



# Toward a Theory of Relational Accountability: An Invitational Approach to Living Narrative Ethics in Couple Relationships

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## *Abstract*

This paper describes an approach to couples therapy that seeks to help couples intimately apply the ethics of narrative ideas in their personal lives and relationships. This intimate application of narrative ideas is focused on helping partners to gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of their actions on one another's stories of self and to engage in intentional relationship practices that nurture and positively shape the stories of self of their partners. While this approach to working with couples is centred in a narrative philosophy and ethics, alternative practices are presented to help couples challenge the negative effects of individualising discourses on their lives and relationships and to enter preferred relationship practices that are informed by a relational understanding of self and accountability.

**Key words:** *narrative therapy, ethics, accountability, social constructionism, couples therapy, intimate accountability practices*

## Our Shared Experience of Living Narrative Ethics

The ideas presented in this paper represent an attempt, over the past many years, to intimately apply the values and ethics that are central to the practice of narrative therapy in the lives of couples in intimate relationships. While the practice of narrative therapy is most known for its focus on the externalisation of problems and the identification of alternative stories of persons' lives, the uniqueness of this approach is not found in its techniques, but rather in the types of relationships that these ideas invite therapists to enter into with the persons who consult them. Freedman and Combs (1996) describe their first experience of witnessing Michael White's work in this way, 'When we met him, we were immediately attracted to White's work, to the kind of relationships he forged with the people who came to see him, and to the way he lives out his values both inside and outside the therapy context' (p. 14). As we work with therapists who are learning narrative ideas as trainers and professors, we are always curious about how they came to be interested in and drawn to narrative ideas. When asked this question, like Freedman and Combs, they, too, often speak of being inspired not by the techniques of the work, but by the ways that narrative ideas have transformed their relationships with the people with whom they work.

Our own experience in witnessing the work of Michael White, David Epston and other narrative therapists, has been similar. We were inspired by the compassion and hopefulness that were present in the work of the narrative therapists that we had the opportunity to witness. We were also inspired by the ways in which White and Epston attended to the shaping effects that his interactions had on the lives and stories of self of the persons who consulted him, and his intense interest in consulting persons about the ongoing effects that these conversations were having on their lives. While these relational ethics certainly seemed to have a transformative effect on the people with whom they met, they also seemed to have a transformative effect on therapists' lives. As we became more and more immersed in narrative ideas, we quickly witnessed the shaping effects that these ideas had in our work as therapists as well. We found it easier to embrace a more hopeful and compassionate outlook in our work, and began to notice that the people who consulted us were experiencing a level of change and transformation that we had long hoped for when we first decided to become therapists.

While we were hopeful that narrative ideas would create the types of change and transformations that we were witnessing in the lives of the people who consulted us, we were not prepared for the ways in which narrative ideas would transform our own lives and relationships. As we became

more and more aware of the ways that our conversations shaped the stories of self of the people with whom we worked, we were confronted with an intimate awareness of the very real effects that our daily interactions had on the lives of our own partners, children, families, and friends. We experienced first-hand Michael White's assertion that narrative therapy is more than just an approach to therapy, but rather, it represents more of 'an epistemology, a philosophy, a personal commitment, a politics, an ethics, a practice, a life . . .'

(White, 1995, p. 37).

As we embraced the politics, ethics, and practice of narrative ideas in our own lives, we were startled by the ethical implications that this particular philosophy of life presented to our lives and daily interactions with others. If, as White believed, 'we live by the stories that we have about our lives, that these stories actually shape our lives, constitute our lives, and ... *embrace* our lives' (White, 1995, pp. 13–14), and if these stories of self are continually being constructed in and through our relationships with other persons (Weingarten, 1991), we then, as persons, are always participating in the shaping of the stories of the persons with whom we come into contact. As we considered the powerful effects that stories have in determining a person's experience of self and possibilities for action in this world, we were again confronted with the serious consideration that, in our everyday interactions with those we love, we are responsible for the ways our actions shape the stories of their lives, whether or not the effects of our interactions are intentional. This understanding was unsettling for us as we were suddenly faced with the knowledge that we are *always* and *inescapably* accountable for the ways in which we participate in shaping the stories of our own partners and children. In an effort to relate to our newfound sense of accountability, we immediately called upon the ethics and practices of narrative ideas to guide our interactions in our relationships. These ethics and practices have required us to rethink common notions of responsibility and accountability in relationships. Concepts like mutual responsibility and bank account metaphors were no longer viable to us. From this new perspective, we had to consider the reality that we were always more accountable than anyone else for the shaping effects of our actions. We considered ourselves more accountable, not because we were somehow better or superior, but precisely because it was the only tenable solution to maintaining a sense of intimate accountability for the shaping effects that our everyday interactions had on the stories of those with whom we came in contact. If we were always accountable for the shaping effects of our actions, then we had to be intentional about interacting with our partners and children in ways that made positive contributions to their stories of self, and to be ever-mindful of the times that our actions (intentional or not) encouraged them to enter into negative or impoverishing stories of self.

Since embracing the ethics of narrative ideas has been so inspiring in our own lives and relationships, it seemed to be a worthwhile endeavour to apply these ideas to our work with the couples who consulted us. It was our hope that by inviting couples to live and embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their lives, it would inspire them to enter into new ways of being in relationship with one another that would be situated in a new understanding of accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on one another's stories of self. It was also our hope that these ideas would help couples be more intentional about engaging in relationship practices that encourage their partners to enter into more preferred stories of self. As we have attempted to apply these ideas in our work, it became necessary to make some adaptations to the typical practices commonly associated with narrative ideas. Our work was no longer about helping persons to enter into their own preferred stories of self but, rather, to invite persons to experience an intimate sense of accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on their partner's story of self, and to enter into relationship practices that intentionally shape their partner's story of self in preferred ways. This shift has required us to re-imagine our work with couples and to explore ways in which we could invite them to embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their own lives and relationships. Collectively, we have spent the past 20 years developing and refining an approach to therapy that helps guide couples through such a process, and have been inspired by the ways that these ideas have transformed the lives and relationships of the couples with whom we have had the honour of working. In this paper, it is our hope to outline the beliefs and practices that inform this approach to therapy that we have come to call 'Relational Accountability'.

## Guiding Principles of Relational Accountability

There are three primary principles that inform the practices that are associated with relational accountability. The first principle is based on the social constructionist notion of the relational self. According to the social constructionist position, the self is a relational achievement and is continually being constructed and reconstructed in our relationships with other people. Weingarten (1991) states that, 'In the social constructionist view, the experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others . . . the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives' (p. 289). This relational understanding of self is central to the ethics that are associated with the practice of relational accountability as it implies that each of us actively participates in constructing the selves of others.

The second guiding principle of relational accountability is

centred in the role that stories play in shaping the stories of self that people are recruited into about their lives. As was previously mentioned, these stories are constitutive of persons' lives in that they shape the very expressions that are possible for people's lives and the meanings that they ascribe to those expressions (White, 1995). As such, the stories that people enter into have serious consequences or real effects on their lives. According to the narrative metaphor, the stories of people's lives are not self-made; rather, they are continually being constituted in and through our relationships with other people. The writings of Michael White frequently refer to the responsibility that therapists have for the real effects that our involvement in the lives of the people who consult us have on the stories that they enter into about their lives and identities. For example, White states:

If we acknowledge that it is the stories that have been negotiated about our lives that make up or shape or constitute our lives, and if in therapy we collaborate with persons in the further negotiation and renegotiation of the stories of persons' lives, then we really are in a position of having to face and to accept, more than ever, a responsibility for the real effects of our interactions on the lives of others (White, 1995, pp. 14–15).

While White is referring to the implications of these ideas on therapists' work with the people who consult them, relational accountability expands this important implication to include the responsibilities that partners have for the shaping effects of their interactions on their partners' lives and the types of stories that they encourage their partners to enter into. From this perspective, our interactions within intimate relationships are never neutral. Everything that we do or say – or think or feel, for that matter – literally participates in shaping the stories of our partners' lives. The implications of this idea are far reaching in that we become *inescapably accountable* for the effects of our daily interactions in the lives of our partners and the stories that these actions invite them to enter into. Since it is impossible for our actions to *not* shape a person's story of self, from this perspective, we become responsible not only for the ways that we intentionally shape our partner's story of self, but also for the times that we unintentionally act in ways that encourage our partners to enter into impoverishing stories of self. We refer to this notion as *radical responsibility*; radical because of the way in which this idea turns the notion of responsibility in couple relationships on its head by removing notions of responsibility from an individualist discourse that privileges the idea that we are only responsible for hurting another person if our actions were intentional.

The third principle of relational accountability acknowledges the role that cultural practices and power structures (i.e., power structures that create unequal relationships between persons based on gender, race, sexual orientation, gender

identity, ability status, etc.) play in shaping the stories of persons' lives (Morgan, 2001). Such a perspective is central to the philosophy of narrative therapy and is vital to our work when using the ideas associated with relational accountability. Since not all people have equal access to power in society and in their relationships, and since certain people experience a greater level of privilege in their relationships, it is important to acknowledge that both partners may not have equal power in shaping the stories of their partners' lives. Therefore, the power differences that exist in couple relationships need to be taken into consideration before beginning any conversation about accountability. For example, in our work with heterosexual couples, we would be mindful to attend to the ways in which patriarchy privileges the needs and experiences of men in relationships in ways that disadvantage or marginalise the experiences of women. Additionally, when working with a lesbian or gay couple, it would be important for us to consider the ways in which living in a heterosexist society influence or shape the stories that they enter into about their lives and relationships, and attend to these issues throughout every step of our work together (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011).

Each of these three principles places ethics at the centre of relationships and our approach to therapy makes ethics the primary focus of our work with couples. The ethics to which we are referring is not an ethics based on notions of individual responsibility or universal principles of right or wrong; rather, an ethics that is situated in an appreciation of the very real effects that our actions have on others, and the stories of self that these actions invite them to enter into. It is an ethics that is centred in a relational accountability that embraces the dizzying belief that we are *inescapably responsible* for constituting the stories of others, whether we intend to or not.

## An Ethics First/Other-Focused Philosophy of Being

We have found the work of philosopher, Immanuel Levinas, particularly helpful in offering a framework for the type of ethics that we are referring to here. Much of the work of philosophy is centred on the notion of ontology as the first and most important philosophy. In philosophy, ontology refers to the concept of being or what it means to *be* a person. From the perspective of most prominent philosophers, like Heidegger, the consciousness of *being* is considered primary to any other form of knowing. From this perspective, it is the consciousness of self that comes before any knowledge or consciousness of the other. Levinas, however, was critical of this self-first focus on being, arguing that it failed to acknowledge or comprehend a relational understanding of the self (Bauman, 1993) and would ultimately lead to a fundamentally self-enclosed or separate self. This realisation

led Levinas to make a radical proposal that placed ethics, not being, at the centre of philosophy. An ethics-first philosophy places relationship (not self) at the centre of all knowledge: a knowledge that invites us into an understanding that we are always responsible for the other. It is this sense of always being responsible *for* the other, or the ways that we are always constituting the self of an *other*, that is at the heart of relational accountability.

## How Individualistic Notions of Communication Problematised Couple Relationships

Ironically, most approaches to couples therapy rely on an individualistic understanding of the self and, as such, are focused on helping each completely separate individual in the relationship to better communicate her/his own wants and needs to another completely separate individual. In fact, problems of communication among couples are considered to be failed attempts by these separate individuals to express and verbalise their thoughts, feelings, and needs to the other. The solution, then, to these problems of communication is to help couples learn the requisite set of skills associated with proper communication. However, these attempts to teach couples communication skills are doomed to fail when they are based on an individual notion of the self. From a relational accountability perspective, it is not a lack of communication skills by individual partners that is the problem; rather, it is the very notion of the individual self that is the problem. From this perspective, a relational understanding of self is essential for any approach to couples therapy and must be the central metaphor for notions of effective communication.

Feminist author, Laurel Richardson (1994), appropriately laments what she refers to as the professionalisation of communication, and calls for notions of communication to be reunited with their 'etymological siblings: community, communion, and commonality' (p. 79). She goes on to argue that problems of communication are not based in an inability to effectively use a certain set of professionalised skills; rather, problems of communication 'are most strongly linked to the kinds of communion we can create' (p. 79). This relational, and even communal, understanding of communication necessarily shifts the focus of couples therapy away from teaching couples to communicate according to a specific set of skills, toward an understanding of communication as something that happens when we are joined in a shared appreciation of another person. When communication is joined with a relational understanding of self, communication in couples therapy happens when partners begin to see themselves as intimately connected and accountable for the shaping effects of their actions on each other's story of self.

The need for such a shift in our understanding of communication as it relates to couples therapy, is highlighted by the work of Gottman, Coan, Carrere & Swanson (1998) who reported that teaching couples communication skills, such as active listening, is about as effective as simply telling couples to be nicer to each other. The reason for this failure, in our opinion, has to do with the individualistic metaphor from which models of communication are based. Again, theories of couples therapy need to be based in models and metaphors that are situated in an appreciation for the relational ways in which identities are shaped and constructed. Laurel Richardson's invitation to view communication as a form of communion seems particularly relevant to helping couples achieve a sense of commonality and shared understanding.

When I (TC) was first learning about narrative ideas, I had the privilege of attending a training by Michael White. During the training, an audience member asked him to share what he thought narrative therapy was all about. Given the complexity of narrative ideas, I anticipated a fairly lengthy response. However, Michael simply stated, 'My work is about connecting people with other people'. In a simply uncomplicated way, our approach to couples therapy is about helping couples enter into an experience of communion with one another. The paragraphs that follow represent an attempt at describing the process by which this happens in our work.

## Primary Practices of Relational Accountability

There are three primary practices that are associated with our approach to therapy. These practices are: (1) Relational Identity Conversation Practices, (2) Relational Preference Conversation Practices, and (3) Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices.

## Relational Identity Conversation Practices

Given that Western culture tends to embrace individualistic notions of self, most couples who enter therapy utilise an individual framework for understanding both the problems that they face and the solutions that could alleviate those problems. This individual framework invites couples into an adversarial relationship that often leads partners to enter into a position of blame toward each other. Individualising discourses of self and relationship also have the effect of robbing couples of the many shared experiences that belong to their relationship, in particular, the shared experiences of hurt and loss that are often present when couples are experiencing relationship struggles. The effect of this individualisation process contributes to what we refer to as the

*isolation of shared relational experience*. As we have worked with couples to help them gain an appreciation of the effects that their struggles have had on their stories and experiences of self, we have found that couples are often surprised by the fact that the effects of their struggles and losses are shared effects. For example, couples often describe having shared experiences of sadness, loneliness, loss of dreams and hopes, etc. These potentially transformative shared relational experiences are rendered invisible by the effects of individualising discourses. Therefore, from the very beginning of therapy, we use language and questions that encourage couples to enter into a relational understanding of self and the struggles that they are experiencing. These relational conversation practices are intended to introduce relational meaning to individualising interpretations of behaviour and to help couples resituate these interpretations in a relational framework that encourages partners to begin to see and experience their own self as a 'self-in-relationship'.

Relational conversation practices are similar to the purpose of externalising conversation practices in narrative therapy. White (2007) refers to the practice of externalisation as a counter-practice 'against cultural practices of objectification of people' (p. 9). In a similar way, relational conversation practices serve as a counter-practice against the cultural practice of the *individualisation of people*. Therefore, from the very beginning of therapy, we introduce relational conversation practices whenever couples enter into individualising discourses related to their understanding of their lives and relationships.

## Using relational conversation practices in therapy

We have found that it is common for couples to come into therapy feeling at odds with each other in terms of their experiences and struggles in the relationship. In fact, it is quite common for couples to share with us that they could not be further apart in regard to their experiences. We would argue that individualistic interpretations of self and relationship make it difficult for couples to identify the ways in which their struggles are actually shared struggles. As was previously mentioned, these individualist interpretations encourage couples to enter into an adversarial relationship with one another and to see their own struggles as completely separate and even opposite from one another. To counter this particular effect of individualising discourses, we have found that it is helpful to begin therapy by exploring the couple's shared relational experience of their struggles and hopes. Because we are interested in inviting conversations that bring forth shared relational experiences, we are careful to ask questions that move couples away from individualising

explanations that are so prevalent in Western culture. We have learned to take great care in beginning our work with couples in a way that opens up space for these shared relational experiences of struggle and hope to emerge. We accomplish this by asking questions that encourage partners to talk about their personal experiences of struggle in the relationship as they relate to their own lost hopes and dreams for partnership from which their relationship likely began. For example, we might begin a session with a couple in the following manner:

I want you to know that I appreciate how hard it must be to come and talk to someone about your struggles together, and I appreciate your willingness to allow me to play a part in helping you come to a better place in your relationship. I imagine that you did not start out your relationship together thinking that you would be in the situation that you are today, and that you probably had some hopes and dreams for your relationship together and for what you could each bring to each other's lives. I am just guessing, but it has probably been difficult for each of you to have struggled to live up to these hopes and dreams that you had for each other and your relationship. I would like us to start today by talking about what it has been like for each of you to be going through these struggles in your relationship. I would also be curious to know what it has been like for each of you to have this experience of not being able to live up to your hopes and dreams for each other.

Notice that the focus here is not on getting an account of the details of what has gone wrong or encourage the gathering of evidence related to who has done or not done what in the relationship; but rather, the focus is on encouraging a sharing of each partners' intimate experience of their struggles and what it has been like for them to be in the place where they are today. To facilitate this process, we have found it helpful to invite one of the partners to take on a witnessing role while the other partner is asked to take on a sharing role. While the sharing partner is talking, the witnessing partner is invited to be intentional about listening for experiences and struggles that might be shared and to listen for experiences that represent new understandings or appreciations for the sharing partner.

After the sharing partner has finished talking about her/his experience of the struggles and experiences of lost partnership, we use relational conversation practices to invite the witnessing partner to begin to gain an appreciation for the ways in which these experiences have shaped the sharing partner's story of self. The questions below represent an example of some of the questions that we might ask to facilitate this process:

- [Referring to person by name] What do you think it has been like for your partner to experience the struggles that have occurred in your relationship over the years and to live with the loss that comes with realising that her hopes and dreams for your relationship have not been met?
- What kind of toll do you think this has had on how she experiences herself as a person and as a partner?
- What is it like for you to know that she has struggled in this way and to know how these struggles have influenced how she feels about herself as a person and as a partner?

Therapists who are acquainted with narrative therapy should find these questions familiar. These are the types of questions that a narrative therapist might ask someone while exploring the first and second steps of the statement of position map to gain an appreciation of the story that a person's experiences related to a particular problem has recruited them into (White, 2007). Since our approach to therapy is focused on helping partners enter into a relational understanding of self and relationship, it is important that these 'story questions' be asked in such a way as to help the witnessing partner gain an appreciation for the ways in which their unique relationship struggles, and the lost hopes and dreams for partnership, have shaped her/his partner's story of self. In this way, these questions invite the witnessing partner into a shared relational experience by *entering into* the story of self of her/his partner. *Relationally-focused story questions*, like the ones presented above, are important because they help couples begin to understand how their shared relationship struggles have had very real and personal effects on the story of self of their partners and, therefore, have the effect of inviting couples into a more appreciative position in relation to one another.

Once we have a sense that the witnessing partner has articulated a beginning appreciation for the effects of the struggle on her/his partner's story of self, we have found it helpful to use the third step of the statement of position map, evaluation, to encourage the witnessing partner to take a personal position on the ways that their relationship struggles have impacted the story of self of the sharing partner. We then use the fourth step of the statement of position map, justification, to help the witnessing partner to begin to identify the values and beliefs that inform the position that she/he has taken. For example, we might ask the witnessing partner the following questions:

- If you were to take a position on the ways that these struggles have affected your partner and have invited her to experience herself as a person and as a partner, would you say that you would be for or against them?

- Can you help me understand why it is that you are not okay with the effects of these struggles on your partner's life?

As this process unfolds, several important things are taking place related to helping both partners enter into a shared relational experience of one another. First, the witnessing partner is invited to join with the sharing partner in a way that is centred in an appreciation of their common or shared struggles. Second, the witnessing partner is asked to enter into an ethical position regarding the real effects of their struggles on the sharing partner's story of self. The sharing partner is also given the opportunity to experience the appreciation that the witnessing partner has for her/his struggles, and to experience the positive effects of being joined in this way by her/his partner – an experience that has probably been missing due to the *isolation of shared relational experience*. Finally, by encouraging the witnessing partner to identify the real effects of these shared struggles on the story of self of the sharing partner, it begins to shift notions of accountability from an individualistic one, where partners rely solely on the other to explain or inform them about their experience, toward a relational sense of accountability, where each partner becomes responsible for considering the potential shaping effects that their combined struggles have on the story of self of the other. This shift toward relational accountability is especially important when working with men in couple relationships, since individualistic interpretations of responsibility play such a powerful role in male culture. These relational conversation practices, therefore, have the effect of challenging this particular aspect of men's culture by helping men develop an increased capacity for attunement in couple relationships. It is important for us to highlight that the practices outlined above would look considerably different when working with couples where inequities of power and/or abuse are present. In these situations, we almost always meet with the person who has been misusing power or acting in abusive ways and take considerable care in ensuring that this person has gained an appreciation for the real effects of their actions on his partner's story of self and has begun to enter into more preferred and accountable ways of being before doing couple work. We have found the work of Alan Jenkins to be quite helpful in informing our practices when violence or abuse are present.

## Relational Preference Conversation Practices

Relational preference conversation practices are focused on helping couples identify their own hopes for how their partners experience themselves both as persons and as partners in the relationship. The identification of these relational preferences

flows directly from the justification questions that were listed above. These questions often result in the articulation of particular values, beliefs, ethics, and emotions that are based on notions of love, concern, and appreciation for the other. The identification and naming of relational preferences is a vital part of this work and serves as the primary foundation for helping couples embrace the ethics of narrative ideas in their personal lives and relationships. In narrative therapy terms, relational preferences represent the preferred story that partners would hope the other partner embrace or enter into. However, there is one important distinction that makes the identification of relational preferences different from simply identifying a preferred story for the other partner. Since our approach is based on a relational understanding of self and accountability, the types of relational preferences to which we are referring are based on an ethical position that acknowledges the intimate role that the witnessing partner plays in contributing to the preferred story of the other. Thus, it is important that these relational preferences be articulated as much more than a desire or hope for a partner to feel a particular way about her/himself (i.e., individual responsibility); rather, it must be situated in a preference that is centred in the type of story that the witnessing partner would hope to invite the other person to enter into through her/his actions, feelings, thoughts, presence, etc. (i.e., relational accountability).

**Using relational preference conversation practices in therapy.** Encouraging this type of consideration on the part of couples is often difficult due to the influence of individualising discourses and the way in which notions of responsibility are interpreted from within such discourses. Therefore, we have learned to be very careful about the way we ask partners to name their relational preferences. For example, when we initially began exploring these ideas in our work, we would ask couples the following question: 'What are your hopes for how your partner feels/experiences her/himself?' While this question could potentially lead to the naming of some positive hopes, we soon discovered that those hopes were often associated with individualised understandings of the self, and were presented in ways that had the potential to be blaming of partners for not achieving these hopes in their lives. For example, common responses to this question were, 'I just wish that my partner would be more confident in herself' or 'I wish she could just love herself more'. This version of the question fell short of encouraging couples to develop an appreciation for their own accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on their partners' stories of self, and for engaging in relationship practices that encouraged their partners to enter into more positive and nourishing stories of self. After wrestling with this process for several years, we developed a series of questions that helped couples move from naming an individual preference for their partners to a preference that was based in a relational understanding of the self. Thus, we now ask partners the following questions

to begin the naming of their relational preference for one another:

- What are your hopes for how your partner thinks and feels *about how you feel* about her/himself as a person?
- What are your hopes for how your partner feels about her/himself when she/he *is in your presence*?
- What kinds of feelings would you hope that she/he could sense coming from you *about how you feel* about her/him as a person?

While we have noticed that these questions often bring a puzzled look to the couples who consult us, and that we often need to repeat the questions a second or third time, it is common for partners to use words like loved, safe, important, cared for, and precious to describe their relational preferences. As these relational preferences are named, we take great care in noting these hopes and desires and repeat them back to ensure that we have an appreciation for the significance of these words as they relate to their preferences for how their partners experience themselves in the relationship.

While words that are identified in the naming of these relational preferences will become a central focus of our work in later sessions, we have found it helpful at this point to shift the focus of our work toward conversations that encourage partners to begin to gain an appreciation for the ways in which their daily interactions in the relationship have shaped one another's stories in ways that may go against their hopes and desires for one another through intimate accountability conversation practices.

## Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices

As was mentioned earlier, the narrative metaphor invites us to consider the significance of how stories shape and influence the lives and relationships that are possible in persons' lives. Additionally, these stories are continually being negotiated in and through our daily interactions with one another. This understanding led White to caution therapists to be ever-mindful of the ways in which our interactions with the persons who consult us in therapy literally participate in shaping the stories of their lives. When we apply these ideas to couple relationships, the ethical implications become very clear as partners are *inescapably accountable* for the real effects that their daily interactions have in the lives of their partners and the stories that these actions invite them to enter into. From this perspective, it is important to acknowledge that we are never neutral in our interactions with one another, as each action/inaction has a constitutive effect on the story of self of the other.

**Using intimate accountability conversation practices in therapy.** Given that our work is about helping couples intimately apply narrative ethics in their relationships, the purpose of intimate accountability conversations is to encourage partners to begin to enter into a place of accountability for the ways they have literally shaped their partner's story of self through their daily interactions with one another. It has been our experience that helping each partner gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of their actions on the story of self of the other plays a central role in bringing about change and healing in couple relationships. Therefore, we take great care in guiding each partner through a process that facilitates a meaningful exploration of the potential ways that their actions/inactions have played a role in contributing to their partner's story of self in negative or impoverishing ways. As part of this process, we have found that it is important to help each partner do the following: (1) identify the specific identity messages that they have been sending through their actions/inactions; (2) gain an appreciation for the shaping effects of these identity messages on the partner's story of self; and (3) accept responsibility and acknowledge the role that they have played in encouraging their partner to take on a negative or impoverishing story of self. It has been our experience that it is common for partners to experience a great deal of distress when going through this process, as they feel the weight or heaviness of the real effects of their actions on their partner's story of self.

After each partner has named a relational preference (i.e., a hope for their partner to feel cherished in their presence), we begin intimate accountability conversations in the following way,

You mentioned that what you hope most is for your partner to feel cherished in your presence and that she could sense this feeling coming from you whenever you are together; knowing that this is something very important to you, I imagine that there have been times in your relationship when you may have acted in ways that have gone against this desire and sent a different kind of message to your partner about how you feel about her. I am wondering if you can think of time in your relationship when you might have communicated to your partner something other than her being cherished by you.

We then use the following questions to help partners begin to enter into a position of accountability for the real effects of their actions/inactions on their partner's story of self:

- As you think about [the particular event/interaction], what do you think it might have been inadvertently saying to your partner *about how you feel* about her/him as a person?
- If you were to translate this into some kind of message that you were sending you in that moment, what would

it be? What would you be saying to her about *your feelings* about her worth as a person/partner?

- How do you think that living with [the message] has influenced how your partner feels about her/himself as a person? As a partner? As a parent?
- Given that this is an interaction that is common in your relationship, what kind of toll do you think that sending this message has had on your partner's sense of worth as a person?

Again, we have found it helpful to use the third and fourth steps of the statement of position map to encourage partners to articulate their personal position on the ways that their actions/inactions have literally shaped their partner's story of self, and to begin to identify the values and beliefs that inform that position. For example, we might ask the following questions:

- What is it like for you to hear yourself say those words, to know that you have been sending this message to your partner for so long?
- Is it okay with you to be sending this message to your partner?
- Can you help me understand why this is not okay with you?

These evaluation and justification questions are important because they help partners enter into an ethical position on the real effects of their actions on their partners' story of self, and encourages partners to begin to articulate how they want their own values and beliefs to more actively inform their relationship practices.

### **Case story highlighting intimate accountability**

**conversations.** The following case story represents an example of what intimate accountability conversations might look like in the context of therapy. I (AH) was working with a couple, Mike and Colette, who contacted me in hopes of decreasing the growing influence of fighting in their relationship. Mike and Colette had been to several therapists to help them 'learn how to communicate better' and shared that, while they had learned the skills quite well, they did not have the type of influence they had hoped for. While they very much wanted to 'save' their relationship, they shared that this was the last attempt at seeing if they could do so. During our first visit, both Collette and Mike lamented the loss of feeling connected with one another and how desperately they missed feeling loved; they were also able to identify a shared experience of isolation and loneliness that resulted from the recent increase in their arguments. This shared relational experience of isolation and loneliness and the connection that resulted from these conversations was encouraging to me, and was helpful as we engaged in intimate accountability conversations together. The transcript below provides an

example of how intimate accountability conversation practices were used to help Mike begin to take accountability for the shaping effects of his actions on Colette's story of self.

- A:** Mike, you mentioned that what you hope most for is for Colette to feel adored in your presence, that if she walked into the room she could feel this adoration coming from you. Knowing that having Colette feel adored is very important to you, I would imagine that there have been times when you may have acted in ways that have gone against this desire for Colette to feel adored and sent a different kind of message to her about how you feel about her. I was wondering if you could recall a time in your relationship when you might have communicated to Colette something other than feeling adored?
- M:** Yes, I suppose there have been. She always wants me to kiss her goodbye – I know this because I hear about it later in the day. You know, when I check in and call later in the day. It's not that I mean to forget, not like I do it on purpose, you know? I love her. I say it every day. I'm a busy guy Amanda.
- A:** So, you're saying that you are sending a message that is different than your desire for Colette to feel adored when you neglect to kiss her goodbye in the morning?
- M:** Yes, when I don't kiss her goodbye. Also when I don't ask her how her day was. That would be another time that I've done something, or not done something that would make her feel adored. I get what you're saying, but I'm a busy person – when I do ask it's not like she believes me anyway.
- A:** Mike, what do you think you could be saying to Colette, that for 23 years, day after day, you have not asked her how her day was, that you have not taken the time to wonder how she was doing or what she did in her day?
- M:** I guess not adored. I guess she feels like I don't care or that I don't love her.
- A:** Okay Mike, so you're saying that maybe she isn't feeling adored or that you don't care. Mike, if you could take a second to reflect, what would you say that this says to her about her worth as a person? And as a partner to you?

It took Mike several minutes to respond. I could tell that he was struggling emotionally with the question that I had just asked, as if he was feeling the weight of the influence of his actions on Collette's sense of self. While we sat there in silence, I looked over to Colette who was intently staring at her hands, tears welling up in her eyes. When Mike finally did respond it was with exasperation; his head was shaking.

**M:** Have I been telling her that all these years? Is that what I have been saying?

[Mike was visibly shaken. Looking toward Colette who was still staring at her hands, tears running down her cheeks].

**A:** Mike, if you could put that message into some statement about how this has her thinking and feeling about herself as a person, what would it be?

**M:** Worthless, worthless. I have been telling her that she is nothing to me. That she is nothing to me. [Colette's tears began to flow more freely and she was nodding her head in agreement. Mike continued to shake his head with tears in his eyes].

**A:** Mike, what is this like for you to know that this is the message that you have been sending Colette, perhaps every day, for 23 years?

It was at this point in the session that Mike reached for Colette's hand and her eyes were now raised to meet his. They were seeing each other, possibly for the first time in years. Mike, without taking his eyes from Colette's responded to my question but spoke to Colette directly:

**M:** I feel awful, sick even. I feel that I have betrayed you. I never want to make you feel that way. You mean everything to me.

**A:** Mike, I hear that you never want to have Colette feel that way again and that you would prefer to have her feel adored. Mike, knowing that you have been sending Colette the message that she is worthless, what is it like to hear yourself say those words and to know that you have been sending this message of worthlessness to her for so long?

**M:** Those are words that I would never in my life say to her, yet that's the message she gets from me, day after day. This is probably why she feels so alone, maybe even why I feel so alone. It's horrible – not something I would do or say to anyone, let alone Colette.

**A:** Mike, you're saying that this isn't a way that you want Colette to feel. Can you help me understand why this is not okay with you? Why is it not okay with you that she feels worthless?

**M:** It's just not okay. I thought that if we just told each other what we thought and how we felt that that was good enough. It's not, it's just not. I love her and I would never want her to feel that way. She's worth everything to me. I really do adore her.

**A:** Colette, what is it like for you to hear Mike say these words? What was it like for you to hear him acknowledge the effect that his failure to respond to your needs has had on your life?

**C:** Everything he said felt so true... [Tears rolling down her face] I have been waiting for him to acknowledge me in this way for so long.

There are a several points from the above conversation that are important to highlight. First, while it appeared that Mike was very aware that Colette wanted or even needed him to take the time to give a thoughtful good-bye each morning, he was quick to explain it away as a result of his busy schedule and not as an indication of his lack of love and concern for her. In fact, he thought that it should be enough for her to know that he just loved her and that she should trust in that love regardless of whether or not he chose to meet this need. As we further explored the potential shaping effects of his failure to respond to Colette's needs, Mike began to experience the gravity of his inability to attend to Colette's simple request and that he had been telling the person he loves that she was worthless to him almost every day of their lives together. Engaging in intimate accountability conversations in this way helped Mike and Colette enter into a more relational understanding of self which allowed Mike to experience a more intimate sense of accountability for the shaping effects of his actions on Colette's story of self.

### Back and Forth Witnessing: Extending the Influence of Relational Preference Practices

As mentioned previously, we use relational preference conversation practices to help couples identify their own hopes for how their partners experience themselves, both as persons and as partners in the relationship. This process involves inviting partners to name a word, quality, or ethic that they could invite into their lives that would help them to be more intentional about engaging in relationship practices that nurture more preferred stories of self in one another. To facilitate this process, we invite couples to enter into an alternative form of externalising conversations that we refer to as *invitational externalising conversations*. For example, we ask partners to reflect on the following questions:

- Is there a quality or feeling that you could invite into your life that would help you communicate your desire (through your actions, thoughts, and words) for your partner to feel [cherished] by you?
- If you had to come up with a name for a quality or feeling that you could invite into your life that would help you more fully live out this desire to send a message of [name the specific message], what would it be?

After each partner has come up with a name for the word, quality, or ethic that they would like to guide their daily

relationship practices, we invite partners to engage in a reflection assignment to help them intentionally invite the presence of these ethics into their lives. For example, if one of the partners had chosen the word 'love' as her guiding ethic, we would specifically invite that partner to intentionally reflect on the following questions during the time before our next visit:

- What would Love have me do in this moment?
- What would Love have me feel toward my partner in this moment?
- What would Love have me say in this moment?
- What would Love have me see in my partner in this moment?

While externalising conversations in narrative therapy are typically used in relation to some type of problem that people want to change in their lives, we intentionally externalise a positive or preferred ethic to help partners gain a more experience-near and relationally-relevant understanding of how these words might inform their ways of being with one another in each particular moment.

The use of invitational externalising conversations is particularly important when it comes to words like love because it has been our experience that it is common for couples to use the word love in universal or global terms in such a way that it has become de-personalised or experience-distant. From this perspective, love has little ability to influence or inform their daily relationship practices in meaningful ways. For example, we frequently hear partners say things like, 'Of course, I love you' or 'Don't you know that I will always love you', as if love is something that is universally present and somehow disconnected from the partner's intimate experience of the moment. The effect of this interpretation of love is that it diminishes partners' responsibility to *be* loving toward the other in each particular moment. It is our belief that the experience of love is something that we purposefully create as we tend to the *ethics of the moment* in our intimate relationships with one another. We have found that the use of invitational externalising conversations helps couples to interrogate the de-personalising effects of universal notions of love and to be more attuned to living as the *ethic of love* would have them love in a particular moment.

The next time that we visit with couples in therapy, we review the reflection assignment that was suggested during our previous meeting and specifically invite each partner to identify moments when the other partner had potentially acted in ways that fit her/his relational preference. Because our concern is to help partners give relational meaning to their daily acts and expressions of love, compassion, and concern for one another, we begin this process by inviting partners into a *reflective witnessing process* where they become

responsible for identifying the ways in which the other partner has acted upon her/his specific relational preference during the week. For example, after reviewing the assignment and reminding couples of the specific relational preferences that they identified during the previous session, we typically begin the next session by asking one of the partners the following question:

- As you look back on the past week, what are some of the things that you noticed your partner doing that represented her/his desire for you to feel loved?

Again, we have learned to take great care in writing down each of the acts or expressions of love that were identified by the witnessing partner, making sure that we pause after each identified action to help partners gain a more experience-near and relationally-relevant understanding of how the specific act was situated in a desire on the part of the acting partner to be intentional about sending messages that are consistent with the acting partner's relational preference (e.g., love, compassion, concern, etc.). While it is common for the witnessing partner to initially identify actions that might seem small or insignificant (e.g., sending a text message to a partner while at work), by carefully extending the influence of these acts and situating them in an intentional relational context, it has been our experience that even the smallest acts can have a transformative effect on the witnessing partner's experience of her/himself and the relationship. We have found that the following questions have been especially helpful in extending the influence of partners' acts or expressions:

- If the act of picking up and washing your coffee cup were to represent an effort on the part of your partner to say something to you about how she/he feels about you as a person, what might that be?
- What did sending you a thoughtful text message say about how she/he was seeing you as a person in that particular moment?
- What does it mean for you to know that your partner was intentionally thinking about you in this way at that particular moment?
- How did it feel for you to be noticed in that way?
- How did that experience influence how you felt about yourself as a person in that moment?
- How did that experience influence you throughout the day? At home? At work?
- How did that experience influence your relationship with your children? Your friends?

The first two questions represent an intentional effort on our part to place each identified act in an intentionally ethical context to allow partners to give relational meaning to acts

## Case Story Highlighting the Back and Forth Witnessing Process

that may have previously gone unnoticed due to the effects of individualising discourses. The remaining questions are intended to help both the witnessing and acting partners gain an appreciation for the ways in which such ethically informed actions contribute to a more positive story of self and relationship with one another. In this way, the use of such questions literally participates in the co-construction of the *felt experience* of love in the moment.

Because our focus is always on developing a relational understanding of self, at this point we turn our attention to the listening/acting partner to explore what it was like for the acting partners to experience the ways in which their actions influenced their partner's story of self. We have found that this experience is often quite emotional for the acting/listening partners as they experience both the: (1) acknowledgement of these actions and (2) the meaningful, and often surprising, ways that these actions have positively shaped the story of self of their partners. We have found the following questions helpful as we guide acting/listening partners through this process:

- How does it feel to know that what you did for your partner, had such a meaningful influence in her/his day?
- As you were washing the coffee cup, how were you experiencing your partner in that moment? What kinds of feelings were you having toward her/him?
- What feelings were you experiencing toward your partner as your partner acknowledged the influence that your actions had on her/himself?

Finally, we use evaluation and justification questions to help the acting partners articulate their position on the shaping effects of their actions on the story of self of their partners. For example, after carefully reviewing the positive effects that each identified action had on the witnessing partner's story/experience of self, we ask the following questions:

- Knowing that washing the coffee cup influenced your partner in these ways, would you say that you would be for or against having this type of influence on your partner?
- Can you help me understand why it is that you would be for influencing your partner in these ways?

After we go through this process with one of the partners, we use this same back and forth witnessing process with the other partner. This then becomes the focus of our work in each subsequent consultation until the couple's preferred relational story is more richly described.

The following case story provides an example of what relational preference conversation practices might look like in the context of therapy. Peter and Kristen consulted me (TC) about their desire to seek couples therapy after 15 years of marriage. During our first visit, they shared with me that they had simply grown apart over the years and were at a place in their relationship where they were not sure if they loved each other anymore. While they were both unhappy in their relationship, they felt that it was important for me to know that they were not angry at one another. There was no fighting; they had just grown apart. I asked both Peter and Kristen whether or not they were okay with this arrangement of having grown apart and being unhappy in their relationship, and each of them quickly indicated that they were not. After hearing such a quick and clear response to this question, I invited them to consider whether or not they were open to the possibility that things could be better for each of them in the relationship. Again, they were quick to answer in the affirmative. After moving through the three practices of relational accountability with Peter and Kristen, we began the process of extending the influence of their preferred ethics in their relationship with one another. Peter and Kristen had both identified love as the preferred ethic that they wanted to guide their daily relationship practices. The following is a transcript of the back-and-forth witnessing process that took place between Peter and Kristen:

**TC:** During our last visit, each of you had settled on the word 'love' as the preferred ethic that you wanted to guide your daily actions with one another. If I remember correctly, we had also settled on the idea that each of you would work to be a bit more intentional about sending messages to each other through your words, thoughts, and actions that represented this hope for your relationship. Does that sound right to both of you?

**P/K:** Yes.

**TC:** I think I remember that we had also decided that it might be a good idea to talk about the ways that each of you had acted on your desire to send messages of love to one another.

**P/K:** [Looking at one another] Yep, we sure did.

**TC:** Rather than asking each of you to give me a report of your own actions during the week, I would be interested in hearing about times during the week when you noticed the other person acting on this desire to be more intentional about sending

messages of love. Kristen, would it be okay if I started with you?

**K:** Sure. That would be fine.

**TC:** Kristen, as you look back on the week since our last meeting together, can you think of times that Peter acted on his desire for you to feel loved by him, times when he might have been sending you the message that he loves you?

**K:** Let me think about that for a minute. I know that it was a better week, but let me think ... yes, yes. The other day, I think it was yesterday morning, I get coffee first thing in the morning and bring it upstairs while I am getting ready for the day. Anyway, when I was coming down the stairs, I noticed that my coffee cup wasn't on the steps like always. I thought that was strange but continued down the stairs to the kitchen and saw that my coffee cup was washed and was in the drying rack. Peter had washed it for me [Kristen was looking at Peter with a smile on her face].

At this point, before I could ask Kristen to share a bit more about what this action represented for her, Kristen went on to describe other things that Peter had done that she felt were an expression of his love for her. In an effort to ensure that Kristen could give relational meaning to each of these actions, I carefully wrote them down and read each one back to her. After reading each of the actions, I asked Kristen the following questions to extend the influence of what these actions might communicate to her about how Peter feels about her as a person.

**TC:** Is it okay with you if we go back to your story about the coffee cup?

**K:** Sure.

**TC:** So you shared how you were coming down the stairs and noticed that your coffee cup was missing, and that you had discovered that Peter had decided to pick it up and wash it for you. If the act of noticing and washing the coffee cup were to represent some type of message that Peter was sending you about how he feels about you as a person, what do you think that might be? What do you think that Peter might have been telling you about how he feels about you in that moment?

**K:** That... that... [unable to speak for a moment while tears are running down her face]... that he loves me! He was telling me that he loves me!

**TC:** He was telling you that he loves you. Okay... As you look back on that moment, what was it like for you to know that Peter noticed you in that way? What kinds of feelings were you having about yourself in that moment?

**K:** [Tears are flowing now] I felt valued...I felt noticed... and loved.

**TC:** Okay, so in that moment you felt valued, noticed and loved by Peter. I am curious to know the influence that feeling this way had on you as you went about the rest of your day.

**K:** Actually, I remember it being a really great day at work. I had to give a presentation to a group of co-workers, and I am usually pretty nervous with that type of thing. But I wasn't nervous at all that day... I wasn't nervous at all. I felt really confident during the presentation... And, the rest of the day at work was just really good. It is hard to describe... I just felt really comfortable with myself.

**TC:** So, you remember feeling comfortable with yourself and more confident. Okay, thank you Kristen [tears are running down her face again]. Is it okay with you Kristen if I ask Peter a few questions about his experience as he listened to our conversation?

**K:** Please... Please.

**TC:** Peter, Kristen shared with us her experience of you picking up and washing her coffee cup and how she felt like you were telling her in that moment that you valued and loved her. She also shared how much of an influence that had on the rest of her day. What is it like for you to know your actions had such a powerful influence on Kristen and how she felt about herself as a person?

**P:** It feels really good to... you know... to know that something I did made her feel so good about herself.

**TC:** Is that something that is important to you? Is it important to you that she feel valued and noticed and loved? She also talked about feeling comfortable with herself and confident. Is it important to you that she feel these things?

**P:** Yes... Yes. It is very important to me. There is nothing more important to me [Peter is looking at Kristen now. Both of them are crying].

**TC:** Can you help me to understand why this is so important to you?

**P:** Because I love her... more than anything in the world... She deserves to be noticed. She is an amazing person.

**TC:** As you look back on the moment that you decided to pick up her coffee cup and carry it down the stairs to wash it, would you have predicted that doing such a simple act would have such a powerful influence on Kristen's day and her sense of worth as a person?

**P:** No... No... Of course not! [Peter takes Kristen's hand]. I just wanted her to know that I was thinking about her.

**K:** Thank you, Peter. Thank you!

There are several aspects of this conversation that seem important to highlight. While Kristen was able to come up with a list of several actions that Peter had engaged in to communicate his desire for her to feel loved, due to the simplicity of these acts they could have easily gone unnoticed (in fact, they already had). By engaging Kristen in this reflective witnessing process she was able to give relational meaning to Peter's act of washing her coffee cup. Through this process, this seemingly simple act had a transformative influence on Kristen's experience of herself and her relationship as it was representative of Peter's love and concern for her. Additionally, this reflective witnessing process allowed Peter to gain a better appreciation of the powerful shaping effects that even the smallest actions could have on Kristen's sense of self when he followed his preferred relational ethic for Kristen. The back-and-forth nature of these conversations allowed Peter to experience his intentional acts as being honoured by Kristen and was encouraging of his efforts to continue to engage in relationship practices informed by his desire for Kristen to feel loved by him.

## *Transforming Problem Moments through Invitational Externalising Conversations*

While we have found that couples are frequently able to identify these positive actions or expressions of love by their partners, it is not uncommon for couples to have an experience of struggle during the time between meetings. In these moments, we use invitational externalising conversations to invite couples to explore what their relational preferences would have had them do in these moments of struggle. For example, I (TC) was meeting with a couple named Barb and Dave. Early on in our work together they both had identified 'love' as the preferred ethic they wanted to guide their ways of being with one another, and they were quite successful during our initial meetings at acting out these preferences in their relationship. We were at the point in our work together where we started each meeting using the back-and-forth witnessing process identified above. I had come accustomed to our meetings starting off in a very positive and hopeful direction. However, when Barb and Dave came to one particular meeting I could immediately tell that something was not quite right between them. As it is my preference to begin meetings by highlighting the times when they acted on their preferred ethics, I started the session by asking Dave to think back to times during the week when Barb had acted on her desire for him to feel loved. Dave immediately shared

that this would be hard for him to answer because they had a terrible argument during the week. He proceeded to tell me that he had planned a special date night for them during the week and that he had made all of the arrangements (which is something that Barb had hoped to see Dave do more of). He shared how he was anxiously waiting by the door for her to come home from work with flowers in hand. But the time for their date came and went. Dave shared that she was more than 45 minutes late and that she didn't even call. When Barb finally came through the door, she walked right past Dave and into their bedroom. Dave was so upset that he threw the flowers down and followed Barb into the room. They got into a terrible fight. While I could tell that this experience was hurtful and difficult for both of them, I also knew that it presented an opportunity to use invitational externalising conversations to help Dave, in particular, to gain a better appreciation for how his preferred ethic of love would have had him thinking, feeling, and responding to Barb in that moment. The following represents a brief excerpt of how this conversation went.

- T:** Dave, I can tell that this experience was upsetting to you and that you had put a lot of time into planning this evening for Barb. I was wondering if you could reflect back on the moment right before you expected Barb to arrive and you were standing there holding the flowers in your hand. What kinds of feelings were you having for Barb at that time?
- D:** I remember feeling excited and full of love for her.
- T:** Okay, you felt excited and full of love for Barb. So, as you were standing there with the flowers in your hand feeling excited and full of love for Barb, what kinds of feelings were you hoping that she would sense coming from you when she walked through that door?
- D:** What kinds of feelings did I want her to sense coming from me? I wanted her to know that I loved her; that she was the most important person in my life.
- T:** So, would you say that you were connected to your preferred ethic of love, your desire for Barb to know that she is loved by you, in the moments leading up to the time that she had planned to be home?
- D:** Yes. Yes! I really wanted it to be a special night for her.
- T:** So, if you would have been able to stay connected with your preferred ethic of love as time went by and you were waiting for Barb to come home, even though she was late, how might love have had you think about or make sense of why Barb might be late?
- D:** I guess that it would have had me wondering if she was okay. Maybe it would have had me feeling worried about her; hoping that she was okay.

**T:** Okay, so love might have had you feeling a bit worried for her and hoping that she was alright ... So, if you would have been connected to those feelings of love and worry for her, how might love have had you respond to her when she finally walked through the door? What kinds of feelings do you think you might have had in that moment when you saw her face?

**D:** Relief. I would have been feeling grateful that she was home safe.

**T:** So, if love were having you feel relieved and grateful in that moment, what might love have had you notice about Barb when she came through the door, that you were unable to see before?

In response to this question, Dave shared that he would have noticed that Barb was upset about something and that he would have noticed that their daughter also came in, shortly after Barb, looking upset as well. As it turns out, Barb was late because their daughter had lied about having to be at an after school activity and Barb felt like she needed to talk to her about this and they had a long talk in the car before her daughter got really upset and yelled at Barb for being mean to her.

**T:** So, as you think back to the moment when Barb walked past you and you saw your daughter walking through the door looking upset, what do you think love would have had you do in that moment?

**D:** I would have followed her in the room like before, but with a very different feeling. I would have been less concerned with the fact that she ruined my plans and probably would have asked her if everything was okay. And maybe I would have held on to the flowers instead of throwing them down and given them to her anyway. Maybe she really needed the flowers after what she went through with our daughter. [Turning to Barb] I am so sorry for not seeing you in that moment; for not seeing that you were hurting. [Both Dave and Barb are tearful now].

As a result of revisiting this difficult situation through use of invitational externalizing conversations, Dave was able to become better acquainted with how love, as an ethic, had the potential to inform and guide his thoughts, feelings and actions in his relationship with Barb. These invitational externalising conversations also provided Dave and Barb with the opportunity to transform a difficult and hurtful experience

into one that brought forth feelings of love, understanding and tenderness between them.

## *Continuing Intimate Accountability Conversation Practices*

While we use this back-and-forth witnessing process as the focus of the remainder of our consultations with couples, we have found that it is vital to continually engage in intimate accountability conversation practices throughout the process of therapy so that partners remain attentive to the ways that all of their actions send shaping messages to one another in ways that they may not have intended and that go against their identified relational preferences for one another. This practice represents an ethical commitment, as therapists, to ensure that partners continue to engage in relationship practices that are centred in an awareness of and accountability for the shaping effects of their actions on the lives of their partners. As with any approach to therapy, our work is rarely linear. While we move back and forth between each of these practices, we are always mindful to attend to intimate accountability conversations throughout all aspects of our work with the couples who consult us. While the focus of the paper has been on working with couples who share in the hope of staying in a relationship together, it is important for us to acknowledge that successful couples therapy does not always involve reconciliation. It has been our experience that relational accountability practices can be quite helpful in encouraging couples to end their relationship in more preferred ways that are accountable to themselves and one another.

## *Conclusion*

It is our hope that the ideas expressed in this paper will encourage therapists to find new ways of helping couples enter into more preferred ways of being with one another, based on accountability, respect, and intimate belonging. We also hope that these ideas will allow therapists whose lives have been inspired by the ethics of narrative ideas, to similarly inspire the couples with whom they work to live out narrative ethics in their own lives and relationships. Finally, it is our hope that these ideas will invite therapists to become better acquainted with their own hopes and dreams for their work and allow those hopes and dreams to positively influence the persons with whom they work.

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