

Narrative Family Therapy with Children: The Dramatization of Life

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One has a science when one no longer has a story
(Gary Saul Morson, 2003, p. 59)

There is no flattery intended in referring to someone as a drama queen. Being prone to drama is seemingly something to resist. Are we intended, then, to live undramatic lives? Are we better off making sense of our days and the unfolding events contained in them by rational means? Should we turn to science and diagnostic language to make our struggles intelligible? Narrative therapists favor drama. In fact, it is indispensable to our practice. Without it, people are made out as ordinary and life is cast in dull tones. Problems, too, when identified by pre-established criteria, can contribute to an experience drained of color save for the dingy blue or gray utilized to make carbon copies. Far from recognizing the curious characters and novel plot points that make their way into our offices, we mistake them for duplicates. Those who reach out to us, seeking relief, have been restricted to a narrow range of linguistic options contributing to ever-increasing numbers of sufferers being reduced to one of a dwindling number of “disorders”. Before long, it seems, we will all be known according to an anxiety disorder of one kind or another, a depressive condition, an attentional problem, or an addictive tendency, with anything in the way of more stirring characterizations all but purged from the lexical field. Anthropologist, Ruth Behar, asks: “Can we give both the observer and the observed a chance at tragedy” (1996, p. 18)? This chapter is meant to support practitioners in finding color in the lives of the people who consult us with a concentration as intense as the crimsons and emeralds we would hope to find in our own lives.

Meet seven-year-old Johnny and his parents, Sue and William. Sue initially called with concerns over what she described as Johnny's unmanageable fears. She noted a sudden change from the moment he witnessed his younger brother by two years, Zach, fall head first from a Jungle Jim. Seeing him lying there motionless, Johnny was sure Zach had been killed by the fall. Thankfully, he suffered nothing worse than a concussion and would make a full recovery. But what Johnny fathomed in that moment appeared to leave an indelible mark. Fear altered his world and from then on seemed determined to stick around and dictate the terms of his existence, as if to convey, "*From this point on you belong to me*". Before that fateful day Johnny had been a fun-loving boy, going on the Disney waterslide and learning to ski but subsequently became unrecognizable to his family and perhaps even to himself. He grew increasingly anxious, seeing risk at every turn. A drain pipe attached to the siding of the next-door-neighbor's house took on the appearance of a snake. The police siren he heard in the distance at night while lying awake in bed signaled a kidnapper headed his way. His disposition, once sunny, turned sullen. His imagination, previously at his disposal for a range of creative enterprises, was misappropriated by Fear¹ for its menacing purposes.

Characterization

The problems we hear about in our everyday practice often appear familiar to us with the young people featured in them taken to be utterly recognizable. There is a vernacular in place that closes the borders, shutting out unique representations. In Johnny's case, he might have fit neatly into a clinical niche such as post-traumatic stress or adjustment disorder. The language of infirmity has enjoyed considerable advantage in the West, so much so, that it offers itself as a primary means of expression (Greenberg, 2013; Thomas, 2013; Vande Voort, 2014; Watters, 2010). Concerned parents, no less than the professional disciplines, have become increasingly oriented to diagnostic nomenclature. As a result, when we hear from them about their daughters and sons, it is often established modes of classification that filter into the conversation. In

the initial telephone call, Sue was as astute as any expert in describing Johnny as suffering from “separation anxiety” and presenting with “attachment issues”.

It is no surprise that in her efforts to give expression to her distress, she landed on the most conspicuous terminology. It is a persuasive taxonomy that supports the kind of theorizing that supplants questions about how to assist a specific child with procedures for working with a condition. A question about how to help Johnny is superseded by an algorithm for working with PTSD. A disquieting shift occurs. The young person becomes generalizable wherein we can speak in the broadest terms:

- *The thing about PTSD is...*
- *Children with this condition require...*

By contrast, consider how young protagonists are uniquely portrayed in literature and film when faced with thorny problems and seemingly insurmountable odds. More often than not they come into focus, even with their frailties, as striking figures. They persist under intense strain and prevail despite conditions that suggest little hope. In many instances, they are elevated for their exceptional gifts. One example is the character, Daniel Sempere, in Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s wonderful novel, *The Shadow of the Wind* (2004). Daniel, the book’s eleven-year-old protagonist, embarks on a dangerous adventure that begins when he is taken by his father to the cemetery of forgotten books and told to consider carefully before choosing a single text. Once inside the vast chamber, more labyrinth than library, he wanders through an impossible geometry of passages before coming upon a book that almost seems to choose him. It is, *The Shadow of the Wind*.² His father informs him that, in choosing, he must adopt the book and keep it alive. It is a foreboding point in the story where the reader is implicitly alerted to the fact that trouble is on its way. In the days that follow Daniel barely registers the presence of an ominous figure but soon enough realizes he is being followed. When he comes face-to-face with his rival he does not waver despite his junior standing and the burnt visage of the figure he faces who gives the impression of being more devil than man. As it becomes clear the book

in Daniel's care has placed him in harm's way he takes bold action, fulfilling his promise to protect the imperiled prose in his possession and filling out the central role in an unfolding drama. In narrative therapy, we attend to characterization more as coauthors than clinicians and believe in the transformational power of a well-conceived leading figure, knowing that a thinly drawn protagonist will struggle to face challenges, win others over, or drive a plot forward.

A Multi-storied Account of Childhood

So impressive a being, however, resides in the realm of fiction rather than in the spaces of everyday life where appraisals of children are guided by such limiting tropes as *seedling* and *empty vessel*. Such monikers saddle young people with low expectations making highly unlikely any resolute response in the face of adversity. Educator, John McKenzie, points to "the ideology of childhood innocence" (2005, p. 91) that would have us treat children as precious but useless during those years when they are thought to be little more than adults in the making and, in the interim, principally in need of protection. Assessing children as "innocent" according to Bruno Vanobbergen, functions as "an important concept as it forms an alibi for exclusion" (2004, p. 165). This is not to suggest that they are invulnerable. But this single-storied account puts any notion of children as enterprising out of mind, especially at times when the going gets tough. It necessitates the placement of adults at the paternalistic center of events. It can simply be understood that, with respect to matters of consequence, adults should do the thinking and acting *for* children, and children should be acted *upon*—with benevolent intent of course.

We would do well to resist this limiting depiction and instead consider readings not otherwise legible. McKenzie tells us that children are often aware of "all the exigencies of life and death" (2005, p. 91). They had better be prepared to contend with hardship since problems will not sit idly by waiting for them to outgrow their knickers and pinafores. If skinned knees and elbows, colds and fevers, loose teeth, booster shots, and dentists' drills are not enough, such interlopers as Fear, Temper

and Disaffection, along with their more somber partners, Trauma, and (grave) Illness are poised and ready to enter the frame.

Beyond the stresses and sorrows problems can bring, opportunities for action are not far off. Children are capable of applying themselves under exacting conditions. In fact, it is only in the event of something having gone wrong that one is inspired to mobilize. Early 20th century developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, tells us, “If life surrounding him [sic] does not present challenges to an individual, if his usual and inherent reactions are in complete equilibrium with the world around him, then there will be no basis for him to exercise creativity. A creature that is perfectly adapted to its environment would not want anything, would not have anything to strive for, and, of course, would not be able to create anything” (2004, p. 28-9). The children we meet are no different from the young heroes they seek out in favorite storybooks and darkened theaters in their capacities to apply themselves at critical moments and exceed expectations. Like their fictional counterparts, they may be reluctant at first. But we can lend a hand by calling them forward at their best rather than making them out as inadequate to the task and turning to surrogates to take their place.

Before Fear asserted authorship rights, vying for the greater share of Johnny’s reputation, he was abundantly represented in family lore. When I asked Sue and William, in our first meeting, to introduce Johnny to me according to his “wonderfulnesses”³ (Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016) ahead of any problem, they had no trouble providing testimony and, in fact, appeared eager to serve as character witnesses. They explained that Johnny was:

- Incredibly kind and thoughtful to his friends at school
- A great big brother to Zach with hugs and love
- A hard worker
- Creative
- Funny
- Sensitive

- Playful
- Good at expressing what he's going through
- Good at coming up with ideas
- Intelligent
- Excitable
- Clever (he can figure things out like Legos)
- Passionate (he can get really interested in something)
- Always looking on the bright side
- Cautious rather than careless
- Brave (like with skiing and the Disney waterslide)
- Able to think things through (he explained: "*I can visualize it!*")

In contrast to a symptom checklist that would have contributed to little more than a diagnosis and prescriptive intervention, Johnny's wonderfulnesses put us on a path to innovation. We rely on parents who undoubtedly love their children and who, despite the appearance of problems, are not dispossessed of an awareness of their daughters' and sons' nobler qualities. We initiate the first interview with a wonderfulness question. After everyone has settled in we turn to parents/caregivers:

I would like to begin by getting to know your son (or daughter) according to his wonderfulnesses—those qualities that show him at his best, those talents and gifts that make him shine and that others may have taken note of. If you would provide an initial image of who he is according to his wonderfulnesses and ahead of any problem, I might learn what he has going for him and may already have in hand to meet the problem with.

Even with an excess of good will, however, it is likely caregivers are caught off guard by what is being solicited. Surely, they anticipate being asked to lead with a full account of the problem. After all, one seeks out a "specialist" to point to what's gone wrong (e.g., *This is where it hurts, Doc!*). Further complicating matters, in instances of unruly behavior, parents can find themselves at odds with their children and at a distance from their early dreams of family life and the role they were sure awaited

them. Though it may come as a surprise, the wonderfulness interview is often felt as a welcome relief. It provides a chance, even briefly, to escape a role they have been miscast in while affording an opportunity to play the part they feel they were meant for—that of adoring parent. The first question is drawn out in order to allow time to migrate from the expected—a report on the problem—to the unexpected—a distinguishing account.

The interview is more than a cursory exercise. We linger over each recounted wonderfulness with an interest in its particulars. We do not mistake them for platitudes or treat them superficially (*Wow! That's amazing!*) in ways that would contribute to little more than a joining exercise. The interview establishes young people's eminence. And it is a good thing since we will be expecting a lot from the girls and boys sitting (or bouncing) across from us on our office couches. But more than expectation (e.g., *You need to take responsibility for what you've done!*), it is expectancy that fills the air as children shift from an enervated to an energized mood. With their reputations newly verified they are more inclined to engage with a sense that they are the ones to assert moral authority over the problem.

Imagination

As young people become known according to particular gifts, the initiatives they undertake and the means by which they execute them often lie beyond prediction. Learning about children's wonderfulnesses at the outset provides the first clues regarding a possible direction. Each wonderfulness points to a prospective endeavor, a singular rather than predictable path. A child who is equipped with sensitivity, for example, may decide it best to mentor a problem like Sadness and teach it where it belongs and where it has no business showing up. Someone with a reportedly exceptional intellect may decide it is high time to turn the tables on Temper and outsmart it. The bends in each storyline contribute to an experience of intrigue rather than the kind of tedium that is found on a rutted (manualized) path. The signs along the way must be studied since they are not spelled out in the usual phrases (e.g. Pro-

ceed With Caution—Vulnerable Child; Do Not Yield—Limits Required; Dangerous Crossing—Adolescent Ahead). We know these markers at a glance. They come with turn-by-turn directions. The only hindrances are the inevitable traffic jams since these are the roads so many parents are ushered down. If there are collisions along the way, it cannot be the fault of drivers unless they deviated from the guidance or ignored the warning signs. Therapeutic dialogue can function like data collection. The practitioner watches for postings in support of a conforming landscape. Or, by contrast, as with a journey along an uncharted path, one looks out (and listens) for what new surroundings may offer in the way of surprise.

It is not incidental that the events depicted in favorite storybooks and films so often unfold in an alternate realm. Children are adept at crossing the threshold from the real to the imaginary where the rational calculus of Western culture gives up ground to untamed territory. This is where children can be found at the ready. Narrative therapist, Marcela Polanco⁴ travels in her imagination to the town of Macondo, the place the beloved novelist, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, invented where magic and reality co-mingle. Polanco explains:

From an imaginative place like Macondo, in narrative therapy conversations, the magical refuses to be entirely assimilated into realism. What might be referred to in modern times as a kind of madness is, in fact, the preferred state of living in Macondo; madness is an aspiration for one's life since it transgresses rational and modern conventions and what is deemed normal.

Rather than draining people's worlds of wonder in deference to reason, Polanco makes room for magic to endow life with greater prospects. And magic happens to be the specialty of children. Novelist, Carlos Fuentes reminds us:

Though subject to school and especially the family, at that time of life we have more freedom with regard to what binds us than at any other period. It seems to me this is because in childhood, freedom is identical to imagination, and since here everything is possible, the freedom to be something more than the family and something more than school flies higher and allows us to live more separately than at the age when we must conform in order to survive, adjust to the rhythms of professional life, submit to rules inherited and accepted by a kind of general conformity. We were, as children, singular magicians (2011, p. 58).

As it became clear who Johnny was, Fear's aims stood in stark relief. In contrast to Johnny's many heartfelt qualities, Fear was cast as insensitive. Johnny decided it was time to push back and, once inspired, he had no shortage of ideas. And they were the kinds of ideas that are the specialty of kids. He explained:

- I can use my imagination like a machine
- I can tell stories to myself (like *Rogue One*)
- I can turn Fear into fun at bedtime
- I can turn bad dreams into sweet dreams

Johnny's talent for coming up with "good ideas" reminded him that his thinking might best be relied upon when push came to shove. The fact that he was also "clever" and "able to think things through" convinced him that he was the right boy for the task. This marked the beginning of his comeback. It was not the end of Johnny's relationship with Fear, but it gave him surer footing where he had previously found himself on unsteady ground. With the problem having been brought within his imaginative range, he felt, more often than that, rather than leaving it to others, the problem was squarely within his own scope of practice.

Personal Narratives Are Not Privately Held

Young protagonists are made estimable by their virtues and the actions they portend. But it is more than the existence of such gifts that contributes to one's sense of fitness. It is in the stories that circulate about them that we come to know children and they come to know themselves as capable or ineffectual. As long as the dominant story of childhood portrays them as fragile, their intended role would seem to be that of "*an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production*" (Zelizer, 2000, p. 90). They will have no hand in weaving the ethical fabric of civic or family life. Anything in the way of values must be woven into them. Arthur Frank tells us: "Once stories are under people's skin, they affect the terms in which people think, know, and perceive". (2012, p. 48). Stories captivate. They are not just felt to be lifelike—they are felt as life itself.

The dominant developmental narrative leaves it to adults, by process of elimination, to take up the slack when problems make an appearance in children's lives. As a result, it is adults who are on display and witnessed for their acumen. Children are more or less pawns to be moved about (lovingly) as others deem necessary. That is not to say that one should rule out instruction or strategies such as positive reinforcement, limit-setting and consequences. But there is a distinction to be made between engaging children in order to elicit compliance vs. the kind of engagement that spurs innovation. As an audience, we came to admire Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ron Weasley, not for their well-honed skills in cooperation but for their daring. It was precisely at those moments when they broke out of the rule-bound academy and made their way through harrowing landscapes by their own designs that our interest was peaked. Vygotsky tells us of the value in ceding the *mise en scène* to young people: "In a true children's production, everything, from the curtain to the denouement of the drama, must be created by the hands and imagination of the children themselves and only then will the dramatic production acquire its full significance and power for the children" (2004, p. 72). Life is theater. Children must be able to find an audience ready and willing to recognize novelty and significance in their performance. Anthropologist Hilda Lindemann Nelson suggests that to be witnessed is to be authenticated: "A personal identity... requires social recognition. Identities are not simply a matter of how we experience our own lives, but also of how others see us... Who we can be is often a matter of who others take us to be" (2001, p. 81). In order to neutralize problem narratives, it is necessary to recognize children as actors capable of meeting the demands of the story at its arc. In the misadventures of life children can take their turn at center stage.

Legacy can provide a further sense that children are in good company and not best summed up in isolation, the result of privatizing practices of assessment and diagnosis. As children cover the distance from problem-laden provinces to richer regions of understanding, they travel best in convoy, rather than as lone riders. They can be found in common purpose with those who came before them. It is often the case that memorable protagonists are revealed to have notable ancestries. Anna,

the young protagonist in Marissa Kennerson's suspenseful "tween" novel, Tarot (2019), discovers a potent patrilineal line that endows her with the powers she will need to defy the king and endure the hardships that await her. She is made more stout by those who preceded her. Rather than peering inward in an accounting of children's gifts (and deficits)—a kind of private property valuation—we look out and trace children's powers backward through the generations. Addiction and depression are not the only endowments that can lay claim to ancestral roots. We would be remiss to leave unexplored the lineage of children's talents and instead mistake them as fledgling. Johnny resonated with his parents' ordering of kindness as his most prized value and appeared more than interested to learn that it was a merit linking him to his parents and their parents and grandparents before them. This strengthened his resolve to resist Fear on the basis of a core family value that was braided throughout his family line. Fear, we discovered, was all about disconnection—keeping him from the activities he loved, from friends and school and worst of all, from his imagination and the ways he might rather apply it. If Fear had its way, it would have kept Johnny all to itself along with his imagination in its full employ for darker purposes. He discovered that standing beside him were his parents, grand-parents, great-grandparents, and a special aunt. Great-grandpa Ted, on his mother's side, was a big man, standing 6'4". He was a doctor who delivered babies and raised money for those in need. "He was the salt of the earth". Great-aunt Augie, on his father's side, was equally kind. She volunteered in the community and made things for William and his two sisters when they were young. And "Grandpa Joe, on his mother's side, never said an unkind word about anyone—except for Donald Trump". With kindness establishing a web of connectivity that wove through the generations on both paternal and maternal sides Johnny found himself clearly at odds with Fear and more determined than ever to re-claim the direction of his life.

Giving Problems Their Due

With young people steadied by the regard of others and the knowledge of what they have in hand to meet problems with, there is no need

to domesticate problems and make them out as obvious. In fact, we indulge the opposite impulse. We bring problems to life and accord them a full measure of regard, though the regard we show is not to be confused with respect. It is a kind of acknowledgement given to one who is not to be trifled with. Problems can be cunning. Anything less than conferring upon them their full rank would risk considering a routine response adequate. It would drain the moment of urgency. When they come into view in favorite stories there is a reason why loathsome antagonists are so affecting and discovered in close proximity to young champions. Thanks are due, in large part, to James Hook for Peter Pan's enduring renown. If the reprehensible pirate were not luridly etched in our minds Peter would soon fade from memory.

Captain Hook is made menacing:

“with his flourish, his poses, his dreaded diabolical smile! That ashen face, those blood-red lips, the long, dank, greasy curls; the sardonic laugh, the maniacal scream, the appalling courtesy of his gestures” (Hanson, 2011, p. 25).

Add a full measure of murderous intent and we are primed to meet Peter at his very best, in epic battle, a defender of lost boys, and forever our young hero. The diminutive protagonists we meet in our offices are locked in dramas of their own that not only test but prove their abilities. With the aid of our questions, they come to recognize themselves as capable and sometimes even remarkable figures adept at overcoming ostensibly insurmountable odds.

Already, there was the promise of a riveting drama featuring 7-year-old Johnny, who, at roughly the same age as Peter Pan, was confronted by life's deadly hazards. And if that was not torment enough, Fear convinced him that danger lurked around every corner. It cast every shadow as a serpent and each foreboding siren as a prophesy of doom. How would Johnny come to meet the Fear that plagued him? Might he prove as memorable a figure as Daniel or Peter? Given his gifts—kindness, creativity, courage, intelligence, the ability to think things through and more—what might we anticipate in the way of his potential to subdue a problem that seemed intent on relegating him to a passive life? These, as yet, unanswered questions contributed to a sense of anticipation. Literary critic, Gary Saul Morson, warns of the consequences of a

life absent of suspense. According to Morson, without this sense of an uncertain outcome where vital matters are at hand, life loses its charge. Rather than wading into an indefinite space, one would simply submit to a life already outlined. Morson explains: “There may be actions, of course, but not adventures, if by adventures we mean an event whose outcome is not just unknown but also still undetermined...” (1994, p. 34). We can fall into a flat existence absent of any sense of challenge, knowing ahead of time what we’re dealing with and what’s to be done. Along the measured path to adulthood, at least in Western culture, we can come to feel that life is little more than a list of unbending rules laid out for our inevitable adoption. We must learn to...

- Delay gratification
- Learn self-discipline
- Develop a strong work ethic
- Individuate
- Compromise
- Practice assertiveness
- Establish proper boundaries
- Cultivate self-care
- Learn to trust
- Live in the moment

Morson points to the cost of meeting the challenges before us with pre-established remedies: “Our choices would be illusory, for they would have already been made. Those aware of this depressing fact would then not so much live their lives as *live out* their already-plotted lives” (p. 51). Think of the tiresome consequences for our engagement with children in our daily practice if, rather than recognizing novelty, we mistook young people and their problems for replicas. We would know ahead of time what they are all about and what’s to be done. As one referring colleague told me: *It is impossible to successfully treat trichotillomania without medication.* I had no doubt she was right. A child would indeed be hard-pressed to address such a disorder, let alone pronounce its name. We resist such

pronouncements and instead aim to unmask problems in a spirit that keeps them within range of young people's worldviews and imaginative powers—and keep our own imaginations in working order in the process.

Moral Character

This chapter could just as easily have been titled *In Pursuit of Children's Moral Character* since they are capable, with the aid of our questions, of intentional responses to the problems that enter their lives. If they make up their minds that a problem is unwelcome, it is a decision founded on what they stand for and what they will no longer countenance. A twelve-year-old girl asserts she would rather follow her own interests than be led around any longer by Comparison in an endless pursuit of popularity. A nine-year-old girl has decidedly spent enough time with Trouble and has no further interest in following it into whatever new muddles it has disguised as adventures. And our eight-year-old champion, Johnny, has had quite enough of Fear limiting his enjoyment of life and taking license with his imagination. These and other rejoinders to plaguing problems are in line with what children come to choose. We are careful not to assume that a given outcome should be obvious to them (*After all, anyone knows that worry accomplishes nothing; temper is destructive; and fear only holds you back!*). It would not do to commence with questions about *how* children can subdue problems without first learning from them *whether* such an undertaking is worth their time and attention. We approach the conversation with the understanding that there are ethical questions children must brood over. Though it is rarely the case that they enter therapy offices prepared at the outset to take up questions of personal conduct informed by ethical commitments, it would be a mistake to conclude that they lack the capacity to do so. The questions asked in narrative therapy create opportunities for children to:

- Achieve a separate vantage point from the problem
- Distinguish between the problem's aims and their own purposes
- Establish solidarity with others on the basis of shared values
- Take decisive action

The platforms children establish are fortified by desire. Without desire there is no basis for action. If a personal narrative is to achieve momentum it is at the bidding of a causal agent who is after something. Anthropologist, Cheryl Mattingly, explains: “A therapeutic plot occurs in a kind of gap, a space of desire created by the distance between where the protagonist is and where she wants to be. A *narrative* possibility cannot be within easy reach” (1998, p. 70). Others’ concerns over a young person’s conduct are not enough. Children themselves have to decide that things must be put right. Johnny found the following questions of interest and in keeping with his own wishes:

- Do you agree with your parents that kindness belongs at the very top on the list of your wonderfulnesses (Though Johnny’s parents authored the list it was his right to authenticate it)?
- Why is kindness number 1 (Inviting ethical reflection)?
- If it were up to Fear, how would it go about making use of your imagination (Bringing the problem’s motives to light)?
- What did you most enjoy using your imagination for before Fear came along and took charge (Children are all too familiar with the experience of being taken charge of and might relish the chance to flip power and take charge of the problem)?
- What kind of future would Fear plan for you if it could (mapping the problem across time)?
- How does (or doesn’t) Fear’s plan for your future fit with what you might have in mind (Creating a space for possible protest)?
- Has Fear ever tried to convince you that it knows you better than the people who have known and loved you all your life (Prompting an experience of solidarity)?

Imagine a story in which one of the characters appears to be aimless and upon further exposure is confirmed to lack all initiative. They would not make for a memorable figure or someone capable of filling out a key role in a plot of any length. To know them in rough outline would be to know them well enough. They would only know themselves in broad strokes and would, by necessity, have to latch onto someone

else, someone with clear purpose, someone worth following—an adult perhaps.

A story, in its development, must resonate with what matters most to the young people we are assisting. This gives them prominence in plotlines that are personal. If, instead of rich story development, a child were brusquely presented with an axiom (*life isn't always fair; don't get caught up in the opinions of others; if you learn good work habits now they will serve you the rest of your life*), it would likely be felt as no more than a rote exercise. Advice of this nature is dead on arrival. Vygotsky cautioned long ago that, “direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalism, a parrotlike repetition of words by the child, simulating a knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum” (1986, p. 150). Of much greater value is the kind of engagement that considers children’s particular location in the world, what they have come to know and the experience of knowing that is just out of reach and *almost felt*. It is in dialogue and reflection that young people come into knowing or come to *know what they know*. And once they know, there is no stopping them.

Conclusion

As concerned parents reach out for help and teachers, school counselors, and practitioners join the conversation, the problem can often demand all of our attention. But we are disinclined to accord it exclusive storytelling rights. Children can assume intentional stances and bring about change, shouldering their fair share of responsibility for the problems that enter their lives. It is a matter of recognizing their brand of knowledge as relevant. The resulting experience can be invigorating as they engage as partners in family life rather than passengers. Assisted by our questions, they establish ethical platforms from which decisive action is made possible. This kind of thoughtful engagement can be deeply felt and can contribute to rich and sustaining story development. Given the chance, and with our help and the support of family, young people become acquainted with their own gifts, seize opportunities, and un-

leash their imaginative powers. By this means, they become compelling figures in unfolding dramas.

1. Problems are personified and given proper names. This helps establish a separation and a distinction wherein the person is not the problem. The problem is the problem.
2. Carlos Ruiz Zafón gives the same title, *The Shadow of the Wind*, to both books—the novel he actually wrote and the invented text that Daniel happens upon in the cemetery of forgotten books.
3. David Epston developed the wonderfulness interview to establish young people's honorable reputations and distinguish them from the problem's (mis) representation of them.
4. polanco explains the use of lower-case in writing her name: "It is written in small letters to emphasize that the life that it carries does not stay put, nor does it hold aspirations to claim any authority of the proper conventions of the classes of names" (2013, p. 16).

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