

# The 4th Australian Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference

Naomi Spencer

**What a blessing and delight it was attending the** Narrative Therapy and Community work conference in Canberra from the 8th to the 10th April 2002. One of 230 registrants, I had the experience of being 'spoiled' and extended in a very full program held over three days, from breakfast time to an evening session. When Michael White, the Australian founder of narrative therapy, asked me on the second day of the conference how it was, it occurred to me that it was indeed a pleasure to switch from being therapist and to become one among many in a large community of care. An essential element in avoiding burnout!

The setting of the National Convention Centre, while not 'politically correct' (a large air-conditioned box!), is certainly congenial. Centrally located, it is very accessible by public transport. The refreshments were nutritious and yummy. The venue has a diversity of rooms and outdoor spaces. Over the road is a wonderful park with hours of walks around Lake Burley Griffin, one of Canberra's beauty spots. The conference opened with a welcome to the land of the Ngunnawal people. Then Dawn Casey, Director of the Australian National Museum, encouraged us to visit this museum, which presents stories about the 'ordinary' Australian.

On each of the three mornings, there was a presentation by inspirational overseas speakers. Dr Ken Hardy, family therapist and Director of the Centre for Children and Families at Risk at the Ackerman Institute for the Family, New York, addressed the topic 'In our own voices: Telling our stories'. His particular interest was in the Native American reclamation of their cultural heritage. From the personal to the political ... Kiwi Tamasese, Warihi Campbell and Charles Waldegrave from the Family Centre, Wellington, New Zealand, told a story of commitment and hope, 'In From the Dark', drawing on their work with distressed families who were on the way to taking charge of their lives. On the last day, Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, authors of the popular book, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, reflected with us on the personal and professional implications of taking seriously narrative ideas, values and practices. They challenged us to consider ethics, accountability, relationship, and remembering what really matters in our practice. After the main sessions, it was then very encouraging and inspiring to be able to choose from a rich variety of workshops. Before and after lunch, participants had the choice of attending one out

of six workshops. To conclude the day, we all returned to the main auditorium, where in the large group we heard an encouraging story from other narrative therapy practitioners. And although narrative therapy is widely known, its unique outcomes and processes are not as well understood!

We were also able to organise and/or attend breakfast interest groups, which was a wonderful way to meet like-minded colleagues. I was able to advertise one around the topic 'How our Christian faith informs and enriches our practice'. I was glad to meet strangers with whom I shared so much. One of the group has volunteered to assist us to stay in regular contact, because we want to be a reflecting community of care — collegial support has certainly made a difference to my professional survival and thriving over the years.

As a lone worker in several small villages in rural NSW, I was pleased to be able to enter so closely into the experiences of many other workers. At the workshops we heard about practice details and sometimes cutting edge therapeutic responses to numbers of recurring themes that therapists manage. I was thrilled to enter into the stories, delights and difficulties of those who 'risked' speaking personally at these workshops. Underlying the practice of narrative therapy are some core beliefs and values, including social justice, equity, mutuality, participation, industrial democracy, self empowerment, trust and a non judgmental stance. These values also inform my professional social work practice. As one who cherishes pertinent training and supervision, I was privileged to participate in a conference such as this one. I am grateful that my employer, a non government organisation and a charity, supports my attendance at these forums. I heard from a number of workers that their workplace gave them the time, but no other assistance, to attend.

Two international narrative therapy conferences are planned in the middle of next year, one in Liverpool, UK, followed the next month by one in the USA. Congratulations to the Canberra collective who had obviously put so much care and thought into planning and enabling the conference to proceed. It was excellent. ©

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