

LEARNING HOW TO COUNTER-STORY IN NARRATIVE THERAPY (WITH DAVID EPSTON AND WILBUR THE WARRIOR)

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This article is designed to be read alongside its companion article: “Wilbur the Worrier Becomes Wilbur the Warrior: A Teaching Story for Narrative Family Therapists” (this issue, pp. 43–57), a story from my practice about an 8-year-old boy with anorexia and anxiety. This article identifies and teaches narrative family therapy practices illustrated in the companion story. Full unabridged versions of both this article and the companion article can be found at www.narrativeapproaches.com and at www.yourstory.org.nz.

There are three stories behind the story of Wilbur the Warrior (see “Wilbur the Worrier Becomes Wilbur the Warrior: A Teaching Story for Narrative Family Therapists,” this issue, pp. 43–57). The first is the story of my apprenticeship to David Epston, the inventor of narrative therapy in partnership with Michael White. The second is the tale of how David Epston invented the practices I bring to bear in my conversations. Both of these stories will be told elsewhere. This article tells the third story, the “making of Wilbur the Warrior,” with the theme of one narrative practice in particular: the practice of counter-storying.¹

This article is neither a description of how to do narrative therapy nor a description of how to practice David Epston’s narrative therapy. It offers a behind-the-scenes view of one version of narrative therapy with one family. The expression of narrative therapy has taken, and continues to take, many guises, embracing “a range of voices,

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My conversations with Wilbur and his parents were only possible because of the guidance I have received from David Epston throughout my 13-year apprenticeship with him learning the art and craft of narrative therapy.

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¹*Counter-storying* is a term that David Epston uses in preference to *alternative* or *preferred stories*. Bamberg (2004) uses the terms *counter-narrative* and *master-narrative*. Counter-narratives are described as personal narratives carrying identity claims which resist those identity claims that originate from dominant discourses.

styles and ethics” (Guilfoyle, 2014). All, however, are united by key philosophical underpinnings and practices which continue to be re-invented, especially by David Epston. David innovates constantly and has called for the “renewal” of narrative therapy (Epston, 2011), one which remains true to the dual inventors’ dedication to the “spirit of adventure” in therapeutic practice (Epston & White, 1992, p. 9). Wilbur the Warrior gives one window into David Epston’s practice through my own. The story intends to offer insight into practice in a similar way to videoed sessions. This, the companion account to the story, distinguishes practices in much the same way a therapist’s commentary alongside a video might do. The difference between the two genres is perhaps that this version forces the practitioner-reader to see the practice in slow motion. Readers can pluck out individual practices to experiment with or can learn more widely about counter-storying. Either way, I hope that practitioners reading these stories—the story of Wilbur the Warrior and the making of the story of Wilbur the Warrior—will find glimpses of how they might better story counter-stories into being.

The practices² I will be drawing out of Wilbur’s story fall into three categories: (1) practices that are fundamental to David Epston’s practice and to narrative practice in general, such as the resurrection of local knowledge³; (2) larger counter-storying practices, such as “meeting the person rather than the problem” (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997); and (3) smaller counter-storying practices, such as wordplay and poetics (Epston, 2011).

I have learned these practices and many others through immersion learning⁴ in the form of what David refers to as “engaged supervision.” Many of these practices have been absorbed into my own over the years, rather than being deliberately enacted.

SESSION ONE: PREPARING A CANVAS FOR THE COUNTER-STORY

Problems attempt to take hold of therapy conversations just as they attempt to take hold of people. When I met Wilbur, Liz, and Doug, the problem was so dominant that I spent the first session attempting to find a foothold and plotting the means by which a counter-story could be heard above the problem’s “noise.” It was not

²Practices with unfamiliar names are previously unnamed practices that I have named with David Epston’s permission. Some of these practices are very close to other practices which have been written about elsewhere, and these have been referenced accordingly.

³“We believe that the real experts on problems are those people who experience them first-hand. It is these people who have lived through the problem and have the most intimate knowledge of it. These knowledges have been referred to by various writers and theorists as “local,” “indigenous,” and “experience-near,” in contrast to “expert” or “professional” knowledges (Maisel, Epston, & Borden, 2004).

⁴Immersion learning originated in Canada in the 1960s. Total immersion involves the teaching of a language through speaking the language for the whole time in class. I, myself, went to a total immersion French class in kindergarten in Canada in 1971.

until session two that we loosened the hold of the problem sufficiently to risk involving Wilbur more.

Wilbur didn't want to come. He's saying there's nothing wrong with him and he doesn't want to meet you. (this issue, p. 44)

Thinking on my feet, as all therapists working with families must do, I attempt to wrong-foot the problem's off-putting effects by distracting Wilbur with carrying the glasses of water. Children and young people often become so identified with a problem by the time they meet a helper that a rescue mission needs to be undertaken before anything therapeutic has a chance of unfolding (Freeman et al., 1997). My "I don't fix kids" speech was designed to renegotiate the rules of engagement with parents who understandably are seeking a cure for one of the most frightening of problems, anorexia. The speech is also directed at Wilbur, who is positioned as an eavesdropper until such time as he is ready to participate overtly. Positioning Wilbur in this way also allows me to avoid the pressure to pit myself directly against the problem before gaining enough traction to unseat it.

David Epston has taught me hundreds of "question practices." A question practice is a practice within a question that plays a particular role in counter-storying (Ingamells, 2016). It does not dictate the content of the question, but it does help the question have a particular effect. One simple question practice (and an example of a smaller counter-storying practice) is a "prefacing question"⁵ (Ingamells, 2014), which sometimes takes the form of a statement. Prefacing questions are designed to prepare people for enquiries and to seek their permission to enter into them. My first enquiry with this family, begins with several of these. In the first question, I am asking Liz and Doug for their permission to stray from the problem.

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? (this issue, p. 45)

These next two prefacing statements provide a rationale for and begin to set the scene for an externalized rather than a problem-bound conversation:

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. (this issue, p. 45)

⁵Prefacing questions are very similar to David Epston's description of "prologue questions," illustrated as preparation for engagement in his practice of "internalized other questioning" (Epston, 1998).

This question and statement extends the rationale and again asks for permission:

Wilbur, would it be all right with you if I asked your parents some questions about you for a few moments? (this issue, p. 45)

I not only requested permission from Wilbur to ask *him* questions, but also *his* permission to ask his parents questions, and in this way I am ascribing him importance and a kind of remote oversight. I am attempting to put Wilbur at ease as well as to include him, albeit in a minimal way. These prefacing questions attempt to take care of any concerns that Doug, Liz, or Wilbur may have and to pave the way for a “wonderfulness enquiry.” Wonderfulness enquiries are a hallmark of David Epston’s work as they now are a hallmark of mine and others (Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016; McAllum Pilkington, 2016) as well. They are one way of beginning a narrative therapy conversation with the reclaiming of the person and the territory of the conversation from the problem. These enquiries express a fundamental ethic of a narrative practice: to lay down a story of appreciation for the person as the foundation stone for the therapy conversation. I learned long ago that David Epston will not begin a therapy conversation until he has found something he can respect about the person he is speaking with (D. Epston, personal communication, August 15, 2005). This ethic has inspired me. The question I asked to begin this wonderfulness enquiry is a particularly short version. It is one version of many and is not intended to be used as a script.

Liz and Doug, could you please tell me what you think I would come to appreciate and respect about Wilbur if I were to get to know him? (this issue, p. 46)

All narrative conversations story identity. This is the point of them. A wonderfulness enquiry allows the person to become known apart from the problem and for their identity to be spoken of (storied), possibly for the first time. In being spoken of, identity is brought into being (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). This enquiry almost always leads to legacy questions, from which surprising territories open up. These territories often turned out to offer remarkable openings into counter-stories with the young people I work with. For instance, the story of Frank, the 10-year-old boy who believes that his courage and “quiet conviction in overcoming bullying” (the counter-story), was handed down to him by his mother, who valiantly reclaimed her life from bipolar. Or 14-year-old New Zealand-born, Aroha, who traced back her commitment to “justice and standing up for others” (the counter-story) to her grandfather who stood up against McCarthyism in defense of communist friends in early 1950’s America.

While legacy questions do not typically follow *this* wonderfulness enquiry, except for the later enquiry about the origins of Wilbur’s “fast legs,” I find out about his remarkable imagination, inventiveness, intelligence, and enthusiasms. These discoveries alert me in part to how the problem may have found its way in: Anorexia seems to particularly attempt to colonize people with a strong and sensitive intelligence.

These discoveries informed me that one way for me to engage Wilbur in our counter-story would be through inspiring his imagination and drawing upon his enthusiasm. I begin to find out about Wilbur's abilities by asking this question:

Could you tell me a story about one of these inventions that Wilbur has thought up?
(this issue, p. 46)

The beginning of this question: "Could you tell me a story about . . ." is another example of a smaller counter-story question practice in the form of a question stem. This is evidently a question that invites story. It is one of three question beginnings that David Epston finds the people he meets with typically report appreciating the most. The other two are: "Could you please help me to understand . . ." and "Could you please teach me . . ."

The last of these question beginnings was invented by Michael White. David remembers hearing Michael ask it for the first time in 2007 while observing Michael's practice on a visit to Adelaide (D. Epston, personal communication, February 23, 2016). These questions all call forth story, and they also reflect the strikingly decentered ethic of Michael and David's practice. Decentered practice is fundamental to narrative therapy and refers to the politics of placing local knowledge at the center of a conversation and professional knowledge on the outskirts. I decenter myself when I ask Wilbur about his inventions and about rugby, in a way that elevates his knowledges and relegates my own (quite rightly).

Wilbur, do you mind if I ask you a question about how you would get your hovercraft out to the people that needed saving? The thing is I know about as much about hovercrafts as I do about rugby and that's not much at all. (this issue, p. 46)

Unsurprisingly, Wilbur steps into the expertise that I have illuminated and begins to take part in the conversation with enthusiasm.

I know lots about rugby. (this issue, p. 46)

In much the same way that Wilbur's own knowledge is placed center stage, other "insider knowledges" are brought in to aid our enquiries. Later on, for example, I introduce the idea that courage exists in the face of fear, rather than in the absence of fear. This idea is gleaned from conversations with clients, my own life experience, and reading. David Epston's practice bursts at the seams with insider knowledge gleaned from his co-research with clients (Maisel et al., 2004), his extensive reading of fiction and nonfiction and research in preparation to work with clients whose experiences he is not well informed about, and his own life experience (Epston, 1998).

Another practice foundational to David's practice, my own practice, and that of narrative therapy in general is the recruitment of allies against the problem (Epston, 1989). Problems tend to isolate people and dismember them (Myerhoff, 1982).

Conversations often need to begin with the repositioning of family members so they stand up for and alongside the person identified with the problem, rather than the position they have been conscripted into by a problem seeking to identify itself with the person. This often unwittingly positions loved ones against the person or in an in-between position. Either way, the person with the problem usually experiences a degree of “aloneness” with the problem. It is the intention of narrative therapy to mitigate this loneliness, or as David Epston puts it:

So what are the effects of positioning oneself differently in relation to the “problem” and construing it as *external* rather than *internal*? I propose the following effects: Persons/couples/families are more likely to become agents rather than patients. They do not appear dulled and stupified as patients often do; rather, they are creative, enlivened, enthusiastic, and can call upon problem-solving capabilities that are surprising even to them. (Epston, 1998, p. 51; emphasis in original)

A wonderfulness enquiry is companion practice which endeavors to valorize rather than denigrate the person and mitigates the problems’ dividing practices (Foucault, 1965). Historically, family therapy approaches have tended to extend the pathologization of the person. This often accompanies equating the person with the problem with a pathologized version of the family or with a specific family member, usually the mother (Walters, Carter Papp, & Silversteen, 1988, as cited in Freeman et al., 1997, p. 72). In this conversation, Liz and Doug are invited into solidarity with Wilbur and with me as the therapist. This is relatively easy with Liz and Doug because they are very understanding, bright parents who are quick to recognize my intentions. Doug, especially, is recruited into the role of co-therapist.

The wonderfulness enquiry sets the stage for detailed conversation. Detail is all important for the elicitation of a counter-story and “restorying requires painstaking work” (Freeman et al., 1997, p. 98). As we proceed, I am listening carefully for phrases, words, and ideas which might offer us a doorway into a possible counter-story. This is an exploration in unfamiliar territory. Although I am armed with knowledge gained from conversations with others with similar problems, enabling me to see landmarks to help me find my bearings, I have no idea what the first possible thread of a counter-story may turn out to be. Counter-storying is a careful process. If the threads I find turn out to be dead-ends, new ones will need to be found. When Liz says, “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,” I seize upon a possible experience-near definition of the problem, asking: “Do you think your mum might be right? Do your ideas try to run away with you a little bit sometimes?”

Aware that such extreme problems as anorexia often seek to root themselves in “worries that run away with the person,” I glimpse the possibility inherent in this detailed problem description: The idea of a problem that runs away with people is less powerful than the description of a problem like anorexia or anxiety. If the problem is demoted to the almost toddler-like status of “running away with you

a little bit,” then the possibility of agency arises, as does the possibility of being able to resist the problem trying to run away with you. The first possible threads of a counter-story emerge from Wilbur’s response:

Yeah, sometimes they take me the wrong way. They took me in the direction of the wrong team. (this issue, p. 47)

The idea of a wrong direction implies that there is a right direction. Now, the idea of the problem being an “idea than runs away with Wilbur and takes him in the wrong direction” volunteers itself as a possible way of describing the problem. This opens up the possibility of a counter-story thread of “running away from or outwitting the problem and running in the right direction rather than the wrong direction.”

This is only one possible thread, and even if it turns out to be helpful, it is in fledgling form. The story of the “clumps of hair clogging up the bathroom sink” illustrates the power of the problem and the distress it causes. This conversation is in a precarious state. I offer Wilbur the story of a boy who left his underpants on for his swimming test in an attempt to wrench back some of the power that the problem exerts with the identity conclusion of “dumbness.” Again, the power of “the thoughts” is demoted to taking a person in the wrong direction, and companionship is offered to Wilbur, who is now not the only young person led astray by such thoughts. In a bid to extend this idea, I dub the thoughts “dumb,” thus turning the problem’s propaganda back on itself.

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? (this issue, p. 48)

I then push a little further into my enquiry about the problem and its intentions:

And could you please help me to understand what else these dumb thoughts try to tell you? (this issue, p. 48)

Wilbur was unequivocal:

They tell me to be skinnier. They tell me I will get fat. (this issue, p. 48)

Finally, I attempt to link Wilbur’s response to the thread of the possible counter-story. This is what I would call a “gathering question.” In a gathering question, the “story so far” is gathered up and pre-presented to the person in the hope that the problem and its antidote may be glimpsed more keenly:

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? (this issue, p. 48)

The first session ends. We have found something of a foothold, yet as Liz's e-mail testifies, we are a long way from rescuing our conversations from the influence of the problem.

SESSION TWO: DRAMATIZING THE EMERGING COUNTER-STORY

Aware that I could lose Wilbur altogether if I rushed ahead, I was careful in session two to invite him once again into the position of an eavesdropper. I intended to tempt Wilbur into a conversation which would be more captivating to him than the problem. With this in mind, I brought in the drama and zaniness of "sheep worrying" from the very start. Concerned that the fledging threads of the counter-story I had introduced could so easily fall by the wayside if the problem was able to hijack the session, I used the metaphor of sheep worrying to reintroduce the idea and placed my trust in both Doug's co-therapist skills and in Wilbur's imagination. Luckily, Wilbur took to the metaphor with zeal. I don't think that Wilbur initially made the connection between the sheep worrying and the worries that were plaguing him in the same way Doug and I did, however, his interest was piqued enough to carry us forward, and he was able to take a clear position on the effects of the worries on his life.

The idea of "training a problem" is a strong motif in David Epston's practice (Epston, 1986; Maisel et al., 2004), and it is also an expression of one of the ways David has found to turn a problem against itself. A related practice is inviting the person to feel sorry for the problem (Marsten et al., 2016). Such ideas stand a chance of taking off when therapists are prepared to throw themselves at them with abandon. We are, after all, inventing counter-stories, and any story worth reading is plump with drama. To this story, I brought wordplay to enliven, for example:

Doug, do you think that when the thoughts are running scared like sheep that they can worry you sick and scare you silly? (this issue, p. 49)

and intrigue to lead the person into fascination with the enquiry and away from the stupor the problem induces, for example, later on in session three:

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? (this issue, p. 52)

and downright silliness to unhinge the problem:

"A sheep dog?" I enquired. "Has your dad had training as a kind of rugby sheep dog too?" (this issue, p. 51)

Wilbur engages so enthusiastically in the drama that I am able to address him more directly for the rest of the session, although not without Doug's help. A

slightly more full-fledged version of the counter-story to the problem, now dubbed “wild worries,” which Wilbur can train himself to tame, is put to Wilbur, repeated within several questions:

Wilbur, do you like the idea of being in charge of all the thoughts so they can't run away and become worry thoughts so easily? (this issue, p. 50)

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? (this issue, p. 50)

I was wondering whether Wilbur could train these worry thoughts like a sheep dog would train sheep? I am wondering if he could calm them down and make them go where he wants them to so they can't run away with him so easily. (this issue, pp. 49–50)

These questions are also gathering questions in that they gather up aspects of the counter-story so far and present them again. The re-description of the problem as “wild” now allows for a more nuanced and playful relationship with the problem which is no longer rendered one-dimensional, in much the same way that the person is no longer rendered one-dimensional.

The transition from sheep training to rugby training is greatly aided by Wilbur's introduction of fast legs. Here is another opportunity for Wilbur to be accompanied, this time by his sister and his ancestors as well as his father. My hope is that the appeal of these connections will pull him more towards strength and courage training than it will towards thinness training (anorexia). Later on in session three, the appeal of wisdom is introduced:

Are you becoming wise like a warrior as well as strong like a warrior? (this issue, p. 53)

None of this storying would have been possible without the attention to detail mentioned earlier. The story arises out of both the detail of answers and the detail of questions. Student counselors I have taught almost always fall into the trap of skipping from one enquiry to another before they have begun to mine all the possibilities of the existing one. An analogy I use to explain this goes roughly as follows:

Imagine the conversation is a house. You are walking down a long corridor, and the farther you walk, the more doorways appear. The corridor represents the territory of the problem, and each doorway represents a possible entrance to a counter-story. To find out whether the room behind each door is worth spending time in, you will need to go in and examine it carefully, being sure to look in all the drawers of all the furniture, under the furniture, and in all the nooks and crannies. Avoid the temptation to leave the room prematurely in search of other rooms. Also, be sure to be on the lookout for trap doors put there by the problem, which might so easily take you back to where you started or send you out into the street.

Examples of questions designed to bring forth details that could easily have been ignored but turned out to lead us in important directions were:

Wilbur, do you have fast legs? (this issue, p. 50)

Doug, are there any other rugby skills that might be helpful for Wilbur in his training to become faster and stronger? (this issue, p. 51)

Why is it called the 'Freak-Fall'? (this issue, p. 53)

SESSION THREE: THE BALANCE TIPS IN FAVOR OF THE COUNTER-STORY

Well aware that the counter-story of Wilbur as a Warrior⁶ was embryonic, I began this session much as I had begun the last one, by introducing the counter-story immediately so that the warrior rather than the worrier would be at the center of our conversation. I learned from David Epston (personal communication, August 15, 2011) to avoid the risks of the problem intervening at the beginnings of sessions and to prevent the counter-story from being diluted by beginning with a question that brings the counter-story immediately to the fore:

Doug, could you tell me if I imagining things, or is there a little bit more warrior in Wilbur than there was the last time we met? (this issue, p. 52)

Thankfully, Doug, my very able co-therapist, helped me steer the conversation towards the warrior from the start:

I think the warrior has been growing in the last week because of the training. Wilbur, can I tell Kay what I have seen? (this issue, p. 52)

Doug's unique outcomes led us to what I describe as:

. . . a gap between the two players in our conversation: the problem story and the embryonic counter-story. (this issue, p. 52)

While teaching a class of post-graduate students with David Epston in November 2015, I was identifying some of the practices he had drawn upon in a live interview

⁶“Wilbur the Warrior versus Wilbur the Worrier” could be considered a headline for the counter-story. The counter-story is the sum of its different threads. That is, (1) Worry/freaky thoughts can run away with you, taking you in the wrong/non-preferred direction, and warrior taking you in the right direction; (2) Worry thoughts might be better thought of as wild, dumb, or misguided than powerful and bad; (3) Wild thoughts can be directed to be imaginative thoughts, and dumb or misguided thoughts (like sheep) can be trained and guided; (4) Fears are not as powerful as they make themselves out to be; and (5) You can train yourself to be stronger and wiser than the fears.

and found myself describing how he “embroidered” the counter-story once he had brought it into being. Thus, once I had shaped the garment of the counter-story, what remained was to embroider it, using questions that would capture Wilbur’s imagination and draw him further towards the counter-story. For example, reinforcing the idea of wrong direction/right direction continues the storying of Wilbur’s bravery and the co-research of further anti-fear knowledge. The counter-story is also embroidered with the introduction of slightly different threads which lend it more substance and character, for instance, the idea of becoming “warrior-wise as well as warrior-strong.”

In this session, Wilbur becomes more engaged with the idea of himself as a warrior wise and strong and less engaged with the problem, announcing, “Yes, the warrior won against the worrier.” The weight of the counter-story is tipped against the problem story as Wilbur starts to be *constituted* as a warrior. Wilbur’s identity is constituted further as he takes on the role of “anti-fear coach” to his father, thanks to Wilbur’s having given away Doug’s fear of heights.

The e-mail I received from Liz after session three signalled how easily the voice of anorexia can be re-provoked, but also that the counter-story, used by Liz to tell Wilbur it was his worrier trying to tell him he was fat, had taken hold with his parents. Given that the intrusion of anorexia’s voice is thankfully short-lived for Wilbur in such blatant form, it appears that the counter-story has taken hold with Wilbur as well. Knowing that such problems rarely go away completely, but are rather ushered into the background of people’s lives where they may remain for long stretches of time or even for all time, I knew that allowing myself to become alarmed could be perilous. The e-mail scare took me further into my own anti-fear training as a therapist.

I learned from David Epston that scary problems thrive on the fear of those whose lives they seek to invade; if a therapist joins them in the fear, the way out may be harder to traverse, if not impossible to find again. I was reminded of when I trained as a life-saver in my twenties. The chant of my instructor still rings in my ears from time to time, “Stay calm even if you don’t feel it, and remember, getting in the water is the very last thing you do. Try anything and everything else you can think of first. The closer you get to a person in trouble, the more likely you are to get into trouble yourself.” Instead of allowing anorexia to unseat me, I chose instead a working hypothesis of “problems often get worse before they get better,” based on the many experiences I have had over the years that the stronger a problem is, the harder it fights for life. This has become such a familiar experience for me that I start to predict something of this sort. Now, I even welcome what might appear to be backwards steps as the gasps of a problem in its death throes. Of course, this is not always the case. The more deadly the problem, the more important it is not to underestimate its cunning—hence, hypothesis rather than certainty.

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, and despite its recent reappearance, anorexia's hold would continue to slip. (this issue, pp. 54–55)

Had I not forged ahead, I may again have made an error I made in the past, the error of clutching too eagerly at some premature, false solution in a bid to dispel the anxieties brought on by such a fearsome problem. Nevertheless, I e-mailed David Epston, my supervisor, with Liz's concerns. His response confirmed my own:

Yes, we have a long way to go but with very bright young people, sometimes they proceed by leaps and bounds rather than centimetre by centimetre. I think we can anticipate some surprises. (David Epston, personal communication, March 16, 2010)

SESSION FOUR: THE COUNTER-STORY IS RE-EMBROIDERED

In helping his dad climb past his fear, Wilbur performs his anti-fear knowledge. In doing so, the counter-story becomes more real:

You know, Dad, I think you should have done it sooner. The worries started freaking you out. (this issue, p. 55)

In eliciting further effects of the problem and the anti-fear knowledge that Doug has gained, more substance is added to the counter-story, and more power is taken from the problem:

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. (this issue, p. 55)

Hearing his father express how Wilbur had helped him turn himself into a warrior and then understanding how he might continue to advise his father, Wilbur's warrior identity is further embellished:

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? (this issue, p. 55)

"Wilbur, do you have any advice for your dad if any other worries start turning into freaky feelings and try to turn him 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." (this issue, p. 56)

As explained in the unabridged version of the companion article:

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 only needed to meet one more time.⁷

I feared that it might only be a matter of time before the effects of the burglary could give anorexia an opening. Concerned to do all I could to usher the anxieties and perfectionism out as quickly as they came in, I consulted with Liz prior to the session, and most probably thanks to her ideas about including stories of her notorious ancestors in the session, anorexia did not rear its ugly head. Our conversation and our work together ended there. Five and a half years after that last session, I am delighted to say the anorexia has not returned.

My descriptions of some of David Epston's foundational practices, larger counter-storying practices, and smaller counter-storying practices illustrated in this story from my practice also end here. However, these are only a small selection of the practices David Epston has taught me over the years, illustrated within this one example. What will not be evident in the story of Wilbur the Warrior or the making of the story of Wilbur the Warrior is that my experience of the unfolding of this story was not as seamless and easy as it might appear on the page. My conversations with the 8- and later 10-year-old Wilbur who came in with a diagnosis of anorexia presented me with one of the biggest challenges of my therapy career. On several occasions, my confidence failed me, and I did not know whether I would succeed in helping Wilbur and his family escape from these extreme worries. Knowing that David Epston is always there behind the scenes as my supervisor, teacher, and mentor lends me confidence at these times. If you read stories from David Epston's own practice, you will notice much that is remarkable. You might notice ingenuity, playfulness, or the sheer genius of his questions. What you may not be so quick to name is the courage that such conversations take to enter into and persist with. David Epston has not only lent me practices and questions, he has also lent me courage.

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⁷This 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.

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