A letter to Robyn: explorations of the written word in therapeutic practice

By Mandy Pentecost

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This paper explores the co-production of a literary therapy. It is drawn from research conducted by Mandy Pentecost which investigated the therapeutic writing practices employed in one narrative counselling relationship in which Robyn was the client and Mandy the counsellor. Four different genres of writing were engaged with during the counselling process: ‘homework’ questions, a therapeutic letter, a ‘rescued speech poem’, and a short story. These four genres are described in this paper which is written in an auto ethnographic form in the shape of a letter to Robyn.

Keywords: narrative practice, definitional ceremony, literary therapy, poetry, re-storying, therapeutic documents, outsider-witnessing practices, co-research
Dear Robyn,

After many attempts, I have decided to write a letter to you, to capture my story of the writing we produced through our counselling work.

This letter tells my story about the writing we did together, but it’s not just about the writing. It’s also the story of how I became the sort of counsellor I am today. I know that the work we embarked on was transformational for you; now I have a fuller appreciation of some of the ways it was also transformational for me. Usually when counsellors write about their work, the focus is on the journey of the client. But the other side of the counselling relationship is also a story of becoming. Only in looking backwards and paying close attention, have I seen the size of the contribution of our work together to the ways I now listen, and the things I think are important in counselling. When I began re-telling to myself the story of our therapy, I realised how much my use of writing practices has expanded from small beginnings. The ways in which you embraced the possibilities of re-authoring by writing walked alongside my growing use of an ‘aesthetic ear’ for language in advancing therapeutic conversations.

CONTENT OF THE LETTER

I want to trace the path of my use of writing practices during the counselling, and some of the ways this was influenced and formed by your responses and your own writing. In a loose chronological tracing of the ways the writing developed over eighteen months, I have had to limit the pieces I can refer to here, and I am mostly writing about the works I penned. I have taken examples of different types of writing from different stages of our counselling relationship, including some ‘homework’ questions, a therapeutic letter, a ‘rescued speech poem’ (Behan, 2003), and a short story.

FIRST SESSIONS

The action of paper and pen, written words passing between us, began in our first session. I had forgotten until I began writing this that the first words in my folder of notes are written by you. When you could not say words for what had happened to bring you to this place, weighted with grief, made mute by sorrow, you indicated that you wanted my pad and pen, and you wrote this stark story:

1987 attacked and raped
On ACC since with ‘unfixable shoulder’
Approx 2000 Diagnosed with serious diabetes
Early 03 David died very suddenly
been ‘fighting’ ever since

You said that since your partner David’s death, life had become purposeless, full of physical and emotional pain. You missed him immensely and wanted to find a way to have him comfortably in your life and to find ways to cope with going on alone; ways that didn’t involve throwing David out, or pretending that everything was fine.

Right from the beginning, you made it clear how you would work with me. You told me the territories we would not be visiting; you had a mischievous way of saying, ‘You weren’t meant to pick that up’; or, ‘Now you’re being cheeky’, to let me know I was trespassing on ground you wanted to keep private. So we’d follow the path you would go on at that time, your mischievousness inviting mine as we picked our way along.

You also let me know how much you depended on and valued our time in the room, and you told me that what we were doing was important to you – that it held some hope of making a difference in your living. Your appreciation mattered to me. I didn’t come into that room alone; all sorts of judges came with me, just as all sorts of judges came with you. Some of my judges were concerned that this way of working was ‘not getting to the heart of the matter’, that it didn’t help you revisit then leave behind the horrors of your past.

No matter that you made it clear that you didn’t want that.

I was often beset by thoughts of not ‘doing it right’. Yet it seemed that when I didn’t put on the straitjacket of ideas of proper practice and engaged with curiosity, or even a touch of mischief, all sorts of things were possible. While you weren’t the only client who shared the room with my judicial panel, it was during our conversations that I first began to learn the dance of counselling, that ebb and flow of responses that creates its own pattern within the guidelines of the form.

I’ve just been watching the cook Rick Stein on TV, advocating that people make their own versions
of traditional recipes. He said, ‘A recipe should be a tune to which you can sing your own song’. In the ways I began to read the recipe for narrative therapy as a guideline, not an absolute, and to pay more attention to what was happening for you and in our conversations, I was developing my own song as a counsellor. It is a song characterised by matter-of-factness and pragmatism, one which pays attention to small particulars of expression and glimmers of poetic possibility, to the nuances of language and the idiosyncrasies of each person’s ways of speaking. Jane Speedy (2005) has found that what she calls ‘poetic-mindedness’, listening out for ‘talk that sings’ (Bird, 2000) in what people say, has changed her way of listening, the notes she takes, and how she responds. Whether she actually produces poems from therapeutic conversations or not, it has been her experience that focusing on ‘talk that sings’ is the most likely way to stand with a client in new spaces, new possibilities.

I remember the first appearance of the clear file folder which became the record of the writings generated by our work. You brought in photos of your gentle David and a poem you had written for his funeral, and we spent a long time looking at him and talking about what the words of the poem meant for you. How many times that folder was to come back and forth, how many times we would pass it between us and examine the words one or the other of us had produced.

MY FIRST WRITING

I remember the first piece of writing I did for you. I was concerned about the amount you were packing into your life, and the toll it took on you. When you came up with the phrase ‘rush quietly’ as a way of meeting your commitments and fulfilling others’ expectations of you, but still finding some rest and inner peace, I was caught by the linguistic paradox you expressed, and by the sense that that paradox may contain an answer. Thinking that it was important not to just let this phrase go by, nor to paraphrase the life out of it, I pounced on your words. We spent some time playing seriously with the idea of ‘rushing quietly’. Then, as you set off to resume your busy day, I gave you back your words in block letters on a piece of card. I enjoyed the expressions you used, the metaphors and verbal play which were scattered through your talk. This particular ‘rescuing of the said from the saying of it’ began an ongoing project of having serious fun with words. Or, to tell it another way ...

RUSH QUIETLY

In the middle of the catalogue of deeds and tasks and duties, repeating and depleting,
In the pause where I ask how Peace
might find its way in,
she suggests two words.

They laugh at each other tempt us to glimpse something new.

Rush quietly? I say
tickled by the phrase.
Can you do that?
That broad grin –
It tickles her too.
Rush quietly.

As she goes, rushing unquietly to pick up the duties of the day,
I hand it to her.
Two jostling words quickly scribbled
 to be
a reminder
a talisman
a piece of play we share

RUSH QUIETLY
I could try that.

Unfortunately, it turned out that we were right to be worried you were overdoing it at that particular time. You collapsed that weekend and ended up in hospital, the first of several times that ill health intervened in our scheduled weekly meetings. So writing became a way I could keep in touch with you. I sent the letters in cards, chosen for pictures of flowers and eggs and views of nature that I hoped would evoke and thicken the tiny hints you had
identified as holding hope for the future. I wanted to present a visual re-telling of the things that reminded you that life could be worth living, and to say behind the words I wrote that I carried you with me and thought about you when you couldn’t come to sessions. As well as saying hullo, I asked you questions that I hoped continued the possibility that a life worth living was there to be stepped into.

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

This practice of written questions became a pattern for us. You came to expect your ‘homework’, as you called it, at the end of a session, and I began during our conversations to earmark phrases you said, or areas I hadn’t asked you about as much as I would have liked to, as potential written questions. Sometimes I offered questions I thought you may not answer if I asked them in the session. In some ways it was as if our conversations carried on on paper.

EXTERNALISING PROBLEMS

I worded all these questions in externalising language, as I did in our conversations, to indicate that the difficulties you experienced were not caused by some deficit inside you (Carey & Russell, 2002). That’s why the questions looked like they did. The questions which externalised Perfectionism, for example, located it outside of you, as a separate entity, and asked you to think about and evaluate its workings in your life:

- How does Perfectionism stop you from resting?
- What tricks does Perfectionism use to keep you in its thrall?
- When you get a glimmer of a way of doing things that is not ruled by Perfectionism, what appeals to you about it?
- Can you think of any ways Perfectionism is robbing you of your life or of enjoyment?
- What sayings that David had about Perfectionism could be helpful to you in overcoming it?

I was impressed always by how seriously you took this work. You were the first person I met who wrote answers to my questions; the first person to ask me for more questions. When I took a long break over summer, you asked for some writing to do so you could keep up the momentum and feel still connected to me and what we were working on together. Your responses to my questions weren’t an adjunct to our work or something to fill in time; they were integral to it.

YOUR WRITING

You told me you answered the questions I gave you by putting down all the facts you thought could be significant, and elaborating on them. Then you would go through and edit what you had written. Were there too many similar words? Had you answered the question? Did you need to seek significance from the outside world and add something from a book? Your responses to the written aspects of our work invited me to keep going with it, to treat it with the same seriousness you did, and to become more committed to exploring the uses of writing as part of counselling.

Your writing began as straightforward, brief responses to my questions. At first, you brought your answers back to me hoping you had answered them ‘correctly’. I didn’t know how to convince you that I had no set ideas for the content of your reply, that there was no test involved. Whatever you wrote would provide a rich resource: more areas of enquiry, more questions and unpacking of meanings, and give access to more opportunities to develop richer and thicker stories of your preferred life.

MY RESPONSE TO YOUR WRITING

Your writing style changed over time, and you began to play with words and images on paper as you did in speaking. I watched your confidence in writing grow. Although I was still an important reader of your work, I had the impression that now your writing was not done with me in mind. It seemed you were writing for yourself. Your writing began to be full of symbols and images, often of people or personifications. I didn’t always know the story behind the story you presented. ‘A small glimmer of hope found at the bottom of a pile of gloomy rubbish’ – the image spoke eloquently of your intent and your purpose, without telling details of what you were searching through. That didn’t matter to me. You said you never felt so good as when you were doing this writing, and that you were
‘sifting through [your] life to find out what was worth keeping’. While I had some thoughts still that therapeutic writing needed to express direct events, the ‘gremlins’ and ‘twinkles’ you wrote of obviously had meanings for you that related to those events. If I could support you in writing practices that served you well, I was all for it. You had even more faith in it than I did. There was a time when things became really difficult for you again, with lots of physical pain, lots of knockbacks. I wondered if you may need to get some medication. You decided to try writing first. For you, writing was therapy.

Occasionally, I’d have a bout of thinking that as your counsellor it was my job to know the dark details the gremlins represented. Then I wondered why I should have that sort of power in our relationship. If you didn’t want me to know any more than what you wrote, what you wrote was enough. You said you were discovering that you could ‘retrain your brain’ and do things and think things in ways you never had before.

You know, Robyn, for a long time I saw your writing as just a way of you ‘getting things out’, or expressing yourself. The more you wrote, as your writing became more creative and fanciful, as we were joined by gremlins and twinkles, the more it dawned on me that you weren’t emptying yourself out, you were filling yourself up, rewriting your life. I’m interested that it took me a while to see this, given that I was practising a form of therapy that’s about re-authoring lives. Coming to think of you as a writer happened even more slowly, and I didn’t respond as seriously to you as a writer as I could have in the early days. I would have accorded a different value to what you were doing and achieving through your writing had I thought of us as engaged in a literary exercise. While I saw us as counsellor and client who happened to be writing, I didn’t give enough importance at the time to the hopes you had for writing. I suppose it’s a bit like the way I can’t say when I started to think of my daughter as a cellist, not ‘someone who learns the cello’. As you wrote, you wrote yourself as a writer.

OTHER READERS

There were other readers too. I’m thinking in particular of the pieces of your writing I shared with my classmates, when I presented a practice paper outlining some of the ways I was thinking about writing in narrative therapy. I had taken some of your writing as examples of what was developing in my practice and in your journey, intending that I would discuss with my classmates how a counsellor could further a re-authoring conversation based on such writing. Your words had such a strong emotional impact that everyone wanted to respond directly to you, to thank you for the privilege of reading your words, and to tell you how they affected them. I brought back a page of their comments. What struck me most, as we went through their comments, was that you wanted to know about each person: What were they like? Where did they live? What sort of work did they do? Did I like them? You wanted to build up a person around the words they had written to you, so you could know who was hearing you.

Another possible audience began to emerge. Could it be that what you were writing, or maybe what you were learning about reshaping your life using writing, would be of benefit to others who were struggling as you had? You dreamed there would be a way of sharing these stories that would speak to people about the hope and possibility they represented for you.

AUTHORING MYSELF AS A COUNSELLOR

As you were stepping into a preferred life through the counselling and writing, and finding ways to choose what you wanted rather than what others set out for you, I was finding my feet as a narrative counsellor and establishing practices that have continued to sustain me and the people I work with. I have chosen a few pivotal instances for me to represent the ways I came to sing my own song as a counsellor, and will call on a variety of creative writing techniques to witness your life.

The people I see now may or may not receive poetic documents; it depends really whether they seem to have a feeling for poetry in the ways they speak. But they all receive the listening of an ear that is increasingly finely-tuned to the nuances of language and the possibilities opened by metaphor and imagery.

On one of those early occasions when you let me know not to ask any more about your darker thoughts, you changed the subject by focusing on
my jersey, which had many loops of fabric attached. At least you had come back from that far away and lonely place you disappeared to sometimes, your eyes fixed on sights you would not share with me, your hand reaching out; longing both to be there and not to be there. I struggled in those times: should I be pushing you, pulling you? Yet how could I call my work co-research if I insisted on the agenda? On this occasion, your agenda, our agenda, was my jersey for quite some time. I wasn’t sure what would happen when I decided that if you wanted to talk about my jersey, then we would talk seriously about it. Ten minutes later I was pleased to have joined you in your curiosity about my jersey and in the ways I had also been curious about what your curiosity meant. I am pretty sure we could not have had the conversation we then embarked upon – about your knowledges about ways out of depression – without my willingness to follow your initial lead.

Slow silence.
The dead weights of sorrow longing living bereft
are palpable in the room. They subdue us.
Conversation halts and jerks around thoughts of not going on.
We wait

‘Your jersey’, she says, ‘However is it made?’
And the voices of structuralist shadows
Move into my mind –
Is this how you counsel grief?
She needs to talk about her feelings.
So I take it off.
We turn it inside out.
What are you doing sitting here in your old skivvy,
looking at a piece of knitting?
This is suicidal ideation, you fool!
How does dissecting your jersey help her grief?

We become briefly and intimately involved with the construction of the garment.
‘We are talking about my jersey’, I tell the voices
‘And maybe something else’.
Not sure what might constitute that Else, I ask her.

She tells me that any spark of interest – a knitting puzzle will do – gives rest from pain. She tells me that to learn to live and stand alone a foal keeps getting up again. She tells me that she will go on.

My pen rescues the words that have edged out from under all the weights of sorrow, takes this temporary gasp of beauty and sets it out again for us to consider, spend time with.

I record these words that might not have been said with my jersey on.

A THERAPEUTIC LETTER

The words I recorded became part of the first longish letter I wrote you, which is reproduced here.

Dear Robyn,

Today you talked with me about just how far down you were feeling, so far down that at times you wonder if there is anything left to carry on for. I was impressed with the thoughts your friend gave to you on living with grief, and walking with it, not fighting it. I hope you keep reading those words of support.

I was also touched by what you said of your ways of coping, keeping that spark of interest going against the pain and sadness. I tried to write down every word you said, but I think I may not have
done justice to this wisdom. Here is what you told me about finding something to go on for:

It has to be something that has enough interest to grab your attention. Most of you will still be where it was, but if you find something that grabs enough of you, it eases the pain the slightest bit, and gives you a bit of a rest from it.

And I hope that, in going on a bit further, you’ll be able to give what you’re doing a little more, so you’ve made a new life. And even though you’ll never forget what’s happened, it’s more copable to live your whole life.

Taking that tiny bit for a start you can find an interest for, then hopefully putting a wee bit more of yourself into an interest all the time.

It’s like a new horse, when it stands up and it’s all shaky; when it falls down it keeps getting up again till finally it stands securely on its own legs. The secret is in being able to keep getting up again, not letting yourself get so far down you can’t get up again.

Don’t let it get too far down that you have to struggle to get back up. Grab hold of it at the first sign. If you are so far down you have to struggle, it takes all the energy you have just to get up, and you won’t have the energy to fight just keeping away from it.

The main thing is to keep thinking David wouldn’t have wanted me to be down there. He would be proud of me coping, doing what needs doing, looking after the chooks. He hated to see me upset …

To tell myself it’s happened. It was his time. I can cope with going on for his sake.

I was not surprised to hear when I phoned that you had been taking this advice you gave yourself, and writing – as you said, creative activities like writing and playing the guitar take your concentration and won’t let you think of not going on. As you said on the phone, it helps you feel more in control. I guess the sooner you see the first sign, the more control you have. Is that how you find it?

Take care, and keep those little bits of interest going,

Mandy.

When I look at that letter now, I am taken back to writing it, on the computer in the corner of the large, noisy room at The Family Centre. The words that you had said were easy to write. The conventions of therapeutic letters in narrative therapy told me to capture words that held the possibility of accounts counter to the dominant, problem-saturated story; they told me I didn’t need to comment or evaluate, just present what you had said and ask questions that further thickened that alternative account. I typed your words straight from my notes, filling out the abbreviations.

As I wrote more letters, to you and to others, I became more au fait with the weaving of my words and others’ and asking questions which might further open the possibilities our conversation had begun. My letters took on a more subjunctive tone, with which I felt more comfortable than the more expert tone which had entered my early efforts.

**THERAPEUTIC POEMS**

I wrote my first therapeutic poem when you couldn’t come to a session because you were ill. In the previous few sessions, you were taking a stand about the unfairness of the treatment you received. You said that it was the first time you had ever thought of it as unfair. I had worked to assist you in building up a case that supported this new conclusion that you did not somehow deserve the bad things that had happened in your life.

It’s been a sad life.
People are so cruel.
Being always big
has meant always having to prove myself,
always feeling the blame.

I am so good
at looking after other people.
Who looks after me?

Now, for the first time,
I am thinking
IT IS NOT FAIR.
My voice rises:
IT IS NOT FAIR
NOT FAIR
NOT FAIR.
Now is the time for some inner peace.
To live from the inside.
To rush quietly.

(Rescued speech poem: Robyn’s words as I arranged them)

Evaluating the effects of problems and locating them in social conditions rather than intrapersonal deficit, is an important part of thickening accounts that counter the storyline that is problematic (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 1995). As I had intended to continue building on this alternative account, I used our appointment time to write to you.

YOUR WRITING ENCOURAGED MY WRITING

I think it was partly the ways you were writing that encouraged me to write differently. The creativity you were bringing to your explorations and answers to my questions called on me to write more creatively too. I had came across an article by Chris Behan (2003) that outlined his ways of responding to ‘talk that sings’, and which inspired me to try some creative writing, presenting your strong words as poems rather than prose. That involved different decisions about what to include, how to shape your sentences succinctly and use the layout on the page to capture meanings in a way that’s more ambiguous and speaks more to the emotions than is often the case with prose (Fox, 1997; Speedy, 2005b).

This poem brought together phrases that had rung out enough during our conversations over the previous three sessions to be recorded in my notes. I found that most of them were still in my memory too. I read the poem to you on the phone, apprehensive about your response. Would you think I had a cheek, entering your territory of creative writing? Would you experience some understanding and compassion, and hear that my voice joined yours in protesting unfairness? You said later that you ‘couldn’t think of a word strong enough for the power’ of what I sent you. You hadn’t had the same emotional resonance with my letters. Robyn, I continue to find that it’s the rescued speech poems that are most remarked upon and valued. They seem to be more powerful in their effects on people’s views of themselves and their lives than my therapeutic letters are.

Some time later we had a long and detailed conversation about the way you celebrated David’s birthday, so you could mark the day, but also mark the difference of the day this year. I wanted to record our conversation for you because it stood out as a shining example of the ways you were going on in your life, still honouring and connected to David, but also establishing what you called ‘a life for Robyn’. I thought what you said was lovely and I was touched by your description of doing things that were what David liked, but not exactly what you would previously have done. I had spent time assisting you to unpack the meaning of your preparing a roast meal with no sausages, and playing music, but music more to your taste than to David’s, so we could have a good look at the reasons and effects of your decision to keep the celebration’s form but change the details, and project into the future how remembering David in this way would fit for your life.

I was excited about the poetic writing practices, and pleased with the poem, Not Sausages, that I produced from your words. As a way of writing, making poems appealed to me and I thought I had captured the everyday simplicity and profundity of the events you described. I didn’t think much about letting you know I had done something different, as I had already sent you one poem to which you had responded positively. So I didn’t bother to say that this was not a letter such as I had sent before, but a crafting of your words into poetic form. This meant I had edited and rearranged what you said more than I did in the letters, where I quoted you in prose, writing down your talk as exactly as I could. I don’t think that poems are any less accurate, but there’s something inexact and movable about a poetic presentation of material.

WRITING POI E

I have already written about producing the document that hangs on your wall, the re-telling of the ways you were accepted with love in a small town visited by your concert party. Thank you for giving me permission to reproduce parts of it here, with names and identifying features of others disguised.
Robyn’s early life was a story of abuse and ridicule. She was raped as a child and as an adult, and found the world an unsafe place until she met her partner, David. For six years, she felt loved and accepted and part of the world. After David died suddenly, she found herself alone again and prey to old fears and feelings kept at bay by his presence. While Robyn had joined a concert party of which David was a member, she had never felt truly part of it. After a trip away to Te Wai, Robyn said, ‘It’s the story of my life. Nothing good can happen without a negative’. Saying she was sad and worried, she produced a chart she had made.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSTIVE</th>
<th>NEGATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great show</td>
<td>Peter said I was too loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the show</td>
<td>Peter not talking, angry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robyn, who had well-developed stories of the negative, was focused on that side of the chart. I was interested that she had recorded anything at all on the positive side. Robyn talked of her feelings about one man’s (Peter) criticism of her playing, and her outspoken response. I noted this as a possible unique outcome to return to, and continued through the list, asking about the positive side. Robyn described the ‘great show’. Then I asked about ‘after the show’. Again, she told me of Peter’s criticism. I am pretty determined when I think an alternative story is emerging, so asked:

M: So why is ‘after the show’ on the positive side then? (pointing to list)
R: Well, I had a really good time. But I’m so worried and upset about Peter. He didn’t like that either.

M: Tell me about the really good time.
R: Robyn began her story with a blow-by-blow account of the end of the show, Peter’s criticisms of her and the entire cast, and their going into a bar. She gave word-for-word detail of conversations. I was beginning to catch on that this was an important story, but that I would have to ask lots of questions to hear the ‘positive side’ richly described. As the story unfolded, I thought of Robyn’s experience as a naturally-occurring ‘definitional ceremony’. Barbara Myerhoff spoke of the importance of people being visible to themselves, and the role of community members in constructing an ongoing sense of identity. Definitional ceremonies ‘provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being’ (Myerhoff, 1986, p.267).

Robyn did not have access to a rich collection of stories about her worth and acceptability, so I determined to help her re-tell as much I could of this experience by remaining curious and keeping asking for detail. Seeing these people of Te Wai as an outsider-witness group, I also interviewed Robyn about how she thought they had experienced her, and what she meant to them. Thus I joined the people of Te Wai in witnessing her value and gave her an opportunity to witness it too by re-telling the experience. Here are some excerpts from our conversation, followed by the document that came from it:

R: They said, ‘Now we want your guitar lady. Where’s your guitar lady?’ First they just surrounded me. They said ‘You’re one of us’. As if I really mattered. As if I was special. Dare I say, I just felt as if they really cared about me. To have all this great surrounding of people who all cared, and not just for what you could do. But for you as well.

M: So they didn’t say, ‘Where’s the guitar?’ It was ‘guitar lady’.
R: It made a difference, a big difference. They said, ‘We’ve been watching you, you’re one of us’. Later they said, ‘You know your stuff’.
M: They noticed something about you.
R: That’s what hits me. ‘You’re one of us.’ That came FIRST, then, ‘You know what you’re doing’.
M: You, and then your talent.
R: That was important.
M: What does that mean to you, that they noticed you then your talent?
R: Probably that you’re worth knowing as a person as well as what you can do.
M: They wanted the person as well as the talent.

R: That’s not usual in my life. I’ve never had it before.

R: They all felt to some extent what I felt from the music.

M: What was it you felt and they felt?

R: I was floating away. I don’t know what I felt. This wonderful feeling, as if everything was all right. It’s hard to explain.

M: Was it a feeling of inner peace? (This is a longing to which Robyn frequently refers.)

R: All that. And more. I could have stayed there for the rest of my life.

At times, I needed to be gently persistent in asking Robyn to speak of the identity conclusions made possible by this experience. It was important not to give up on her initial reluctance to say anything that could be read as positive about herself.

M: When they said, ‘You’re one of us’, not just about playing the guitar, what do you think they saw?

R: I don’t know. I didn’t see what they saw.

M: Would you be prepared to speculate?

R: (Grimace.) I wouldn’t, because it would be too …

M: Which one? (grins)

R: He’s important. The fellow who was playing the other guitar and gave it to me. The one that said, ‘We’ve been watching you, you know what you’re doing.’ He’s my key.

M: What’s he like?

M: Then what did you play … you may not remember them all in order.

R: ‘Poi e’ was it. Yeah. That was the … (long silence.)

M: ‘Poi e’.

R: The special part was to give them back … I never tried to play it before. He played lead. I played a nice soft rhythm. They reckon I’ve got a real Maori strum. That helped. They said, ‘You know what you’re doing’. I was in another realm, a place I could have stayed. A place that was comfortable. A place that was, I say it again, dubiously, a healing place, something like the healing place we can get to. I’m not used to it.

M: When you remember this whole night, what do you think and feel?

R: It’s scary to think I am worth something, that it’s not just what I can do that’s worthy of note. I’ve got to get to the stage where my immediate reaction is not ‘what a lot of rubbish’. I felt that there, and it wasn’t rubbish … It’s not something you can let others get away from you. Every time you relive it, whether with yourself or telling someone else, it strengthens it again.

M: If I wrote it down and you read it, what would be the effect of that?

R: It will be marvellous. There are times when you want to get right inside it … I’ve been preparing for a long time. I’ve got lots to be thankful for. Something like that will keep me there, up a notch and even further. But to stay there you need a boost to keep going. When you get that boost you know where you’re going …

I rang Robyn later that week to check how she wanted the story written. At first she didn’t want to specify, but I said it was important to me that it be exactly as she wanted it. She decided she wanted it handwritten, in the first person. The story I wrote was composed only of Robyn’s words:

POI E

After the show in Te Wai, when we all went into the bar, the barmaid said to me, ‘We’ll show you how we entertain in Te Wai’. I didn’t know what she meant – I thought probably after a show like ours, it would be pretty mild.

They got out a couple of guitars and they began to sing. One of the songs was Guitar Boogie. My brother and I used to play that together.

Then a fellow said, ‘We want your guitar lady. Where’s your guitar lady?’ I tried to hide amongst the
concert party, but they found me in a sea of blue.

First they just surrounded me. They said, ‘You’re one of us’, as if I really mattered. As if I was special. I felt as if they really cared about me – all these people surrounding me who really cared, cared for me, not just what I can do. First they said, ‘We’ve been watching you. You’re one of us’. Then later they said, ‘You know what you’re doing’.

One guy said, ‘Come over by me’. He wasn’t very old. We sang some beautiful duets, harmonising. Every time he had to do a bit on his own, he’d lean his head one way. When it was time for me, he’d lean to me.

Then they said, ‘Now you’re going to play something’. ‘I don’t know about that!’ I said, but play I did. I played ‘South of the Border’ a couple of times through, and they all sang beautifully. We played some other songs. It was mainly two guys. One of them had such a lovely smile. He was so gentle and warm. I found out later he was the lead guitarist of (a well-known band), but I didn’t know that when we were playing together.

Then they wanted ‘Poi E’. I’d never tried to play that before, but they said, ‘You can do it’. He played lead, and I played a nice soft rhythm. They reckon I’ve got a real Maori strum – that helped!

It was special. I was floating away, this wonderful feeling, as if everything was all right. Part of the beauty of the sound was that I was giving them back something that was precious to them. There I was in the middle of all this beautiful sound. I was in another realm. It was so comfortable, a healing place. I could have stayed there for the rest of my life.

I read this story to her at our next session, to check that it was in the format she wanted. She cried as I read it, and said it was ‘the best piece of writing I’ve ever heard’. Robyn said that it was having had this experience and reliving it in her head that got her through a tough week. Later in that session, the story became part of a plan for surviving loneliness for David while she was on tour.

Robyn, when I re-read that account, I was struck by how much my telling left out. I left out how excited I was both by the story you told, which was like magic to me, and by the ease with which simple questions brought forth the story. I am changed for having heard it, and walked with you along a path that led to its happening. What you told me – that the story hangs on your lounge wall – seemed so right and so deserved. You had seen yourself being seen as you wished to be seen. My heart was cheering these people, and cheering you.

Robert King, a wonderful storyteller, says these words each time he tells a story: ‘Do not say, in the years to come, that you would have lived your life differently if you had heard this story, for now you have heard it’ (2003). I hope, Robyn, that this letter has conveyed to you the two-way nature of our counselling relationship, and the ways your life story and your engagement with re-constructing your life through writing has contributed significantly to my life and to my work with others.

Thank you,

Mandy.

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REFERENCES


