

WILBUR THE WORRIER BECOMES WILBUR THE WARRIOR: A TEACHING STORY FOR NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPISTS

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This story from narrative family therapy practice illustrates the process of developing a counter-story for a problem story using David Epston's version of narrative practices. The problems are anorexia and anxiety in an 8-year-old boy. This story can be read together with the companion article ("Learning How to Counter-Story in Narrative Therapy," this issue, pp. 58–71), which describes and explains the ideas and practices used by the therapist. This is an abridged version and the full version can be found at www.narrativeapproaches.com and at www.yourstory.org.nz.

One Monday morning late in the New Zealand summer of 2010 I opened my inbox to find this message:

Hi Kay,

You were recommended to me by Dr. Moiva, who is a specialist in eating disorders. My son Wilbur, who is now 8, has suffered from anorexia since the age of 5. I am hoping you might be able to offer Wilbur some counseling? I would appreciate it if you would give me a call.

Thanks,

Liz

A boy with anorexia since the age of 5? I had worked with many a young person carrying this most frightening of diagnoses, but an 8-year-old with a 3-year history? Incredulous and with trepidation, I picked up the phone. Liz's voice began to crack as any loving parent's would as she told the tale of how ordinary childhood worries had slowly become more extreme and then assumed the voice of anorexia. Her sorrow rose above and beyond her words as she told me how Wilbur, desperate to shed weight from his already slender frame, had begun to run in circles around the dining room table until he dropped to the floor in exhaustion. Despair attended her sorrow as she told me that Wilbur had also talked about taking his own life.

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We made an appointment for the following week. Liz explained that her husband would also come even if it meant canceling important meetings. I learned that Liz and her husband, Doug, were both senior research scientists. Devoted parents, they had first consulted with a psychiatrist. Consequently, Wilbur was assessed twice, including an assessment in his school environment. The psychiatrist concluded that Wilbur was progressing well and needed no further treatment, but Sue and Doug were unconvinced.

SESSION ONE

It was 11:03 a.m. My mobile phone rang:

Hi Kay, this is Liz, Wilbur's mum. I'm really sorry, we're running late. Wilbur didn't want to come. He's saying there's nothing wrong with him and he doesn't want to meet you. We've been fighting to get him into the car. We're on our way now though.

I had already been approaching our meeting with some trepidation, wondering whether I might be able to help Wilbur and this family, so the news of his reluctance unnerved me even more. I gathered myself together as a professional athlete might do when, minutes before an important game, the team's best player has had to withdraw due to injury. The spring sun had blessed Auckland early this year, and it was an unusually warm day. I went downstairs from my upstairs office to the kitchen, took four glasses from the cupboard, and set them ready on the counter. I heard the door click open. I crossed the waiting room, hand outstretched, as is my way of greeting reluctant young people. I met Wilbur's eyes as he hesitated at the entrance.

"You must be Wilbur, good to meet you. You must be hot after your journey! Would you mind helping me get some water for everyone?"

I glanced fleetingly towards his parents to signal my welcome. On the strength of Wilbur's nod, I ushered him through to the kitchen and placed two of the glasses I had already filled into Wilbur's hands.

"Wilbur, would you mind carrying these upstairs for your parents? You go up and I'll tell you which door to go through when we get there."

Wilbur unwittingly led us up the stairs to our session. I followed closely behind him, keenly aware that any moment he might think better of it.

"Hey, Wilbur, how about you put the glasses on that table over there, one on each side for your parents and then how about you sit here."

I leaned down and picked up my basket bulging with richly colored pencils. "Wilbur, have you ever seen pencils like this before? Have you ever seen colors so bright?" I made a few rough strokes on the paper I also had to hand. Wilbur stared at the bright strokes rippling across the page. He sank onto the cozy carpet in front of the table.

“Wilbur, you can draw as much as you want if you feel like it. How about you listen in as I talk to your parents and just let me know if there is anything you want to say.” Wilbur nodded, as if in a trance, pencil already in hand. Liz and Doug took their seats and looked expectantly towards me. All too aware that unless I found some antidote to Wilbur’s understandable reluctance, the meeting could be over before it had begun, I gleaned my opening words from similar conversations I had had in the past with other young people who had also revolted against the idea that there could be “something wrong with them.”

“Before we begin I need to make sure that you haven’t come to the wrong place.” Doug and Liz looked at one another, then back at me, somewhat bewildered.

“Let me explain. Sometimes when young people are brought along to meet with me they get the idea that there’s something wrong with them and that I am here to help fix them. Very often this is not what parents think, but somehow young people get this idea. I don’t expect you think there’s anything wrong with Wilbur that needs fixing, although I appreciate that you are here because you are worried about him. I want to be sure that you know that I am not a kid fixer. I wouldn’t want you to be talking to the wrong person.”

Through the corner of my eyes I could see that, while Wilbur’s eyes were fixed on the paper, his ears were keenly tuned to my words. Liz and Doug looked baffled. This would certainly not be the opening they had expected. A knowing glance passed between them as they seemed to make the link I had hoped they would make to the phone call a few minutes earlier. Liz exclaimed, “It sounds like we are in the right place then, because we certainly don’t think Wilbur needs fixing.” Doug joined in, “As you said, we are all here together to help. These are not just Wilbur’s worries, they are all our worries as a family.”

Now that the way was clear, I proceeded.

“Liz and Doug, even though I know we are here to talk about what is worrying you all, would it be all right with you if we put that to one side for a few minutes? I ask this because I find that worries often try to take over my conversations with people. As if it’s not enough to worry people in their own homes, those same worries try to gate-crash into this room and try to take over. If it’s okay with you, I would like to know a little bit about Wilbur and his life when the worries are not around. I have a strong feeling that I may be able to discover some things about Wilbur that we can use together to pit against these worries.”

Liz paused, then let out a bemused “Sure.” Doug looked at me, as if hoping I knew where I was going.

“Wilbur, would it be all right with you if I asked your parents some questions about you for a few moments?”

Wilbur’s eyes immediately snapped away from his drawing and locked on mine. As he stared at me with an imperiousness more usual in a courtroom, I became very aware that this young man did not suffer fools gladly.

“If you want, you can just listen in or you might just want to keep drawing.”

Wilbur hesitated, and then gave me a solemn nod of consent before turning his attention back to the paper.

“Liz and Doug, could you please tell me what you think I would come to appreciate and respect about Wilbur if I were to know him as well as you do?”

Liz replied eagerly, “Well, Wilbur is great at thinking out ideas. He thinks of things I would never think of in a million years. Sometimes I just sit with my mouth open in amazement when I hear about some of the inventions he has come up with.”

“Could you tell me a story about one of these inventions that Wilbur has thought up?”

Liz quickly told me of Wilbur’s plans to make a new form of remote-controlled lightweight hovercraft that would rescue people at sea. I had been about to ask more about Wilbur’s intentions to rescue people with his hovercraft when an excited voice cut through my thoughts.

“I would send my hovercraft out when the waves were big so I could help the life savers.”

Quick to make the most of this opportunity, I changed tack. “Wilbur, do you mind if I ask you a question about how you would get your hovercraft out to the people that needed saving? I know about as much about hovercrafts as I do about rugby and that’s not much at all.”

“I know lots about rugby,” Wilbur piped up.

“Do you? Do you play too or do you just like knowing about rugby?”

Before he had a chance to answer, my eyes were alerted to a large number 12 on the back of his shirt—a rugby jersey! “Hey, Wilbur, is that a rugby jersey?” Wilbur proudly nodded. “Could I ask you what team it’s from?”

Wilbur looked at me sidewise, perhaps finding it hard to believe that a sentient being would not recognize an Auckland Warriors rugby jersey. “It’s a Warriors’ jersey!” he said indignantly.

“Hey, I’m sorry, Wilbur, you must think I’m stupid. Do you like the just Warriors or do you like other teams too?”

Wilbur relaxed as he began to take up his role as rugby educator. “I like the Titans, the Broncos, the Cowboys, the Chiefs, the Crusaders, and the Blues.”

“Hey, does that mean you don’t like the All Blacks then?”

A momentary look of scorn crossed Wilbur’s face. “No,” he said with scathing disdain, “of course I like the All Blacks!”

“Your mum said earlier that you are good at remembering a lot of things. Would you mind telling me a little bit about what you know about rugby?”

“I know about Ben Matulino, and Simon Mannering [Warriors rugby players].”

“Really?”

“I know about lots of other sports too.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I know a lot about tennis and fencing because I play those and I do hip-hop skills too at school and swimming so I can be a life saver when I grow up. And I want to play cricket and basketball and golf and soccer.”

Liz chipped in, “Wilbur loves sport and he wants to do all of them. He loves music too. He plays the guitar but wants to start the piano and the flute. We have to tell him that he just can’t do them all at once and that he needs to hold back and try just a couple at a time. It’s a bit like that with all the ideas he has. We have to try and slow him down or they can run away with him.”

“Hey, Wilbur,” I strategically interrupted, “do you think your mum might be right? Do your ideas try to run away with you a little bit sometimes?”

“Yeah, sometimes they take me the wrong way. They took me in the direction of the wrong team.”

I must have looked a little puzzled because Doug took up the baton. “When Wilbur was playing rugby last week he got confused and ran in the wrong direction. It was really distressing for him. It was distressing for all of us because that night after dinner Liz went into the bathroom and found clumps of hair clogging up the sink.”

Liz joined in, her brow furrowed, “We discovered he’d been pulling out his hair. Sometimes he does this when he’s been being too hard on himself.”

Doug gave Wilbur a worried sideways glance, as if checking to see whether he was able to withstand the conversation. Wilbur had seemingly retreated into the world of his drawing. I noticed the stiffness of his body and feared that I might need to steer the conversation elsewhere before long. Reassured by the tenderness of his parents, I decided to proceed a little further.

Doug spoke again now. His voice slowed as if he too was only too well aware that his words needed to be chosen with special care. He included Wilbur, even though his back was turned. Doug said that it had dawned on him that Wilbur’s hair pulling could have had something to do with what had happened at the game. He told me he had asked Wilbur if he was still upset by what had happened at rugby. Wilbur had replied that he thought it was his own fault and that he was “dumb.” Doug had assured Wilbur that he was certainly not dumb, that everyone runs in the wrong direction sometimes, and that he had done the same thing himself as a boy.

“Doug, do you think that maybe the thoughts took Wilbur the wrong way after the game too? Do you think they tricked him into going the wrong way twice?”

“Yes, I think that’s exactly what happened. It’s like Liz said. Wilbur is really clever and has lots of clever ideas but sometimes it’s like the ideas turn into worries and run away with him.”

I looked down at Wilbur. I noticed that his body had slumped somewhat and his hand idly moved across the paper, making only straight lines compared to his previous extravagant forms. “Wilbur, do you think the worry thoughts maybe took you the wrong way after the game too? Did the worry try and tell you that you are dumb when in fact you have lots of ideas and know about rugby and all about Simon Mannerling and Ben Matulino?”

Wilbur looked skeptical. “I don’t know everything about them, just almost everything.”

“Okay,” I relented, “am I right in thinking that you might know nearly everything, or if not nearly everything, then quite a lot?”

“Yeah,” muttered Wilbur.

“Wilbur,” I piped up in a lively voice, hoping I might lift the mood of the room, which seemed to have slumped along with him, “did you know that right there, at that table where you’re sitting now, I talked to another boy once who told me that thoughts kept taking him in the wrong direction too? Can I tell you about him?” Wilbur gave a nod that seemed a little more energetic than his previous nod of consent. “Do you have any idea what the thoughts did to him, Wilbur?” Wilbur shook his head. “The worries made him forget to take his underpants off when he went for his swimming test.” Wilbur stared at me in mild horror.

“When I asked him what had happened he told me that the worry thoughts about the test chased away his concentration. Do you think that maybe his thoughts took him in the wrong direction at the swimming pool just like your thoughts took you in the wrong direction on the rugby field?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Wilbur said, then added, “Did everyone see his pants?”

“I don’t know. But he said he was worried that everyone had seen his pants. Do you think that maybe the worry tried to run away with him a little bit like those dumb thoughts tried to run away with you? Do you think that it’s possible that maybe that’s what happened to him too?”

Wilbur’s eyes narrowed. He seemed to me to be assessing whether I was leading him up the garden path and then thankfully appeared to decide to risk an answer: “I guess.”

Hoping that I could make the most of Wilbur’s responsiveness I asked, “And could you please help me to understand what else these dumb thoughts tell you to do?”

Wilbur was unequivocal: “They tell me to be skinnier. They tell me I will get fat.”

“Wilbur, is this another way the thoughts try and take you in the wrong direction: do they try to tell you that you are fat when you are not, and try to get you to stop eating?”

Wilbur was unable to answer. Instead climbed onto his mother’s lap and buried his head in her chest.

“Wilbur, do you think you have had enough for today? Is it time to go home now?” Wilbur remained still, his face buried.

Liz looked down at him tenderly. “I think so, Wilbur, don’t you?” Liz glanced across at Doug. A look of concern passed between them.

A few days later an e-mail arrived from Liz:

Thanks so much for this morning. On the way home Wilbur asked me, “How is she going to help me lose weight? Is she going to give me a pill or something?” Then he said, “She thinks that me being fat is a distraction for me.” As if she is on the wrong path. I realize now we have a long way to go.

Regards,

Liz

SESSION TWO (ONE WEEK LATER)

This time, Doug brought Wilbur on his own. Wilbur, although a little less wary than the first time we had met, did not offer me a smile in return for mine. Instead, he settled down at the table again and lost himself in examining the colored pencils. I realized quickly that I would need to engage Wilbur through Doug.

“Wilbur, is it okay if I talk to your dad again, like I talked to your mum and dad last time?”

Wilbur didn't answer. He had been on my mind since meeting him the previous week. Thoughts of clumps of hair in the sink and a bright spirit being misled by anxious thoughts entered my dreams. One night I woke with the idea of thoughts being like frightened sheep. It was this dreamy vision that gave me my direction. It also struck me that Doug and Liz, like some other parents I had met, would be excellent co-therapists and without them I might not get very far at all.

“Doug, I have been thinking about what you told me last time about thoughts running away with Wilbur.” Doug looked at me a little bit askance but continued to entertain me. “I found myself thinking about sheep. Do you know the expression ‘sheep worrier’?” Before he could answer, I answered for him, concerned that I might lose the thread of the conversation. Through my therapist's peripheral vision I judged that Wilbur's ears were pricked.

“A ‘sheep worrier’ is a dog that chases sheep. It can worry them so much they just start to run in all directions. They really don't have a clue where they are going and if they are not careful they run right at the fences and get stuck trying to get through them. Doug, what do you think of the idea that the wild thoughts that chase Wilbur are a bit like the wild dogs that chase sheep around—or do you think that this is too crazy an idea?”

Doug seemed to get my drift and took up the baton with the skill of a master therapist. “Yes, I think maybe that's what happens. I know that when I get a bit worried about stuff it's really hard for me to hold onto my thoughts. It's a bit like I can't catch them and then before I know it they are running all over the place. Like sheep, just like you said. So I guess this could be the same for Wilbur.”

“Doug, do you think that when the thoughts are running scared like sheep that they can worry you sick and scare you silly?”

Once again Doug ran with the idea. “Yes, and it's like Wilbur said. If I can stop and concentrate, then I can calm myself down and usually I can find a thought to follow that's better.”

“Doug, I just had an idea. Can I tell you?” By now, Wilbur was looking up, intent on our conversation and seemingly unaware that he was doing so. “Do you know the best way to settle down sheep?”

Doug took a guess. “Do you mean by having a good sheep dog?”

“How did you guess? That's exactly what I was thinking. I was wondering whether Wilbur could train these worry thoughts like a sheep dog would train sheep? I was

wondering if he could calm them down and train them to go where he wants them to go so they can't run away with him so easily."

Confident now that Wilbur would respond, I turned casually towards him. "Hey, Wilbur, can I ask you a question? Would that be okay?" He nodded. "Wilbur, do you think your imagination runs away with you sometimes and goes wild, just like when wild dogs run after sheep and make them wild with worry?"

"Yeah," said Wilbur, "it goes all over the place."

"Do the wild worries send you all over the place sometimes too, a bit like they did at the game the other week?"

"Yeah, I don't want them to do that."

"Wilbur, do you like the idea of being in charge of all the thoughts so that they can't run away and become worry thoughts so easily?"

"Yeah, sometimes they make me late too, and I miss out on things I want to do."

"Would you like to round up the wild worries like a trained sheep dog, stopping them from running all over the place like worried sheep? If you did that maybe could you go in the right direction and get to do the things you wanted to do?"

Wilbur's eyes sparkled at this prospect.

"Wilbur, if you were a sheep dog and you had lots of sheep that ran away from you, all over the place, and they were getting sick with worry, how do you think you might round them up and calm them down?"

Wilbur's imagination came to his aid as he burst out, "I would chase them really hard and bite them if there weren't listening. Then I would lead them to their cage and call the farmer. I would wrestle the sheep into that thing."

"Do you mean a sheep pen?"

"Yeah. I would like to wrestle them too, and nip them and bite them so they do what they are told!"

"That's good to hear! And if you got them to do what they were told, do you think you could have fun with them rather than being scared by them?"

"Yeah!" Wilbur said with a hint of satisfaction.

"I think I can see a problem though with you doing sheep dog training to tame these wild worries, Wilbur. Can you guess what it is?"

Wilbur's brow furrowed before asking: "Is it that I'm not a sheep dog?"

"Yes, exactly! Do you think that you, me, and your Dad could put our heads together and work out another way for you to train the wild worry thoughts?" Wilbur looked slightly disappointed. "I know!" I exclaimed, in such a loud voice that Doug visibly started in his seat. "Wilbur and Doug, can you tell me what you have to do for rugby training? Do you need to train your body lots? What do you need to do?"

Wilbur piped up before his Dad could. "You have to be muscly, skinny, and fast so you can get through the other players and push them away and tackle and not get tackled down to the ground so easily. You need really fast legs."

"Wilbur, do you have fast legs?"

"Yes, really fast," he replied, with a puff of pride.

“Are you the first person in your family to play rugby, Wilbur?”

“No, of course not! My Dad used to play rugby and my big sister played touch.”

“Doug, is this right? Did you play rugby and by any chance did you even pass on your fast legs to Wilbur and his sister?”

Doug again picked up the ball. “Sure do, or did, should I say. My playing days are over, but I played in the First 15s for New Zealand in my late teens. I tried out for the All Blacks before the Tri Nations [an international rugby championship]. Wilbur’s great-granddad on Liz’s side and her father played for Wales way back. I was an okay runner, but I guess Wilbur’s fast legs have come from Liz’s side of the family. I was a halfback, so passing and sidestepping were more important than speed.”

Thrilled that we were on a roll, I kept moving. “Wilbur, did you know that your fast legs came from your mum’s grandfather in Wales?” Wilbur had to admit that this was news to him. “Do you need a strong body to have fast legs? Have you been working at getting your body strong so you can have fast legs for rugby?”

Wilbur considered my rapid-fire questions and responded, “Yes, I need to be faster though and stronger.”

“I don’t know much about rugby, so can you both help me here? I am thinking about how Wilbur can get strong enough to round up the wild worry thoughts and stop them running away with him. I’m not saying that he should try and train them all the time though because they need a bit of freedom to run around. Do you think it is possible that Wilbur might find that, when the worry-thoughts start to do what he tells them, they might decide to become imagination-thoughts instead and help Wilbur with his inventions? Doug, what do you think? If Wilbur trains his body do you think that it might help him to train the wild worries that take over his mind?”

Doug was quick to reply. “I think my rugby training helped me to train my mind when I was about Wilbur’s age, so I am sure it could help Wilbur to do the same thing.” Doug looked over at Wilbur. Wilbur looked back at Doug. “What do you think, Wilbur?” asked Doug. Wilbur’s nod shook his whole chest.

“Great!” I jumped in. “Maybe we have a plan here. Doug, can you tell me what kind of rugby skills might be helpful for Wilbur to train himself in?”

“Well, as I said, I was always a passer, so clearing from the scrum, of course.”

Wilbur piped up, “Dad, you were like a sheep dog weren’t you?”

“A sheep dog?” I enquired. “Has your dad had training as a kind of rugby sheep dog too?”

“Yeah,” said Wilbur, “you had to get the ball and pass it, didn’t you, Dad?”

Doug chuckled, “Yeah, I guess I was a bit of a sheep dog.”

“Doug, are there any other rugby skills that might be helpful for Wilbur in his training to become faster and stronger?”

“Fending,” said Doug. “Finding a gap too.”

Wilbur added, “And dodging and controlling the ball.”

“Okay. Now there is something else I don’t know for sure but I strongly suspect. Am I right in thinking, Doug and Wilbur, that you need courage to play rugby? I

mean, if you have a kid who looks like a tank coming towards you as fast as his legs can carry him, do you need to be brave? Doug, did you need to be brave when you played rugby?"

Doug gazed ahead, seemingly reaching back into his memories. "I certainly did."

"Wilbur, have you been training yourself in courage at the same time as you've been training for fending and passing and finding a gap?" He admitted that he had had to be brave. "Wilbur, have I remembered rightly, did you tell me last time that your favorite rugby team was the Warriors?" Wilbur nodded emphatically. "Do you think that you could be about to train yourself from being Wilbur the Worrier into Wilbur the Warrior?"

As Wilbur's glance caught Doug's eye, they laughed. "What you think about that, Wilbur?" Doug said through his smile. "Are you about to become Wilbur the Warrior?"

SESSION 3 (TWO WEEKS LATER)

The moment I set eyes on Wilbur, I had a strong suspicion that I was in the presence of a warrior more than a worrier. Somehow he looked more robust. My suspicions were confirmed as I witnessed Wilbur bouncing up the stairs two at a time to reach my room on the second floor. Before the opportunity could slip away, I launched into the session. I directed a question at Doug, knowing that I might have only one opportunity and I needed to increase the odds of my question finding its aim.

"Doug, could you tell me if I am imagining things, or is there a little bit more warrior in Wilbur than there was the last time we met?"

Doug caught my question in midair and ran with it. "I think the warrior has been growing in the last week because of the training. Wilbur, can I tell Kay what I have seen?" Wilbur nodded. "On the weekend we took a rugby ball, met up with some other boys, and played touch rugby. I noticed that Wilbur was running between the two players. He used to run backwards or run away from people and now he can find a gap. I think that is a very useful and important warrior skill."

"Really!" Noticing that Wilbur's ears were pricked to his father's words, I decided that this was an opportunity to embroider this story of emerging warrior-dom. I began with a touch of intrigue. "Wilbur, I have a hunch about what might be going on here. Would it be all right with you if I shared my hunch with you? I might be wrong so would you put me right if I have gone wrong?" Wilbur looked at me expectantly but with a hint of skepticism. "Wilbur, has the warrior started to take control of your legs and send you in the right direction?"

"Yeah!"

This was a moment to be seized. I had found a gap between the two players in our conversation: the problem story and the embryonic counter-story. "Wilbur, if your warrior has been starting to control your legs so that you are now going in the right direction, do you think that it has been starting to take control of the wild

worries too? Has the warrior been rounding up the wild worries so they go in the right direction, not the wrong direction?"

"Yep. And the warrior helped me at Adrenalin Forest [an adventure theme park in Wellington] too."

"Really? Are you saying that the warrior doesn't hang out with you only on the rugby field? Are you saying that your warrior is brave enough to go to Adrenalin Forest?"

"Yep. I even went on the Freak Fall, and I wasn't even scared!"

"Why is it called the 'Freak Fall'?"

"Because," Wilbur said, with some authority, "you fall down and it's kind of freaky. Well, for some people it might be freaky, but I was scared only for the first bit and then the freaky feelings went away."

"The freaky feelings went away! How did you get them to go away?"

Wilbur informed me that he had been on it before and realized what the feeling was like.

"Ahhhhh. Right! Hold on, do you mind if I write this down. It seems very important to me." Wilbur willingly consented. "Okay, I'm writing this down: 'Been on it before so knew what it was like.'"

"Wilbur," I explained as I stabbed the pencil onto the page for effect, "are you onto something here? Do you think you may have discovered something about the freaky feelings that you might not have known before? Have you discovered that their bark is worse than their bite?"

Wilbur nodded. "I guess," he said.

"Wilbur, what do you think about this discovery you have made that the freaky feelings are dressed up worries? Do you think it might be like a Warrior's Knowledge? Are you becoming wise like a warrior as well as strong like a warrior?"

"Yeah!" He nodded intently.

"Doug, what do you think? Is Wilbur becoming warrior-wise as well as warrior-strong?"

"Yes, I think he is. In fact this morning I saw a little battle between the worrier and the warrior."

"Really?"

"Yes, I saw it before Wilbur went to tennis today."

"A battle?"

"Yes, there was a battle going on. That's what it looked like to me. And the warrior won against the worrier this morning."

"The warrior won! Hey, Wilbur, high five!" I said, as I held up my hand to Wilbur. Wilbur raised his foot instead of his hand. "Okay, high foot," I said instead. We all laughed. "Really, Wilbur! Did your warrior win against the worrier?"

"Yes," Wilbur replied, exaggerating his words, "the Waaaarrior won against the Woooorier."

"Wilbur," I ventured, "do you think your waaaarrior and the woooorier have changed places?"

Wilbur considered my question, looked at me a little wearily, and uttered a “maybe.”

It struck me that perhaps Wilbur needed to be “rested.” With my encouragement Wilbur curled up in the chair much as he had done in the previous session. “Doug, could I ask you a little about what you said earlier about being scared of heights?”

“Sure,” Doug said, a little surprised by my change in direction.

“Doug, how scared of heights would you say you are? An enormous amount, a middle amount, or a small amount?”

“Oh, a huge amount.”

A voice piped up from the curled up cat-like Wilbur on the easy chair. “Dad, you are even too scared to go on the climbing wall.”

“Is that right, Doug?” Doug admitted that this was so. It turned out that Doug had always had a fear of heights. Earlier in our conversation I had tucked away an idea. If Wilbur took to it, I was confident it would help propel his warrior training forwards. “Doug, do you think you might be in need of a bit of warrior training too?”

Wilbur looked up and scrutinized his father. Doug agreed with slight embarrassment that indeed he did.

“Would you agree, Doug, that Wilbur may be a little ahead of you with his warrior training, at least as far as the freaky feelings about height go?”

“Yeah, I could help you, Dad.”

“Would you, Wilbur?” Doug kindly asked. “I’m a bit scared, but I think I could do with some help.”

A moment later, Wilbur had conscripted Doug into “warrior training” at the local climbing wall that very weekend, the weekend of Doug’s birthday.

A few days later I received an e-mail from Liz:

Hi Kay,

You have been fantastic for Wilbur and the family. Part of me does not think Wilbur is out of the woods yet. One week ago, I accidentally left my scales out because we are having a room painted. He got on the scales before going to school. From then on it was mayhem! He was out the front of the house, screaming at the top of his voice as we walked down the road “I am so fat!!! I am going to tell everyone at school I am so fat!!!” I just told him it was his worrier trying to tell him he was fat. I did not show him how distressed his behavior was making me. He was a lot calmer when I picked him up from school, and appeared to have had a good day (even though I had a terrible day thinking about it). So, yes, Wilbur has improved a lot, but I hold my breath thinking, When is all of this going to resurface?

SESSION 4 (ONE WEEK LATER)

Just as Liz had not “shown her distress” to Wilbur, I too had withheld the quickening of my own worry at the reappearance of the specter of anorexia. Fear could have taken me in the direction of doubting the ground we had gained. Instead, I

seized my therapist's courage and gambled on my hunch that as long as Wilbur's courage continued to outpace fear, despite its recent reappearance, anorexia's hold over him would continue to slip.

I asked my first question almost before they had touched down on their respective seats. The line of my inquiry was contrary to what they might have expected. "Wilbur," I asked, "were you somehow able to pass on some of your courage to your dad so that he could dodge the freaky feelings or did they get the better of him? I hope you didn't have to take him home again on his birthday?"

Wilbur smirked and then a gravity took hold of him as he declared, "Dad did it! I know he was scared because I could see his legs wobbling, but you did it, didn't you, Dad?"

I looked at Doug. His face had tightened at the recollection of the ordeal, although at the same time I could see his pleasure at his son's exclamation. This had indeed been a testing birthday event, and even if it had been born of a concern to accompany his son through his own ordeal, this was no fake performance. Father had joined son in rendering himself courageous.

"Doug, since climbing the wall with Wilbur's help on your birthday, have you discovered anything about fear that you either didn't already know or that you had forgotten? For instance, did you find that the fear's bark was worse than its bite, or that once you had made the decision to climb, the fear had less of a grip on you?"

Doug paused reflectively. "Yes," he replied, "there have been times in my life when I have been so scared of heights that I've missed out on things that I would have loved to have done, such as going on the great New Zealand mountain walks with friends. At other times I have the fear, and although it's still been scary, it hasn't always been as bad as I'd imagined. So, yes, its bark has often turned out to be worse than its bite. I guess it's true that worries can be pretty powerful and can convince you they're real when they are not always as real as they seem. I knew in my head that there was nothing to be scared of climbing the wall, but it took doing it to really believe it."

"Doug, if you hadn't tested the climbing worry, do you think it could have become freakier and freakier?"

Doug, noticing Wilbur's intensity, adeptly passed my question to him. "Wilbur, what do you think?"

Wilbur pulled a face before delivering a home truth. "You know, Dad, I think you should have done it sooner. The worries started freaking you out."

"Wilbur, do you think the worries turned your dad into a worrier, and then, in the nick of time, he turned himself into a warrior, like you did?"

"Yeah," he said, once again exaggerating his words, "he was a Wooooorier and now he's a Waaaarrior."

"Doug, in any way would you say that Wilbur's taking himself away from a worrier direction and towards a warrior direction has helped you to do the same? Or am I making too much of this?" Doug was quick to reassure us both that Wilbur

had indeed inspired him. “Wilbur, do you have any advice for your dad if any other worries start turning into freaky feelings and try to turn him back into a worrier?”

Wilbur was ready with his counsel. “Yep, Dad, you just need to tell yourself that worries are liars and that you can be a warrior.”

Confident that Doug was with me every step of the way, I asked Wilbur, “Would you be willing to coach your dad, like your rugby coach coaches you, if you noticed that there were any freaky feelings worrying him?” Wilbur nodded so hard he looked as if his head would fall off. “Doug, would you be willing to let Wilbur coach you?” Doug agreed to this arrangement, and, to ritualize it, I asked them to shake hands. They did.

We had all agreed that we would wait to see how Wilbur’s warrior-dom was getting on before scheduling another session. A month later I e-mailed to check in. Liz e-mailed back to say,

Wilbur is in such an amazing space at the moment, we are not sure if he needs to see you again in the near future. The warrior has been winning and there have been lots of positive things in the last month. His doctor is happy because he is gaining weight and eating well. He’s not talking about being fat and needing to be thin anymore. He’s a much happier child all round. We are so delighted.

Eighteen months later, at the beginning of August 2012, Wilbur asked his parents if he could meet me again after a burglary at the family home led to reemergence of the anxiety and perfectionism but thankfully not the anorexia. We needed to meet only one more time¹. A few weeks after this final session, on August 22, 2012, I received an e-mail from Liz:

Thanks so much, Kay, we are so appreciative of the work you have done with Wilbur. The burglar worries seemed to have fallen away altogether. Not only that, but Wilbur entered a guitar competition on the weekend for the New Zealand Modern School of Music. He went into three different components of the competition. He got two golds and one bronze, and won the trophy for the best guitar player in New Zealand for his age group. His confidence is on a high. . . . For the first time in ages he is letting us take photos of him (with his medal, of course). Wilbur is in such an amazing space at the moment, we’re not sure if he needs to see you again.

As with most of the young people I meet, and especially those who have touched me the most or whom I find most remarkable, thoughts of Wilbur would flit across my mind, and I would wonder how he was getting on. Had anorexia returned? I hardly dared to entertain the thought. Then with some trepidation in September 2015 I e-mailed Liz and Doug to ask them if I could write about Wilbur and our work together and of course asked for news of their son.

¹This session describes a second stage of Wilbur’s warrior/courage training in which we drew on ancestral stories. It is a story in its own right. The session is included in the unabridged version that can be read at www.narrativeapproaches.com and at www.yourstory.org.nz.

Here is an extract from Liz's e-mail, which I read with both relief and delight:

Hi Kay,

Lovely to hear from you. I hope that you are well. Wilbur is in such a good space at the moment! It's unbelievable! We have had a few hiccoughs over the years which may have had to do with a surprising amount of stress in the family that he seems to be very sensitive to, but he is doing just great. His self-esteem has improved no end through music and sport. He does soccer and cricket. He now plays five instruments and is in three bands—one of them he put together and manages personally. Music is his life, really. He also was runner-up in his class last year for academic performance. As a family we don't emphasize academic performance at this age, but I thought I would let you know!