

THE CORNER: ONE GOOD STORY DESERVES ANOTHER

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INTRODUCTION

David Marsten’s story is recounted in collaboration with Lisa Johnson and David Epston. David and David first joined together in 2009 to begin writing and subsequently published “What Doesn’t the Problem Know About Your Son or Daughter? Providing the Conditions for the Restoration of a Family’s Dignity” (Epston & Marsten, 2010). Lisa joined this project in 2010. Together, they are currently preparing a book outline for W.W. Norton tentatively titled *On the Other Side of the Looking Glass: Narrative Therapy in Wonderland*. This will include revisions of papers published in this journal, and others published elsewhere. This project has concerned itself with taking up some under-described themes and practices of Narrative Therapy with young people and their families and in particular the recruitment of the imagination so that what eventuates might be said to have taken place in the “magically real” (Polanco, 2010). In any context when magic enters a space previously thought to be reserved for empirical undertakings, meaning is destabilized and made provisional. When a meaning system holds the space insecurely, one is inclined more to an attitude of inquiry, making room for imagination to delight in “. . . a sense of mystery within the ordinary” (Faris, 2004, p. 46). Much fun can be had in questioning what had been taken to be inviolable. This might be thought of as the special talent

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of young people to engage in the “carnavalesque” while escaping “official life” to enter a province where play is accorded high status.

According to Bakhtin, carnival makes us discover that truths are relative and that the world is open and free, in a manner reminiscent of how children play with and have fun with the order of things, turning things inside out and upside down (Øksnes, 2008, p. 150).

Magic and mischief combined in play hold the potential to excite the senses and find a seam into a “sub-universe” where more is possible than previously was considered to be so (Berger, 1997, p. 7). Michael White often quoted Bordieu in “exoticizing the domestic” (Bordieu, 1988, xi). Here our attempt is to “bring the exotic home” and, for periods of time, render it a “wonderland.”

AN UNFORTUNATE EVENT: A CASE OF LAZINESS AND FEAR, OR A STORY OF PROFOUND AND LASTING LOVE

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire (from the Lemony Snicket series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*) made it all the way to *Book the Ninth* and counting, in spite of having faced one perilous predicament after another, all the while carrying heavy hearts due to the loss of their parents in a tragic but suspicious fire that left their home and family in ruins. Their talents for problem solving and confronting deadly traps with ingenuity and courage were, by now, legendary to their readers. The dangers they faced were not the usual kind young people often do, or at least not akin to the matters I (David Marsten; DM) had any awareness of in my privileged early years. And what I saw reflected in Saturday morning children’s television and after-school programming offered no window into the harder realities of life.

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny found themselves suddenly orphaned. And in hot pursuit of them and their inheritance was their diabolical and dubious distant relative, Count Olaf, and his lover and accomplice, Esme Gigi Geniveve Squalor. Literature has rarely produced, through the ages in its pages, more menacing characters, with designs on their inheritance, not to mention plans for their premature demise. And did Olaf have anything to do with the fire and tragic death of the orphans’ devoted and loving parents? One can only conclude that he most certainly did.

I met with Alex and his son Danny, aged ten, a day after receiving a call from Alex during which he expressed his frustration over his son’s “laziness” and concern about Danny’s “constant fears.” He explained that his son had been living with him full-time since his mother’s sudden death four years earlier and since then, “all he does is sit around and read his books or watch

TV. If we go out I have to drag him along.” Alex went on to describe how “[Danny] has bad dreams and wakes up in the middle of the night convinced he’s in danger and someone’s breaking in or hiding under his bed or in the closet.” As I hung up the telephone, I drifted in my thoughts to memories of young people I’ve met through the years and all the things they taught me about their dealings with Fear. In each instance, one or more special talents appeared. What would I soon discover about Danny, I wondered? If at night, Danny’s imagination was vivid and freighted by Fear, might this be an indication that his imagination could, under less weight and stress, take flight? If that turned out to be the case, it would not be the first time Fear exploited a young person’s capacity for imagination and even invaded her/his sleep, turning dreams into incapacitating nightmares.

Alex walked through my office door, turning and waiting on Danny, who trailed behind with book in hand, appearing anything but enthusiastic. When I asked him what he was reading he silently held it out to me. It was from *The Series of Unfortunate Events: The Carnivorous Carnival* (Snicket, 2002). The drawing on the front cover was reminiscent of Daniel in the Lion’s Den, and enough to give anyone distressing dreams. I was soon to learn that these were his favorite books. He asked if I’d ever read them. I admitted I hadn’t, wishing I had. Before learning anything more about the problems Danny faced, I wanted to understand something about him apart from any further description the problems of *Laziness* or *Fear* might offer, so I solicited from him a detailed description of the book series. I wondered what I would find out about him in his appreciation of the Baudelaire children and whether it might shed some light on what was at stake for Danny and what was crucial to him. Might we all find this information useful in engaging whatever problems we were about to encounter?

The first thing he explained about the Baudelaires was that, though they were always in the hands of one adult or another, it was most often a caregiver who seemed to lack any of the requisite skills or talents for delivering care. Consequently, in every practical and important way, they were “totally on their own” when contending with whatever fiendish scheme Count Olaf surely would soon be hatching. Danny took pains to ensure I understood just what the Baudelaire children were up against in their dealings with the Count. He described Olaf as “a bad person” and explained, “He’s like the worst person you could ever meet.” In contrast to his detestation of Count Olaf, Danny’s admiration for the Baudelaire orphans was boundless. Since the death of their parents, they had faced peril at every turn and it was only through their own combined efforts that they survived (Snicket, 2000). However unlike Danny, each of the Baudelaires always had the other two to turn to in the event that one of them crossed danger’s path or was suddenly bewildered or outstripped and cornered. Danny

was still sorting out his relationship with his father and, in the move to Los Angeles, found himself at a distance of more than 100 miles from the people who had previously been central to his life. He had his father, of course, but their relationship had been more occasional and distant until four years earlier when his mother's shocking death turned his world upside down. Father and son still had not found their way into each other's hearts. To Alex, Danny was a riddle. He was "baffled by him." Danny was distant, seemingly keeping his own counsel, or perhaps adrift and even lost to himself. It might have been, at that point in time, that Danny knew the Baudelaires better than he knew himself. He was most fervent when discussing them. His keen interest in their imagined world was at odds with his lethargy at other times and seeming disinterest in his own life and surroundings. The contrast raised questions in my mind. What did Danny's interest in the plight of the Baudelaire children suggest about what might underscore his commitments and purposes for his life? How would he describe his experience in those pages wherein an unexpected plot twist awakened his senses and engaged his mind? What was more possible for Danny to know at these times? How might we bridge the gap between what was possible for Danny in this imagined world and the everyday world in which he seemed to be living a kind of half-life? These questions floated through my mind as *my* imagination seemed to take off.

Accordingly, I asked Danny what it was about the Baudelaire children that had him sticking with their story through book nine rather than leaving them behind in book three or four? Surely one would know all one needed to by then! Danny rolled his eyes. It was clear I had a lot to learn. I pursued a more detailed understanding of the Baudelaires through Danny's eyes, hoping to learn more about him and his aims along the way. He introduced them to me, each in turn:

DM: Alright, let me see if I've got this straight. When Violet puts her hair up, you can tell she's thinking and putting her mind to work. Is that right?

DANNY: Yeah, and Klaus reads and has lots of information and Sunny can bite through anything, not just like a rope or something easy, but like hard metal things. [His interest is obvious.]

DM: But I thought you said Sunny was a baby?

DANNY: Yeah, but she has really sharp teeth and she understands a lot, even though she can't really talk. She can talk, but only baby talk, but Violet and Klaus can understand her.

DM: OK, I think I'm beginning to get the picture. These are pretty special kids with special talents for living and for facing difficult problems, even life and death problems. Am I on track here?

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: Do you know anyone in real life who reminds you of the Baudelaires?

DANNY: Um, I don't know. [He seems annoyed by the question.]

DM: Any relatives, or anyone at school maybe, or someone from your neighborhood? [Attempting to link Danny's two worlds—the real and the imaginary.]

DANNY: No.

DM: Anyone with really sharp teeth? [A feeble attempt to re-engage him with humor.]

DANNY: No. [He shuffles his feet, finding nothing funny in my comment.]

DM: Is there a special kind of link between you and the Baudelaires?

DANNY: Um . . . no . . . can I use the bathroom?

Danny may have needed a bathroom break, or perhaps he was generously giving me some time to get our conversation “back on track.” In retrospect, this was an ill-conceived attempt to connect the real and imagined worlds, which needed more of a bridge. If I was to be of assistance to Danny and if he was to re-inhabit his life, it would come from more carefully developed questions that would support the legitimization of young people's knowledge and in particular, Danny's capacity to know. He settled back in and I tried again.

DM: Is there something in particular about the Baudelaires that interests you, Danny?

DANNY: I don't know . . . I just like them and the way they can get out of anything. And they're smarter than the grownups. [He looks up as he answers.]

DM: Is that right? Do they live in an upside down world where kids are smarter? Because in this world don't we treat adults as smarter than kids and knowing what kids need? In the world of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, is it kids who know what kids need?

DANNY: Yeah. [Smiling.]

DM: Is that one of the best things about the books?

DANNY: Yeah. [He seems pleased.]

DM: Is there something special about kids' knowledge? Can kids' ideas fit into kids' lives better than adult ideas some of the time? [Perhaps this is a more effective bridge?]

DANNY: Yep! [Stated with obvious pleasure. Danny seems to move towards a more explicit understanding of young people as *knowledge-able*, an understanding that, previously, may have only been implicitly appreciated; either that, or it was seen as a talent that had been exclusively reserved for the Baudelaires.]

DM: Do you relate with your mind to the way that Violet uses her mind?

DANNY: What? [Attempting, once again, to bridge the two worlds.]

DM: Let me try that again. Can you use your mind to understand the way Violet uses her mind?

DANNY: I guess so. [He seems hesitant, perhaps still confused by the question, a possible indication of how foreign Danny's own skills are to him at this point.]

DM: Do you like putting your mind to work or giving your mind a good workout the way Violet does? [Finally getting the question into better form.]

DANNY: Sometimes. [He seems to consider the question.]

As our first meeting came to a close I found myself wondering what more there was to learn about Danny's mind along with additional talents that might be uncovered. I would give close attention to what could become known about Danny and his world with the help of three young orphans.

At our next meeting, which took place a week later, I pursued a more detailed understanding of Danny's mind and the uses to which it might be applied. Among other things I learned that Danny had a talent for vocabulary and spelling, at least according to Alex. In addition, there were two late night occasions, in his room in the dark, when he concentrated his mind to out-think Fear and was able to "kick it out" and get a good night's sleep. Alex and I were inclined to consider this a remarkable use of mind given that Fear thinks of the dark as its playground and, as every kid knows, it loves taking young people's minds into the darkest corners of their rooms and imaginations. I asked Danny if it was his talent with vocabulary and words that helped him outsmart Fear. He wasn't sure, but thought it might be possible. While he did his best to answer my questions, he seemed to labor over them. During this inquiry something unprecedented occurred. As the end of the hour approached, there was a noise. We glanced over in time to see an envelope fly through the mail slot in the door. I retrieved it immediately only to discover that it was addressed to Danny. I handed it over to him and watched as he first examined it, then slowly opened it, and read in silence, appearing transfixed. Then he read it again, this time out loud. Here is what it said:

Dear Danny,

Your current *plight*—a word used here to mean a challenging circumstance someone is facing—has come to my attention. Given that I am unable to visit you at this time—as it will be no surprise to you that we currently have our hands full, to say the least with none other than Count Olaf—I immediately decided to put pen to paper and write to you. I hope to have more time to write in the future, but for now, just a quick note of support and appreciation. I have felt very lucky to have a mind that works in my favor and helps me deal with plights in my own life, not to mention the importance of being able to come to the aid of my brother Klaus and sister Sunny, both of whom are very dear to me. Though I have only recently learned about you, I have an early hunch and wonder if I am right. Are we—you and I that is—*like-minded*? Have you ever put your mind to something and found that your very own thinking provided the answers you'd been looking for? If so, isn't it a wonderful feeling? I made the exciting

discovery some time ago that I had the kind of mind that could be put to use for all sorts of things. But I'd be interested to know more about you, Danny? Have you ever thought back to early signs of your mind trying to tell you something clever or brave? Is there a favorite story about you that your mother or grandparents used to love to tell whenever the whole family got together?

That's all I can say for now. I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs and they're getting louder. Unless I'm mistaken, they are the footsteps of *YOU KNOW WHO!* Wish me luck, and the same to you (of course, if I'm right about you, we both have a little more than luck going for us, don't you *think?*)

Keeping you in mind,

Violet B.

Upon finishing the letter, Danny looked up at me with what appeared to be equal parts astonishment and suspicion and asked if I had written it. I assured him that I had not. He turned to his father who equally denied any knowledge of the letter. And while Danny appeared largely unconvinced by our denials, he seemed only too willing to suspend disbelief. Danny had been stalled for some time in a liminal space (van Gennep, 1960), having been wrenched from the world he knew, without having yet achieved a sense of arrival at a new destination. Languishing in between worlds he experienced little in the way of resonance with the indicative—what was apparent and directly before him. What had been dependable and stationary was now adrift. It was more the imaginary to which his attentions seemed drawn, and I hoped to seek him out there. An imagined space might be just the locale where we could meet and where Danny might find himself. He seemed already primed to enter into a different realm where fact and fiction co-mingle. “To be in the subjunctive mode is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (Bruner, 1986, p. 26). Bridging the divide between the worlds of the Baudelaire children and his own might be a more tempting direction than anything more routine. According to Marcela Polanco,

The borderlines between the magical and the real are crossed toward the emerging of a further category—the hybrid of the magical-real. Instead of eliminating one for the sake of the other, or reversing permanently the positions of dominance or subjugation, a third category emerges from which something new is conceived (Polanco, 2010, p. 4).

We would see, soon enough, if this newly conceived space would offer enough of a welcome for Danny to find it habitable.

Young people often find themselves at a distance from *higher learning* given that the ideas are dispatched from above rather than discovered in their company. It might be well worth considering that ideas meant to *enlighten*,

appear, in the cold light of day, too harsh for young people's ears and eyes. Efforts that bring deconstruction to therapeutic practice are intended to disturb those assumptions that would aspire to, or already enjoy, truth status. In the process, meaning is made incomplete. In any context, when a meaning system holds the space insecurely one is inclined more to an attitude of critique, making room for imagination to delight in ". . . a sense of mystery within the ordinary" (Faris, 2004, p. 46). Much fun can be had in questioning what had been taken to be inviolable. This might be thought of as the special talent of young people, to engage in the "carnavalesque" in escaping "official life" while entering a province where play is accorded vaulted status.

According to Bakhtin, carnival makes us discover that truths are relative and that the world is open and free, in a manner reminiscent of how children play with and have fun with the order of things, turning things inside out and upside down (Øksnes, 2008, p. 150).

Play holds the potential to excite the senses and find a seam into a "sub-universe" where more is possible (Berger, 1997, p. 7).

Our aim is not to exile the *knower* or the *already known*, but to move them out of any central position and give them indeterminate status, their storytelling rights, not rescinded, but made provisional. At the same time we reach out to the margins where we find young people and their knowledges and bring them to the center of our focus. As we "exoticize the domestic" (Bordieu, 1988, p. xi) in an attempt to dislodge what had previously enjoyed secure location and normative status, we domesticate the exotic—that is, we center children's knowledges; not making the marginal ordinary, but rather, giving children's knowledges passport and making it possible to *bring the exotic home*.

Still, these considerations might convey more of a problem-solving attitude than a reflection of our main interest in story development. Narrative form looks beyond the ordinary in anticipation of *the unexpected event*. It depends on "a large imaginative charge" (Faris, 2004, p. 46). When Violet's letter came flying through the mail slot in the door, it constituted a turn of events, a point of departure from the "known and familiar" (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009, p. 320), and an opportunity to "seize the mystery that breathes behind things" (Polanco, 2010, p. 6). Mystery, and in this instance young people's talents and what is possible for Danny to know by means of his connection to the Baudelaires, represents a departure from conventional storylines in which adults and their knowledge are more readily legitimized. As 1 Corinthians 13:1 reminds us, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (King James version). Here we are not just reminded

of children's provisional status, but of what they are meant to leave behind as they are ushered into adulthood and *reasoned contexts of understanding*.

However, given that young people's worlds are the very enclaves where magic survives and often thrives, we attempt, instead, to visit these preserves, even if, like tourists, we are held at some distance. The letter from Violet offered Danny passage. It was not written out of whimsy but intended as footing (Goffman, 1981) and surface from which he could step into other possible worlds.

No doubt child psychologists have speculated on the phenomenon of children's imaginations and the extraordinary energy invested in play, and surely it has to do with the testing of parameters of the self and of "reality," and, of course, imitating adult models. But the fact remains that it is a mysterious activity, exciting, fascinating, unpredictable. Like Lewis Carroll's heroine, Alice, the child plunges willfully down the rabbit hole, or through the looking-glass, into another dimension. The "other dimension" is a counterworld into which only one individual has access. The counterworld both mirrors the "real world" and distorts it; in it, you both are, and are not, yourself, the most primary, if unacknowledged, fact of artistic creation (Oates, 2003, p. 42).

Though we may not be able to travel there with them or inhabit counterworlds with the same conviction as young people, we can establish the conditions for their imaginations to flourish (Epston & Marsten, 2010). Of course those conditions are, in many ways, informed by what they have indicated to be crucial to them. The hope was that, by giving license to Danny's imagination and offering a portal through which he could, for a time, leave the world that had caused him so much pain, he might, in a place where magic still lingered, find what was vital to him.

At our third meeting, the conversation turned to Danny's mother and the sad telling of her sudden and tragic death. Danny recounted how his grandparents and uncle first told him she was struck, as she stepped into a crosswalk, by a speeding car, the victim of a drunk driver. Alex explained how Danny never showed any emotion over his mother's death, either at the funeral or since. Danny added, in a distant voice, "everyone was crying at the funeral, but me." Avoiding any professional impulse to hypothesize about what Danny's dry eyes might mean, I undertook to assist him in establishing meaning that might hold resonance for him. Of course, given that Danny was not an *authorized meaning maker*, I anticipated that it would involve an effort to clear the center position for him so that his ideas could be given significance:

ALEX: He hasn't cried or shown any emotion since. It's like he's numb.

DM: Is your Dad right, Danny? Is there a kind of numbness that's taken hold of you?

DANNY: Kind of . . . I don't really know. [He appears distant.]

DM: I wonder who would know. Who knows you best Danny?

DANNY: I'm . . . I don't know.

DM: Do the Baudelaires talk much about the loss of their parents?

DANNY: Not that much. [He seems wary.]

DM: Do you have a hunch about why that is?

DANNY: It's not easy to talk about.

DM: Do you think their parents would understand anyway, how much they are missed, even if Violet and Klaus don't say much?

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: What would their parents understand?

DANNY: That they miss them.

DM: What about your Mom? Do you think your mother would understand, even though you didn't show that much? [Hoping, again, that the Baudelaires have helped to create an entry point?]

DANNY: I don't know. She's not here. [He states this flatly.]

DM: Do you believe your mother is watching over you? [Trying to engage Danny's imagination?]

DANNY: I don't know.

DM: If she were, would she be surprised about the numbness you've lived with these last four years?

DANNY: No. [He pauses, seeming to consider the question.]

DM: Did your mother know you best? Would she understand what this numbness is all about? [Attempting to establish an alliance between the two, mother and son, that would begin to *unriddle* Danny. One's sense of identity is often enhanced and made vivid when there is audience and witness to one's experience. Lost loved ones and ancestors can be "called upon" in this way (White, 1988).]

DANNY: Yes. [His tone is serious. He appears to consider the question.]

DM: What would she know? What would she understand about how numbness came into your life? [Here, Danny is being relied upon to help us, and perhaps himself, understand.]

DANNY: That it was hard. [There is emotion in his voice. Danny seems to be moving toward a position of knowing. Perhaps he is becoming more visible to himself through his mother's eyes.]

DM: Are you talking about your mother's passing? Is that what was so hard on you?

DANNY: Mmhmm. [He is choked up.]

DM: Was this a deep loss, Danny?

DANNY: Mmhmm.

DM: Do people feel deep loss especially when they have felt deep love? [Danny is being acknowledged rather than faulted for the numbness that has occupied him for so long. He is being further acknowledged for possible depth of feeling, a description counter to that of any problem description Numbness would offer.]

DANNY: Yeah. [He tears up.]

DM: [To Alex] Did Danny and his Mother love each other deeply? [Inviting Alex to bear witness to this developing account]

FATHER: They had a good relationship. They were very close.

DM: Was she a good mother to Danny?

FATHER: She was. She was very involved in his life. She was devoted to him. [Alex is invited to come to Danny's aid and contribute to the story under development.]

DM: [To Alex] And was Danny a good son to his mother?

ALEX: Yes, I think so.

DM: Danny, is it possible that the numbness that came into your life was a sign or proof of your deep love for you mother?

DANNY: Yeah. [There appears to be conviction and perhaps relief in his tone, as tears begin rolling down both cheeks.]

DM: Do you think your Mom knows and understands this even now, from where she is?

DANNY: Yes . . .

Here, with the scaffolding provided to help him step into the world of imagination, Danny was engaged in an experience of active meaning making as he reconnected to his mother, with a little help, once more, from the Baude-laires. We have found that people can, at one and the same time, describe an event and the meaning it holds, and encounter that meaning for the very first time. We resist structuralist accounts of such experience and think of it less as the uncovering of something that was there all along, awaiting discovery, and more as a rich "performance of meaning" (Bruner, 1986, p. 25). The sense of one's identity relies on both performance of meaning and witness to that performance (Denzin, 2003). It might have been that Danny was living in a state of disconnection from his mother and himself, entrusted to the readiest metaphor in circulation—one of disconnection (e.g., letting go and moving on). By bringing the spirit of his mother into the conversation, not just as an inanimate or faded object, but as a consultant (Marsten, Epston, & Johnson, 2011; Epston & White, 1992; Epston, 1989; White, 1988), Danny seemed able, through her loving eyes, to encounter a rich account of himself.

It was at the start of our fourth meeting that a second letter sailed through the mail slot in the office door. Again it was addressed to Danny. This time he opened it, less amazed but no less delighted, and as before read the following first to himself and then aloud to us:

Dear Danny,

I was in the middle of reading a book on reptiles this morning when Violet came rushing in and interrupted me. I tried to make it clear to her that I was busy, and did not wish to be disturbed. I am sure you know how *absorbed*—the word is used here to describe the pleasure that can be felt in losing oneself in a riveting text—and contented one can become while engaged in a gripping story. This was just such a story, specifically one about poisonous snakes that are common to the Americas. Would it interest you to know Danny, that there are 32 species of rattlesnake? But that is beside the point. Violet insisted that we speak right there and then. She rarely interrupts me without good reason. As a result, I have learned to trust her in such instances, so I closed my book and gave her my full attention. When she told me your story and how you suffered the loss of your mother, I was really moved. Of course there is no avoiding the sadness I feel over the loss of my parents and I know Violet and Sunny suffer too . . . especially Violet. Sunny is still very young. I have imagined both my parents watching over me from heaven, and sometimes I am convinced that this is absolutely the case. Sometimes they are closest to me in the moments before I fall asleep and also in my dreams. I think of those experiences as the most special, holding bits of magic, at which times, anything is possible. Have you found ways of reconnecting to your mother, Danny? It is a most wonderful feeling. At times I cry and cry over the loss, but Mr. Snicket doesn't say too much about that in the book series. This is in keeping with my request for a degree of privacy. Violet knows better than anyone how I have struggled with the loss. I have turned to her many times for comfort. It is sometimes a great mystery to me how to face the loss of my parents and, at the same time, still hold them close in my heart.

I want to thank you for your interest in our sad story and for sticking with us through book nine. My thoughts are with you, Danny.

In sympathy and friendship,

Klaus B.

Klaus joined Danny in the saddest of all human experiences, the loss of a loved one. Again, Danny was summoned to travel to an imaginary place where he could take to heart the letter from Klaus, and a place where his mother would be available to him and loving him still. We join with young people at the point of their expertise where reality, as we know it, is unsettled and the improbable and even the seemingly impossible become possible.

The elements of narrative structure gave form to Danny's developing story. It was infused with drive by the arrival of a letter. The mystery was joined

with Danny's imagination and the story began to take flight. He eased into the position of protagonist and as with any prospective lead agent who crosses our threshold, we attended to character and plot development. Danny came into sharp relief in view of his adroit mind, his imaginative spirit, and his abiding capacity for love, against a backdrop of tragedy and loss that was colored by numbness and fear. The story became heartfelt with the cultivation of his still tender connection to his mother. Family and friends, some real, others in spirit, and still others conjured from the pages of his favorite books, served as an appreciative audience.

There are readily recognizable elements to this telling and these are necessarily relied upon to make relatable the story under development. But much of the conventional meaning that would, with the use of professional discourse, de-center our young protagonist, is carved away from the center. It is the talents and the coincidental circumstances he shares with the Baudelaires that are brought to bear on the Problem. Still, Danny's occupancy, as a young person, at the center of a story, was unexpected. While it may not be in the least uncommon to see these story elements cinematically projected onto a big screen for viewing at a Saturday matinee, the role of protagonist is not typically reserved for ten-year-old boys in the presence of adults in a therapy office.

As Danny's story unfolds, Alex joins in:

ALEX: I'm learning. A lot of his behavior has been hard to understand. [Here, we are listening for opportune entry points that would be in service of a preferred developing storyline. The first part of Alex's comment about learning stands out.]

DM: When you say you're learning, what comes to mind? What have you begun to learn?

ALEX: Well, when I think about it or take a longer view he's been through a lot. [He may be shifting more towards an alternative story, which could have the effect of countering the Problem.]

DM: Are you describing two different perspectives? [Not wanting to rush or get out in front of Alex, rather to follow him as he makes the turn to a storyline that holds greater promise.]

ALEX: Yeah. When I'm in the middle of it every day, it's frustrating and I'm thinking, what's going on here?

DM: And now, taking the time here, you're tapping into another view?

ALEX: I am. I mean . . . I've always known he's been through a lot, but I feel more aware in a way. In a way it makes sense that he's had such a hard time. I guess I kept thinking he should be over it by now.

DM: And now?

ALEX: Now, I think he's doing pretty good considering . . .

DM: When you consider what he went through, what is it you're appreciating?

ALEX: He's doing his best. [Alex seems to step further into an attitude of understanding Danny.]

DM: What's telling you he's doing his best? [Inviting more of a detailed description.]

ALEX: He did a little better last semester. And I think he's trying, even if it's a little hard to see sometimes.

DM: Are you finding a way to see things that could be otherwise overlooked?

ALEX: I guess so. It's all baby steps, right? But he's trying. School is getting better. I think he's doing better this semester. Aren't you? [Turning to Danny for confirmation.]

DANNY: Yeah.

ALEX: And we're spending a little more time together. He's not *always* in his room. We watched some TV together last night and he helped me with dinner. [Alex seems to be turning toward a more ample description.]

DM: Is that right, Danny? Did you help out last night?

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: How come?

DANNY: I don't know.

DM: Is your Dad right that some things have been better, like school and some things at home with you and your Dad?

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: Would you agree with your Dad that considering what you've been through, you're doing pretty good? [Seeing if Danny is engaged by the alternative story and aligned with his father's description.]

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: With what you've been through, would you agree with your Dad that you're doing pretty good or doing your best?

DANNY: Yeah, cause I've been through a lot, and after my Mom died I just didn't care about anything and was just kind of in shock. I just missed her and didn't want to move, but I didn't really care about anything, school or anything. [Danny seems to join in the telling quite easily.]

DM: OK, so you've been caught in this state of shock for years . . . since your mother's death and it's not the kind of thing a person just snap out of, especially when it's a deep two-way love we're talking about. Is that right? [Summarizing and keeping the story on track.]

DANNY: Yeah, but I'm coming out of it. [Here he moves out in front as lead agent for the first time.]

DM: How can you tell?

DANNY: I care more.

DM: Is caring an important sign?

DANNY: Yeah, because before I didn't care about anything.

DM: OK, I'm starting to get it. And what are you caring more about? Things you used to care about that you're caring about again, or are there things you're caring about for the first time?

DANNY: Everything. Like school and just everything.

DM: What's it like to care again after all this time?

DANNY: It feels good.

DM: For somebody who knows what deep love is and is capable of giving it and receiving it, is it even more important to be able to care again? [Further establishing caring as a value.]

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: Can you explain why, Danny? Do you feel like you know something about love and caring and what's important about it?

DANNY: Because if you don't care about people or if they don't care about you then what's the point? [This was not an easy question to answer, but Danny seems to be more fully situated in a preferred story of his identity. From within a preferred story, such questions present much less difficulty.]

DM: Yeah, that makes sense. And this has come back to you, this awareness?

DANNY: Yeah.

DM: And how can you tell? What's been happening, or what have you been up to that's making this clear to you? [Inviting Danny to give more substance to the story under development.]

DANNY: I'm starting to spend more time with my Dad.

DM: Has spending time together been important to you?

DANNY: Yeah. It's just the two of us.

DM: Alex, did you know that Danny's been caring more about caring in a way, and that he's bringing caring back into his life and relationship with you?

ALEX: Yes and no. As I said, he's been hanging around more, but I didn't know he's been thinking about it or really caring about it. [Alex appears surprised.]

DM: [To Alex] How is it affecting you? What would it mean to you to see your son caring about you and about life again?

ALEX: It would mean everything to me. [He is clearly moved.]

DM: Do you think the two of you just might make good partners in caring?

ALEX: I'm sure we will. We're gonna be OK. [He looks at Danny with loving eyes.]

DANNY: Yeah! [There is an undeniable warmth between them.]

We entered into a space made meaningful by the recollections, sufferings, and relationships that were the touchstones of Danny's life. From this place we fashioned an understanding that would hold resonance for him. With an eye toward constructing a story that drew upon Danny's imagination and

the properties and scenery that made up his world along with the players who populated it, we found our way. It was a matter of making permissible those knowledges that might otherwise have languished at the margins of his awareness. In their place ideas that enjoy acclaim and represent themselves as boundless and timeless were all too ready to fill the space. In an auto-ethnographic project on language, culture, and circumstance, Marcela Polanco reflects on her surroundings and location within Columbian culture. Rather than attempting to divest herself of her lived experience and the sights and sounds it conjures, her explicit interest is to keep time with the everyday pulse of her local scene, to let it reverberate and move through her, attempting to tap into its vibrations and vernacular, to

. . . sense the implicit distinctive soft Columbian coffee aroma, or feel the rhythm of the *cumbia* or a *vallento* sonata from the Columbian coast, or read the enchanting mythic treatment of language of some of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels" (Polanco, 2011, p. 79).

Rather than cast indigenous knowledges, traditions, and rituals to the margins of existence in favor of *higher knowledge*, we attempt to reserve the home ground for the homegrown. We count on "locally grown" knowledges to arouse the senses and spark the imagination. There is greater agency there than in any attempt to emigrate and leave one's home knowledges behind in an ill-advised quest for transcendent knowledge (Ley, 2003). Perhaps Zeno's paradox applies most aptly in illustrating the potential frustration if one were to embark on such a journey. One may roam endlessly, now and then catching a glimpse of that mythic apparition, objectivity, always with a sense of having cut the distance to the target in half, without ever capturing the prize. We "went home" instead and put our trust in Danny's participation and guidance in collaboratively telling an eventful story in which his kinship with the Baudelaires, his imaginative spirit, his enduring love for his mother, and developing bond with his father, were the guiding features that made for a convincing and compelling narrative. It was fraught with tragedy, mystery, and magic, ingredients that can be found in many a story with narrative drive. And in this story, Danny showed the way for all of us to follow.

Father and son returned for three more meetings over a span of six months and in that time Danny held to his commitment to re-engage with his life, and disavowed any interest in giving way to numbness or a passive existence. Fear still made occasional appearances in the middle of the night but without the same virulence it once possessed. Danny reached the conclusion that given the circumstances of his mother's dramatic death and his awareness of how suddenly a life can end, it was more a matter of figuring out how to live with

Fear than entertaining any goal of getting over it. Alex and I readily agreed and allowed this to tutor our thoughts on the matter. The tack he proposed was undeniably born from the wisdom of experience. And besides, once Alex and I thought it over in light of what we had learned from Danny, we realized that he was not just suffering his relationship with Fear, but contending with it pretty well given the circumstances. Alex realized the significance of Danny turning to him now, in moments of need, much like the Baudelaires turned to each other. He trusted his son's judgment, and on those nights when Danny's mind was simply overrun by thoughts too strenuous to bear, Alex lifted up the blankets as Danny crept past the ghosts and goblins and slid into his father's bed where he would be safe.

At our final meeting, one last letter came floating through the slot in the door. Danny jumped up to retrieve it, familiar with the routine by now. He opened it without hesitation and read its contents, grinning from ear to ear. He showed the letter first to his father and then quickly walked over, handing it to me.

It was signed, Sunny, in cursive form, bearing some resemblance to Violet's curved signature, though it could have been in Klaus's hand. At the bottom of the page there were six symmetrical indentations in a semicircle appearing to be sharp teeth marks. You will recall that it was Sunny's razor sharp teeth that could puncture even steel and had saved her older siblings from many a perilous circumstance in Lemony Snicket's books 1–9. This was undoubtedly her mark. The brief missive read as follows:

Grrox! most likely meaning—*Danny, thanks for teaching me so much about caring.*

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