically some of the time, that things could be possible in worlds where the beliefs were that they were not. We began to see futures in which the intractable, the puzzling, the so-called chaotic, the complex in many different dimensions might be in processes of co-evolutionary change. We began to see that if we

merged, blended, co-created and lived with those future dimensions of therapy, then for clients, professional systems, managers, organisations and more recently whole communities new worlds would emerge and human, living could and would be transformed.

Over the years that inspiration has continued and we have been on long explorations into themes of the future. There are a whole variety of these themes that we have re-researched and that have been fruitful for the people that we have worked with. So we have moved from hope to hope, from dreams to dreams. We have moved into areas that have been challenging to us; areas that have led to people questioning and, through their demands for clarity, helping us to develop. So the quest into living with the dimensions of the future has connected us with networks of people who have been our collaborators and partners in the crime of naivety, of daring to believe and hope and therefore move to talking about the future rather than the past. We have much to thank Luigi and Gianfranco for in this searching for the future and day dreaming.

The Future Creating the present. . .

“Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings.” Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) *Journey to the Western Isles*; Inch, Kenneth, *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (1972), Oxford University Press, London.

In our earliest practice of working with the notion of future hypothetical questions we coined the catching statement “the future influences more the way in which we live in the present than anything that happened in the past”. We asked all sorts of questions in the therapeutic work with families, with couples, with individuals about this, faithfully following the examples which we learned from Boscolo and Cecchin and making use of the ideas in Peggy Penn’s inspired and inspiring “Feed Forward: Future questions, Future Maps.”

“When you consider your own condition in the future, you are automatically fitting another context around your present context.” p 301 (Penn 1985)

An early experience which formed a commitment to this sort of conversation was an interview with a family where the mother was dying with the complications arising from an earlier undiagnosed and thus untreatable illness. Imagine the scene of two children one around eight years old, the other around thirteen and a father sitting round a mother in bed. The doctors feared she may have, probably, no more than days to live. The therapist was asked to enter into a conversation with the family as the staff in the hospital were exercised that the father and the children may be unaware of the gravity of life and perhaps were not facing the fact that they were in the last days before a change would create a new family a family without a mother.

After initial discussions the therapist cued in by the children that they were deeply affected by what was happening asked them what they were concerned about. They immediately volunteered that mother “is sick”. Being unsure what to do the therapist asked them to describe the way in which mother was sick. Eventually the younger child says, “Mummy’s terribly ill”. “Terribly ill”, says the therapist, “what do you mean by

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being terribly ill?" The children begin to talk about their stories about the illness. They describe how their mother has been very unhappy and gradually been able to do less and less. They relate stories of visits to hospital and how "mummy and daddy have got more and more unhappy". They describe ways in which their mother is able to do less and less until she is finally in a bed and sleeps for hours and they see her very little. They describe that she gets more and more ill and that eventually "she will die". The therapist, at a loss, simply says, "Die? What are your ideas about dying . . .?" The children begin to describe how "Mummy will go to sleep and that she won't be with us any more. She will go to be somewhere else." The younger child says, "She will live somewhere else and she will watch us and take care of us. But we won't see her . . .". He begins to cry during this conversation as does his sister and the mother.

The therapist simply follows the clues and the "grammar" that the children give.

"An ocean of meaning", says Wittgenstein, "in a drop of grammar".

Meaning is about the future. It is the future that creates the meaning. It is in the future that the meaning grows. It is in the future that the meaning of events emerges. An act gains its meaning partly by what its significance is in the present, but the meaning is crafted by what happens in the future. The meaning is crafted in the consequences of an action in the future. The moment of "consummation" or the moment of revelation or the "AHA moment" according to John Dewey is not the moment of truth. The truth and significance emerges as these consummatory experiences are lived out in relationship with others in the future. Events gain and grow into their oceans of meaning as they are lived into in the future. Stories grow in meaning as the possibilities are created by what is caught into future imagination.

The therapist simply follows, asking the mother "When you go to this other place and you are watching your family what do you see." The mother begins to create a whole future for the family in which, though absent she becomes a present, involved and an active participant. She begins to describe them growing up, going to different schools. The whole family, father, mother and children begin to create a dreaming collection of stories of the unfolding future. The mother talks of the children's success at school, she talks about them having friends, boyfriends and girl friends, she talks of them going to university, of her pride on their graduation day. She talks of their wedding days and of marriage and children. All this is punctuated by comments from the children and the husband discussing how they will be thinking of mother and including her in these happenings. They even talk about the father and the possibility of meeting someone else who would become a partner for him and make sure that he is not left alone. The family cries, laughs, is reflective, sad and happy in these story creations. They create a different meaning of ". . . she will die . . .". Some days later the staff of the hospital call to say that there have been major changes in the family. A deep peace has superseded tension, conflict and stress. There is a freedom in their conversations with each other. Physically the mother's medical condition is changed. She becomes able to go home for days and share life with the children. This goes on for some considerable months until the mother dies. For the family, she lives on and so do they. Each of the significant events which

they dreamed about in the conversation with the therapist she becomes a living member of. So the relationships grow and in the events of life mother shares with them. This totally changes the time that leads up to her death, changes the meaning of the death and enhances the richness of an ongoing life.

These and many similar experiences created for us a fascination and a commitment to exploration. In our explorations we discovered many variations on a theme; variations in which the future notions were a centre. A move forward in these variations connected us to John Dewey. We found discussions in which he explores the notions of the future. Dewey has a particular phrase that he uses for some of his discussions of the future. He talks of the future in terms of the "end in view". In a fascinating discussion of means and ends we find him talking about the way in which the articulation of the "end in view" simultaneously includes in it many of the means which move us into the ends.

"... some of the things that we do, and some of the things that we interact with, are distinguished by their role in wider unities which we set ourselves to realise. These wider comprehensive unities, what Dewey calls 'ends in view', inform our perception of events or things and change them, both for us (alter our perceptions of them and the satisfactions we take in or from them) and in themselves, for, we have seen, our altered perceptions alter their potentialities for physical interactions. Dewey illustrates with the familiar example of building a house. The house as end-in-view informs 'each stage of the process [of building]; it is present as the meaning of the materials used and the acts done. As meaning... the end-in-view guides the next stage and possibly also the development of the idea of the end-in-view" p 195. (Tiles 1990)

Closely connected to this notion is the idea that the end is not, as it were, in the future, but forming the present. Dewey has a discussion in which he uses the metaphor of an archer at one end of a field. At the other end of the field is the target. The target is in the future, it is the "end in view". When we observe such a scene what we see is that all the behaviour of the archer is formed in relation to reaching the target. The archer's positioning of himself, his judgement, his focus and attention, his physicality, his emotionality, these are all informed and in-formed through the target which, in the future, is being aimed at. Thus the future is not, as it were, out there. The future is in the here and now creating and in-forming the present. The present is imbued with the future.

"Systemic therapy... has ended up preferring orientation towards the future... Systemic therapy brings the future or rather, many possible futures into the present and allows clients to choose the ones they prefer." p 170. (Boscolo and Bertrando 1993)

We have here two dimensions which take us further in significance than the writings of Boscolo and Cecchin did initially, though their practice foreshadows this form of attention. Over the years we have developed more and more this notion of the future in the present. Take as an example the sort of case that we have had repeated

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invitations to work with in the strange and richly rewarding worlds of therapy in connection with sexual abuse. Imagine a situation where an adolescent is sent by social services to be seen by someone in a child guidance clinic. Imagine someone who has been sexually abused for several years, who has been in care, who is now nearly 16 and who has had a number of years of psychotherapy to try and help her cope with the consequences of the abuse and violence that she endured at the hands of perhaps both a father and a mother. There is much that can be done, but faced with all that professionals have already done and with the welter of experiences at the hands of those professionals how, we asked ourselves could we do something that would be meaningful and useful, something that would make a contribution of difference after multitudes of conversations.

We have been exploring the use of dreaming conversations in these situations. We take courage into our hands. After brief introductions and context setting we ask a question which is now a regular part of our repertoire. We ask, "What are your dreams and hopes for the future?" We are not interested in being realistic only in tuning into the creative grammars that dreaming conversations will bring forth. We are surprised and tantalised when, for example, our imagined adolescent, with shaved head and tattoos, talks of dreaming to be a princess. Princesses are a ready part of culture in England, so we explore in detail, "What sort of a princess". We use those examples of stories of princesses readily available and well known . . . a princess like Diana, like Anne, like any of the others? We talk of the details in the imaginings. . . What are princesses like? How do they behave? What do they do? Who are they princesses for? How are they recognised by others? How do they dress? How do they relate? Our conversations move through pictures and stories that move from "THEM and THOSE" until the focus becomes increasingly "ME AS A princess". We begin to explore caring for yourself, dressing in particular ways, relating to new groups of people, becoming physically and in action more the story of a princess. Our experience in such cases has been thrilling and enriching. The young adult women we are working with in very short spaces of time create their own ways of becoming the dreams they talk of. We rarely ask, after being in the dream conversation, "How can you get there?" We find that the dreaming conversation itself creates the means whereby we become the things that we dream. We have grown to become aware that the question of dreams being idealised is not relevant to the exploration. Dreaming conversations are a way of living in the world of the imagined such that it creates from within their own grammars the pathways to their realisation. By creating the pictures the abilities to walk into the dream become attainable. Abilities emerge contextually and relationally as the episodic details of dreams are told.

In this example we use the idea of the constituency of princesses to explore possible ways forward for the young person. The young person can call on images of others within that constituency to create possibilities for the emergence and modelling of possibilities and abilities. The ideas of constituency of ideas can be used to create possible futures for many roles or positions in life. For example, we may often ask fathers and mothers to call on their experiences of the constituency of mothering or

fathering, which in the same way begin to change the narrating from a them to an I position where a whole bank of possible actions and abilities are held. (Byrne 1996).

Problems as frustrated dreams : problems as pathways into the grammars of future dreams. . .

“Hold fast to dreams. For if dreams die life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly” Langston Hughs “Dreams”

Our experiences in this frame have led us to work increasingly with hopes, dreams and visions. We have come to an understanding that a way of construing problems is to talk of them as examples of frustrated hopes and dreams. The most that we might, in some moments say of problems, is that they may provide a focus for the dreaming conversations. The way the problem is defined gives some clue of the themes around which the dreaming conversations need to focus. More than this. We have come to talk about the notion that in our understanding the dreams and hopes are precursors of the problems. The problems come to birth as we tell stories of frustrated hopes, as we come into stories of hopes frustrated.

“The world we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far creates problems we cannot solve at the same level of thinking at which we created them.” Albert Einstein

This has led us to begin to practice from the outset of therapy with a different focus in mind. From the very beginning of our therapeutic encounters we abandon the neutrality of, “What would you like to talk about?” or “What do you think it important for us to talk about” or other questions in a similar voice. Instead we talk immediately about hopes; hopes for this particular therapeutic conversation or consultation; hopes and dreams for the whole process of therapy and consultation. In this we immediately, at the outset of the therapy, develop a change in the language that people use, a change in the focus of their attending, a change in the emotions and emotionality of the way they relate with each other. We attend through these different voices of hopes and dreams to a change in the “lived experience” of people who are present in the therapeutic consultation meeting. Imagine a group of perhaps nine or ten professionals, school teachers, social workers, police and the like together with a family of four coming to a meeting to discuss where to go next with a son who has been truanting and been in trouble with the police. Our experiences of talking about problems encompass conversations in which the son has the experience of being an “it”, an object. The emotions that are lived in such problem conversations can frequently be accusatory, shaming and blaming and defensive. Transforming our conversations into future oriented discussions creates a “by pass” around the negativity of problem voices with the attendant deficit language.

We have become intrigued by Wittgenstein’s notion of “emergent rule language games”. He describes these language games in contrast with “fixed rule language games” (Cronen and Lang 1994). These latter he describes in terms of language games in which the rules of the games are re-established, reconstituted through the process of participating in the game.

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“By playing you reconstitute the game and reconstitute the rules that it give it its coherence and its coherent character.” (Cronen and Lang 1994)

This accords with our experiences when working in problem conversations. They have a way of going which keeps them stuck in particular patterns. By contrast in emergent rule language games the conversation develops in such a way that the rules for the process of how the conversation develops emerge in the flow of being in the language of such conversations.

“In the case of emergent rule games, the rules and the actions must emerge together and this must happen in such a way that what we produce is not a mere succession of acts. Rather there is an organic connection between an utterance at one time preceding utterances, and the possibilities for extending the conversation.” (Cronen and Lang 1994)

Thus to attend to people in conversations of dreaming and hope from the outset of a first meeting creates emergences which have been illuminating to all present and which open up possibilities from the outset. One of the biggest changes is connected with the emotions of such conversations. The language of hopes and dreams leads to the person around whom the attention is focused, hearing themselves talked about in a different voice. They change emotionally as those who talk about them express different emotions of concern, care and desire for a positive future. The conversation then moves into new patterns of relationship.

The language of future hopes moves also from the deficits of “stopping stealing” which creates no other possible path for the youngster to walk down, to the episodic questioning which brings out the hopes of getting on well at school, having friends, being safe and out of trouble. Through the episodic questioning the youngster and the interviewer discover what abilities are already there, and by going into details of successful episodes bring into language and understanding what has made possible these abilities, both relationally and contextually. In this way these abilities become both stories lived and told and often repeated. Within the process of episodic questioning the youngster feels affirmed and his values as a human being are high lighted. There is a change in his moral orders; his obligations, prohibitions, those actions that are possible, those actions that do not matter. Simultaneously there is a change in the emotionality. This difference in language also has the effect of identifying what we are living-into as a context. Once the affirmative identification has taken place the means begin to emerge in the flow of the conversations. Change simultaneously takes place in stories told about identity, actions, moral orders and emotions.

Lightening and shadowing . . . liberating the future and past through each other.

In our searching for futures and future conversations we have stumbled on insights in a variety of voices. We have found light in Morion’s (1994) work connecting with the writings of Bakhtin what we term shadowing conversations. Morion talks about time in terms of the metaphor of shadows. Events in the living of life he talks of a fore shadowing the future. (We are indebted to Morion’s *Narrative and Freedom* for this exciting and interesting aspect of Bakhtin’s and others’ thinking about time.)

Everything that happens casts its shadow into the future. The events of the future are prefigured by events in the present and the past. This is closely paralleled with Dewey's notion of consequences. Thus any action that we may take has its consequences. Those consequences are, as it were, contained in the act. The very moment of the action includes the consequences. Morion talks of this as the fore shadowing of the future. The more fixed the story of the event the more restricted, limiting and narrowing is the shadow that the event casts into the future.

Our practice has been focusing on ways of creating multiple futures. Here we have found a lot of fun in using Morion's notion of side shadowing.

"What is open time? We now come to the core of the concept . . . side shadowing, a way of understanding the plurality of possibilities" (Morion 1994 p 117)

This notion involves moving the light around the event, playing light above, below, moving from one side and then to another. In this process we have been working to create multiple stories such that the event becomes multivocal casting many different shadows into the future.

"Along with an event, we see its alternatives; with each present, another possible present. Sideshadows conjure the ghostly presence of might have beens or might bes . . . the hypothetical shows through the actual and so achieves it own shadowy kind of existence in the text . . . Sideshadowing . . . invites us to inquire into the other possible presents that might have been and to imagine a quite different course of events." (op cit p 118)

Take an example in which a person talks, in a consultation about being fearful, filled with anxiety about the future and unable to move in taking action in a particular direction even though she has decided that it is the right thing. As she describes herself, she speaks in a fearful voice. In the conversation we begin to move the light around. The person talks about events in life which are exceptional and the things that she has done. She describes moving a number of times from one country to another, she describes changing profession twice in life, she describes taking on tasks which are challenging. All this begins to create a story of courage. However as we talk she says that after doing something which looks courageous she always engages in doubt. The conversations about doubt become fascinating. They proceed in a particular way. Whenever she doubts, she then feels challenged and the feeling of being challenged leads to attempting to take on things which she would not normally think about. This side shadowing conversation, or as we prefer to call it, this side lighting conversation leads to a different picture. Together we create an emerging story of abilities of courage and fearlessness which are fed by anxiety and doubt. The anxiety and doubt take on new meanings and foreshadow different futures. Action now becomes something which is connected with fearlessness and courage. Different considerations now become connected with actions in such conversations.

Conversations in which we live in the dreams of the future also have found a place in our work. Here we have taken Morson's notion of back shadowing and used the corollary of his definition to enliven our work. We have used this by joining people in

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a conversation in which they describe living in the future as if it were now. We build that future up in as varied a richness as can be created in the conversation. The conversation is of the future dream but we do it in the present voice. So, for example: "a new job, for example, in which I am working with colleagues, negotiating contracts carefully, keeping free from taking things on which will demand activities which are too engulfing. I am choosing who I work with from among a number of colleagues. They are pleased to work with me . . . we enjoy time planning etc." Then from the envisioned future we look back, we look back at the present, we look back at the past and we talk about how we appreciate them differently. Thus the decision to leave a present job to move into that future vision is appreciated as wisdom when looked at from the back-shadowing perspective. The challenging and suffering experiences of a series of jobs now become the training-schools of resources which I am using in the present of the dream conversation. So the future talk transforms, the present and the past. So we would paraphrase Bakhtin, "you can never predict the future of the past".

We prefer to replace Morson's shadows with light. So we talk about fore lighting, side lighting and back lighting. The influence of light on these conversations is fruitful in our therapeutic and other conversations.

Another concept we have found useful in developing conversations and abilities for the future is that of voices. All of us hear multiple voices, some are very loud and imperative, others soft and gentle, others silent and are apparently not listened to, although probably have a great deal of influence through their silence. Some give us affirmation and are proud of what we do, others would disapprove. Often we will interview the voice of the future and create a context of relationships around the dream or hope of the future, and how that passage will be made easier and who will approve or disapprove. Through developing a future voice the pathway to the future becomes a possibility for people to walk down. In situations of child sexual abuse we have interviewed the perpetrator speaking with the voice of the child he has abused to create relational empathy in his future interactions with the child. This way of interviewing also brings out new identities and abilities of the person being interviewed. A number of men in this situation have told us that they have got to know themselves through their daughter's view of them. They have begun to understand the stories that are told about them and the abilities they have been demonstrating. New hopes and dreams arise out of these interviews in which the men can see different ways of relating by beginning to understand the effect their actions have had on others.. The shortest route to know oneself is through the stories others tell of you or through the detour of the other.

"The shortest route from self to self is through the other . . . the self is never enough, is never sufficient unto itself, but constantly seeks out signs and signals of meaning in the other." (Kearney 1996)

Imaginings . . . "Imagination is more useful than knowledge" —Einstein

Imagining is the stuff of which we humans are made. The power of fantasy, the creativity and expansive nature of dreams. The ability to free ourselves from constraints. These are the flows of future conversations. To have been introduced to the notion of

future questions through the work of Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin has created for us and our clients lives our wishes never led. Our appreciation and thanks go to them as we salute their birthdays and the celebration of the twenty five years of their centre. They opened up pathways we are still exploring and developing.

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