

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy  
Dulwich Centre, Australia  
E-learning program

**FINAL PROJECT**

**“FINDING A MEANING”: NARRATIVE WORK WITH KATE**

**Papaioannou Hara**

**Thessaloniki**

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This project presents narrative practices that have been used in therapeutic work with Kate, a young girl who struggles with the “no meaning sense”, according to the name she has given to her problems. An externalizing conversation, a discussion based on the “failure map” and a remembering conversation are presented here. Basic conclusions concerning the work that has taken place and some thoughts about ways to continue therapy are also discussed.

## **A) Introduction**

Kate is a 15 year old girl, at the first grade of senior high school.

Her father called me last February, asking me to see her and help her with her difficulties: bad mood, self – traumatism, eating problems.

Kate is an excellent student, she plays the violin and she speaks two languages. She loves mathematics and painting (she is interested in studying at the School of Fine Arts).

Her father, Costas, is a Health Visitor and has a very demanding job, concerning the hours he has to spend at work. Her mother, Dimitra, is a teacher in high school.

Kate's sister, Helen, is two years older than her and she struggles with juvenile diabetes, since she was a little child.

In order to honor her, I asked Kate which way she would pick up to introduce herself in such an occasion. This is what she wrote to me: *"My name is Kate and I think that I am not something really special. They tell me that I don't have confidence, but I really think I am not really special. I know I have good friends, I now know I can rely on them. This is really important to me. I also know that I now can approach people easier. I love painting because it helps me forget problems. I want to be a painter..."*

## **B) Our first externalizing conversation**

### **Giving a name**

I have to mention that in our first meeting, Kate seemed really pressed and sad. She was crying a lot and talking a little.

We had trouble giving a name to what she is going through, since her answers were full of "don't knows" and long spaces of complete silence.

Trying to describe what is happening, she referred to "bad mood", "crying a lot without a reason", "not being able to concentrate", "cutting herself", "many kilos that have been lost", "difficulties in opening herself and coming close to people".

I have to mention that all Kate's descriptions concerning the problem were pretty internalized (Carey et al, 2002). I tried to show her that I am pretty

curious to listen to all the details and find out together with her the ways that all these things function (White, 2007). But the truth is that Kate was pretty hesitant in this first meeting and, perhaps, even unwilling.

During our second meeting, she was surprised to listen to me summarizing her statements. She was impressed by the fact that I used her own words to summarize (this was something I deliberately emphasized by telling her again and again *“these are your own words”*) looking only a little bit in my notebook. She didn't expect me to think that her exact statements are important, to have read them again before the meeting and to even remember most of them by heart. She told me *“I was expecting you would start telling me what to do now, since I already talked to you about my problems last time”*. This was an opportunity for us to have a little talk about narrative therapy, which I think Kate found really interesting and revealing (White, 1997).

After summarizing was completed, I asked Kate: *“Now if you wanted to give a name to all this thing you are going through, which would that be?”*. Her answer, after a few minutes of thinking, was *“life has no meaning”*. I stayed to that, since it seemed to be a pretty experience – near definition (as one could tell from her non – verbal expressions, as well) (Sliep, 1998).

### **Mapping and evaluating the effects of the problem**

Kate firstly described that the sense of no meaning is stronger when she has to face a stressing condition concerning school, violin exams and language learning exams. So, when I asked her *“do you think that anxiety for school, violin and language exams cooperate with the sense of no meaning”*, I got a positive answer. She chose to deal with this cooperation later and focus on *“no meaning sense”* for now.

Trying to describe the effects of the problem, Kate referred to many things she had already told me during our first meeting. But now, all these things were not just many different problems disconnected from one another, but, instead, they were all put under the *“umbrella”* of the *“no meaning”* sense. This was an important understanding for Kate, according to her own reflections.

These were some of the effects of the problem that Kate referred to: *“When this sense of no meaning gets me, I cannot open myself to others...”, “I have the sense that others don't think anything nice about me...”, “I cry a lot...”, “I don't talk to my parents...”, “I have troubles studying....”, “I blame myself...”*.

Kate, as expected, stated that she is not ok with all these consequences, she clearly took a negative position on all these outcomes.

Surprisingly, Kate had two things to mention, when I asked her if there are any positive effects that the sense of no meaning brings into her life: *“I think that losing all these kilos was positive..... Because I want to be really skinny... I don’t want to be more than 43 kilos....”*.

It was the first time that cutting came into the discussion, as another positive effect of the sense of no meaning. Kate told me: *“when I cut myself, I feel relieved... A burden goes away...I manage to feel something...”*. I felt really weird to hear from Kate that cutting is something that she holds precious for now, that she finds it really helpful and that she wouldn’t want us to deal with it for now. She also told me that she knows that cutting is a fashion among the girls of her age, but for her this is not at all the case. *“For me there is a deeper meaning..... and I get angry, when I see a girl cutting herself just for the love of a boy....”*. Anyway, I respected her will to leave cutting aside for now and we decided to come back later.

### **Justifying the evaluation**

After summarizing the negative consequences, I told Kate that I would like to know anything that would help me understand why what this sense of no meaning brings in her life is not ok for her. These are some of her exact words that I wrote down: *“Because I want to find a meaning and to have goals..... Because I want to be happier.....I want to be able to understand if the other person loves me and why, instead of thinking all the time that I only give to people and I get nothing....Because I want to be more confident....they keep telling me that I don’ t believe in me enough”*.

I asked Kate how it is for her to listen to herself describing all these things that are important for her. She told me that it was nice to realize what was just said, but she still didn’t know “how to get there”, which was the main problem. Closing this session, we agreed to cooperate in order to investigate all these “hows”.

### **C) An opening to the alternative story**

I asked Kate to tell me a story about something that happened, in which she managed to keep the problem away and to have all these things that are important to her close to her (being happier and more confident, being sure that the other person loves her, finding a meaning) (Carey et al, 2003).

Kate, with her eyes full of tears, narrated an incident that had happened some weeks ago: It was Friday night and she was all alone in her room, having a really bad mood, crying and thinking again that she needs to lose weight, that nobody really likes her. At that time, her best friend, Judy, called her and asked

her to go for a walk. She decided to do so. They walked around, they took something to eat, they were laughing at the pairs in love (since it was Valentine's Day) and they were just fooling around. They even got an ice-cream and Kate ate it without feeling any guilt about it. She told me that it was a nice and warm evening, even though it was winter, so they sat outside with a cola by hand and they kept laughing and laughing....

At this point, I have to say that Kate kept giving me details about what happened that evening and smiling (maybe for the first time since we had started working together).

A crucial, I think, question I asked Kate was: *"How come you accepted the invitation from Judy, although you were not feeling well that moment? What made this acceptance possible?"* (Denborough, 2006). Kate told me that she thought that going out with a friend would cheer her up and that especially Judy has her way to make her feel better. She told me that her friend wants to become a psychologist and that she has the ability to understand people. From that point a very touching re-remembering conversation began concerning Kate's relationship to Judy, which brought on the surface significant matters about feelings of trust and sharing among the two girls. I am not going to refer in detail to this at this point, since there was another remembering conversation that took place at a next session and that was even more touching and significant, according to my opinion and Kate's as well.

#### **D) Thickening the alternative story**

This sparkling moment in Kate's near past was an important path to drive ourselves closer to the core of the alternative story.

Despite the fact that, with a second look, I feel that the scaffolding of the questions could have been more pertinent, significant matters came up.

Asking Kate *"Does the fact that, thanks to this particular event, you put the sense of no meaning aside for several hours shows something about what is important for you?"* (White, 2007).

Kate answered that she is a person that enjoys company, that she wants to be able to count on her friends, that she wants to be close to people. She told me that her values have to do with mutuality in relationships and her dreams have to do with having around her friends to whom she offers and from whom she gets recognition and acceptance without criticism. She went on to tell me that she is dreaming of having these qualities, especially acceptance without criticism, in her relationship with her parents too.

I asked her for another story linked to all these that are precious for her. She told me that when she revealed to Judy everything about cutting, Judy told her: "You must not be ashamed! There is nothing to be ashamed of!" Afterwards, she just hugged her! This moment was really important for Kate, because she felt that she was not being judged, only supported.

When I asked her if she, herself, is like that as a friend I was surprised to hear that Kate had no answer. She couldn't say much about her own abilities to be a good friend, she didn't seem to appreciate her role in friendship. This would come back in conversation again later.

I believe that although several things concerning the alternative story came out, it was yet thin; the most vivid part was still missing. I didn't feel that it was yet mature for us to give a name to the alternative story. In the sessions to come more pieces of the preferred self - puzzle would be added.

#### **E) A conversation about eating problems following the failure map**

The conversation I had with Kate about her eating problems was very interesting.

Her initial request was to manage to "stop thinking about food, calories and ways to lose weight". At the beginning, her refers were pretty internalized: "*I am so stuck with those thoughts, I cannot find other ways than vomiting*". We discussed about all the things that these thoughts are stealing from her: She told me that these thoughts are there most of the day, that she doesn't eat anything in the morning and, therefore, she gets dizzy at school, that when she goes out with her friends, she cannot enjoy herself, because she worries about finding ways to hold herself from eating. She complained that her throat aches because of the continuous vomits and that her period stopped the last five months.

She evaluated all these effects in her life as mostly negative. The positive effect was that she lost some weight. Trying to justify her evaluation, Kate told me: "*I want my freedom back, I want to get rid of all this pressure*".

I asked Kate "*if you had to describe all these thoughts that trouble you like a human being, what kind of human being would this be? A man or a woman? How would he or she look like?*" (White, 2004).

Kate told me that it would be *a bonny woman*. We decided to refer to all these thoughts as a bonny woman from now on.

We then talked about the bonny woman's intentions and the tricks she uses to get Kate in trouble. She told me that this woman keeps telling her that she has to vomit each time she overcomes the allowed calories (600 calories per day),

that she has to be less than 43 kilos in order to be beautiful, that she has to endure starving in order to gain the body she is dreaming of, that she must look just like her (the bonny woman).

I asked Kate *“what do you think that this bonny woman wants from you?”*, so that intentions are given to this woman, which could be in contrast with Kate’s intentions and hopes for freedom. Kate told me that, firstly, the bonny woman wants her to be slim and beautiful, but, on the other hand, she wants to succeed this by pressuring her. The truth is that I found these two woman’s contradictory goals pretty hard to handle. I decided to just accept Kate’s feeling of sharing a common goal with the bonny woman (being slim) and search for stories of resistance to the woman’s pressure (White, 2004).

She told me that, in order to resist to the woman’s needs, she sometimes speaks to herself saying: *“try to avoid vomiting; your throat will ache again. Just try to count the calories and avoid certain kinds of food”*.

At the next session, Kate told me that she tried not to vomit, since the pain in the throat had become really intense. But she was still feeling pressured by the bonny woman, who was not making her vomit any more, but she kept on telling her to count her bites, to think about food all the time, to remain starved until late at noon, so that she can eat more at night, to always be afraid that she might gain weight.

I asked Kate *“Can you remember some hours or days that this pressure was not that hard? What happened then?”* (Hutton, 2008). Kate told me that the pressure was not that hard when she was painting. The conversation that followed took us from the landscape of action to the landscape of identity: it was the first time to discuss what painting really means to her and how it is linked to her knowledge about herself, abilities, values, intentions, hopes, dreams and commitments. These are some of her exact words:

*“Painting is one of the few things that please me this period. I feel relieved when I paint. I express my feelings... It’s better than talking....Especially when I am done with a painting, even though sometimes I don’ t like it, I feel like I have done something....A few days ago, I was asked from school to gather some schoolmates and paint the walls.... It was a really nice procedure and everyone was happy...”*

At my question *“which is the painting’s place in your dreams?”*, Kate talked to me for the first time about her dream to succeed in the School of Fine Arts. I also asked her *“I wonder if painting could be a way for you to find a meaning?”* (after

reminding her our initial conversation about *the no meaning sense*). She told me that it would probably be one.

I summarized her ways of resistance to the woman's needs and intentions and we close the session. Afterwards, we didn't see each other for a long time, since it was summer vacation. After summer, Kate told me in our first meeting that her eating problems had been almost totally faced during vacation. She was happy to tell me that the crucial reason for this was Annie, a cousin of her who leaves in Germany and with whom Kate spent all her summer together. A really touching remembering conversation began, to which I will refer in the next chapter.

#### **F) A touching remembering conversation**

Actually, this conversation was not "planned". It "came up" while trying to continue the "failure map" conversation described above. As already mentioned, Kate told me that her summer vacations was the only period during which she managed to think less about calories, to vomit fewer times, although the voice of the "bonny woman" was strongly recommending her to do so. While searching together what helped this "unique outcome", Kate could initially think only about the absence of school anxiety. But I think that we both had the feeling that there was something more (and probably more important) to be said. So, only after a few moments of silence and without a question about an important figure taking place, Kate told me that probably the "golden key" (these are her own words) during this period was Annie.

In my question "*in which way did Annie contribute to these steps you made this period?*" (Carey et al, 2002), Kate responded that Annie is very social, that her sociability helped her get in touch with other young people, go out and, so, think less about food. Kate also told me that Annie said to her that she needs not to lose more weight, because she is just beautiful. At this point I asked Kate "*I think that there must have been other times as well that you heard from other people that your body is OK. What was so different about hearing it from K's lips?*". Her answer was that she totally trusts Annie, that she always says what she thinks and that she is sincere. The discussion that followed in the landscape of identity about trust and sincerity was really precious. Moreover, Kate told me that Annie herself has a really "cool attitude" (again her own words) towards eating (according to Kate's descriptions, Annie has a nice body, despite her "cool" attitude), which Kate seemed to be envy of. It seems that this cool attitude worked as an example for Kate during these vacations. The discussion that came next about what this "cool attitude" that both girls shared during this period and seemed to be helpful could mean about new steps that Kate might take in the future was precious as well.

Proceeding in the remembering conversation, I asked Kate about these things in her that Annie appreciates (White, 1988). Kate seemed to have a hard time answering. I asked her to close her eyes and imagine me having Annie on her own next to me and asking her to tell me some things about what she loves in Kate. I also asked her to imagine what her face would look like or her voice would sound like. Kate finally told me that Annie would answer that she is really trustworthy, that she is not judgmental and that she is sensitive. Another discussion in the landscape of identity came up. I must say that it was the first time hearing Kate saying “good things” about herself, although I have really tried many times. She also sounded a little proud for the type of friend she manages to be towards Annie. Moreover, trust came up to be a shared value for the two girls, which was revealing to be seen by Kate. She told me that, closing her eyes, she imagined Annie to be smiling, to be happy and nostalgic when talking about her. As for me, in my imagination, Annie was already sitting there, being an outsider witness for Kate’s steps! (White, 2007).

Finally, I would like to note that Kate was really touched while having this remembering conversation. Most of the times her eyes were full of tears, another sign that she holds her relationship with Annie precious.

#### **G) Conclusions**

- Only one part of the work that has been done with Kate was presented above. There were other interesting conversations as well, such as a discussion about Kate’s complains about not having enough attention from her parents through the absent but implicit map, an externalizing conversation about school anxiety etc.
- I think that the most vivid part of these conversations is lost in the context of a written project, compared to the real session, since the eyes, the expression, the face cannot be seen. I have to mention that Kate is very expressive; therefore many things were said through non-verbal communication.
- I think that the next steps at work with Kate should be heading at the following direction: ***We should find a thread to tie up all the small pieces of the preferred self, in order to thicken even more the alternative story, by moving always back and forth from the landscape of action to the landscape of identity. At this point, there is plenty of material to build up the preferred story: We have all her abilities, values, believes, hopes, dreams, commitments discussed at different sessions and through different maps (trust, recognition, acceptance without criticism), her stories of resistance to the bonny woman, her stories of linking with Judy and Annie, her connection with what painting means to her. Now, maybe all these pieces***

*should be connected to a larger puzzle, in order to find a more central theme in the alternative story. Documenting these different steps of therapy might help as well (Newman, 2008).*

- **Moreover, maybe a step could be made if we could investigate the ways in which all Kate's knowledge about "perfect body", "perfect student", "perfect relationships" is linked to social norms and social knowledge.**
- ***Finally, I would like to dare to make a hypothesis concerning the path that could take us to the steps described in this paragraph. I believe that "the failure map" could probably offer us the "thread" we are looking for, the opportunity to navigate through all Kate's "musts" and find out even more interesting and touching stories, full of resistance to the norms and saturated of the preferred self (White, 2006).***

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