

The Power of Story in Group Work:
A Critical Conversation with Gadamer, White, and Gerkin for a Theory of
Narrative Practice in Groups

Prepared According to Requirements of Cardiff University for a Degree
of MPhil

2020

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48,941 Words

Abstract

Using the theory of Michael White, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Gerkin, this thesis discusses how and why narrative therapy techniques work and how they could be applied in group or parish settings. It further explores using theory developed by Charles Gerkin regarding how spiritual reflective practice could be utilised in the narrative process to help people process their life experiences for hope and resilience.

In examining similar and difference theoretic framings in Gadamer and White, the thesis discusses and develops a process for purposeful listening. This method of listening, unlike listening-to someone or listening-for information, involves an immediate “presentness”¹ with others. It creates a context of openness for new insights to come and be explored openly. A special kind of questioning enables horizons to expand and new learning to be experienced either within a group or in pastoral care settings. This listening recognises biases and people’s historic realities and interpretations while fostering new interpretations that expand people’s horizons and bring new understandings.

In Gadamer’s writing we find the theoretical understanding of human communication – what works and why it works. While in White we have practical applications of theory based on narratives and ways to use communication to bring healing and new interpretations of life experiences. Finally, Gerkin provides a spiritual component that assists people in connecting the bigger narrative of God to their individual faith to foster healing and hope. The thesis concludes with suggestions for training for pastoral care providers as facilitators of this process² and ways in which this communication methodology could be utilised in a parish setting.

¹ Daniel Tate uses this term in his article: “In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art,” *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012): 93, 92–113

² Training includes awareness of the power dynamics within a group.

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Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all those who helped me with this work, especially Rev. Dr. Andrew Todd who supported, encouraged, and inspired me throughout my time working on this thesis.

A very grateful thank you to my spouse Scott who always supports me as I continue to seek to learn more.

Chapter One

Introduction and Rationale for the MPhil

A Note on the Context of the Thesis

This thesis is a critical conversation between the theories of David White, founder of Narrative Therapy; Hans-Georg Gadamer, decisive figure in the development of twentieth century hermeneutics³ and Charles Gerkin who developed in his work training chaplain, an Identity-Embodied and Community-Embodied Pastoral Theology⁴. It continues the work I began in a PhD about meaning-making and the use of narrative to facilitate people's finding hope and resilience even in the midst of suffering, dying, and death, but examines the theory behind narrative techniques and looks at a new context—using narrative techniques in groups. Because I propose using narrative applications as found in Narrative Therapy, it is appropriate to also provide the context from which I write since my context shapes my research findings and interpretations in some unique ways. I am a white, American female. I taught Business and Economics full time before entering seminary in 2000 and then being ordained in 2005. My seminary was Evangelical Quaker, but I was ordained first in the Church of God, Cleveland, TN; then as a Mennonite (because of my spouse), and I am now ordained in the Anglican tradition. Before coming to Wales, I was a lead staff chaplain since 2002, first with a Hospice organisation and then as a Board-Certified lead chaplain in a large hospital system. I

³ Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Zalta (Fall 2018 edition), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/gadamer/>, last accessed 4 April 2020.

⁴ Samuel Park, "History and Method of Charles Gerkin's Pastoral Theology: Toward an Identity-Embodied and Community-Embodied Pastoral Theology, Part I, History," *Pastoral Psychology* 54, No. 1 (September 2005). Basically this is an approach that utilises people's narratives in pastoral counselling.

am now a vicar for five churches in mid-Wales. I experienced trauma in the form of abuse at a young age which continues to influence my behaviours in helpful and unhelpful ways. All of these experiences, the odd juxtapositions and contradictions of my life, and the sufferings I have experienced, are gifts that give me a unique perspective, shape me, and shape my interpretations. They also give me an ability to see and analyse situations in unique ways. My life stories are important to me because of how they have contributed to my view of self and how working with has brought personal transformation. Even the research for my PhD and now for this thesis has become part of my story and part of the ongoing transformational work. The writing is rooted in a passion—the desire to see others overcome hardship, suffering, and even the despair in order to find freedom from the bondages of interpretations that do not work for them, to find life abundant and transforming. I also recognise this desire to help others heal is also a story of my own quest for healing.

The research questions for this thesis came out of my own history, practice, and desire to create conditions in group times where meaningful lived experiences could happen. I wanted to understand and know more about narrative techniques and how and why they worked. It was not enough to use them and see how effective they were. I wanted to know **why** they worked and how to use them in a group context. The why is important because it provides the guide to answer “How might group time become a place for healing and hope, a place where people see themselves and life in new and growth producing way?” This thesis embraces not only the theory needed for understanding but also processes for exploring practice and experience. I am a reflective practitioner, meaning my practice is “informed by and informing (often

transforming) theory,”⁵ happening in a particular context (cultural, political, social and pastoral).⁶ The nature of this research into the theory behind narrative techniques and communication makes it qualitative rather than quantitative research.

Work That Led to this MPhil

As Lead Chaplain⁷ at a large Cancer Centre in the United States, I regularly led support groups that had a narrative basis. Although the groups often provided a social benefit for patients, some of the groups impacted people’s lives profoundly by bringing participants new insights that they could take into life to make it more fulfilling. I wanted to know what the difference was. What made a difference between one group’s outcome and another? Was it solely due to the participant mix? Or was I doing something that changed how the group worked for people?

At the time that I was working full time, I was finishing a PhD focused on specific interventions for fostering hope and resilience what people were facing mortality. In that research, I studied extensively narrative processes used in narrative therapy. I began to see a link between what I was learning about narrative processes and the lasting life impact that some groups experienced. I became more intentional about how I led the groups using narrative techniques. End surveys revealed what I had thought—intentionally using narrative techniques with groups meant people felt they gained new insights about themselves and how to cope better with their diagnosis. I still didn’t understand **why** these techniques worked though. More study was needed to understand the underlying theory that was causing the techniques to

⁵ David Tracy, “Chapter One: The Public Character of Theological Language,” in David Tracy and John Cobb, Jr. *Talking about God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, Religion Online available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-the-context-the-public-character-of-theological-language-by-david-tracy/>, last accessed 7 April 2020, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A chaplain in America is part of the interdisciplinary team consisting of doctors, nurses, and other medical staff. They make rounds, respond to trauma calls, attend morning report, lead groups, and help train other staff. Their scope of practice can be much greater and requires more specialised training—clinical pastoral education graduate units and often Board Certification.

work. My research question became: What is the underlying theory behind narrative practices that enables people to go through difficult circumstances and gain insight from them that will renew their faith and give them hope to withstand crises of life?

My quest to understand why didn't end when the PhD was completed. I now see that this motivation to continue the work comes out of my own life story. I am a survivor of abuse. I still see the evidence of how abuse has shaped my life in helpful and unhelpful ways. Getting an MDiv with a concentration in crisis counselling was part of my healing process. Another part of my journey was to become a Board Certified Chaplain and an advocate for those without a voice. I continued the search for healing for myself and others through my PhD work. So, when I found that utilising narrative practices in groups made a difference in outcomes of hopefulness, I wanted to learn more. Like a dog with a bone, I haven't been able to turn the quest loose.

I continued to read research articles on theology, hope, and narrative practice after completing my PhD. In the process of studying how people understand and interpret experiences, I discovered the work of Gadamer. Gadamer's work was not part of my PhD research, but in reading about Gadamer, I noticed that his theory regarding how people interpret what they see, read, and hear seemed to affirm and support what I had read in Michael White's discussions of narrative therapy. Yet, I found no mention of Gadamer in White's work even though he studied philosophy extensively.

However, I also saw important differences between their works. In Gadamer's writing I found the theoretical understanding of human communication – what works and why it works. While in White I found the practical applications of theory based on narratives and ways to use communication to bring healing and hope. It felt like I

might find the answer to my question about the underlying theory behind narrative practices through a critical analysis of the work of these two men. I also wanted to make any insights I found available to others in counselling fields. That is why I have pursued this MPhil.

A Lacuna

The original PhD question arose out of a desire to help dying people not be afraid of death. Research and experience revealed that within the context of current Christian pastoral care practice particularly of chaplains, there existed a lacuna in Christian theological frameworks which contributed to “North American Christians’ inability to connect a theological understanding of death with the experience of their human finitude despite the presence of considerable literature on death and dying.”⁸ I found that this gap tended to “deprive many Christians of the possibility of finding a unique and specific source of hope and strength within their own faith tradition for facing crisis.”⁹ That lacuna led me to pursue a PhD here in Britain. The reflexive process of the research led me to formulate a methodology and theological foundation for a uniquely Christian contribution for facilitating hope, resilience--even transformation--throughout the various stages of life until the time of death particularly through the use of narrative therapy’s techniques.¹⁰ The work was not focused on group work but on working with individuals. Nevertheless, I found that the insights gained changed how I led groups. After completing the PhD, I taught others how to lead groups using narrative techniques coupled with questions that helped people use their spiritual beliefs to find hope and cope with dying.

⁸ Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See Chapter Three for an in-depth look at Narrative Therapy.

The desire to draw on insights gained from my PhD (completed 2015) took on additional importance when I knew I would be coming to Britain to serve as a priest for churches in rural Wales. So many people had told me how beneficial the groups had been, I wanted to continue that helping others in that way. I wondered if the group work done in the States in a clinical setting would be transferable to a non-clinical setting in Wales.

Weaving Together Christian Metaphors, Narrative Methods, and Gadamer's Theory

My PhD¹¹ work in Practical Theology focused on how Christian pastoral care providers could utilize narrative therapy techniques with Christian metaphors to support hope and foster resilience in people who were struggling with the suffering and anxiety associated their finitude. As I critically analysed the work I had done (both in research and in practice), especially the work with how narrative techniques might be utilized in a clinical context, it became evident to me that what was lacking was some part of the theory behind narrative practices. I could not find research that told me **how** people develop interpretations of life events. I asked, "What is the methodology by which people come to understand their experiences?" In exploring hermeneutic models for work and teaching, I found the theory in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹² His theory regarding understanding and meaning and how they come in a continuous dialogue through the medium of language¹³ described the hermeneutic inquiry that happens with group narrative work and provided the explanation for why narrative techniques are so effective.

¹¹ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015.

¹² Particularly in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. This will be discussed later in this chapter and in the next.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Translated and edited by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 31.

Doing the MPhil, allowed me to look more closely at how narrative-based groups might work in a non-clinical context. The groups that I conducted in the outpatient, clinical setting often focused on themes of loss (of health and the life the patients once had; of members and friends who had died; and of sense of self and identity); yet, these small groups (usually 6-10 people) also became places of connection and spiritual growth. As stories were shared and received as sacred treasures by the listeners, healing happened, and we were all changed. My PhD work had introduced me to the work of Barbara Myerhoff and I thought I would revisit her work to see if I could find a possible model for group work, particularly in her “living history” sessions.¹⁴ I realised from Myerhoff and narrative therapy that there was something in how stories are listened to, understood, and interpreted—hermeneutics—that was an integral part of the participants’ engagement with the group process. Gadamer also discussed different modes of listening and how this influenced interpretation. In his work, *Truth and Method*,¹⁵ I saw points of connection between his underpinning theory of working with art and language and Michael White’s work with Narrative Therapy. In addition, Gadamer’s ideas seemed to suggest why and how narrative techniques work.

In this MPhil, I have woven together all three strands of practice, theory, and participation. It is my hope that the work done here will contribute to the larger field of practical theology. As I write this, in the middle of a pandemic, I am aware that group work can now take on a whole new context online. How does a group work within that context? Part of what made the groups so effective was the sense of community

¹⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 33-4. See also Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 110, 112, and 140.

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).

developed through the time spent in group. If that could be replicated online it would be tremendously important for times like these. The work begun here, continues.

Insights Gained from the Groups at the Cancer Centre

As with Myerhoff, the groups that I led, though inclusive (open to and respectful of anyone), were spiritual in nature. Myerhoff worked with a largely Jewish population. My groups tended to incorporate Christian language and thought since this is what participants brought—although “Christian” included people of widely differing views. Surveys, at the conclusion of each six-weeks, were conducted by the Cone Health System and all participants responded that the groups had helped them grow spiritually and emotionally and that they had found the groups to be beneficial for their coping with the present circumstances of a cancer diagnosis.¹⁶ Moreover, participants stayed in touch with each other after the groups ended and became a support for one another.

Though the structure and composition of the groups in the Centre was similar (I followed the same format utilizing narrative techniques acquired during my PhD research, held groups in the same place each session, and sought participants with a common life experience either a diagnosis of cancer or living with and caring for someone with cancer), each group was slightly different because of the group members’ individual personalities. After analysing what worked, I have identified factors that must be taken into consideration when planning and implementing groups that intentionally seek to help people connect to one another in ways that foster spiritual and emotional growth and healing. This thesis will work with these factors and discuss how they might be important within a different context—in a

¹⁶ Over a twelve-month period, I facilitated seven of these groups. I had other support groups that I led, but these seven were specifically designed to help people grow and build connections with other people in the group.

church or even a non-institutional context, rather than hospital outpatient clinic. As part of the work done for my PhD, I identified several characteristics of group context that were essential if participants were going to develop the high degree of trust necessary for open sharing. These were that the nature of the groups must be: Inclusive and non-judgmental and spiritual without being dogmatic. In the next two sections I will discuss why these are important for the group process generally and for the MPhil group process in particular.

Inclusive and Non-Judgmental

I found that for trust to develop participants needed to feel “safe” in talking about what they believed. This meant creating space and respect for differences in how people might utilise words like Christian, spiritual, and faith. Creating a context of openness affected the kinds of questions asked although most questions were open-ended and needed to use non-judgmental language. As leader, it was important for me to discuss respect and confidentiality in the first meeting. I had to be willing to intervene if needed to maintain respectful discussions so that people would feel they could speak openly without negative repercussions.

In my MPhil work, I recognised that I was now working in a ministerial role within the Church in Wales and that my thesis could be largely helpful for pastoral care providers ministering within a cultural context very different from that of the Cancer Centre in the United States. The “spiritual context” for MPhil research would be “Christian;” however, the Twenty-First Century brings challenges for those doing research on belief regarding how to define what the term “Christian” means to people living in Britain. Old ways of defining what it means to be a Christian no longer fit many people in their daily lives.¹⁷ Some researchers are questioning whether the

¹⁷ Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford:

label Christian even has meaning for today. Are people Christians because they live in a certain nation, because their family identifies itself as a Christian family, or because they were baptised as a baby into the Church?¹⁸ Is the label linked to certain cultural behaviours, such as how they vote or what they believe about certain social or political issues?¹⁹ Is it about what they value in life? In some evangelical segments, particularly in America and British people influenced by American evangelicalism, being a Christian can seem to mean little more than a way to allay fears about what will happen in the afterlife with little connection to life now.²⁰ And there are many people who though counted statistically as having no belief, are quite spiritual and might even be in the category of “Christian” if the words used in the surveys, such as “religion,” were better defined.²¹ Because of the possibility of misunderstanding regarding what “Christian” means, any group addressing spiritual ideas must be both inclusive and non-judgmental so participants feel safe when speaking about faith in whatever language and with whatever metaphors they choose. In later chapters, I will be talking using Gadamer’s ideas about space and

Oxford University, 2013), 91-2, 174. Day’s work with youth is significant for demonstrating the trends in belief and how they do not conform to traditional forms of Christianity. Jeff Astley has done extensive work in this area. He feels that surveys sometimes understate religious belief because of the questions asked. See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Hants, Ashgate, 2002). Chapter Four contains his research in this area, pages 97-122.

¹⁸ See Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), discussion beginning on page 79, particularly note about importance of grandparents “as active agents in process of religious identification.”

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 180 and following in chapter nine, “Understanding Christian Nominalism.”

²⁰ In the American South, “once saved, always saved” or the Doctrine of Assurance, eternal security, has contributed to the idea that once someone has made a profession of faith, they are assured of going to Heaven no matter how they live after the profession is made. The need for assurance helps people cope with dying, see my discussion in chapter two of my thesis, particularly pages 79-83, 94 (linked to a discussion of how the Doctrine of Purgatory met this need.) For a discussion of the Doctrine of Assurance and its implications see Carl F. H. Henry, D. A. Carson, Scott Hafemann, Charles Tackett, and C. Ben Mitchell, “What are the Biblical and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Assurance,” *SBJT*, 1998. Available online at: http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/sbjt/sbjt_1998spring5.pdf, accessed 9/3/2017. I have met some of these Christians in Montgomery, Wales and in Chester, England.

²¹ See the work of Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, and Mandy Robbins who have done considerable research in how to assess and document the changes in people’s spirituality, including their work in *Religion, Education, and Adolescence* (2005) and Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Hants, Ashgate, 2002), chapter four.

openness to show how the group environment can be designed to be open in a specific manner.²² Non-judgmental takes on a wider meaning as we consider how “opening to experience” brings new insight for participants.²³ In the group, participants including the leader, come to the group not knowing or even predicting what the outcome of the conversations will be. This holding of a space with respect for each person’s story allows for the creative thought to occur and insight to emerge.²⁴ Consequently, the leader (facilitator) must be trained in how to work with this specific way of communicating and must be someone people feel they can trust, who maintains confidentiality, and develops (with the group’s feedback) and enforces ground rules for the group. More will be discussed about the kinds of questions and language used in encourage the development of the group context of being inclusive, non-judgmental, and open so that people can hear their own understanding and glimpse the possibility of new understandings in chapter three. Working with spiritual issues will be introduced again in chapter three and then discussed in more depth in chapter five.

Spiritual without being Dogmatic

For people of Western Christianity, spirituality²⁵ has become more

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), xv-xvi, 355, 387.

²³ Terminology from Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 350. More will be discussed on this topic in chapter two.

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 385.

²⁵In the thesis I am using the following terms in fairly specific ways: Spirituality as defined by the Royal College of Psychologists (Spenser 2012) is a “broad concept” that involves the “feeling or belief that there is something greater than myself, something more to being human than sensory experience....” People who say they are spiritual often believe their lives have significance and that events in life have a purpose. For this research, I will be working with the concept of spirituality and using “religion” in practical terms-- how people demonstrate through actions what they believe about the Transcendent (God) and existential questions of life as they go about their daily living. Religion is a vague term that is difficult to define [See Victoria Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-cultural World” (University of Glasgow) available online at http://www.gla.ac.uk/0t4/humanities/files/mindmapping/Religion1_files/docs/Pragmatics.pdf]. However, much work is being done in the area of “Living Religion.” See particularly Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (London: Oxford University, 2008) and Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (London: Oxford University, 2014). I will return to the concept of Lived Religion in chapter three.

individualised,²⁶ contributing to their lack of affiliation with a church. However, church attendance probably has never been a good indicator of whether someone is spiritual or not. Surveys with labels also do not reflect well what people believe although they can give us some understanding of changes taking place in what people believe and how they live into their beliefs. After drawing on a “wide range of sources,” Vincett and Woodhead have written that 30-60% of British people would either call themselves spiritual or hold beliefs “characteristic of spirituality.”²⁷

Researchers analysing the results of a research survey commissioned by CTVC and Theos in 2013, concluded that despite a decline in recent decades in people saying they held a “formalized religious belief” or having an “institutionalised religious belonging,” a majority of people, 77%, still said they believed that “there are things in life that we simply cannot explain through science or any other means” and many people still believe in healing prayer and miracles.²⁸ The research analysts also concluded, based on the survey results, that spiritual belief is still prevalent in society even among those who do not consider themselves religious. However,

findings appear to differ slightly between beliefs and practice, with fewer people acting on their spiritual beliefs than holding them. This may be one of the salient differences between spirituality and religiosity – the latter, because it is more organised, communal, formalised, and explicitly ethical, is more likely to see belief translate into practice; whereas the former, because it is more personal, individualised and diverse is more likely to remain as a belief.²⁹

²⁶ See Peter Jonkers, “What does it mean to call yourself a Christian? Some philosophical reflections on the Christian identity.” *Deel* 53, Supplementum 3 (2012): 56-57, particularly 56 where he introduces the idea that people’s perception of Christianity has become more “internal” and “subjective”. Available online at: https://pure.uvt.nl/portal/files/3047650/What_Does_it_Mean_to_Call_Yourself_a_Christian.pdf, last accessed 3 July 2018.

²⁷ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 162, referencing the findings of Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead in “Spirituality” in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, edited by Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami and Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2009), 323.

²⁸ ComRes, “The Spirit of Things Unseen: Belief in Post-Religious Britain” (London: Theos, 2013), “Executive Summary”.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 25. See “Executive Summary” for the other data, 7-9.

Yet, though people may not act on their belief by going to church, what they believe about the transcendent, why things happen, and the existential questions of life, influences them psychologically and emotionally. What people believe—about spiritual matters, life, and cultural norms—feeds a larger narrative about who they are and comes to provide, through language, an identity context which affects how they interpret the experiences they have and gives them meaning.³⁰ These narratives, life stories, about who they are help them make sense of life and are “a primary, but not sole, cultural instrument for the making of meaning”³¹ and as such are theological in nature. The stories will be influenced by their views about God³² and they will, in turn, influence how they imagine God to be. Like a pebble dropped into a pond, the effects of the life stories ripple out to influence people’s lives, influencing their thoughts and actions and helping them interpret other events such as illness, crisis, or death. They contribute to feelings of hope or hopelessness, encourage the development of behaviours supporting resilience, and, because it is

³⁰ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990), 43. See also Gregory Bateson, “Introduction,” in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. Michael White and David Epston utilized Bateson’s ideas in their work. See “Story, Knowledge and Power” in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), particularly pages 2, 10, and 27. See also Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006); Gregory Bateson, “Introduction,” in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. See also M. M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen, “The Social Construction of Narrative Accounts,” in K. J. Gergen and M. M. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical Social Psychology* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984).

³¹ Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 4. In understanding what is a religious or theological issue, I quote David Tracy who says, “a genuinely ‘religious’ question” is a “fundamental question of the meaning of human existence.” David Tracy, “Chapter One: The Public Character of Theological Language,” in David Tracy and John Cobb, Jr. *Talking about God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, *Religion Online* available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-the-context-the-public-character-of-theological-language-by-david-tracy/>, last accessed 7 April 2020, 6.

³² See Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of The Living God: A Psychoanalytical Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) and David Seamands, *Healing of Memories* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor, 1985). A negative image of God was linked to increased mortality in a 2-year longitudinal study of mentally ill elderly inpatients (K. Pargament, H. Koenig, N. Tarakeshwar, and J. Hahn, “Religious Struggle as a Predictor of Mortality among Medically Ill Elderly Patients: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 161 (13-27 August 2001): 1881-1885. See Sharon Cheston, Ralph Piedmont, Beverly Eanes, and Lynn Lavin, “Changes in Client’s Images of God over the Course of Outpatient Therapy,” *Counseling and Values*, 47 (2003).

possible for them to be re-created or even evolve as new insights about life arise, help people find new meanings that foster inner strength and contribute to spiritual growth when crises overwhelm old narratives.³³ Myerhoff wrote that the process of finding meaning, through which people choose an interpretation from many possibilities, that summarizes and epitomises what they feel about the experience is “intentional, not spontaneous. . . rhetorical and didactic.”³⁴ And through this process “they tame the chaos of the world, at once asserting both existence and meaning.”³⁵

Clergy offer support in and facilitate the process of people’s connecting their spiritual beliefs to their everyday lives. Christianity is meant to be a lived faith not merely a cognitive exercise. Group work using narrative techniques can help people connect to their faith so that they appropriately utilise gifts from the Christian tradition, understand what they believe and why they believe it, and see how it informs their lives.³⁶ In this MPhil, I am proposing using spiritually reflective methods, particularly building on the work of Charles Gerkin,³⁷ that could strengthen the work that pastoral care providers do to help people connect to and live out their faith in a vibrant and healthy manner. Peter Junker’s work in which he shows that Christian

³³ Findings supported also by my research. Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 221-2. I developed a schematic diagram to describe this process, 223. See also Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990), 43. See also Gregory Bateson, “Introduction,” in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. Michael White and David Epston utilized Bateson’s ideas in their work. See “Story, Knowledge and Power” in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), particularly pages 2, 10, and 27. See also Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006); Gregory Bateson, “Introduction,” in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. See also M. M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen, “The Social Construction of Narrative Accounts,” in K. J. Gergen and M. M. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical Social Psychology* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984).

³⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 45 and 173 (particularly my discussion of Gerkin’s work).

³⁷ An in depth look at Gerkin’s work and its importance for this MPhil is found in chapter two.

identity today is the “result of a personal identification with a given tradition through a process of re-interpretation,”³⁸ provided insight for me on how powerful group narrative work can be for facilitating the re-interpretation process. In chapter five, I discuss how priests and pastoral care providers can use narrative group work to support the re-interpretation process in a spiritual but not dogmatic manner, particularly appropriate within the contemporary context.

Introducing Narrative Process

People find, choose, and connect interpretations and meaning to experiences to develop a narrative of their life. Because there are other interpretations and meanings available which aren't chosen, therapists who work with people's stories say that people live “multi-storied lives.”³⁹ However, because people can't live all these various interpretations at the same time, one story will become the dominant one. The interpretation and meaning may have served a particular purpose at one time and then become obsolete for coping with life now or may negatively impact their sense of self and relationships with others. These messages or stories can contribute to “negative identity conclusions”⁴⁰ which may ultimately cause people to seek counselling or help. People who work in healing professions, including clergy, are aware of this and if genuinely concerned, will want to help people change (deconstruct) these negative conclusions associated with the stories and be open to other possible accounts and new options for actions. New interpretations of past

³⁸ Peter Jonkers, “What does it mean to call yourself a Christian? Some philosophical reflections on the Christian identity.” *Deel 53, Supplementum 3* (2012): 56-57. Available online at: https://pure.uvt.nl/portal/files/3047650/What_Does_it_Mean_to_Call_Yourself_a_Christian.pdf, last accessed 3 July 2018.

³⁹ Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 6. The concept of “multi-storied” lives comes from the work of Jerome Bruner. See Bruner's, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University, 1990). See also Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy, in Theories in Psychotherapy Series* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 12.

⁴⁰ Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 5.

experiences and new identity conclusions can then contribute to a more meaningful life, freedom from internal bondages, and new opportunities for growth.⁴¹ Yet, people who engage with story work for healing must always remember that the story must be the person's own—it comes out of them. We cannot give them ours or make them have a narrative that doesn't fit who they are.

Narrative techniques are very important to the work of this MPhil. Chapter two discusses the theory of narrative therapy that is important for this work. I will keep coming back to that theory and practice in later chapters, particularly chapter three when I address the kinds of questions to ask and five when I tie together research, analysis, and practice.

Rationale for Narrative Therapy Techniques

Of the various counselling theories and interventions available, Narrative Therapy works specifically with narratives to help people find understanding and meaning for their lives. One core feature that makes narrative therapy effective is that narrative therapists view the clients as experts in their life stories, while the therapists are experts only in the art of asking open-ended questions that help the person re-interpret experience and find understanding or “come to terms with that which they find problematic in, or unsettling to, their lives.”⁴² This stance of “not-knowing” gives therapists the freedom to think outside of what they might know or assume.⁴³ Clients, in turn have more authority in shaping the therapy conversation

⁴¹ See Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, and Mandy Robbins, *Religion, Education, and Adolescence* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2005), particularly page 11.

⁴² Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 4.

⁴³ Rachel Berko, “The Approach of the Therapist in Narrative Therapy,” online article on Jerusalem Narrative Therapy Institute, published 8/9/2011, accessed 20/11/2016. Gadamer also speaks of the importance of “not knowing” in his discussion of Platonic Dialectic, an essential part of asking the “right questions.” (*Truth and Method*, 356-357). There will be more discussion regarding this in the Hermeneutics chapter. It also one of the defining characteristics of this type of therapy and one that makes it different from other therapies that use narrative practices. Another fundamental understanding of Narrative Therapy is that the person is separate from the problem. The problem is

(to make it fit them and their need) and more authority to make changes in their lives. During the appointment, therapists will ask the clients if they feel they are being understood, giving the person a greater sense of being heard. The narrative technique of asking open-ended questions, often leads the client to find a different interpretation than the problem one that is affecting his or her life. A new way of seeing often comes to the person as an “ah-ha” moment of insight.⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this process brings an “opening to experience” in that person’s life. Gadamer describes this as true insight and says that: “Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that deceived us and held us captive.”⁴⁵ Group work facilitates these moments of insight and can contribute to profound moments for people to re-interpret painful memories and images of God. For this MPhil, I led two groups. Participants in both groups experienced these moments. I discuss how the insights come in chapters three and four and then connect it to the larger process of personal growth that can come through group interactions in chapter five.

Narrative therapists often invite others to sessions. These others are support for the person seeking to understand. However, they can also facilitate the development of a “thick narrative”⁴⁶ that enables deeper analysis and reflection about how the person has interpreted a life event. Through this process, the person is able to strengthen one of the non-dominant stories that he or she carries within, receiving

not in them, is simply the problem that can be looked at objectively. See the Dulwich Centre for a complete list of articles related to his modality, <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/articles-about-narrative-therapy/common-questions-narrative-therapy/>.

⁴⁴ Rachel Berko, “The Approach of the Therapist in Narrative Therapy,” online article on Jerusalem Narrative Therapy Institute, published 8/9/2011, accessed 20/11/2016.

⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 350.

⁴⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic, 1973), 3-30. Thickening the narrative means that the therapist helps the person look back at the past for examples with the theme or themes of an alternate story and then use these examples to strengthen the alternative story and make it become prominent.

insight through contrary evidence that helps him or her deconstruct the dominant narrative that has been causing problems and find a new life affirming one. The strengths of this method are discussed in depth in chapter five and I talk about how this method can help people connect to narratives of faith using it.

Even though narrative therapy began in a therapeutic context, the techniques work well in non-counselling contexts such as a cancer or grief support groups. In these groups, all participants collaborate to support one another in deconstructing⁴⁷ negative dominant stories that have held them back from living as fully as they would like—or finding meaning in their current life situation. A group facilitator trained in narrative questioning techniques can move the discussion to places where participants can find meanings of life experiences that are unique for them. With the right kind of spiritually-based open-ended questions (as Jesus often utilized⁴⁸), they can “think theological issues out for themselves, which results in them ultimately putting belief and experience into their own words and subsequently understanding it.”⁴⁹

Challenges Using Narrative in a Christian Context

When I first did my PhD research, finding Christian narrative therapists was difficult. This is because Narrative Therapy’s postmodernist approach, particularly as it relates to the sense of self, discourages some Christian therapists from looking more closely at the field. “Post-structuralist thinking does not conceive human beings

⁴⁷ Deconstruction refers to the process whereby a therapist helps a person examine the constructs they have created about their sense of self and “deconstruct” or take these apart if they are not helpful and replace them with healthier and more hope-filled definitions of who they are. Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin, “Narratives and Phantasies,” in Arlene Vetere and Emilia Dowling, eds., *Narrative Therapies with Children and Families: A Practitioner’s Guide to Concepts and Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 28.

⁴⁸ This will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

⁴⁹ Magdalen Smith, *Steel Angels* (London: SPCK, 2014), 35. An important source for later discussion will be the work of Christian narrative therapists. One book in particular stands out for these discussion: Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds., *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008).

as possessing universal inner essences or one essential human nature unrelated to cultural and changing circumstances.”⁵⁰ Martin Payne, practitioner, teacher, and writer, writes about the importance of the idea that our sense of self and identity are constantly changing as we interpret our identities in response to relationships with others, cultural messages, and power dynamics. Narrative therapy helps people reshape their lives and sense of self and identity “through re-assessment of how the meaning they give to their experience has permeated the situation”⁵¹ and how the meaning could be different from what they thought. Therefore, “self” is a concept that can change as new insight comes to a person. Other non-narrative therapists, particularly Christian ones, may view problems, ideas and qualities as originating deep within an “inner self” that is fixed and essential within a person.⁵² The idea of a concept of self that can change is at the heart of narrative therapy. Yet, one source proved invaluable for my PhD work in this area, *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*.⁵³ Though narrative therapy is still not fully accepted by all Christian therapists because of how they define post-structuralist or postmodern approaches and/or define “self,”⁵⁴ more Christian

⁵⁰ Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006), 161.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵² “Structuralist and non-structuralist approach,” Michael White, in *Pratiques Narratives*, available online at: <https://www.pratiquesnarratives.com/-Structuralistandpost-structuralistapproach.html>. Last accessed 24 April 2019. Also, “Structuralism and Non-structuralism,” Leonie Thomas, in *Pratiques Narratives*, available online at: <https://www.pratiquesnarratives.com/-Structuralismandnon-structuralism.html>. Last accessed 24 April 2019.

⁵³ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds., *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008).

⁵⁴ See Dominick Hankle, “Christian Worldview and the Use of Narrative Therapy in the Christian Counseling Setting,” *The Journal of Christian Healing* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016). Available online through www.researchgate.net, publication 312490803, accessed 9/3/2017 and Daria Kutuzova, “Narrative Practice and Christian Belief: A Review of *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*,” by Alexander and Richard Cook, eds., in *Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice*, No. 2 (2010): 99-106. The concept of self is an important one in narrative therapy. See “Structuralist and non-structuralist approach,” Michael White, in *Pratiques Narratives*, available online at: <https://www.pratiquesnarratives.com/-Structuralistandpost-structuralistapproach.html>. Last accessed 24 April 2019.

therapists are now utilising this modality. Christian narrative therapists or counsellors make peace with the post-structuralism by typically espousing both a “structural and relational”⁵⁵ self—that there is self that has a stable structure, sometimes called the authentic self or true self, and a relational self that is shaped by cultural, family, community, and other influences.⁵⁶ Christian Narrative Therapists see people as co-authors with God rather than seeing them as having sole responsibility for authoring their lives. Irene Alexander who is a Narrative Therapist and a Christian explains this:

The discovering of the ‘true self’ is a process of partly looking back at my life . . . to the times when I have felt most ‘at home’ with myself, and God and partly in seeking to become what most fits with my values and dreams.⁵⁷

Alexander finds the healing that comes out of therapy sessions as a “dynamic interchange” occurring between the person and God, producing “freedom and the promise of abundant life.”⁵⁸ I have found that Narrative Therapy works with Christians and non-Christians, and I have found that Christian themes work within the context of a therapeutic exchange. This MPhil weaves together narrative applications, theology, and meaning-making. In chapter two I will discuss the hermeneutic and reflective theory and how it will work with narrative techniques. Then in chapter five, I will discuss this in more depth using some of the work of Christian narrative therapists and the work of Charles Gerkin.

⁵⁵ Lex McMillan, “Stories of Encounter: Christianity Meets Narrative Therapy,” in Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds., *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds., “The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy, in *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 12-3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13. For a more detailed discussion of the therapy by Christian and non-Christian therapists, see Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 129-136.

Hermeneutic of Belonging and Importance of Gadamer's Theory

Hope is an act of collaboration; it cannot be achieved alone. We offer grains or fragments of hope to one another so that everyone's sense of possibility can grow. In this way we can do together what might seem impossible alone.⁵⁹

Ultimately, my goal in all the group work I support is to help people find more hope for their lives by connecting to God through their faith and to their own sources of resilience. We are made for a communal existence, living with God, others, and ourselves. Communal existence requires a certain kind of listening and understanding what is heard. One of the most important parts of this MPhil work is the work I have done with Gadamer about how we listen to others and understand and how the way we listen throws light on the interpretive process.

In working with people's stories, the group facilitator listens beneath the surface to find the questions that need to be asked. How do we do this listening? And, how are we to understand what is being said? Gadamer said that having a conversation with someone does not necessarily lead to understanding. Gadamer's work presents different kinds of listening: listening-to, listening-for, and listening-with⁶⁰. Understanding or meaning can be found where a certain kind of mode of being characterised by openness and listening-with is present.⁶¹ During regular conversations we are often "listening-for" information that we will use somehow or "listening-to" another. We enter into these conversations with our own experience, beliefs, biases, and culture that shape how we hear and interpret the conversation. If

⁵⁹ Elaine Hopkins, Zo Woods, Russell Kelley, Katrina Bentley, and James Murphy, *Working with Groups on Spiritual Themes: Structured Exercises in Healing, Volume 2* (Duluth, MN: Whole Person, 1995), vii.

⁶⁰ More discussion of this is contained in the body of this work.

⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 385. See also Mike Jostedt, "Jane Addams and Hans-Georg Gadamer: Learning to Listen with the Other," PhD Thesis, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL (2015), 50. The importance of "listening-with" is discussed later in chapter five. Listening-with occurs when we are aware of our situatedness and biases and also of the other persons; yet, all in the conversation can speak on their own terms. It is the most relational form of listening. See Jostedt, 47-50.

we are unaware of our situatedness and finitude, we are not open to change and may be unable to hear another and gain meaning (understanding) from what they are saying. We leave the conversation without really connecting to them or being changed.

Understanding is not simply accomplished by getting inside another person and reliving his or her experiences nor is it about knowing another person in order to gain a certain outcome.⁶² Understanding is situated in context. Therefore, as we listen-with another, we “experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us.”⁶³ This is true openness to the other. “Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so.”⁶⁴ Listen-with creates the space for people to hear their own understanding and glimpse the possible of new understandings.

This way of being present with another enables a “genuine human bond”⁶⁵ to form and creates a sense of belonging; in the understanding of one another, we find ourselves in a mutual belonging even as we still retain our individual identities. Through this relationship there is a willingness to be open to one another through listening and an openness to be transformed through the discussion and material covered in that discussion.⁶⁶ I first noticed the power of a sense of belonging when researching the group work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Though my research did not support the grief theory of Kübler-Ross, I found her methods for leading grief groups, to be effective. Using narrative techniques as she had, enabled participant to be

⁶² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 353-4.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 355.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, xvi, 355.

more engaged with the group and each other. End surveys showed a high level of sense of belonging. Group participants continued to support and care for one another long after the groups ended. In this work, through critical engagement with Gadamer's theory, I came to understand how Kübler-Ross was able to facilitate a powerful sense of unity, support, and hope by using listen-with techniques along with the narrative tools.⁶⁷

Rationale for Incorporating Charles Gerkin's Work into MPhil

Hearing stories helps people interpret their experience but doesn't go far enough. The stories sometimes need reinterpretation within a larger context of life and faith. Though fewer people identify as having a particular faith, spiritual and emotional needs for meaning, hope, and understanding remain.⁶⁸ Even within the medical world, there is a growing awareness of the importance of spiritual assessment, particularly as it relates to coping.⁶⁹ This thesis work proposes utilising Gadamer's theory of understanding and practical skills of listening-with to enable theological reflection-for-action.⁷⁰

Because discussions of meaning express a genuinely "religious" question⁷¹

⁶⁷ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 231.

⁶⁸ Rachel Perkins, "You Need Hope to Cope," in *Enabling Recovery: The Principles and Practice of Rehabilitation Psychiatry*, edited by Glen Roberts, Sarah Davenport, Frank Holloway and Theresa Tattan, London: The College of Psychiatrists, 2006, 117-121, particularly 119-121.

⁶⁹ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 225, particularly the notes on that page. See also the discussion in Larry Vandecreek, Christian Nye, and Kaye Herth, "Where There's Life, There's Hope, and Where There is Hope, There is. . ." *Journal of Religion and Health* 33, No. 1 (Spring 1994): 51-59, particularly 52 and Paul Bay, Daniel Beckman, James Trippi, Richard Gunderman, and Colin Terry, "The Effect of Pastoral Care Services on Anxiety, Depression, Hope, Religious Coping, and Religious Problem Solving Styles: A Randomized Controlled Study," *Journal of Religion and Health* 47, No. 1 (March 2008): 57-69.

⁷⁰ Term from Donald Schön. His contribution to this work will be discussed in this work.

⁷¹ David Tracy, "Chapter One: The Public Character of Theological Language," in David Tracy and John Cobb, Jr. *Talking about God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, *Religion Online* available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-the-context-the-public-character-of-theological-language-by-david-tracy/>, last accessed 7 April 2020, 6.

whether people are conscious of it or not, I chose to focus on Charles Gerkin's research and work as part of this thesis. I did this because of my familiarity with his work from previous research, because he used narrative processes and techniques in his work, and because he helped people utilise their faith in positive ways.⁷²

In previous work, I also critically engaged with Capps and Browning,⁷³ but found their work not fully compatible with the model of listening, understanding, and reflecting presented in narrative therapy. While Capps utilizes scriptural text in his counselling, his focus is still on psychological methodology in a Freudian style and he uses a psychological hermeneutics⁷⁴ particularly in his later works, such as *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist*. Freud's influence is seen in Capps' use of deterministic language. Browning found this language problematic and said Capps' language is "derived from electronics and hydraulics" and therefore is not compatible with "the working of our instinctual wishes."⁷⁵ He also said that Capps' deterministic language works against the idea of freedom of choice and presents a view of human

⁷² Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997); *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979); and *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984).

⁷³ Donald S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and "The Revival of Practical Theology," *Religion-Online*, Claremont School of Theology, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1373>. Donald Capps, *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); *Giving Counsel: A Minister's Guidebook* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001); *Living Stories: Pastoral Counseling in Congregational Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); and *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2000). See also Yolanda Dreyer, "Reflections on Donald Capps' Hermeneutical Model of Pastoral Care," *HTS Theological Studies* 61 Issues 1 & 2 (2005), available online at www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/download/450/349. See Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 150-219.

⁷⁴ With "psychological hermeneutics," the biblical text is interpreted through insights derived from psychological models. See J. Harold Ellens and Wayne Rollins, *Psychology and the Bible* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005) and the upcoming J. Harold Ellens, *Psychological Hermeneutics for Biblical Themes and Texts: A Festschrift in Honor of Wayne G. Rollins* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark International, July 2014) for more on this "new way to read scriptures."

⁷⁵ Donald S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 40.

behaviour, particularly in terms of the source of behavioural problems, that can contribute to someone's feelings of hopelessness and despair. This MPhil does not go into the depth of analysis on Freudian versus Narrative Methods that my PhD work did since this is not the focus of this work; however, I will address some of the limitations of Freudian theory for this work and its incompatibilities with Narrative Therapy in chapter five. To summarise here, I found that in my previous work that Freudian practice, such as Capp utilises, grows out of presumption that every act, thought, or emotion happens as a result of underlying causes. The limitation of this approach in a counselling context is that it places the problem within the person needing help and can contribute to feelings of hopelessness if the person cannot find the underlying cause for the problem or make changes in behaviour and thought that bring relief. Narrative therapy, on the other hand, places the problem outside the person (through objectifying and externalizing⁷⁶); then, together, the therapist and the client look in depth and objectively at how the problem came to be and its effects on the person's life. These are mapped out and the therapist and client collaborate to find a new life story that either eliminates the problem or causes it to lose its power in the person's life. This re-storying process enables the person to gain a sense of agency, hope, and even freedom from the influence of the problem. The emphasis on personal agency in narrative therapy is more compatible with work in groups fostering hope.⁷⁷ More will be said about this in chapters two, three, and five.

⁷⁶ Externalizing the problem is the process of creating "a context where the problems are treated as separate from the people." Carl Hilker, *Making Trouble for Problems: Therapeutic Assumptions and Research Behind the Narrative Practice of Externalizing Conversations* (Argosy University Ph.D. Thesis, 2007) quoted in Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds., *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 55. The quote you will often hear associated with Narrative Therapy is that "the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem." Michael White and David Epston.

⁷⁷ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 168-9.

Because of my concerns about Capps' Freudian style, I did not draw on his work when developing a plan for the group work. Browning does offer some helpful material and insights, particularly in the area of theological reflection (discussed in chapter two), and he also shies away from Freudian psychiatry. Though esteeming Freud's genius and his impact on western culture, Browning not only confutes Freud's use of deterministic language but also Freud's ethic and cosmology (his metaphors of *ultimacy*) in terms of Christian thought.⁷⁸ Browning is also wary of over utilising psychological constructs for fear that they may become "alternative faiths."⁷⁹ The community groups are not meant to become therapy sessions, nor should they encourage people to find an "alternative faith," but should facilitate a people's understanding and growth in their own faith.

For, spiritually reflective methodology, I connected Gerkin's spiritual reflection methods to Gadamer's theory. Gerkin emphasized a *dialogue* between social sciences and the Christian message while allowing for more human freedom and agency than found in deterministic psychotherapeutic models.⁸⁰ At the time he wrote the *Living Human Document*, pastoral care providers (particularly in the field of chaplaincy) were placing greater emphasis on the methodology of psychology and psychotherapeutic criteria than on spiritual and/or narrative interventions. This is understandable given the focus in America on Evidenced Based Practice. Gerkin

⁷⁸ Donald S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 32-60. Browning says that under Freudian models, "freedom is denied or deemphasized." Browning admits that in practice "Paul Ricoeur and others have demonstrated some modicum of freedom" in Freud's therapeutic interactions; nevertheless, the theory does not support this freedom. Browning says that the same is true of Skinner's dogmatic behaviorism, 133. In contrast, "the metaphors of ultimacy of the Christian tradition explicitly allow for and promote understanding of human freedom and agency," 134.

⁷⁹ Donald S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 2.

⁸⁰ Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 20.

respected the fields of psychology and psychotherapy but reminded pastoral care providers that over emphasis on psychological interventions robbed pastoral care providers of the wider and deeper context of faith. He continued to voice the concern that contemporary psychotherapy fails “to recognize that one of the most basic caring functions that a community of faith can offer is a storied context of ultimate meaning within which life can be lived.”⁸¹ Gerkin’s work challenged pastoral care providers to think theologically about human experience, particularly through examination of the language of narratives and reflection about where that language originated.⁸²

Gerkin’s work has been important for this MPhil because he acknowledged the tools and gifts of other disciplines, including the psychologies, while utilising them “within a hermeneutic framework of the Christian message.”⁸³ He recognised that a person’s individual narrative or “story of self” is at the deepest levels connected to the larger narratives and metaphors of God, family, and culture into which the individual has been born.⁸⁴ His model not only helped people understand how familial and cultural languages and messages had shaped their dominant life narratives, but also to look beyond them to the larger narrative of Christianity. He left the foundational structure for the framing of a narrative focus on “incarnational life-style,”⁸⁵ the awareness of who God is and how God is with us. This theological

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 39. See also Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 103.

⁸² Thomas St. James O’Connor, *Clinical Pastoral Supervision and the Theology of Charles Gerkin* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1998), 73. See also Gerkin’s discussion about language in *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), particularly part 2.

⁸³ Thomas St. James O’Connor, *Clinical Pastoral Supervision and the Theology of Charles Gerkin* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1998), 72. See also Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 19.

⁸⁴ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 19.

⁸⁵ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care*

framing of life meant and means that all human beings' "activities are permeated and given redemptive coherence and direction by the activity of God."⁸⁶ The message of God's faithfulness could bring hope, promise, and stability into a rapidly changing world in which people often have feelings of powerlessness.

As stated, Gerkin's work opens possibilities of spiritual reflection within a narrative therapy context. In this MPhil, I will be discussing the rationale for adding a theological reflection or spiritual awareness⁸⁷ component to group work particularly in chapter five. Spiritual care providers miss an important opportunity to help people connect their faith to life experience if they don't ask questions that allow people to access their own spiritual resources. Helping them connect is not telling people what to believe, but rather helping people understand and live what they already believe. When a crisis comes, can people draw on their spiritual and faith resources to help them cope? As a chaplain, I met many people in crisis who weren't able to utilise their faith as a coping mechanism to enable them to draw on resources of hope and strength. Studies show that without an ability to integrate belief with practice, people are more apt to experience depression or face life with resignation rather than hope.⁸⁸ Yet, Christian scriptures and themes have much to contribute to helping people find hope and strength for facing illness, change, and loss of all kinds—not in removing the fact that suffering is a part of life, but to help people feel God's love amid struggle and suffering.

Utilising Gerkin's work is not without challenges. His work, like Gadamer's,

(Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 321.

⁸⁶ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 71. See also Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 320.

⁸⁷ Elaine Hopkins, Zo Woods, Russell Kelley, Katrina Bentley, and James Murphy, *Working with Groups on Spiritual Themes: Structured Exercises in Healing, Volume 2* (Duluth, MN: Whole Person, 1995), xi.

⁸⁸ Bruce Rumbold, *Helplessness and Hope: Pastoral Care in Terminal Illness* (London, SCM, 1986), 60-61.

remains largely theoretical. He died before he was able to test his ideas about how his theology might be applied. He admitted in his last work that his ideas still needed to be brought into a community setting.⁸⁹ His works also contain language and terminology that are not fully explained. Gerkin also developed a model of pastoral care that relied on traditional forms of power and authority not compatible with narrative theory. The pastoral care provider is viewed as the counsellor or expert; the counselee or client look to her as the one who will provide the answers. Narrative Therapy flourishes in a context where a traditional power structure is replaced by a collaboration/co-creating partnership between the narrative counsellor and the client. In this relationship, the client has more authority and autonomy to find his or her own meanings.

Nevertheless, Gerkin's work opens ways of thinking and spiritually reflective practice that focus on the incarnational presence of God.⁹⁰ His writing challenges us to add a reflection or spiritual awareness⁹¹ component to group work-- to ask the spiritual questions that allow people to connect theology to life experience. There is a difference between telling people what to believe and helping people understand and live what they already believe. Yet, Christian scriptures and themes have much to contribute to helping people find hope and strength for facing illness, change, and loss of all kinds—not in removing the fact that suffering is a part of life, but to help people feel God's love amid struggle and suffering. I will discuss this further in chapter five.

⁸⁹ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 129, 131.

⁹⁰ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 321.

⁹¹ Elaine Hopkins, Zo Woods, Russell Kelley, Katrina Bentley, and James Murphy, *Working with Groups on Spiritual Themes: Structured Exercises in Healing, Volume 2* (Duluth, MN: Whole Person, 1995), xi.

When crises or other events disturb their lives, people may be open to new perspectives or horizons as they seek meaning and find old ways of coping spiritually no longer work for them. Jesus in his use of parables was very practical in how he helped people self-judge their lives and gain new insight. The methods of listening-with (from Gadamer's theory) and questioning (from White's work with narrative therapy) can be linked with understanding of spirituality (through Gerkin's work) and reflection to bring new interpretations and understanding to people right where they are in the midst of life.

A Critical Engagement of Gadamer's and White's Work to Facilitate Hope

For this MPhil, the context for this work is Christian ministry. The goal of the work was a methodology for working with groups led by either clergy and lay pastoral care providers that would use narrative techniques to support people's emotional and spiritual healing for greater resilience and healing of sense of self. Gadamer's theory is not uniquely Christian and neither is Narrative Therapy. Yet, both areas provided insights and techniques that suggested their work might be beneficial in pastoral care for Christians. Particularly of interest is how they minimise the imbalance of power often found in traditional counselling therapies.⁹² The questions for this project became: "What outcomes for fostering hope and healing past trauma or loss might come from a critical engagement with the theory of Gadamer and the techniques from Narrative Therapy as developed by David White? How could these outcomes contribute to critical spiritual reflection within a group context?" Critical engagement with Gadamer's methodology for listening, in particular, supported the concept of a unique form of questioning and engagement, a "to-and-fro, back-and-

⁹² "The therapeutic relationship between a therapist and a client is inherently unbalanced in terms of power. The client invests the therapist with power, which the therapist then uses to help the client empower him/herself." Karen Keifer-Boyd, "Power Imbalances and Therapy," *Focus* Volume 11, No. 9 (August 1996): Abstract.

forth movement” similar to what constitutes a game⁹³ in which people get caught up in the movement of the question and response. In that flow, “we may find, however temporarily, a new sense of a self given in, by and through” the movement.⁹⁴ An application of this to-and-fro, back-and-forth movement was how stories were told in the groups I facilitated at the Cancer Centre. I also found that people responded best when the power was understated (my leading was not obvious). A terminology that I found helpful was to call us all “fellow soul pilgrims.”⁹⁵ Though I led the opening questions and shaped the discussion, participants did not feel that I forced them into a particular way of thinking. This gave them a feeling of safety (that things would not become too “woo woo,”⁹⁶ as someone remarked) and freedom to express doubts or ideas that might seem contentious or threatening to others.

In one group, we worked with an art project that used their hands and their story. After introducing the activity, I stepped back from leading and let them work. One participant was very hesitant at first. “I’m not an artist. I can’t do this.” She stated. After others coaxed her, she did create something. When the time for sharing came, she said, “I have nothing.” There was silence for a moment. I looked at what she had created. “Nothing?” I gently repeated her naming of her art. “How did you choose Nothing’s shape and colours? Others began to ask her about the colours chosen. Slowly she opened up to describe Nothing. The group noticed positive and affirming elements of Nothing, and they pointed it out to her. I silently watched the to-and-fro, ready to step in if I needed to. I didn’t. The woman who’d drawn Nothing

⁹³ David Tracy, “Creativity in the Interpretation of Religion: The Question of Radical Pluralism,” *New Literary History* Vol. 15, No. 2, In *Interrelation of Interpretation and Creation* (Winter, 1984): 296-297.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Term from title of a book: *The Soul of a Pilgrim* by Christine Valters Paintner (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2015).

⁹⁶ “Woo woo” is American slang. The Urban Dictionary online defines it as “unfounded or ludicrous beliefs,” (10 January 2017) but it also carried the connotation of something unorthodox or a bit too alternative spiritually for the speaker when utilized in a spiritual context.

came to me in tears later. She had never felt such love and affirmation. That single moment was profound for her. Who led? It would have been difficult to say, but the presence of God was very much in the love and caring given and received. I was as surprised at the direction in which the discussion went as she was.

She later told me that she had come into the group feeling that she had “lost her faith” because of her illness and related complications. She came away from the time with others, with her faith renewed and a deeper, personal experience of what it her faith meant to her and a more confident sense of hope that she could begin a new life.⁹⁷

Interactions like this prepared me to recognise that a narrative therapy kind of questioning gave people a chance to give a voice to feelings and experiences in a non-threatening way. Once I began a critical engagement with Gadamer, I understood how essential the kind of questions and listening are if a group is going to generate an outcome of hopefulness. Gadamer’s work became my primary source for hermeneutical methodology and theory and for study of how language, story (text), interpreting experience, and listening can work to foster hopefulness.⁹⁸ I will discuss this in more depth as I discuss Gadamer’s main theories that inform group processes in chapters two, three, and again in five.

A Wider Context -- Wales

The pastoral work I do is now in Wales. Each community is in rural Wales, close to the border with England. The people of this area have been and continue to be shaped by history and tradition, sense of identity, and the “multi-layered context”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ From a personal letter she sent me after the group was over.

⁹⁸ See Edward Tingley, “Gadamer and the Light of the Word,” *The Institute of Religion and Public Life*, (Jan 2004) online at: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/01/gadamer-amp-the-light-of-the-word>; last accessed 30 March 2017.

⁹⁹ James Bell, Jill Hopkinson, and Trevor Willmott, *Re-Shaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2009), 26.

of their lives. This context includes factors such as population density, demographics, sense of belonging versus isolation, language, economic situation, and even landscape and sense of place. How quickly change is coming to the community will affect and shape the amount of cohesiveness in the community.¹⁰⁰

The meaning or interpretation a person attaches to an experience is shaped by the *overall context* of that person's life, which includes family and all these cultural narratives about life. And, all that meaning comes through language.¹⁰¹

These local variations will affect how people respond to a Christian message.¹⁰² However, according to Morgan and Morris, "Christianity has been a significant part of Welsh identity."¹⁰³ Morris continues by saying that "religion and Welsh linguistic and cultural identity have thus been intertwined for centuries."¹⁰⁴ Most of the people I work closely with are connected to the church and value its contribution in their lives.

In my initial research phase, I designed a grief group with the help of a local vicar who gave me names of people who had experienced a recent loss. They all

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, chapter one, "Reading the Context."

¹⁰¹ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 222. See also Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990), 43. See also Gregory Bateson, "Introduction," in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. Michael White and David Epston utilized Bateson's ideas in their work. See "Story, Knowledge and Power" in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), particularly pages 2, 10, and 27. See also Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006); Gregory Bateson, "Introduction," in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Dutton, 1972), <http://www.oikos.org/mind&nature.htm>. See also M. M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen, "The Social Construction of Narrative Accounts," in K. J. Gergen and M. M. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical Social Psychology* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984).

¹⁰² Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 1.

¹⁰³ Wayne Morris, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Indigenous Minority Language Groups: A Case Study on the Welsh Language," *Practical Theology* 9 Iss. 1 (2016), 65. Available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1756073X.2016.1162998>. Last accessed 3 April 2020. Morris is quoting from Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales, 1914-2000* (Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2011): 1.

¹⁰⁴ Wayne Morris, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Indigenous Minority Language Groups: A Case Study on the Welsh Language," *Practical Theology* 9 Iss. 1 (2016), 65. Available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1756073X.2016.1162998>. Last accessed 3 April 2020.

lived in a small rural village. I went to visit them and developed a rapport with each family. I then asked family members if they would attend a group to assist me in my research. I had a list of 7 people who committed to come. Three came from one family who had a farm in the village. They had lived in the village; the mother spoke Welsh and English, one son spoke Welsh a little but not the other son. One grew up near the village on a farm but did not speak Welsh. One moved to the village from another part of Wales and did not speak Welsh. Two had moved to the village from a large town in England. The evening of the group, no one came. I called them all the next day. The stated reason people gave me when I followed up was their fear of being emotional in front of their neighbours.¹⁰⁵ The village has gone through a lot of change. The post office closed. The pub and shop have limited hours now. At one time, there were many clubs, but now there is only one. A new housing estate has brought fifteen new families who don't have much connection with the long-term residents because both parents work and are only at home in the village on weekends or evenings. As I reflected upon how important building rapport and trust is in groups, I realised that the expressed fear was a reflection of a lack of trust created by rapidly changing life in the village. People don't know each other as well as they used to know their neighbours. The clash of cultures may also be a factor. How much of people's not wanting to join the group had to do with "behaving in the correct way"?¹⁰⁶ Or turmoil created in the village over conflict between a well-established Welsh farming family and an English couple who had moved to the village less than five years ago? I began the research for this thesis three years ago. I now realise how important it is and time consuming it is to build rapport and trust in

¹⁰⁵ I spoke to people who had committed to come and then didn't show up the week after the scheduled meeting. This was the most often cited reason for their not coming.

¹⁰⁶ See Carol Trosset's discussion of this in *Welshness Performed: Welsh Concepts of Person and Society* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1993), 77-78.

the villages here. I am starting to do group work in churches I have been with for at least two years now. It is working because we know each other. The fact that we know each other and each other's stories actually allows the rapport and trust to develop quicker.

The well-developed sense of belonging and a desire for it, could make Wales and/or Britain as a whole a perfect setting for groups exploring spiritual formation. However, care must be taken not to assume acceptance is automatic. Trust is earned over time. And, the fact that people know each other well and can also bring challenges in getting people to open up and be vulnerable in front of their neighbours. More will be discussed in chapter three regarding this as it created challenges in group formation.

God works through a person's sense of culture and place.¹⁰⁷ Part of designing a group is to help people recognize God's action and respond to it in where they are. That is also why it is important for the group facilitator to use questions specifically designed to help people recognise and voice the evidence of God's action in their own lives. This thesis discusses not only the importance of these questions but also how they need to be structured to encourage and support listening-with.

Designing the Group Time

The process of building group trust and a sense of belonging within a theological and spiritual context must be intentionally designed. Intentionally choosing open-ended questions, "framing questions,"¹⁰⁸ that invite dialogue about connection and spiritual reflection, is an important part of the design and implementation process. Questions should be specific, focused, and easily

¹⁰⁷ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 29.

¹⁰⁸ Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones, *Living Reconciliation* (London: SPCK, 2014), 147.

understood. I speak at length about how to think about and develop questions for the groups in chapter two.

In the work that Barbara Myerhoff did with groups over the years in her “Living History” sessions,¹⁰⁹ she learned that it was important to have clearly designed “ground rules”¹¹⁰ for the group that provided for all people to tell their stories and be listened to with respect and confidentiality. In designing such groups, it is also important, therefore, to intentionally choose a leader who will encourage open, inclusive communication, who participants feel “safe” with and feel they can trust, and who they feel might have some authority to make changes if changes need to be made.¹¹¹

As the group times are planned, it is also important to consider the language for theological reflective questions. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned research regarding how many people in Britain may still self-identify as “Christian” without really understanding what that means. They may be more spiritual than religious or borrow spiritual concepts from many faiths outside Christianity.¹¹² Pastoral care providers and clergy working in village settings need to be aware that the traditional language of religion may be foreign to people today. Words that have clear meanings to people raised in the Church may be misunderstood or meaningless to the people. We need to decide, if we want to teach them the language before we can even talk to them about faith or whether we learn a new way of expressing ideas and concepts linked to faith that is easily understood by someone with no traditional

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 34.

¹¹⁰ For this thesis, ground rules will be discussed in chapter three.

¹¹¹ See Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones, *Living Reconciliation* (London: SPCK, 2014), 148 about choosing a leader for Church-connected groups.

¹¹² Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 91-2, 174. See also Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening, and Learning in Theology* (Hants, Ashgate, 2002), 97-122.

Church frame of reference. This thesis will focus on using the latter response. More will be discussed about this and other design and implementation factors in chapter three on group design.

Chapters

Chapter one has been an introduction to and rationales for this work. I have discussed why I choose Gadamer, Gerkin, and White to focus on for my work and not others. It also explained how this work has grown out of previous work that I did for a PhD in Practical Theology. I've not found a research article connecting Michael White's theory of narrative therapy to Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics. Nor have I been able to find any mention of Gadamer in Michael White's writing (which I read widely when doing my PhD research). Yet, there are many commonalities. After finishing my PhD research, I was able to see these when I first discovered Gadamer. While White is practical—always focused on how to apply theory, Gadamer provides the theory for why people tell stories and how they work for human beings, explaining the process for how human beings are constantly interpreting experience. I discuss the connections between the two in chapter two and how this insight has greatly enhanced the work I do with narrative techniques.

In chapter three, I discuss the planning that went into the groups regarding methodology for the questions and activities to be utilized. I also talked about the theory for the reflective learning aspects. For this work, I chose Donald Schön's method of reflective learning. Then in chapter four, after actually conducting two groups, I discuss what worked and didn't work, how the questioning, theory, and groups' interactions happened, and what the outcomes were. I used two different activities which worked in very different ways. Yet, all participants involved said they had benefitted and learned from the activities and one another.

In chapter five, I return to the theory behind narrative techniques. The work justifies and supports utilizing narrative techniques. In chapter five, I discuss how Gadamer's theory, though developed in a different context and in terms of text and art rather than oral storytelling, explains how narrative therapy works. In particular, this chapter looks at how the group narrative process facilitates listening-with others rather than listening-to or listening-for. This kind of listening lends itself to people's connecting with one another on a deep level and how Gadamer's theory speaks to this kind of connection. I also return to the idea of bringing spiritual reflection into these groups and discuss its benefits and opportunities for more exploration with this.

Finally, chapter six summarises the work done in this thesis and talks about lessons learned and more research to be done. It also addresses implications for a wider audience and use.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced themes that will be analysed in more depth in future chapters, particularly the importance of story and how a theological understanding of life events contributes to people's search for meaning and purpose contributing to an outcome of hope. Christian hope that comes with a "realistic knowledge of the situation" enables people to hope even in the midst of change, loss, and crisis and opens them to new experiences, new relationships, and a broader perspective on life.¹¹³ Narrative techniques utilized within a Christian theological context provide key tools for facilitating hope and a connection not only to others, but also to God. Christianity continues to offer a theologically rich tradition of

¹¹³ Bruce Rumbold, *Helplessness and Hope: Pastoral Care in Terminal Illness* (London, SCM, 1986), 61.

hope through story, language, metaphor, and themes, which trained pastoral care providers can draw upon for supporting people living within a village context.

In 2013, the research survey commissioned by CTVC and Theos found:

. . .spiritual beliefs are not the preserve of the religious. Indeed, this research strongly suggests that a significant minority and sometimes even a majority of non-religious people hold spiritual beliefs. This is particularly evident when it comes to non-traditional forms of religious beliefs, where it seems to make very little difference whether someone considers themselves religious or not.¹¹⁴

In 2004 John Drane wrote an article about how prevalent New Age spiritual practices were becoming. Rather than viewing this trend as a threat, he understood it to be a sign that people were engaging in a “personal search for spiritual tools” to overcome their hurts, to realize their hopes, and to make the world a better place. He went on to say that this search seeks answers to “age-old questions of human identity and purpose: who am I, where did I come from, what does my life mean, and how can I make a useful contribution to the life of this world.”¹¹⁵ People are more open to spiritual exploration than in the past and are even seeking it out. It is my belief that a well-designed group that encourages spiritual reflection in a non-judgmental manner would be particularly appealing to people today.

Ministry develops not just out of theory or just out of practice but through “a dialectical relationship of reciprocal influence and correction.”¹¹⁶ This thesis, and the work that grows out of it, is endeavouring to follow in the same spirit, looking for and allowing a reciprocating communication flow between theory and practical pastoral ministry that will strengthen ministry practice within a Welsh context and support people’s spiritual exploration and growth.

¹¹⁴ ComRes, “The Spirit of Things Unseen: Belief in Post-Religious Britain” (London: Theos, 2013), 25.

¹¹⁵ John Drane, “Encountering New Age Spirituality,” *Rural Theology: International, Ecumenical, and Interdisciplinary Perspective* 2, no. 1 (2004): 10.

¹¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), xiii.

Chapter Two

Listening, Understanding, and Growing Souls

Introduction

The group work¹¹⁷ proposed in this thesis, involves several important techniques: (1) The leader listens to people's stories in a specific way, (2) utilising a questioning methodology that allows respondents to learn through self-generated understanding,¹¹⁸ while (3) remaining open to responses and outcomes that could take the conversation in unexpected directions. These methods are particularly helpful when supporting people in a theologically reflective process. Chapter two presents the theoretical understandings for these processes drawing on the work of two people in particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer (particularly in *Truth and Method*) and Michael White founder of Narrative Therapy.

People tell their stories all the time without healing or transformation taking place; yet, I know that it is possible for healing and transformation to occur because I have seen people's lives profoundly changed by an insight that causes them to reassess what they have believed about themselves. I found in Gadamer and White theory and methods that explain and support how people interpret what happens in their lived experience and how these interpretations can be used to encourage

¹¹⁷ I use the term "group work" as it is used in the U.S. meaning "a method of social work practice which is concerned with the recognition and use of processes which occur when three or more people work together towards a common purpose." Mark Doel, "Groupwork," in M. Davies (Ed.) *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Work* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 148.

¹¹⁸ Narrative therapists have developed the methodology specifically to help people look deeply at how they have interpreted events in their lives. In asking these sorts of questions, the therapist is drawing out more information about these events and people's understanding of them. At the same time these questions enable people to imbue the events with meaning and significance. See Maggie Carey and Shona Russell, "Re-Authoring: Commonly Asked Questions," *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3 (2003): 60-71. More will be discussed about this methodology in that section of the thesis. See also my discussion in chapter three and on pages 223-4 in Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015.

emotional and spiritual healing and transformation as people gain new insights about themselves and broaden their vision of who they are, what hope means for them, and what they need to find meaning. Though neither Gadamer nor White mention the other's ideas, both came to understand in surprisingly similar ways how human beings interpret and give meaning to experience—often using very similar language. Each provides pieces of insight about interpreting life that contribute to the work of the other. This thesis seeks to bring their insights together in a way not done before to provide a picture of how and why narrative techniques work. Using these insights intentionally can make narrative work in groups more effective in effecting change and provide understanding about how change/growth in a narrative setting happens.

For Barbara Myerhoff, a social scientist who also observed positive growth moments, moments of insight that happen as people tell their stories and others hear and respond to them are times when “a kind of fundamental healing takes place”.¹¹⁹ She went on to call these healing encounters “growing of soul.”¹²⁰ In her writings she talked about an intentional way of being with others, a way of listening and understanding. Though she didn't give the process of listening and understanding a name, she was describing a process of hermeneutics. Used in this context, hermeneutics is not just a method of interpretation, but also, “an investigation into the nature of understanding.”¹²¹ This is where Gadamer becomes an important voice in the discussion.

In the hospital, much attention is given to using scientific methodology to find empirical evidence. This methodology has limitations since stories can't be fully

¹¹⁹ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*, edited by Marc Kaminsky and Mark Weiss (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 19.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²¹ Andrzej Wiercinski, “Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (1):3-14 (2009): 3, available online at: journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/viewFile/2/1.

understood using scientific methods; yet, they have much important information to provide. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics methodology can be a helpful way to understand people's stories where scientific methods of study fail. Gadamer, himself says, that texts (written stories) should be understood and interpreted differently from objects of experience that are scrutinized using the scientific method.¹²² His method of hermeneutical enquiry used by the human sciences is a better fit since it concerns itself not only with a "mode of being-in-the world," but also with interpretation of what has been understood that is oriented towards the whole of human life.¹²³ "Hence, the human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science."¹²⁴ Insights are acquired and truths known that cannot be verified by the methodological ideal of science.¹²⁵ This chapter will explore these ideas and discuss how they could be incorporated into a narrative process for helping people heal from unhealthy and traumatic past memories and interpretations of experiences that influence how they view themselves and God.

The Importance of Story and Narrative Therapy

The main claim for the use of narrative in many forms of social research, especially education and counselling, is that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives."¹²⁶ This understanding of how human beings experience the world has been a major research model since the 1980s, gaining authority when Kenneth Burke and Walter Fisher published their research using the root metaphor for human beings, *homo narrans*: human beings

¹²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), xx-xxi.

¹²³ Andrzej Wiercinski, "Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (1):3-14 (2009): 4, available online at: journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/viewFile/2/1.

¹²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), xxi.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, xx-xxi.

¹²⁶ F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry," *Educational Researcher*, June-July, 1990: 2, available online through Pennsylvania State University, 9/11/2016 at <http://er.aera.net>, accessed 23 February 2017.

as storytellers.¹²⁷ I also found the work of psychoanalyst Roy Schafer helpful in understanding how people perpetually recreate their sense of self through their stories.¹²⁸ Today the concept of the importance of story and narrative to people is so well accepted that a recent (9 February 2017) Google scholar search using the keywords: “Importance of Narrative” brought over two million relevant articles from scholars in a wide variety of fields, including history, religion, medicine, and education.

As researchers were understanding the importance of story for human beings, Michael White, a therapist in Australia, was discovering that people use story as a fundamental building block for their ordering and interpreting experiences. According to White, the stories people create around an event become road maps for their lives.¹²⁹ He became the chief progenitor of the field of narrative therapy as he began working therapeutically with people’s stories about their lives and identity. He and others who followed in his footsteps found that “at any point there are multiple stories” available for people to choose to help them interpret experience and “no single story can adequately capture” the broad range of experience. However, over time, as people create stories linking events in their lives, “particular narratives are drawn upon as an organizing framework and become the dominant story.”¹³⁰ Like a

¹²⁷ Walter Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51 (March 1984): 6. See also C. W. Wahl, “The Fear of Death,” *Bulletin of the Mellinger Clinic* 22 (1958): 214-223; Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: George Braziller, 1955); Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); and Kenneth Burke, “Definition of Man,” in Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1968). Fisher points out in his work that the narrative does not have to be true for it to bring meaning and power to a person’s life.

¹²⁸ Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 53. See also Roy Schafer, “Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue,” in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 31. Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 29.

¹²⁹ See Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

¹³⁰ William Madsen, “Inviting New Stories: Narrative Ideas in Family-Centered Services,” *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 18, no. 3 (1999): 7. See also Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative*

double-edged sword, the dominant story a person lives by can be a positive one that affirms a person's sense of self, or a negative, critical one that causes pain and problems for a person. The stories linked together are important for helping people make sense of life and, in many cases, providing meaning for the experiences. They also provide building blocks for a person's sense of identity. Alice Morgan, a leader in the field, calls this process of meaning-making, creating the "plot" of our lives.

As humans, we are interpreting beings. We all have daily experiences of events that we seek to make meaningful. The stories we have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them. This meaning forms the plot of the story. We give meanings to our experiences constantly as we live our lives. A narrative is like a thread that weaves the events together, forming a story.¹³¹

Narrative therapy techniques are particularly designed to work with the narratives of people's lives through the use externalizing problems, deconstructing old stories, and re-authoring new stories through the use of well-crafted questions that open up space for alternative stories to come forth contradicting and then replacing negative, harmful interpretations of self. The result of the therapy according to White, is the "identification or generation of alternative stories that enable them [the clients] to perform new meanings, bringing them desired possibilities."¹³² Through narrative work, the person seeking help may experience a "greater freedom to choose a course of action"¹³³ and experience a new understanding of self and, if utilized in connection with theological reflection, of God.

Means to Therapeutic Ends (New York: Norton, 1990).

¹³¹ Alice Morgan, *What is Narrative Therapy*: Chapter 1, available online through the Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, Australia, at <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy/>.

¹³² Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 14.

¹³³ Nicola Hoggard Creegan, "Narrative and Being Free: A Theological Look at Narrative Therapy and Implications for Conceptualising Human Freedom," in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 55. William C. Madsen, "Inviting New Stories: Narrative Ideas in Family-Centered Services," *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 18, no. 3 (1999): 1-22.

White's Understanding of Story, Knowledge, and Power

White was an avid reader of others' studies as well as a practitioner of narrative therapy. He read not to affirm his work, but to challenge himself and to learn more. He continually implemented ideas from other philosophers, anthropologists, and social scientists to provide the theoretical context for his work and strengthen practice. It was through his creative engagement with a diversity of authors that he would find a new language to describe an innovative therapeutic practice.¹³⁴ This personal context of study and reflective practice context made narrative therapy different from other counselling modalities. Through the work of Bateson (1972, 1979), White was introduced to the social scientists' methodology for "interpretive method, . . .the processes by which we make sense out of the world."¹³⁵ Bateson's work helped White understand the process of interpretation whereby people consider how events in their lives fit into a whole pattern of events (context) over the course of their life. Bateson also introduced him to the importance of the temporal dimension, that the development of peoples' stories about who they are happens "through time."¹³⁶ Building on this theory, White saw that people have problem behaviours not because of some underlying family or personal dysfunction or structure, but because of the meaning they attributed to the events of their lives which then led them to respond behaviourally in certain ways. White began to look at how problems survive, assuming a life of their own, and how those problems influence peoples' lives and relationships. He "proposed that the family members' cooperative but inadvertent responses to the problem's requirements, taken

¹³⁴ David Denborough, "Some reflections on the legacies of Michael White: An Australian perspective," Dulwich Centre. Available online at: <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/michael-white-archive/michael-white-legacies/>, last accessed 24 April 2017.

¹³⁵ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 2.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

together, constitute the problem's life support system."¹³⁷

From Foucault, he drew heavily for his understanding of the importance of language. Since meaning is derived through the structuring of experience into stories, and that process is dependent on language, understanding how language influences people is important especially as it is used to bring about a certain outcome.¹³⁸ The importance of language to narrative therapy is shown in the following quote as well as Foucault's influence regarding language.

There is a privileging of the client's language rather than the therapist's language. There is a respect for working at the client's pace that finds expression in regularly summarizing and checking that the client is comfortable with the pace. The therapist assumes that since social realities are constituted through language and organised through narratives, all therapeutic conversations aim to explore multiple constructions of reality rather than tracking down the facts which constitute a single truth.¹³⁹

From Foucault, White also learned and often said "that power and knowledge are inseparable."¹⁴⁰ Within White's narrative therapy, the therapist adopts a position of consultant or collaborating co-author "to those experiencing oppression at a personal level from their problems and at a political level from a mental-health discourse and set of practices which permeates western culture."¹⁴¹ In moving from therapist-centred to therapist as one who works alongside the client, clients are empowered to question the socio-political contexts within which so-called objective diagnostic truths emerged¹⁴² and the power structures that people unconsciously subjugate their lives

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. See also Michael White, "Negative explanation, restraint and double description: A Template for Family Therapy," *Family Process* 25, no. 2 (1986).

¹³⁸ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 27-8.

¹³⁹ Alan Carr, "Michael White's Narrative Therapy," in Alan Carr, ed. *Clinical Psychology in Ireland, Volume 4, Family Therapy Theory, Practice and Research* (Wale: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 22.

¹⁴⁰ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 29.

¹⁴¹ Alan Carr, "Michael White's Narrative Therapy," in Alan Carr, ed. *Clinical Psychology in Ireland, Volume 4, Family Therapy Theory, Practice and Research* (Wale: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 21.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

to “that involve continual isolation, evaluation and comparison.”¹⁴³ The therapist in collaboration with the person look for “alternative stories that incorporate vital and previously neglected aspects of lived experience.”¹⁴⁴ These alternative stories come from the person seeking therapy, not from the therapist. To minimize the tendency of the therapist to use their expert knowledge to influence the client to do what the therapist thinks the client should do, White was careful to establish conditions in the field of narrative therapy that encourage the practitioner to examine his or her own motives and use of power. He did this by having them identify the context of their own ideas and then examine the history of those ideas to enable them to identify “effects, dangers, and limitations”¹⁴⁵ that these ideas might have on counselling sessions.

Gadamer and White: How to Listen and Understand

I find many points of connection between the philosophy behind various aspects of narrative therapy and Gadamer’s ideas. In this section I will be discussing some of these and then talk about how they relate to group work.

In the last section, I discussed how important language is in narrative therapy. White demonstrated its importance by showing through his work how meaning is derived through the structuring of experience through the medium of language into stories. How people describe an event contributes to the meaning they attach to that event. Changing the description through intentional word choice can also change the meaning which can then lead to different outcomes.¹⁴⁶ Gadamer, like White, saw that language was an integral part of experience. In his discussions of language, he

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 31.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴⁶ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 27-8.

wrote about how people use language to relate to the world and the environment they inhabit.¹⁴⁷ Yet, the language used can also shape their reality. Since it is possible to express things in different ways using the same language or new language as learning comes, language holds the potential to change a person's perspective.¹⁴⁸ It is not that the original event changed, but that they now can see their experiences in a different light --almost as if they have changed the place in which they stand and that new vantage point changes what they see. The different locations and angles will give them a different view of the event itself and may therefore, change the way the person interprets or relates to the event. This discussion of language lays the groundwork for understanding Gadamer's concept of horizons which will be discussed shortly.

Temporality

In White's writing we see research regarding how and why people change their interpretations over time (the process of interpretation) which was inspired by Bateson's work but goes further than Bateson took it. White also speaks of the importance of the temporal dimension in interpretation, a concept important in Gadamer's work. In Gadamer's writing, the time between when the work was created and when the reader reads the work, is filled with "tradition, which opens access to the text for us."¹⁴⁹ He went on to say that this in-between place is the "true locus of hermeneutics."¹⁵⁰ Narrative therapists would agree that the in-between place, the

¹⁴⁷ Beata Piecychna, "The Act of Translation in Hans Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy of Language," *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, 28, issue 21 (2012): 164-5. (161-182). Piecychna's journal article looks at Gadamer's *Boundaries of Language and Man and Language*.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Chinatsu Kobayashi and Mathieu Marion, "Gadamer and Collinwood on Temporal Distance and Understanding," *Special Issue: Historical Distance : Reflection on a Metaphor in History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, Wesleyan University Vol 50, Issue 4 (December 2011): Abstract (pages 81-103).

¹⁵⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 295. Gadamer expresses the importance of the temporal dimension in later works when speaking of art through his use of tarrying (*Verweilen*) and while (*die Weile*). For more on this see: Daniel Tate, "In the Fullness

time between the original event and initial interpretation by a person and the place where she is today, is important for what it teaches us about how the person got to where she is today. Gadamer also wrote about the importance of context in interpretation, particularly in terms of the historical conditions under which the text was created.¹⁵¹ His views differ from Schleiermacher who said that a text or work of art lost some of the meaning when it is wrenched from its original context. According to Schleiermacher, a work can only be fully understood if there is a restitution and restoration of the past context in which the text or work of art were created. Gadamer said that though the past context undoubtedly is an important aid to understanding the work, full reconstruction of the past context is “a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being.”¹⁵² Furthermore, Gadamer said that though the past context is important to works, what brings the works to life, what provides the meaning is the “*interiorizing recollection (Er-innerung)* of the still *externalized* spirit manifest in them.”¹⁵³ The true understanding comes “not in the restoration of the past but in the thoughtful mediation with contemporary life.”¹⁵⁴ White would agree that hearing the story of the past which birthed an interpretation aids in understanding; but, like Gadamer, he would say that the meaning and understanding of the event goes beyond the original context. Over time, the problem has assumed a life of its own

of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art,” *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012): 93. 92-113 Available online at www.sbu.edu/docs/default-source/Faculty-Profile-Documents/tate-files/4-in-fullness-of-time-rp-print.pdf?sfvrsn=20a59953_2, last accessed 8/11/2018 and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” available online at faculty.washington.edu/eweb/Gadamer, last accessed 1/10/2019.

¹⁵¹ Andrzej Wiercinski, “Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (1):3-14 (2009): 5, available online at: journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/viewFile/2/1.

¹⁵² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 159. A full discussion of the differences in his view from Schleiermacher is found on pages 158-9. The reflection on history “can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.” (page 301)

¹⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 161.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

and the therapist works with the problem as it is now by helping the client reinterpret the past events from a new perspective. Recreating or reliving the original event is not necessary for healing to occur. More will be discussed about Gadamer's view of the past shortly.

Understanding and Meaning in Language

So far, we have been discussing Gadamer's work with texts and art. As mentioned earlier, both Gadamer and White sought to comprehend how language worked in the understanding process. Gadamer said that understanding and meaning come in a continuous dialogue through the medium of language.¹⁵⁵ White uses similar language when he discusses the question and answer process used in narrative therapy. White calls this process "text analogy" and described the process of looking at the problem narrative in terms of a **dialogue** between "readers" and "writers" around a particular narrative or story. He said:

The career or lifestyle of the problem becomes the story of the problem. This description opened up new areas of inquiry, including an exploration in a literary sense, and encouraged me to propose a "therapy of literary merit."¹⁵⁶

White used the term "text analogy" as social scientists do. They observed that even though a behaviour that happened in the past no longer exists in the current time, the meaning given to that behaviour can survive across time. Social scientists could "read" the current "text" to understand the past behaviour as a reader interacting with a particular text seeks to understand the meaning behind the words. With this view, "every new reading of a text is a new interpretation of it, and thus a different writing of it."¹⁵⁷ Inviting the person to be an audience to their own performance of an

¹⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Translated and edited by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 31.

¹⁵⁶ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 4. See also Michael White, "The Process of Questioning: A Therapy of Literary Merit?" *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, Winter (1988).

¹⁵⁷ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton,

alternative story through the use of questions enhances the survival of the new story and increases the person's sense of personal agency.¹⁵⁸ The new writing is further enhanced by recruiting an "external" audience, others who act as witnesses to the performance of the new story, who contribute to its meaning, and become part of the writing.¹⁵⁹ So both White and Gadamer have identified a process by which people interpret and understand and both offer insights into how this process could be understood in group work.

Yet, Gadamer has a further insight about language that White does not specifically address. This is that language also limits understanding at times. Gadamer noticed "that every conversation assumes that its participants use the same language." He went further saying: that "only then does understanding take place...."¹⁶⁰ He used the example of people who speak different foreign languages and can't understand each other. You would not think people speaking the same language, English, would encounter this kind of limitation. However, I have found that even when it appears that two people have the same language, their word usage may lead to misunderstandings. I have mentioned the problems in talking about spiritual matters in the current cultural environment because many younger people are unfamiliar with church terms. In any work with language that leads to dialogue among people, considerations about language used are important. I have found in working with groups here, that this limitation is not formidable, however. People will ask what something means when they don't understand something said

1990), 9.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17. Examples of questions White used to demonstrate the increase in person's sense of personal agency include: "How did you manage to resist the influence of the problem on this occasion?" and "What does your success at resisting the problem say about you as a person?"

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17. The mode of questioning will be covered in depth in chapter three on methodology.

¹⁶⁰ Beata Piecychna, "The Act of Translation in Hans Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy of Language," *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, 28, issue 21 (2012): 167.

and fortunately, in a group setting others are present who help “translate.” The translation process itself becomes a learning application for both participants in the group and the facilitator.

Openness

In doing narrative group work, people listen to one another’s stories. This listening is not a passive medium of exchange, not satisfied with simply wanting to register what is there or said there. For group work to be effective and healing in a narrative therapy sense (even if it is not in a therapeutic context), people listen to understand, “going back to guiding interests and questions.”¹⁶¹ This listening and interpreting “becomes an expression for getting behind the surface,” to understand in a particular way through dialogue.¹⁶² In this kind of listening, no one is the expert, knowing what the outcome of the group session will be. There are ground rules for respect and confidentiality and some reminders about how our expectations and prejudices can influence what we hear. This is important because people naturally project a meaning for the discussion as a whole as soon as some initial meaning begins to emerge. Even the initial meaning emerges because of the particular expectations that we bring.¹⁶³ Gadamer does not view the expectations and prejudices we carry as necessarily negative¹⁶⁴ and neither does White. Both realized, however, that the biases we have influence what we believe and how we interpret experiences.¹⁶⁵ White and Gadamer have written about how people find meanings through an interpreting process. Not seeing our biases leads to misunderstandings

¹⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, edited by Thomas McCathy (London: MIT, 1982), 110.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 100.

¹⁶³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 269.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 272-3.

¹⁶⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 271-2.

both in our individual lives as we misinterpret an event and within a group setting in how we hear the narrative being told. It is important, therefore, that we remain open to the meaning—an expression that both White and Gadamer use. When we intentionally work to remain open, we find, as Gadamer writes, that the meanings “represent a fluid multiplicity of possibilities.”¹⁶⁶ This multiplicity of possibilities of understandings and interpretations is why so many clients involved in narrative therapy find the process freeing and creative. However, with so many possibilities, there is also a need for discerning or judging the possibilities for, as Gadamer recognised, not all meanings are possible. He said therefore that “*The hermeneutic task becomes of itself a questioning of things.*”¹⁶⁷ This questioning work allows one to constantly revise expectations as new insights emerge, thus, allowing all those involved in the work to penetrate more deeply into meaning. For Gadamer, this questioning task brings understanding.

Every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation.¹⁶⁸

Gadamer and White voice similar thoughts when they describe the process of understanding that happens when you listen with a willingness to change fore-projections and with curiosity and caring to hear what you do not know or expect. In this state of being open to the new experience,¹⁶⁹ we have the opportunity for an “Ah ha!” moment of insight. Gadamer describes this (when speaking of a text) as the moment when we are “pulled up short by the text. Either it does not yield any

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 271. Italic in original text.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 269.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 350.

meaning at all or its meaning is not compatible with what we had expected.”¹⁷⁰ In listening to a person’s problem story, the narrative therapist looks “for moments, actions, thoughts, or stories that might contradict the problematic story-line.”¹⁷¹ These can be used to help the person find an alternative story of identity that can then be strengthened by finding evidence that supports the alternative story. People involved in narrative therapy often describe the process as liberating because it can free them from previous mindsets. It can be exhilarating for the therapist also who gets to experience the joy and healing that comes for the person as understanding is found. Gadamer said this “understanding is an adventure and like any other adventure is dangerous”¹⁷² because it contains far less certainty than scientific study. Yet, “when one realizes that understanding is an adventure, this implies that it affords unique opportunities as well.”¹⁷³ This kind of understanding “is capable of contributing to a special way to the broadening of our human experience, our self-knowledge, and our horizon.”¹⁷⁴ All in the group, including the leader, experience this growth.

Horizons

As mentioned, there are “problem stories” and “alternative stories.” Narrative therapists speak of human beings as having “multi-storied” lives:

There are many stories occurring at the same time and different stories can be told about the same events. No single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction and no single story can encapsulate or handle all the contingencies of life.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 270.

¹⁷¹ Carey, Maggy and Shona Russell. *Re-authoring: Some Answers to Commonly Asked Questions*. http://narrativepractices.com.au/pdf/Re-Authoring_Commonly_asked_questions.pdf (accessed 25 February 2017).

¹⁷² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, edited by Thomas McCarthy (London: MIT, 1982), 110.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* See also 109.

¹⁷⁵ Alice Morgan, *What is Narrative Therapy*: Chapter 1, available online through the Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, Australia, at <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy/>.

Gadamer's work includes the concept of horizons which has implications for talking about multi-storied lives and how stories of past experiences could influence our lives if we became aware of them and engaged in dialogue with them. Gadamer defines a "horizon" as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."¹⁷⁶ Gadamer says that "a person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, 'to have a horizon' means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it."¹⁷⁷

In narrative therapy a person focusing on a dominant, problem story has a range of vision that is too narrow. The story they have been living with has become their whole world and, as such, has become the horizon with which they live and cannot see beyond. This causes him or her to focus on the wrong things or prevents the person from seeking other possibilities for life. However, within a group, a variety of perspectives may be present and shared respectfully through conversation. It is common for people to be inspired by what someone else has said and, as a result of a new insight gained through listening to others, have their perspective, or horizon, expand. This expansion of the individual horizons happens as people seek to understand what others are saying. Gadamer said the reason for this is that we "transpose ourselves" into their horizon.¹⁷⁸ This does not mean we disregard ourselves or over hastily assimilate another's horizon. Instead, listeners "look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and a truer proportion."¹⁷⁹ It is this process that leads people to feel that they have a new sense of vision and openness in their life.

¹⁷⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 301.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁷⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 304.

Gadamer, in his discussion of horizons, goes on to talk about how important it is to be conscious of how our history has affected us. Gadamer said that people have a "historically effected consciousness" and that they are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them.¹⁸⁰ However, even though our history has influenced current thinking and action, we can never know all the ways it has affected us because we never have complete knowledge of ourselves. As we look back, we are interpreting rather than seeing the past as a scientist sees a specimen under a microscope. Still we must try to see where we have come from to see what the past has to speak to us. The insights we gain in understanding the past may change our current horizon and broaden our vision. Gadamer warns that looking back is not without the potential for mistranslation; it is possible to misunderstand what the past has for us to learn.¹⁸¹ White would agree and talked about how problem stories can arise from mistranslations. In addition, we should not try to over-assimilate the past insights into the present expectations of meaning. Instead, Gadamer and White speak of remaining open. Finding understanding that brings life "involves opening space,"¹⁸² for more possibilities--the possibility that a previously marginalized narrative will fit with and not contradict significant aspects of lived experience. The opening allows more possibilities in interpretation and action as clients gain new control over some aspect of their lives.¹⁸³ And insight comes as people see how they may have been mistaken in their interpretations of past experiences (because of biases and prejudices). Thus, remaining open allows people to open themselves "to listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 301.

¹⁸¹ See his discussion in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 301-5.

¹⁸² Alan Carr, "Michael White's Narrative Therapy," in Alan Carr, ed. *Clinical Psychology in Ireland, Volume 4, Family Therapy Theory, Practice and Research* (Wale: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 17.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*.

own meaning heard.”¹⁸⁴ Their openness to, and awareness and testing of prejudice and bias causes the horizon of the present to be in a continually changing process.¹⁸⁵ The process of changing horizons is ongoing, as old and new understandings combine into “something of living value...”¹⁸⁶ Gadamer talks about this process in terms of a dialogue. He is describing a process of growth. White and other narrative therapists describe this openness in narrative therapy’s process which allows people to re-author their stories as a dialogue with and among themselves and others. So, Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory provides an underpinning for understanding how people understand, interpret, and apply¹⁸⁷ the stories that shape their lives. His work “breaks down the theory-to-practice (text-to-application) model of humanistic learning....It implies more nearly a radical practice-theory-practice model of understanding.”¹⁸⁸ In the group work people are telling, listening to, and understanding one another’s stories in the manner of a conversation. In my experience, this process often generates new insights for the story tellers which can then be applied to their lives. In turn, these new insights generate new understandings and personal growth as group participants’ current horizons expand. The application of interpretation does not follow from understanding. Instead application to practice “guides the interpretive process from the beginning, often in subtle, overlooked ways.”¹⁸⁹ Narrative therapies’ tools make the subtle and overlooked come into focus and intentionally draw them out to be seen and understood.

The understanding process described here, happens because of and through

¹⁸⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 304.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 304-5.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 153.

¹⁸⁷ Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.), 39.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*. Browning speaking of Gadamer’s contribution.

the medium of language. Beata Piecychna, in an article for *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, wrote that for Gadamer, language is “a universal medium through which (and in which) the process of understanding takes place.”¹⁹⁰ Language and thought cannot be separated because the thinking is only possible in a given language.¹⁹¹ Gadamer wrote that “meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well.”¹⁹² He called language “our linguistic interpretation of the world.”¹⁹³ When an experience happens to us and we attach meaning to that experience, we are giving that experience a voice through the language we use. We are translating experience so that we know how to think about it and can understand what it means. This expressed experience now has a meaning that influences the concept of the world (provides the worldview) for that person. What the leader brings into this process of understanding is the knowledge of how language is working and how it might work more effectively. A primary tool for supporting the work of language is the use of open-ended questions that help participants see and understand: the meanings that they have given to experiences; how these meanings influence their lives; and how they might understand, translate, and interpret them differently.

¹⁹⁰ Beata Piecychna, “The Act of Translation in Hans Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Philosophy of Language,” *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 28 no. 41 (2012): 164.

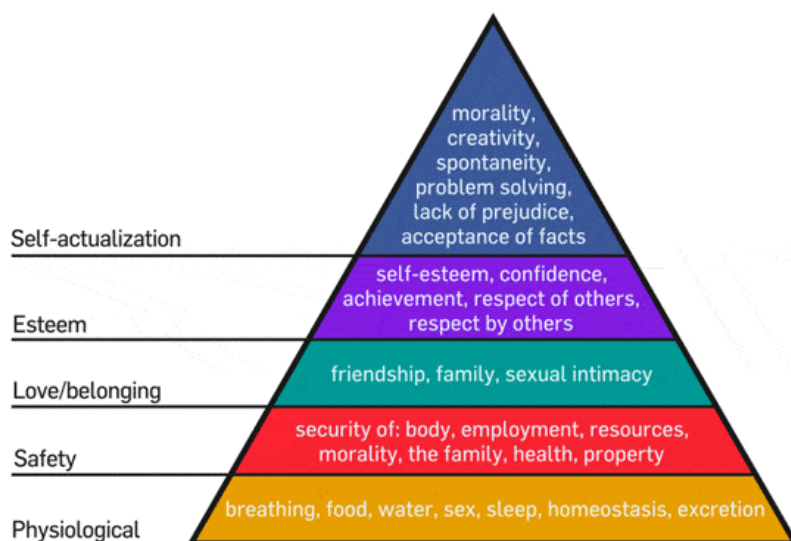
¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 153.

¹⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Translated and edited by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 64.

Maslow's Work: Implications for Today

We now cover the last part of theory for the group work—how the groups meet participants' needs. In 1943, Abraham Maslow identified a hierarchical list of



human needs that provided the basis of human motivations (diagram).¹⁹⁴ In his earlier work he wrote that the first four levels were essential for all human beings and these needs would have to be

met before moving to higher-level needs. He described Self-actualization as the highest level of needs which included people's desire to seek self-fulfilment or to live fully to their potential.¹⁹⁵ However, later in life, Maslow adjusted his needs pyramid to include another level: Self-transcendence, the need to seek "to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience".¹⁹⁶ His understanding of these needs came as he asked people "What moments give you the most satisfaction?" or "What moments make

¹⁹⁴ Image: online at <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/abraham-maslow/> accessed 26/1/17.

¹⁹⁵ Mark Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology by American Psychological Association* 10, No. 4 (2006): 303 (302–317). Available online at https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31015585/Koltko-Rivera_2006_%28RGP%29_Maslow_Self-Transcendence.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1539185433&Signature=A4HZX%2FVUrN%2BLwpj8S%2FWHt%2BAKYSg%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DRediscovering_the_later_version_of_Maslo.pdf (last accessed 10 Oct 2018).

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

your work and life worthwhile?"¹⁹⁷ He found that the answers to these questions were expressed in terms of "ultimate verities,"¹⁹⁸ fulfilment and satisfaction people attained through self-sacrifice, service, or through communion with the Transcendent.¹⁹⁹ In speaking of "ultimate verities," Maslow has moved into the domain of spirituality. Notice the similarities in language between Maslow and other writers speaking of spirituality. Sandra Schneiders has defined spirituality as a "conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."²⁰⁰ Michael Downey defined the study of Christian spirituality as a study of: "...the full spectrum of those realities that constitute the agenda of a Christian life in relation to God."²⁰¹ Charles Gerkin wrote in his *Introduction to Pastoral Care* that the "most basic caring functions that a community of faith can offer is a storied context of ultimate meaning within which life can be lived."²⁰²

Since Maslow's death other researchers have tested his theory regarding human needs and motivations and have found that through it is basically sound, human beings have a greater need for sense of belonging, self-actualisation, and transcendence than the pyramid form suggests. In research studies, people reported the top needs are more important than safety, esteem, and other needs of existence.²⁰³ Hospice care researchers are focusing on the higher-level needs

¹⁹⁷ Abraham Maslow, "The Farther Reaches of Human Nature," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 1, Issue 1 (1969): 3-4.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Mark Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology by American Psychological Association* 10, No. 4 (2006): 306 (302-317)

²⁰⁰ Sandra Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods, and Types," in Philip Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 1. See also her "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in Arthur Holder, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 16.

²⁰¹ Michael, Downey, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), viii.

²⁰² Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 103.

²⁰³ Eugene Mathes, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Guide for Living," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 21, No. 4 (Fall 1981): 69-72.

through expressions of “personal journey and growth in illness, peace, transcendence, and closure” to help patients die peacefully and pain-free.²⁰⁴ More recent research is finding that social researchers have undervalued the human need for connection with other human beings. There is an epidemic of loneliness in contemporary society that is having far-reaching implications. Studies are suggesting it is a serious public health issue that predicts early death.²⁰⁵ Connections with others help people weather the ups and downs of life.²⁰⁶ Connectedness also facilitates people’s sense of fulfilment.

Most of the time, human beings are unaware of their basic need for belonging. However, when we are uprooted from place or from our connections, we feel the disruption and there can be a profound sense of loss. In a rapidly changing, chaotic world, people are bombarded with change: in the way they work and live, in culture and demographics, in normal structures and relationships. The rapid changes make us more aware of our lack of control over life, old ways of finding connection and belonging may no longer exist, and ways of coping that worked in the past may be overwhelmed.

In 1994, Grace Davie published *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* which documented how people’s sense of belonging to a Church (the traditional place of gathering within a village or community) had declined. She analysed the evidence and effects of this change.²⁰⁷ She found that as a result of the

²⁰⁴ Robert Zalenski and Richard Raspa, “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: A Framework for Achieving Human Potential in Hospice,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 9, No. 5, (2006): 1124 (1120-1127).

²⁰⁵ A Google search quickly brought up scholarly articles related to the research. See for example, Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Hayawardhana, “Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization Among Older Adults,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105 (May 2015): 1013-1019, available online at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pms/articles/PMC4386514/. Last accessed 8/11/2018.

²⁰⁶ Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

²⁰⁷ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 1994). There is a different emphasis in her later work. I am using her original findings here

changes in society, people were now seeking and finding community where they could. The Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford, published the results of a study they did in July 2007 in which they identified “six key social identities in which people most frequently anchor their sense of belonging today.” These are: family, friendship, life style choices, nationality, professional identity, and team interests. The researchers found that “networks of friends have become increasingly important as a means of constructing a sense of belonging that in some cases rivals the importance of family.”²⁰⁸ But anxiety even influences how some seek out friends. Do we have so many Facebook friends in hopes of finding at least some real friends?

How Groups Can Support Connectedness and Growth

Groups for listening with others can provide a safe place where people can feel heard and within which caring is expressed. Because of the intimate nature of sharing your story within a context of listening, trust, and desire for good for each of the group members, the group methodology presented here has the potential to allow group participants to form lasting friendships and a sense of community and belonging. Research done in the area of social work has provided evidence that through group conversations, new ideas are expressed, multiple perspectives seen, meanings changed, and alternative stories generated.²⁰⁹ Unlike individual therapy where the therapist works with individuals or families to create narratives, group work lends itself to the development of a communal narrative which contributes to a sense of belonging within the group.²¹⁰ As people share their stories and find that others

in a different way than she has used them for later work.

²⁰⁸ The Social Issues Research Centre, “Belonging,” research commissioned for Automobile Association, Oxford, July 2007: 16.

²⁰⁹ Ruth Dean, “A Narrative Approach to Groups,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 26 no. 1 (1998): 23-37.

²¹⁰ J. J. Laube, “Therapist Role in Narrative Group Psychotherapy,” *Group* 22 no. 4 (1998): 227-243.

have experience similar struggles bonds are forged and people feel less alone in their suffering. More will be discussed regarding how this happens in the next chapter on methodology.

In addition to creating a place where people feel like they have a community, the group work context has the potential to strengthen positive outcomes that might happen for all participants. Narrative therapy teaches us the benefit of an “outside witness.” White emphasized the importance of an audience other than the leader for people’s telling and re-telling their stories. These outside witnesses help the person feel supported as they re-author their stories and can strengthen the alternative story by suggesting other ways it is true.²¹¹ Gadamer provides insight in the understanding that takes place when we are with another. In general conversation, as we listen we may be thinking about how we agree or disagree with the person speaking. In a group designed to seek self-awareness and deeper understanding, we can discover “the other person’s standpoint and horizon,” and come to understand them without necessarily having to agree with the person.²¹² The process of seeking to understand another allows us to develop an expanded horizon, or a greater breath of vision.²¹³ So, the benefit to the group members is not just in the telling of their stories but also in the seeking to understand the stories being told. The group work proposed in this thesis is about reflection and transformation. It is about growing the souls of those who participate—including the leader—in the sense of how sharing, listening, reflection, and connecting can bring new insights to all involved.

Theological Connections for the Work

One way to examine the theological underpinnings of this work in groups is to

²¹¹ Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (London: Sage, 2006), 16.

²¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 302-3.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 304.

ask, "Where is God in this?" I would answer that God is present not only in the practices of the group but also in the very narrative structure and the themes that come forth in group times.

God is a God of words. He speaks using words. Before the words of the Old Testament were written down, people preserved the material by word of mouth.²¹⁴ The stories were told over and over until they were recorded and even then people continued to tell the stories. Christians also passed along the stories of Jesus to others.²¹⁵ Jesus used words to reveal truths about who he is, who God is, and about the Kingdom. He often told stories to teach important information. John 1 tells us that Jesus, himself, is the Word. In using narrative structures within the group, we continue using means that God and Christians have used for centuries for conveying important ideas, truths, and healing words.

The group structure is also relational. To understand the importance of this in theological terms, I look to Jürgen Moltmann's discussions of the Trinity. Moltmann said that the unity of the trinity is not monadic or numerical but is communal, a shared "fellowship" of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This unity is best expressed by the Greek term, *perichoresis*.²¹⁶ The unity is a unity of love:

Because of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with each other, for each other, and in each other that they themselves constitute a unique, incomparable, and complete unity.²¹⁷

This unity of love means that Father, Son, and Spirit are engaged with one another completely, sharing at inward as well as action levels. This is the kind of love that

²¹⁴ "Oral tradition," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by W. R. F. Browning, *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1382> (accessed Jan 19, 2019).

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 149-50.

²¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Unity of the Triune God," *St. Vladimir's Theology Quarterly* 28 (1984), 166.

God seeks from his people as expressed in the prophets (particularly in Hosea)²¹⁸ and, I believe, the love that Jesus commanded his followers to have for one another (see John 13:34-35). Compassion and empathy functioning within a narrative structure such as I am proposing allows for relational fellowship to occur among the group members, providing space and a feeling of safety that facilitates open sharing and listening-with, rather than just listening-to someone else or listen-for information.

The space created allows people to be real and open about pain in their lives. This allows people to experience God's love and presence in their current situation. Through spiritual reflective practice in the group, they can also come to see how Christ's suffering gives meaning to their own suffering. If Christ was forsaken and suffered as we do and died as we do, then his resurrection opens the door to hope in a brighter future. God is not the untouchable, unreachable, uncaring Other but becomes known through "the practical direction of a new relationship to reality" in which the believer "meets God in the reality of an entirely unpredictable, historical life filled by infinite and to a great extent unfathomable vicissitudes."²¹⁹

Narrative therapy often helps people feel optimistic by showing them that they are not trapped in the old narratives that have ruled their lives. Bringing in Christian reflective practice creates space for Christian hope to germinate and grow. This hope is rooted in a faith that does not ignore the realities of life [guilt, suffering, death, and putrefying decay remain for every believer] for a heavenly utopia nor does it dream itself into a reality of a different kind.²²⁰ Instead, we can have hope

²¹⁸ See Abraham Heschel's discussion of the Hebrew word *daath* in *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 2001), 70-75.

²¹⁹Hans Joachim Iwand: "Theologia Crucis: The Theology of the Cross," paper prepared for the Beinroder Konvent in Herbst (1959), trans. Aaron Moldenhauer, (2004), http://www.doxology.us/downloads/33_cross-iwand.pdf.

²²⁰Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 19.

even in the midst of suffering and pain through God's faithfulness to his promises as demonstrated by, in, and through the Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.

Reflective Practice

As I have mentioned, theological reflection can be an important part of the group process-- one that facilitates hope for the future and helps people see recognise alternative narratives that open paths for new patterns of life and thought. But, how do we as group leaders bring theological themes into the group without telling people what to believe?

For my PhD thesis, I looked at a variety of practical theologians who incorporate theological themes into their pastoral counselling work.²²¹ Charles Gerkin's work stood out to me for several reasons. First, his work provides theory using theological reflection with narrative interventions. Second, he worked with clinical pastoral education chaplaincy training which gave him experience with pastoral care interventions and training within the context of group work. Third, Gerkin also, like White and Gadamer, recognised the importance of language. He speaks of "a pluralism of languages for interpretation of what human life in the world is about."²²² In writing about this, he said that people today, Christian and non-Christian, go through their days having to "move from one social context governed by one primary language of interpretation to another governed by another, and often, to yet a third or fourth."²²³ Another way of understanding what Gerkin means by the languages of interpretation that are linked to social contexts is to think of the how researchers understand culture—whether it is a nation's culture or a business

²²¹ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015. I also reviewed this research in chapter one of this thesis.

²²² Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 15. The reference here is not to foreign languages

²²³ *Ibid*, 15.

company's culture. Language influences and is influenced by culture. Gerkin's discussion of language seemed to be compatible with Gadamer's and White's work with language but also added another layer of depth to the discussion particularly as we examine how theological themes can be utilised in a group context within a culture that is unfamiliar with religious language.

As mentioned in chapter one, Gerkin thought that the psychotherapeutic model fails to adequately recognize that one of the most basic caring functions that a community of faith can offer is a storied context of ultimate meaning within which life can be lived.²²⁴ He taught others how to be empathetic guides who could facilitate an open dialogue, or conversation, that included people life stories, mutual questioning, and authentic connections between people and the greater Christian narrative of faith.²²⁵ His model not only helps people see how cultural and familial context have shaped their dominant life narratives, but also helps people see how God has been present in their lives even when they were unaware of God's presence. Gerkin called this awareness of God's presence "incarnational life-style."²²⁶ A significant Christian understanding of the word "incarnation" is found in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." It is at the centre of Christian belief that God, the Son, took on human flesh and entered into the world. Jesus came for us, but he was also (and is by the Spirit) with us.

To go deeper with this idea of incarnational life-style, I looked at Samuel Wells' *Incarnational Ministry*. Wells says that Jesus spent 90% of his time "being with" rather than "working for" or "working with".²²⁷ He discusses eight dimensions of what

²²⁴ Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 103.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

²²⁶ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 321.

²²⁷ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2017), 11.

being with actually involves which include: presence; focused attention; mystery (understanding that a lot of things just can't be fixed); delight which opens us to surprise, humour, and playfulness; participation; partnership; enjoyment; and glory.²²⁸ This is how Jesus was with others and this is how the persons of the Trinity are with each other.²²⁹ Barbara Myerhoff embodied these principles in her work with Jews in a retirement community. They can't be forced; yet, they can be encouraged through a non-directive way of leading. In chapter one, I discussed the differences between listening-to, listening-for, and listening-with. Listening-with happens when both parties work together with a "sympathetic understanding"²³⁰ to gain understanding. Gadamer's listening-with provides the necessary space for understanding to occur since it is non-judgmental, non-blaming, and non-deterministic. In such openness, bonding can occur. The group leader can create an environment which could allow for this kind of presence and bonding to occur. Gerkin's descriptions of pastoral care sessions demonstrate how he facilitated the creation of this space and in the process, helped people understand not only that God was with them, but also **how** God was with them. He also modelled this incarnational, "being with" life style in his ministry.

In the next chapter, I will spend more time discussing the importance of questions and how we use them to create the space for participants to share openly. Gerkin used questions as the fundamental way to help people increase their awareness that life experiences "are permeated and given redemptive coherence and direction by the activity of God."²³¹ Such questions:

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 11-13.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, 12

²³¹ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 71. See also Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 320.

- What are your sources of hope and comfort?
- What helps you cope?
- What spiritual resources have helped you in this time?
- Where have you experienced God's love and grace in the past?
- What spiritual practices help you be aware of God's presence?

In practice, these types of questions encouraged people to perceive, be open to, reflect upon, and cultivate “the awareness of the presence and function of grace”²³² operating within their day to day lives. This Judeo-Christian incarnational narrative that God is with us even when we feel he is absent provides people with a theological theme that enables them to endure suffering and find meaning and purpose in difficult times of loss and crisis. More will be said about questions in the next chapter.

What makes Gerkin's schema of narrative theological pastoral care different from traditional narrative therapeutic interactions, is how he helped people connect to and understand what they believed. In his writings, he described how he would listen for their inner resources of resilience—gifts and strengths, a feeling of call, memories of past positive experiences with God, and connection to God through worship and prayer. Gerkin calls this the fusion of two narrative structures—“that of human activity about which we seek greater clarity and that of the Christian story”—a process of “mutually critical correlations.”²³³ His work demonstrates that practical

²³² Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 322. See concept of God's work in the world rather than just in the Church is commonly called *mission Dei*. See D. Bosch's discussion of *mission Dei*, God's mission in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991). Andrew Todd has a nice description of how this concept influenced military chaplaincy in Andrew Todd, “Moral Engagements: Morality, Mission, and Military Chaplaincy,” in Andrew Todd, ed., *Military Chaplaincy in Contention: Chaplains, Churches, and the Morality of Conflict*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 165.

²³³ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 65-67.

theology seems to work best when it “finds its primary coherence in a contextual approach to the theological text.”²³⁴ He wrote that he still had work to do “in probing the biblical images and metaphorical resources that may offer those of us in the West a way through the cultural malaise with which we are afflicted.”²³⁵ Though he did not get to finish this work, his suggestions challenge pastoral care providers to look for the image and themes that will speak to people living in an age of rapid change.

How What We Believe Influences Life

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the Trinity as a theological underpinning for the group work. The social analogy of Trinitarian unity expressed by the Greek term, *perichoresis*²³⁶ has profound implications for Christian support care and praxis particularly as it relates to incarnational understanding and being with another. According to the Institutes of Health in the United States, loneliness and social isolation are public health issues.²³⁷ When doing spiritual assessments in hospital environments, chaplains commonly check on a person’s connectedness to others.²³⁸ Research has showing that people do better, heal faster, and are happier when they are in close, loving relationships, when they have community.²³⁹ The idea that we are

²³⁴ Paul Ballard, “The Use of Scripture,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 164.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

²³⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 149-50.

²³⁷ Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Jayawardhana, “Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: The Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization Among Older Adults,” *American Journal of Public Health*. 105 Issue 5 (May 2015): 1013–1019, available online at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4386514/>, last accessed 19 January 2019.

²³⁸ See: Gowri Anandarajah and Ellen Hight. “Spirituality and Medical Practice: Using the HOPE Questions as a Practical Tool for Spiritual Assessment.” *American Family Practice* 63 (2001): 81-88; George Fitchett, “Spiritual Assessment in Pastoral Care: A Guide to Selected Resources.” *Journal of Pastoral Care*. Monograph no. 4. Decatur: GA: Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, Inc., 1993; Mark LaRocca-Pitts, “In FACT, Chaplains Have a Spiritual Assessment Tool.” *Australian Journal of Pastoral Care and Health* 3, no. 2 (December 2009): 8-15; and Larry Vandecreek, “Spiritual Assessment: Six Questions and An Annotated Bibliography of Published Interview and Questionnaire Formats.” *Chaplaincy Today* 21, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2005): 11-22.

²³⁹ Goetz Ottmann, John Dickson, and Paula Wright, “Social Connectedness and Health: A

created in the image of God takes on another level of meaning when we consider the Trinity as a community, united in eternal love, being with one another. It has the potential to change how we relate to ourselves and others in healthy, life giving ways. It is also a theological idea that resonates with people who seek connections with others. As in the Eucharist, where we though many, are one as we share the bread, people find that their lives seem more alive when they find other people with whom to share their stories and faith. "Human existence is social existence."²⁴⁰ Life requires connectedness—to God and to others. This loving, compassionate, relational connectedness works against the de-humanizing effects of contemporary society where people feel they have lost traditional ways of belonging.

Moltmann's view of the community of the divine Persons of the triune God indwelling each other (*perichoresis*) also speaks of **God's** love and desire for intimacy. This concept is helpful in grief support and crisis because it is comforting for people to think of God's desire for community and intimacy with his people as part of his character. The message of the Trinity is that God is with his people and calls them to share in the Trinity's loving communion, reminding them of his empathy and bringing comfort when they feel alone and abandoned. The Trinity also becomes a model of human interrelatedness, love with space or distinctiveness,²⁴¹ to remind people that they with each other and God are part of God's work of connection; entering into God's work becomes participation with God and others through love. Narrative techniques coupled with theological reflection methodology can help

Literature Review," Cornell University ILR School, Gladnet Collection (21 July 2006), <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/gladnetcollect/471>, [accessed 21 February 2014]. An impressive and comprehensive literature of research currently available on the topic of social connectedness and its impact of health.

²⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 62.

²⁴¹ Neil Pembroke, *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 2.

people find the insights they need to create and cultivate connectedness with others and understand at a deeper level God's desire for community and His love for them. From this modality, people learn that, "We live out the stories of our lives in our interactions with others and those interactions substantiate our narratives and further shape our lives."²⁴²

Issues and Learning in Context

The group work of this thesis focuses on encouraging people to share their stories for the purpose of strengthening their faith and sense of hope. I had originally planned to do groups in two of my villages, but that did not work out as planned. I planned the groups as a straight forward grief and loss group and planned to meet with people in the village who had experienced recent losses. No one came. One family told me they "couldn't come" at the last minute. Their grief was still too raw. In reflecting on why the group didn't work, I realized that given the village context where everyone knows everyone and, yet, doesn't want to become emotional in front of their neighbours, that this approach was too direct. People want connection, but it is as though they have forgotten how to have it and they are afraid of being vulnerable in front of others. I also remembered that this direct approach hadn't worked well in the hospital either where people were afraid of showing emotion in front of their co-workers. The grief and loss groups that worked best there were ones that weren't directly about grief and loss. These groups took the form of a book discussion group. People's stories came out as the weeks passed, but by then, people felt safer about showing emotion in front of others. As a grieving gentleman here told me, "If you are grieving, it comes out no matter what you are doing. You can be watching a movie

²⁴² William Madsen, "Collaborative Helping: A Practice Framework for Family-Centered Services," *Family Process* 48, No. 1 (2009), 113.

that seems to have nothing to do with grief and it comes out.”

Given the analysis of what didn't work, I did two groups of clergy members who had experienced personal losses. We met on at my vicarage. One of the groups used pictures of monsters to objectify grief in the discussion and the other used suitcases and the metaphor of taking a journey through life. I will discuss how the groups functioned in chapter four.

People grieve and cope differently. Research about commonly held ideas about grief is showing that many of them are myths and research does not support ideas that have been accepted as truths about how people grieve.²⁴³ Nevertheless, people who have experienced loss have stories of loss and they benefit from sharing these with others so that they can remember and honour what they had, find out they are normal in their expressions of loss, and find ways of moving forward. More will be discussed about this in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Barbara Myerhoff, a gifted Anthropologist who contributed much to the methodology and epistemology of the field, said: “A kind of fundamental healing takes place when a story is told and heard.”²⁴⁴ She called this healing process, “growing a soul.”²⁴⁵ When I led groups at the Cancer Centre, I was often surprised by how profoundly the group experience proved for members, including myself. Members reported how an unexpected question brought new sight, new interpretations, and new life. In daily life, it may seem that insight often happens “by

²⁴³ Camille Wortman and Kathrin Boerner, “Beyond the Myths of Coping with Loss: Prevailing Assumptions Versus Scientific Evidence,” *The Oxford Handbook of Health Psychology*, Howard Friedman, ed. (London: Oxford University, 2015), available online at www.oxfordhandbooks.com, accessed 26 February 2017.

²⁴⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*, edited by Marc Kaminsky and Mark Weiss (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 19.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

accident.” However, this thesis proposes utilising narrative techniques and a questioning methodology designed intentionally to support and foster new insights. Since the group’s work involves the sharing and hearing of people’s stories, how the group leader hears is particularly important for knowing what questions to ask and for teaching others in the group how to understand what is being said. The question of “How do we hear and understand?” brings us to an applied hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. This thesis uses the tools of narrative therapy in conversation with the understanding of how they work because of the writing and deep understandings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who said: “Hermeneutics is above all a practice, the art of understanding. . . In it what one has to exercise above all is the ear, the sensitivity for perceiving prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in concepts.”²⁴⁶ In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodology for creating groups of understanding.

Summary of Narrative Themes from White and Gadamer

To summarise the parallel concepts in Gadamer and White that I discussed in this chapter, I have included the following table. I will refer to this in later chapters.

Concept	How represented in Gadamer	How represented in White
Temporality/Tradition	There is continuity with the past. The time between when the primary event took place and the present time is filled with that helps people re-interpret the original events meaning. Understanding comes over time as people continue to reflect on the original event as new information (a new viewpoint) comes.	People’s stories and the interpretations they give to life experiences happen over time. As new information comes to them, they change their interpretations.
Openness	Is a way of listening that allows the reader (listener, or experiencer) to recognise what the other (person, text, or historical experience) has to say to the reader. It is necessary for understanding to take place, but understanding does not mean becoming the message but allows for	Object of meeting is listening with (non-interventive conversation). The listener “adopts a hermeneutic stance of ‘not knowing’, that is, always ‘being informed’” by the one speaking. “This allows space for conversation and change to

²⁴⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” in Lewis E. Hahn, ed. *The Philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997) 17; cf. 3-63.

	the reader or listening both to respect the message without obeying it (<i>Truth and Method</i> , 255). Remaining open allows for “a fluid multiplicity of possibilities” in interpretation (<i>Truth and Method</i> , 171) .	emerge in the form of new, ‘not yet told’ stories and narratives.” ²⁴⁷
Understanding and Meaning in Language	People use language to relate to the world and it shapes their reality.	Meaning is derived through the structuring of language into stories
Limitations to Language	The people speaking may not use the same language or have the same understanding of the words used. Self-awareness helps communication through awareness of biases and prejudices.	Existing power structures can influence or determine language constructions that contribute to interpretations that limit people in finding newer, more freeing and healthier interpretations. ²⁴⁸ Self-awareness in the listener is crucial for understanding to occur.
Hermeneutic Cycle	Understanding is a dynamic process. People are influenced not only by how they interpret an event in the past but also the whole tradition that has surrounded them up until this present moment. This means that new insights and understandings can come to expand their current horizon and broaden their future vision. Questioning is important and leads to constant revisions in expectations thus bringing new insights.	Therapeutic conversations aim to explore multiple constructions of reality rather than tracking down the facts which constitute a single truth. These explorations lead people to non-dominant narratives that can enrich their lives.
Horizons	Our vantage point, the place where we are spiritually, emotionally, historically, and personally which influences the interpretation and understanding we create of events. It can limit a person’s ability to see and understand. However, as people listen with others in a conversation where a variety of perspectives may be present and shared respectfully, it is common for people to be inspired by what someone else has said and for their perspective, horizon, to expand.	When people allow themselves to tell alternative stories about historic events or they see that others have a different perspective or interpretation of an event, it allows them to change their interpretation and understanding of how the event influenced their lives. This process often leads people to feel that they have a new sense of vision and openness in their life.
Historically Effected Consciousness	People’s interpretation and understanding of an event is embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them. Understanding comes as we are aware of the situation, but since we are unable to have an objective knowledge of how we are influenced we can never completely know ourselves. (<i>Truth and Method</i> , 301)	The meaning and understanding of the event originally occurs in a historical context. However, over time, the problem assumes a life of its own and the therapist works with the problem as it is now by helping the client reinterpret the past events from a new perspective. Recreating or reliving the original event is not necessary for healing to occur.
Silence as a part of listening with	When we tarry before a piece of art, there is an absence of our awareness	Listening with allows for long silences giving people ample time

²⁴⁷ Glen Lerner, “The Real as Illusion: Deconstructing Power in Family Therapy,” *The Journal of Family Therapy* 17 (1995): 192-3.

²⁴⁸ See Glen Lerner, “The Real as Illusion: Deconstructing Power in Family Therapy,” *The Journal of Family Therapy* 17 (1995): 191-217.

	of time passing. This temporal quality “is a function of the fullness: the intensity of engrossment and attention.” ²⁴⁹ (More will be said on this in chapter 3.)	to think of their response.
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²⁴⁹ Sheila Ross, “Event Hermeneutics and Narrative: Tarrying in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer,” PhD Thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada 2003, vii.

Chapter Three

Methodology: Using Questions and Silence

Introduction

In chapter one, I provided a justification for the work done in this thesis and talked about my past work and research experience. In chapter two, I spoke about the theory and theology behind the work. For the theory of how this group will function, this thesis primarily uses the work of White on the power of story for our lives and techniques of narrative therapy and Gadamer for how we listen, interpret, and understand what happens. A chart at the end of chapter two compares the two for easy reference. I have also drawn on Gerkin's work for incorporating spiritual reflection into the group discussions. All of this theory is brought together in a unique way for group work and for understanding a different way of "being with" and "listening with" that can enrich and transform people's lives. In this chapter, I will focus on the "how" the ideas and theories could be used.

Considerations for Working with Groups

In working with the groups, several considerations or questions are relevant: What language will the group leader use? How will the group facilitator support and encourage people in the telling of their stories? How does spiritual reflection occur the group setting? And, what method will be used to facilitate the reflection process? In doing group work, I have found that this analysis through questioning is an ongoing process: before the group occurs, during it, and afterwards. The leader will go into a group with an understanding of what needs to be asked to get discussion started. However, each group of people and each meeting is different. The group leader must be able to determine what questions need to be asked to encourage thoughtful reflection without leading the discussion. It is possible for the whole

direction of the group discussion to change and the leader needs to be able to read the flow of the conversation like a kayaker reads the rapids—knowing when to let conversation flow, when to ask a question that will adjust the direction of the conversation, and when to and what to ask to get the conversation unstuck when it lands on a rock. Not just any question will facilitate the relational connections and insightful moments. Consideration must be given to what kind of questions will be asked and how will they be used.

Methodology for Using Questions

In narrative therapy, the therapist, asks questions that draw out information about what happened, how it happened, and what the event might mean. From this, material comes for re-authoring the story. The therapist and clients then collaborate in using narrative techniques of storytelling to fill in the gaps in present experience. In the process, the client re-examines his/her core ideas and a creative sense of possibilities helps the client feel like he/she has more control over where his/her life is headed.²⁵⁰

The kind of questions asked is an important part of the process. When I began working with groups using narrative techniques in 2012, I was unable to find any mention of someone doing something similar. Since then, the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia, has been training people in community therapy using narrative techniques. It is still in its infancy but pioneers are beginning to use the techniques for community counselling in Asia and Africa with much success.²⁵¹ The Dulwich

²⁵⁰ Dominick Hankel, "Christian Worldview and the Use of Narrative Therapy," *The Journal of Christians Healing* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2016): 8.

²⁵¹ One group worked with gender violence in Singapore, <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/recipes-for-life-a-collective-narrative-methodology-in-responding-to-gender-violence-by-meizi-tan/> and another dealt with the effects of trauma and displacement on a family in the Congo, for information about this work see <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/product/our-story-of-suffering-and-surviving-intergenerational-double-story-development-with-people-from-refugee-backgrounds-emma-preece-boyd/>. Both websites last accessed on 21 January 2019.

Centre is training people working in therapeutic and clinical settings. I also found another example of someone using narrative techniques after training at the Dulwich Centre. Professor Suzanne Coyle, at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, IN, USA, is using narrative techniques with groups to help theological students discern their call to ministry.²⁵² I have looked at how these groups use questions even though the context I propose is different. I will be discussing this shortly. I have also studied focus group theory and practice since they have a long- and well-established history of use. In addition, social scientists using focus groups often study how communication occurs within these groups in order to make the groups more effective. This understanding is important for work with any group.

How Communication Occurs

Day-to-day communication seems to be relatively free flowing and flexible; yet, in reality, it has a “set of procedures that are both closely and regularly organized.”²⁵³ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter who work with and teach others how to work with focus groups have analysed many transcripts of conversations in these groups to understand the communication process. They have found that the structure of a conversation reveals much about motive, understanding, opinion, etc.

²⁵² Suzanne Coyle, “Deepening the Call to Ministry” *Journal of Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 35 (2015), available online at journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/download/383/375. Coyle uses narrative techniques to help people discern and understand their call to ministry. She uses these techniques in Spiritual Formation Cells. I have found two other examples of collective narrative work documented, but it does seem to be a developing area as others are seeing the possibility of using narrative techniques. One group worked with gender violence in Singapore, <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/recipes-for-life-a-collective-narrative-methodology-in-responding-to-gender-violence-by-meizi-tan/> and the other dealt with the effects of trauma and displacement on a family in the Congo, for information about this work see <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/product/our-story-of-suffering-and-surviving-intergenerational-double-story-development-with-people-from-refugee-backgrounds-emma-preece-boyd/>. Both websites last accessed on 21 January 2019.

²⁵³ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), 9. For more on this see the field of Conversation Analysis. For a particularly good brief history and discussion of the field, see John Heritage, “Conversation Analysis as Social Theory,” in *New Blackwell Companion to Society Theory*, edited by Bryan Turner (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 300-320.

even if these responses are not directly articulated in the conversation.²⁵⁴

Expectations about a response, even subtly conveyed, can influence the response given. Unspoken rules that people learn from childhood govern communication responses. When one of these rules is not followed, that in and of itself can convey information. For instance, when a question is asked, there is a strong expectation for an answer to be given. If the answer is not forthcoming, it could be because the person asked needs some time to “sort out” what the question is asking before a response is given, or the silence could be indicative that there is something that the person does not want to reveal.²⁵⁵ For focus groups that are a “task-oriented activity” where “both moderators and participants orient to the task of producing opinions,”²⁵⁶ (a focus group for marketing purposes, for instance) Puchta and Potter have found that understanding the structure of conversation “can be exploited by moderators to generate specific kinds of interactions.”²⁵⁷ And, in a focus group context this may be appropriate because the leader and participants understand the purpose of the group. However, a narrative group is not task- or outcome-oriented in the way that a marketing focus group is; therefore, this manner of asking questions to generate a specific outcome would not be appropriate. It is therefore important for any group leader to understand how the communication in the group is working.

Focus groups often work effectively because leaders generally have information about how to lead a group. One thing that focus group leaders do well is introducing the work of the group to the participants and creating a feeling of

²⁵⁴ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), 13.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Focus groups are particularly designed to gather data for either market or other research purposes (Puchta and Potter, 6-8) The group is carefully selected and often paid for their time. See Michael Bloor, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, and Kate Robson, *Focus Groups in Social Research* London: Sage 2002, 5-8, 20.

²⁵⁷ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), 13.

informality and welcome that gives people the space to share openly. Some leaders of focus groups will come with pre-planned questions to lead the group conversation in directions that will generate “opinions, views, attitudes and beliefs, and fewer stories or personal narratives.” Puchta and Potter prefer a more “non-formal” process with less structured planning and guidelines²⁵⁸ although the task of a focus group will still be to accomplish a particular informational goal which may require the moderator’s intervention if the group discussions wander off task in order for the desired outcome to be achieved.²⁵⁹ They suggest intentionally using language and speech methods to display informality through pauses and hesitations, word choice, intonation, and the use of the word “oh” as a “mark of receipt of knowledge.”²⁶⁰ Even though narrative and focus groups differ in nature, the way focus groups welcome participants and set the tone of the group is helpful information for the leader of a narrative group. Puchta and Potter present ideas that are transferable. I will be using some of the ideas about the group introduction and creation of a non-formal process later in this chapter.

Though the communication understandings and tips on setting up the context for the group are important, a focus group differs markedly from a narrative group and cannot be operated in the same way as a focus group. Unlike focus groups, a narrative group works in and through the personal narratives of the participants; whereas, in traditional focus groups, the leader is concerned with collecting attitudes and beliefs about something and personal stories are discouraged. Another difference involves how participants are chosen for the group. In focus groups the composition of the group is important and deciding who to invite is an important part

²⁵⁸ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), 19.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 47, for instance.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 36-8, “Oh” 43.

of the planning process.²⁶¹ The focus group leader also plans the questions to ask that will enable him or her to gain the information needed. In a narrative group, participation is open to anyone who wants to come and specific narrative questions cannot be pre-planned as questions will only become clear as the narratives emerge in the group time. In addition, the nature of facilitation is different for a narrative group. Narrative practices respect people as the experts of their own lives. This view means that the facilitator does not ask questions with the intent of shaping the participants response but instead uses “a scaffolding of questions, that makes it possible for people to become more aware of their own skills and knowledges”²⁶² and use these to re-interpret their experiences. Michael White called the style of the facilitator/therapist “decentred and influential.” Decentred meant that the therapist made the client’s personal story, knowledges and skills “priority.” The client has “primary authorship status, and the knowledges and skills that have been generated in the history of their lives are the principal considerations.” Influential does not mean that the therapist imposes an agenda or even direction on the session, but instead builds a:

kind of scaffold, through questions and reflections, that makes it possible for people to:

- a) more richly describe the alternative stories of their lives,
- b) step into and explore some of the neglected territories of their lives, and to
- c) become more significantly acquainted with the knowledges and skills of their lives that are relevant to addressing the concerns, predicaments and problems that are at hand.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Michael Bloor, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, and Kate Robson, *Focus Groups in Social Research* London: Sage 2002, 20.

²⁶² Dulwich Centre, “Collaboration and Accountability” available online at: <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/lessons/collaboration-accountability/> Last accessed 28 September 2017.

²⁶³ Dulwich Centre, “Collaboration and Accountability” available online at: <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/lessons/collaboration-accountability/> Last accessed 28 September 2017. See also Michael White’s Workshop Notes, available online at <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/michael-white-workshop-notes.pdf> Last accessed 28 September 2017.

This collaborative style in a group setting contributes to a more egalitarian power relationship than found in focus groups. Members stories are woven together and insight gained through listening to others' stories and connecting them to your own.

Given the narrative criteria set down by Michael White, I still needed a model for the questions that would draw out the stories without directing the outcomes. I looked back at my past experiences with groups and at my coaching certification materials. For the kind of questions to ask, I rediscovered the work of David Grove. For these groups, I suggest the using the questioning technique first presented in his "Clean Language."²⁶⁴ It is widely used in coaching situations but has not been used in a narrative group context. When I was going through my certification process, I found this method of questioning to work very well not only in coaching sessions, but also in my work leading support groups at the Cancer Centre. The next several sections will discuss the nature of questions in used in my group narrative work.

Clean Language

David Grove discovered, in the early 1980s, after studying transcripts of therapists like Virginia Satir and Carl Rogers, that therapists often asked questions that shifted their client's frames of reference. He realised they were "introducing their own model of the world by subtly rewording what the client was saying."²⁶⁵ He developed a different way of questioning that focused instead on using the clients' language, metaphors, and stories rather than the practitioners' and, thereby, involved the clients more in their own healing process which resulted in lasting

²⁶⁴ See David Grove and B. I. Panzer, *Resolving Traumatic Memories: Metaphors and Symbols in Psychotherapy*, (New York: Irvington, 1989) and articles available at <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/authors/7/Grove%2C-David>. I learned Grove's technique as part of a coaching certification program that I completed in August 2015 and began using the techniques in my group and individual coaching and spiritual direction work with great success.

²⁶⁵ Penny Thompkins and James Lawley, "Less is More...The Art of Clean Language," *Rapport* 35 (February 1997), 33. Available online at <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/CleanLanguage.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017.

changes in behaviour. Based on analysis of his work, he then identified a number of very simple questions with a particular syntax and a unique delivery method that he called Clean Language.²⁶⁶ His technique is not one we commonly use in conversation. The technique must be learned and practiced. Grove identified a series of questions that he asked 80 percent of the time and coupled this with repeating or reflecting back clients' exact words. The method has been found particularly effective in breaking down blocks that have kept clients stuck in a particular pattern of thought by helping them hear their own thoughts and internal reactions and, thereby, gain new insight.²⁶⁷ Another reason, other than its compatibility with narrative therapy, to use the technique for this work is that Clean Language is "led by metaphors created entirely by the clients."²⁶⁸ This use of metaphorical language will assist with the reflective part of the group that helps people connect their story to the larger narrative of faith. More will be discussed about use of metaphor later in the chapter.

Clean Language questions are delivered more slowly than questions in normal conversation and in a more rhythmic cadence which causes the client to think more deeply about the response. Questions often begin with "And" or "So" delivered in a gentle, quiet tone which softens the approach and is more informal. Clients are less apt to become defensive or feel the questions are invasive. Clean questions are described as closed questions, such as the example: "And is there anything else about that?"²⁶⁹ This question could be answered with a yes or no, but may also

²⁶⁶ Penny Thompkins and James Lawley, "Less is More...The Art of Clean Language," *Rapport* 35 (February 1997), 33. Available online at <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/CleanLanguage.html>. Accessed 1 June 2017. See also Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 188.

²⁶⁷ Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 190.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 188.

²⁶⁹ Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 190.

provide an opening for people to think more about meaning and respond at a deeper level. Phrasing the question as “What else is there?” is not a Clean Language question because it implies that there must be something else. The Clean Language technique also uses the clients’ own words in a process of reflecting back what people have said so that they can hear what they’ve said and reflect more deeply on it. The therapist will listen for words that seem to be significant emotionally or which are repeated and use these in the reflecting back. The reflection process normally follows a pattern where if the client is speaking about X, the leader will ask: “And what kind of X is that X?” Tone is very important and the therapist will also ask questions with a sense of curiosity and engagement as if both the therapist and client are about to discover something they hadn’t seen or noticed before.

Example:²⁷⁰

Client: It is a forest. A thick, dark forest. [The forest is X and the therapist notices how X is described.]

Therapist: And what kind of forest is a forest that is thick and dark? [The question encourages the client to think more deeply about the descriptors.]

Client: It’s very shady, with sun dappling through the trees. There’s a sound of birdsong and it’s very peaceful. There’s running water, a river. Quite a wide river. [The client has adjusted the description.]

Therapist: And is there anything else about a river that runs through a forest which is thick, dark, and peaceful with birdsong? [The therapist responds to the adjustment while bringing back in the original descriptors.]

The focus of this practice is information-centred.²⁷¹ The principles of Clean Language mean that the therapist only asks certain questions if the client introduces the idea (unless permission is asked).

The following shows the basic question format derived from David Grove’s

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 191.

²⁷¹ David Grove, “The Philosophy and Principles of Clean Language,” edited by James Lawley from a talk at a Clean Language Research Day, 13 November 1998, London. Available online at <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/38/1/Philosophy-and-Principles-of-Clean-Language/Page1.html>, last accessed 1 June 2017.

work and currently used by others:²⁷²

In these questions, X and Y represent the person's words (or non-verbals)

Developing Questions

"(And) what kind of X (is that X)?"

"(And) is there anything else about X?"

"(And) where is X?"

"If you were to compare X to something, what is X like?" (this gets you to a metaphor that you can then explore)

"(And) is there a relationship between X and Y?"

"(And) when X, what happens to Y?"

Sequence and Source Questions

"(And) then what happens? or (And) what happens next?"

"(And) what happens just before X?"

"(And) where could X come from?"

Intention Questions

"(And) what would X like to have happen?"

"(And) what needs to happen for X?"

"(And) can X (happen)?"

The first two questions: "What kind of X (is that X)?" and "Is there anything else about X?" are the most commonly used. For example, someone may say "I need to be more assertive" and you respond "What kind of assertive is more assertive? They may say "less of a doormat" and you say "What kind of doormat? Is there anything else about less of a doormat?" As a general guide, these two questions account for around 50% of the questions asked in a typical Clean Language session.

Other Considerations for Questions

There are a few final considerations regarding for the group leader when choosing questions to ask. Leading questions (when a question contains the answer that the question wants to get in the question itself—or leads the client to give a certain answer²⁷³) should be avoided as well as questions that may feel judgemental to the person being asked the question. Often judgemental questions begin with "why" and cause people to feel like they need to justify themselves which blocks open communication. This is not to say that all "why" questions should be avoided. With the right intention and with caring and respect, a practitioner can ask "why"

²⁷² Hugh Russell, professional trainer and coach, Russell Associates, 12 Princes Gardens, Larne, BT40 1RQ, Northern Ireland, e-russell.com. List of questions available online at e-russell.com/images/The_basic_clean_language_questions1.pdf, last accessed 1 June 2017.

²⁷³ Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 140.

questions that open the conversation by seeking more information that may be pertinent to the discussion without putting people on the defensive. It is important for the leader to keep the goal of the communication in mind and to be intentional about using questions that help people explore their thoughts and feelings and gain new insights in the process.²⁷⁴ James Wright, a professional coach and leader in coaching education, provides a helpful question to help the leader guide his/her questioning: “Do I want to ask this question because I am interested in the answer or because it is useful to the coachee?”²⁷⁵ Though the context here is a coaching interaction, I think the question is a good one for a person leading a narrative group to also ask as he or she is thinking of the next question to ask the group. In the groups I propose, I would ask myself, “Am I asking this question because of my own curiosity or because it will help someone gain insight and have a greater horizon in his or her spiritual life?”

Tarrying, Listening-with, and Silence

At the end of chapter two, I included a chart of similarities and differences in the work of Gadamer and White. The last theme compared is silence as a part of listening-with. In considering how to question, it is important to also think about the importance of silence in the group times.

In Gadamer’s discussions of art, he talks about the temporal dimension of a work as a “work of being.”²⁷⁶ In this he draws on two Heideggerian concepts: tarrying (*Verweilen*) and the “while” (*die Weile*).²⁷⁷ As we tarry with a work of art and are immersed in it, we lose track of time and another “more original experience of

²⁷⁴ Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 139-40.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 142.

²⁷⁶ Daniel Tate, “In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art,” *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012): 93, 92–113

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 93, 92–113

time”²⁷⁸ occurs. This experience of time is not empty, but full. The work of art has for us an “immediate presentness”, “a more authentic experience of ‘fulfilled’ time”²⁷⁹ than our experience of ordinary time. As we listen-with someone who is telling his or her story—tarrying—we also enter into the immediate presentness with him or her. I believe that God also is present in that tarrying place. It becomes – metaphorically speaking—holy ground. This is what makes listening-with so powerful for all involved in the listening-with narrative experience. This also happens in Spiritual Direction where it is called “holy listening,” we listen-with one another and listen together for the voice of God in the stories told.²⁸⁰ In the silence and tarrying we break with ordinary time creates space to become aware of the presence of God.²⁸¹

So, the kind of questions we ask is important but so is the kind of listening. Silence is as important as speaking. Through silence we can convey empathy, facilitate reflection or expressions of feelings, or even challenge without words. Silence also gives everyone time to reflect and respond. It would be easy for the leader to be so focused on the next question that he/she might hurry on to it without either listening to what has been said or allowing silence for people to think about the question just asked. We need to learn to tarry and allow the immediate presentness of the moment and God to move in and through the conversations we have. Silence is as valuable a tool as the kinds of questions asked. It gives people time “to process their thoughts and come to new awareness and understanding.”²⁸² The moderator of a focus groups pre-plans questions. In a narrative group, some of the silence time is

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 93, 92–113

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 94.

²⁸⁰ See Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1992), 144-146.

²⁸¹ Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton, eds. *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory* (New York: Morehouse, 2010), 61.

²⁸² Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to the Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 142.

so that questions can be formed *as the discussion is happening*. As discussed in chapter one, when working with a narrative group, no one, including the leader knows in advance what exactly will come out of the conversation. This holding of a space with respect for each person's story allows for the creative thought to occur and insight to emerge.²⁸³

Allowing quiet for the person to have time to think is also important because the facilitator is asking participants “non-preferred”²⁸⁴ questions. People naturally respond better to closed-ended questions, such as questions that require a yes or no response or contain multiple choices in a list format from which to pick. Open-ended questions require a higher level of motivation and cognitive effort and if people feel rushed, they will seek the easier response which may have a limited effect on their processing of the question and connecting it to their personal story.²⁸⁵ Non-preferred questions, particularly those asking about a personal narrative also require people to share in ways that may make them feel vulnerable. Allowing people time to respond can demonstrate a form of caring—offering an unspoken meaning of “we are making time for you to think about this because we really do want to hear what you have to say.”

Considerations in Use of Language within a Cultural Context

Narrative therapists begin with the basic assumption that language is a “building block of reality.”²⁸⁶ In chapter two, I mentioned how both Gadamer and White wrote about the importance of language in the understanding process.

²⁸³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 385.

²⁸⁴ Jolene Smyth, Kristen Olsen, and Alian Kasabian, “The Effect of Answering in a Preferred Versus a Non-Preferred Survey Mode of Measurement,” *Survey Research Methods* 8, No. 3 (2014): 137-152.

²⁸⁵ Jolene Smyth, Kristen Olsen, and Alian Kasabian, “The Effect of Answering in a Preferred Versus a Non-Preferred Survey Mode of Measurement,” *Survey Research Methods* 8, No. 3 (2014): 138, 145-146.

²⁸⁶ Dominick Hankel, “Christian Worldview and the Use of Narrative Therapy,” *The Journal of Christians Healing* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2016): 5.

According to White, people use story as a fundamental building block for their ordering and interpreting experiences. The stories they create and the language they use shape their understanding of experience and the stories that grow out of this understanding shape their sense of who they are and become road maps for their lives.²⁸⁷ Gadamer wrote about the importance of historical context in interpretation of a text²⁸⁸ saying that true understanding comes not in restoring the past context completely but in how the text taken *in context* speaks to and mediates in contemporary life.²⁸⁹ Human beings use language to construct interpretation and meaning for life experiences; yet, language itself can be a complicating and limiting factor. As an American, I have learned that the language I speak, American English, is very different from British English. Culture influences word meanings and metaphors.²⁹⁰ The Welsh sense of identity is complicated by whether someone is native Welsh or not, speaks Welsh and how well, has family ties to Wales, is affiliated with the Welsh chapels or not, and a host of other qualifiers.²⁹¹ These factors make planning the beginning of a group more complicated but are not insurmountable. If adjustment to the communication was not difficult enough, a media- and technology-driven world means that language is changing more quickly than even and so is the culture. Since I will be leading this group, part of my group experience will be in seeing how language and culture in Wales has influenced

²⁸⁷ See Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

²⁸⁸ Andrzej Wiercinski, "Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (1):3-14 (2009): 5, available online at: journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/viewFile/2/1.

²⁸⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 161.

²⁹⁰ David Elmes, "The Relationship between Language and Culture," *National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya* (2013). Available online at www2.lib.nifs-k.ac.jp/HPBU/annals/an46/46-11.pdf. Last accessed 28 September 2017. See also Robert Krauss and Chi-Yue Chiu, "Language and Social Behavior," in D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, & F. Lindsey (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (4th ed., vol 2) (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997), 41-88.

²⁹¹ Carol Trosset, *Welshness Performed: Welsh Concepts of Person and Society* (Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1993), 75-79.

peoples' stories and how my culture and language will impact the telling of and my hearing of peoples' stories. This unknown will only be discovered as the groups are conducted and the conversations then analysed.

Conversations of Spiritual Reflection

This thesis has a Christian-focused context. Part of the desired outcome is helping people connect their personal stories to the larger story of faith. Using Clean Language methods alone, will not allow this to happen. There must be connector questions. The spiritual connection is not to tell people what to believe but to help participants (as Jane Leach has said) “discover the resources they already have: of faith, of knowledge, of skills, of discernment.”²⁹²

Many models for spiritual reflection begin with an attending. Jane Leach calls the process a “practice of a kind of spiritual attention through which we expected God to speak.”²⁹³ She adds that the questions we ask have no “magic power or answers on their own, but became a vehicle through which they could name and explore issues, listen and learn from each other, and together seek to hear what God was saying.”²⁹⁴

Questions that begin to explore the God connection to the narratives might be similar to the following:

Related to finding meaning: What do you suppose that incident could mean? What might God, or the Spirit, be doing in your life? What are you looking for at this time in your life?

Connectedness to God: How might the image or metaphor reveal what God, or the Spirit, is doing in your life? Where do you think God is in this? What contributes

²⁹² Jane Leach, 'Pastoral Theology as Attention', *Contact: practical theology & pastoral care* No.153 (August 2007): 21.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 23.

²⁹⁴ Jane Leach, 'Pastoral Theology as Attention', *Contact: practical theology & pastoral care* No.153 (August 2007): 23. See also Sally Nash and Paul Nash, *Tools for Reflective Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2009), 42-53.

to your sense of God's closeness? Have you seen evidence of God at work in your life?

Exploring metaphor or image: What images give you life? What image, story, hope or dream comes to mind as you remember...?

Discovering resources: What resources do you have? Is there a scripture, song, film, prayer, metaphor, etc, that has helped you? When this happened to you before, how did you cope?

The main reason to ask these questions is to get people to reflect on how God might have been present with them in the past and might be present with them now. Yet, it is important to remember that the questions leading us to reflect spiritually on our narratives may also be influenced by the complexities of language and culture. The leader may need flexibility in finding a question that people can connect to especially as Christianity as a cultural force and its language of faith is losing its impact and presence in cultural. It is not that Christianity's story have become irrelevant for today's world, but language has changed and many people aren't familiar with the meanings of the religious words used in the Church because they are not growing up with that background.

The lack of words does not negate the fact that -- whether recognised or not-- God is at work in the world. There is a need in most people --sometimes at an unconscious level-- to find meaning and purpose.²⁹⁵ If the Church seems irrelevant to today's teenagers is may be because Christian leaders have continued to repeat words of the New Testament as if the words are "self-interpreting, requiring no translation."²⁹⁶ And, it could also be that the church has lost its ability to listen to the

²⁹⁵ See "Me and My Quarter-Life Crisis," *The Guardian* (30 December 2018), available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/dec/30/me-and-my-quarter-life-crisis-a-millennial-asks-what-went-wrong>, last accessed 23 January 2019.

²⁹⁶ Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP,

pain, hopes and longings of the people around us.²⁹⁷

If we believe that there is a spiritual aspect to all of life²⁹⁸, there must be a language to help people understand that vital part of their lives. Analysis of spiritual language is important since “to belong to a religion is to adopt a certain grammar, a way of speaking, an interpretive schema that structures one’s understanding of oneself and one’s world.”²⁹⁹ I suspect that within the group context, spiritual discussions will lead to the group finding a way to communicate spiritual/theological ideas and themes that may be distinctly its own. The Clean Language questions may actually facilitate discussion by allow people to choose their own ways of expressing spirituality and faith. How this process happens may be instructive for working within the wider Church in Wales context.

An Example

In working with groups in the Cancer Centre in the Cone Health System. I used book discussions as a venue for talking about spiritual matters. The experience of one of the groups made me particularly aware of how powerful narrative practice can be. Over the period of a year, one group of participants kept signing up for group activities in order to be together. This group was made up of 8 female cancer patients. All of them were suffering from some form of side effects from chemotherapy and a sense of loss of self and life meaning. Several of them thought they had lost their faith completely. Although all self-identified as Christians, what that meant differed considerably with one very influenced by Buddhism. The

2000), 18. See also Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society* (Eugene, OR: Cascades, 2015), 3-4 and Brian Appleyard, “Is Sin Good?” *The Sunday Times Magazine* 11 April 2004, 18-28, particularly 20.

²⁹⁷ Jane Leach, ‘Pastoral Theology as Attention’, *Contact: practical theology & pastoral care* No.153 (August 2007): 22-3, quoting Hopkins and Grey.

²⁹⁸ A belief that seems to be widely accepted if you search for it on Google. A number of scholarly journals, including medical ones, mention that the majority of people believe that there is a spiritual aspect to all life.

²⁹⁹ Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 108.

consistency of attendance led to a high level of trust within the group. In the Autumn, we used the book *Soul Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within* by Christine Valters Paintner. The book used language and monastic ideas that the participants were not at all familiar with and which seemed quite foreign to them. However, the book also uses metaphors that the participants could relate to. For instance, in chapter two they were asked to think of life as a journey for which they needed to pack a bag. We explored the things that weigh us down and what things we might need to release to travel more lightly. This led to a discussion of “attachments” and “letting go” of things that keep us from God and from moving along on our journey toward “authentic freedom.”³⁰⁰ I included an art project where they made a small suitcase and then added what they thought they needed and what they didn’t need. In our next group meeting, we took turns showing our suitcase and telling its story. I asked Clean Language questions to encourage each person to think more deeply about what they had included and not included. All of them worked with their personal stories about loss from the past and in the present time. Questions focused on the following themes: What items were necessary? What function do they serve for you? What would happen if you left this item behind? Imagine carrying this item in your suitcase. Suitcases included items related to things, commitments, relationships, beliefs and ideas. They also wrote a blessing for their journey and one for each of their group mates.³⁰¹ Other weeks included the themes of: crossing the threshold, making the way by walking, being uncomfortable, beginning again, embracing the unknown, and coming home.³⁰² Though we had the book as a resource, some of them did not read it but merely followed the week’s theme and

³⁰⁰ Christine Valters Painter, *The Soul Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within* (Notre Dame: Sorin, 2015, 34-35.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 37-38.

³⁰² *Ibid*, table of contents.

worked with the questions and activities. They still found the specific spiritual language in the book difficult. At the end of eight weeks, they did a survey for Cone Health and we also processed what the group had done for them. Two things stood out. A community of caring had formed. They had even begun checking on each other outside the hospital and supporting one another. And, they had all grown in their faith in ways they called transformational. I found that I also had grown from the group interactions. Rather than only being the leader, teaching them these concepts, I had become a fellow pilgrim.

In chapter two, I discussed Gadamer's concept of horizons. For Gadamer, horizon contained the idea of a "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."³⁰³ He said that "a person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, 'to have a horizon' means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it."³⁰⁴ Cancer, suffering, and loss had made these participants' world smaller. It had shrunk as they focused on surviving day to day, going to chemo and doctor's appointments, and worrying about whether they would die. The group expanded their horizon of life. They could see how they might have a bigger life even in the midst of cancer treatments. They felt cared for and supported by others who understood and especially by God.

The experiences with the groups at the Cancer Centre, taught me that spiritual care providers can meet people where they are using the language of the vernacular, and through the reflective process, help people learn a spiritual language through the use of spiritual/theological themes which will then help them expand their

³⁰³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 301.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

horizon and grow spiritually and emotionally. People involved in these narrative groups were not only listeners but also were bearers of stories. A spiritual person trained in narrative group techniques has the potential to become a sort of empathetic guide who facilitates a serious open dialogue that includes the “sharing of feelings, stories of past experiences, mutual questioning, and search for authentic connections” between the person’s particular life stories and the Christian story.³⁰⁵ As I worked with groups in the Cancer Centre using narrative combine with spiritual reflection, I was able to help participants interpret or reinterpret experiences in such a way that a new set of images emerged thus revealing “a new, less painful and more hopeful story.”³⁰⁶ This finding of the alternative story that takes the place of the old, problem saturated narrative is what contributes to peoples’ ability to find meaning, hope, and resilience when facing crisis as it expands their vision of life.

The reflective growth process begins when the reflective practitioner meets people where they are using the language they know. The group mentioned didn’t understand the monastic tradition language and most of them probably never did really understand it. Yet, they were able to benefit from the wisdom of the tradition. The questions were key, drawing out what was already within them: their resources for resilience—their gifts and strengths, the feeling of call they might have, the memories of past positive experiences and new insights about where God might have been at work in their lives. Charles Gerkin called this process the fusion of two narrative structures—“that of human activity about which we seek greater clarity and that of the Christian story”—in a process of “mutually critical correlations.”³⁰⁷ For

³⁰⁵ Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 112.

³⁰⁶ Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 28.

³⁰⁷ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 65-67.

Gerkin this was a picture of grace:

God's grace is more than a promise; it is a reality present in human experience to be recognized and appropriated as it appears in myriad forms incarnate in the events and relationships of life. Its appearance is a mystery to be grasped only through the eyes of faith. Its grasping is. . . a new way of seeing and giving significance to what occurs. Certain events can become parabolic, as if capturing in their significance the power and meaning of grace.³⁰⁸

"A new way of seeing. . ." Through the reflective process taking place as stories are told and heard, people gain insight and a language to express the new which can in turn contribute in a special way to the broadening of their human experience, their self-knowledge, and their horizon.³⁰⁹

Reflective Methodology Use

The goal of the groups is that they would be a venue for collaborative knowing-in-action³¹⁰ experience that leads to personal spiritual growth and life changing insight. It can be life changing because human beings not only use narratives to describe and communicate experience, but also to gain their sense of self.³¹¹ The story a person links to an experience is both a catalyst for "developing a sense of self," and for "constructing individual identity."³¹² Our narratives can change as memories are recalled and the experiences are looked at in new ways. This

³⁰⁸ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 324.

³⁰⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," *Reason in the Age of Science, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, edited by Thomas McCarthy (London: MIT, 1982), 110. See also 109.

³¹⁰ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991), 49.

³¹¹ See the research discussed in Ivor Goodson, *Developing narrative theory: Life histories and personal representation*. (Rotterdam: 2013) and in Ivor Goodson, Avril Loveless, and David Stephens, eds. *Explorations in Narrative Research. Studies in Professional Life and Work*, Vol. 6 (Rotterdam: Sense, 2012), particularly 6-8. See also Dana Dunn and Shane Burcaw, "Disability identity: Exploring narrative accounts of disability" *Rehabilitation Psychology* 58, No. 2 (May 2013): 148-157. See also Valerie Rance, "The Importance of Narrative in Contextualization," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* (January 2014): 61-64; Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society: Second Edition* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 59-60; and George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 111.

³¹² Dominick Hankel, "Christian Worldview and the Use of Narrative Therapy," *The Journal of Christians Healing* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2016): 6.

process of reworking the interpretations and stories, happens as our brain takes in the new information and processes it changing not only how we understand the present, but also how we anticipate the future. Curt Thompson, M.D., a psychiatrist, has written about how the process operates in the brain in his book *Anatomy of the Soul* in which he presents the latest research in neuroscience and discusses its implications for Christian spiritual formation. He said that human beings construct their understanding of the world and their place in it through the lens of their own story.

And the manner and context in which you reflect on your story (in your mind) or tell your story (to others) becomes part of the fabric of the narrative itself. In other words, the process of reflecting on and telling others your story, and the way you experience others hearing it, actually shapes the story and the very neural correlated, or networks, it represents.³¹³

This research shows how small insights can change belief and behaviour because of the ways that sharing your story and having it heard shapes the neural networks. This research provides medical proof for the observations that Barbara Myerhoff made about the power of narrative work to facilitate a healing process that she called growing a soul.³¹⁴

To support and encourage this process, I have chosen a reflective methodology that is based on the work of Donald Schön. I have chosen his work rather than a more traditional theological reflection method because of its focus on “reflection-in-action.” This kind of reflection is done as a person is engaged in an activity. He used phrases such as “thinking on your feet” or “learning by doing” to describe this active process.³¹⁵ Schön said that “much of the reflection-in-action

³¹³ Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul* (Carrollton, TX: Tyndale House, 2012), 77.

³¹⁴ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*, edited by Marc Kaminsky and Mark Weiss (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 19.

³¹⁵ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991), 54.

hinges on the experience of surprise.”³¹⁶ If the results are what we expected, then we don’t tend to think about them much; however, if the results surprise us or are different than what we expect or thought (pleasing or unwanted), we may respond by reflection-in-action. “In such processes, reflection tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action.”³¹⁷ This is the kind of reflective process that I would like to foster during group meeting times.

Schön compares knowing-in-action to reflection-in-action. Knowing-in-action refers to how human beings use learning gained from similar or other situations when they are facing a new situation. Over time people can develop a “repertoire of expectations, images, and techniques” that influence what they look for and impact how they respond.³¹⁸ This learning become part of narrative related to themselves and how they interpret and respond to life. Schön said that this hampers the ability to experience surprise. The benefit of this specialization is that this knowing-in-practice allows people to respond more quickly and automatically in some situations.³¹⁹ The disadvantages are that a high degree of specialization can lead to a parochial narrowness of vision.³²⁰ At times this narrowness of vision can cause people to miss important opportunities for new insights and learning and even cause selective inattentiveness “to phenomena that do not fit the categories of his knowing-in-action” and even lead to a pattern of errors.³²¹ Schön’s observations are expressed in language that is similar to Gadamer’s language when speaking of horizons.³²² His

³¹⁶ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991), 56.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 301. See the discussion in chapter two.

work gives us a contemporary language to explain people get stuck with an unhealthy narrative about who they are and their expectations about life as discussed in the theory of narrative therapy.

Schön discusses how important and surprising incidents create opportunities for new learning to occur. He says that disadvantages can be overcome if rather than clinging to our preconceived ideas about what should be done in a particular situation, we use reflection to make sense of situations of uniqueness. This reflective process for learning is often strengthened as reflection-on-action both during the midst of an event and after the event.³²³ In a problematic situation, the practitioner of this reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action “may construct a new way of setting the problem—a new frame”³²⁴ that he or she will bring to the situation. This is what happens in a narrative therapy session when contrary evidence is presented that challenges a dominant problem narrative and the person has to construct a new narrative that fits the new insight obtained in that moment. As part of this process the therapist will strengthen the narrative by collaborating with the person and with others to find more evidence that supports and builds on the new insight.³²⁵ Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, impacts practice. Then reflecting on practice leads to further reflection which further impacts practice and brings new insights, learning, expectations about self and life and changes in actions.

In the group meetings, questions will be asked that stimulate reflection-on-practice. Sometimes the questions come out of the discussion as people provide contrary evidence that contradicts a dominant narrative. A question then comes that draws out the contrary evidence and contributes to reflection. Some questions in and

³²³ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991), 61-2.

³²⁴ *Ibid*, 63.

³²⁵ See discussion in chapter two.

of themselves lead to reflection. At the end of each meeting, insights will be reinforced by questions regarding summarizing learning that happened in the group during that session. The leader will encourage reflection-on-action in between group sessions. Each session will begin with a question that asks for reflection on what insights have been gained and how they might be changing how people think/act. This process creates a series of reflections that links people's stories to their life experiences. In Schön this has been called a reflective ladder.³²⁶

I'll use another group experience that demonstrates this process. Another patient population I worked with in the Cone Health System were behavioural health patients. In addition to crisis work, I periodically co-led an outpatient addiction group. One of the narrative sessions I led, illustrated Schön's reflective theory.

Example: Monsters

The addiction groups at Cone Health follow the protocol for the twelve-step program. Patients are taught to take responsibility for their addictive behaviour. Counsellors tell them the problem is in them and remind them that they need to change. The lead counsellor was interested in my narrative work, so she asked me to lead a group using it, and she and another counsellor came to watch. The group had been meeting several weeks by the time that I first met them and they were quite familiar with each others' stories of addiction.

I brought a stack of pictures of monsters, some scary and terrible, and some pitiful looking and almost cute. As the group began, I led the group first in a relaxation exercise to help them focus on the activity; then, I asked them to think of an issue that interfered with their lives and caused them to have problems coping or

³²⁶ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991). See chapter five "The Structure of Reflection-in-Action."

with getting along with others. I gave them enough time to think. Then I laid out the monsters on a table and asked them to choose a monster that they thought represented their issue. They laughed but did what I asked. Then I asked them to name the monster according to the issue. They did. We then had a sharing time where each person showed their monster, called it by name, and then talked about how the monster interfered with and influenced their lives. No one named their addiction as the monster.

As they each shared their personal stories, I used questions to draw out a deeper understanding of their story. One of the participants had chosen a picture of a giant made of stone that looked very much like a mountain. From one of the monster's eyes a stream flowed. The participant called the monster "Sadness." I asked her, "How do you experience Sadness in your life?" She talked about her battle with depression. One of the counsellors tried to insert "your depression?" However, when I asked questions, I was careful to objectify the issue that caused her the problem by using the monster name and by talking about the depression as the monster who inhabited her life and caused her problems. I would ask follow up questions, "Is there anything else about Sadness that would help others see Sadness better? If you were to compare Sadness to something, what is Sadness like?"

It was interesting to see how quickly the others picked up the technique and began telling their stories about how their monster influenced their lives. They even asked each other questions about the monsters. When everyone had shared about their monsters, I asked, "How do you cope with your monster?" This is when the addiction issues came out. Many said that was how they dealt with their monster. We then were able to share strategies for fighting back against the monsters although for

some, like Sadness, the discussion was more about how to live with the monster without using drugs or alcohol to hide from the monster's influence. Somehow, objectifying the issue that led to the addiction brought them a sense of freedom and agency. There was much creativity expressed. People in the group seemed to gain insights from one another regarding issues in their lives that they hadn't seen before. Besides Sadness, two other monster stories stood out. One was Vampire, a picture of an emaciated and pale vampire and Cupcake, a small monster that lived in a cupcake. Cupcake's owner described cupcake as feeling small and not worth much. When we were talking about how to battle with the monsters, the owner of Cupcake said that he felt sorry for the little monster and he thought more than anything, he wanted to continue to live with Cupcake, to learn more about him and learn how to show him kindness. This seemed to be a profound revelation to the owner as he now saw how his own feelings of worthlessness influenced his life. The discussion about Vampire led his owner to realize that the reason he became an addict was because he was bored. He had been quite involved in sports, but he had gotten a job working nights and the schedule was draining him. When he was awake during the day, he didn't have enough energy to do the activities he loved to do. He just watched TV and was bored. Seeing a visual representation of the monster draining the life out of him caused him to seek other employment and get back into sports clubs as part of his recovery. The group time ended with a brief reflection on the insights gained in the group that day. When the group time was over, most of the participants wanted to keep their monsters as a visual reminder of the work they needed to do. The counsellors followed me out in the hall to tell me what a remarkable session it had been and to ask how I did what I did. Since that session, I have called on the monsters to make many trips with me to groups.

Schön's reflective process helps us understand how the monster activity worked. The activity not only began with reflection initiated by my framing of the activity and the participants' choice of a monster. Then the reflective process continued and strengthened as reflection-on-action³²⁷ (telling their monster stories) took place throughout the group time. I learned later from the counsellors that the group continued to use their monsters in future sessions to help them understand the roots of their addiction. The process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action opened a new path, a new way, for them to understand and see the problems they were dealing with that led to their addictions.³²⁸ The counsellors continued to build on the reflective process begun in the group that day.

Putting Theory into Practice in a Rural Welsh Setting

As I reflect on the groups that have been successful, I see how these groups worked because participants knew one another and there was a high level of trust. This is important for people if people are to allow themselves to feel vulnerable by telling their stories. Based on this, I think the narrative process works best if people know each other. In an individual narrative session with a therapist, this is not as much of an issue as it is when stories are shared before others—particularly people you know and see in your village.

Putting It Together

It is important in working with a group to allow the group time to be a place where people can speak freely without fear of being blamed or judged. Ideally, the group participants should be able to develop a good rapport quickly and over time come to care for one another. In planning group sessions, it is important to think of

³²⁷ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991), 61-2.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 63.

how to create a group environment which contributes to rapport building. Puchta and Potter recommend generating informality, where people feel at ease and relaxed. “Informality encourages interaction to happen” and is essential for getting people to open up and share.³²⁹ They recommend the leader begin a group by introducing what the group will be talking about and also mentioning what the group is not. It is not a therapy session, focus group, forum for a particular idea or view, or Bible study. It is also important to assure people that they can speak freely without fear of judgment or having confidences taken outside the group. From the onset, the leader models informality in the ways that the group is introduced through pauses and hesitations, word choices, and intonation.³³⁰

The actual group narrative “work” begins with the first questions designed to encourage people to tell their stories. Each person gets the opportunity to speak. Clean questions draw out the story at a deeper level. When enough of the story becomes clear, questions of a more reflective nature—including spiritual ones can be asked. Other group participants will also contribute to the questions and by telling their stories that connect to other stories. The leader must remain in a co-creator/facilitator role. Participants arrive at their own insights and interpretations. Time is allowed for meanings to unfold. The leader is also a listener—listening for repeated words and metaphors and listening-with the others. If, in the hearing, I or someone else hears something that we think might help the person gain insight, it is appropriate to ask permission to give feedback by saying something like: “Can I share something I have noticed?” Permission is a useful and often unidentified tool that is non-threatening and helps people feel safe in group interactions.³³¹

³²⁹ Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: Sage, 2004), 25.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, 32-7.

³³¹ Carol Wilson, *Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training* (London: KoganPage, 2014), 144, 146.

Finally, at the end of each session, there should be a closing. This consists of asking participants what they have experienced in the group that day. By asking questions such as: “Has anything stood out to you today? Have you gained any insights today? What questions does today raise if any?”

Conclusion

This chapter had largely been about questions. I began by discussing what kind of questions need to be asked for the people to be encouraged to tell their stories. I have found David Grove’s Clean Language to be helpful in guiding the crafting of group questions. The majority of questions should be clean language so that meaning and interpretation comes from the participants themselves and not the leader. I also talked about the importance of allowing silence. Using Gadamer’s theory of Tarrying and White’s work I talked about how the silence provides a temporal dimension that takes us out of ordinary time and puts us into a place of timelessness which contributes to listening-with and to our awareness of God in that place and time. I also talked about how to incorporate spiritual questions into the groups to help people be aware of how God may have been and still is present with them. Finally, I put it all together and talked about how insight comes as people listen-with others and reflect on it in the group times and afterwards.

In the next chapter, I will be using two groups that I led here in Wales to demonstrate and discuss how the principles presented in this work could be transferable to any reflective group working with narrative techniques.

Chapter Four

Methodology for the Groups

Introduction

I attempted to hold two narrative groups with a theme of grief support in two nearby villages. When I personally invited people who had recently experienced a loss, they were willing to help by coming to a group, but then all called and cancelled at the last minute. I followed up with them and learned that they had thought about it and decided that talking about personal grief in front of their neighbours was too difficult for them. It seemed that the approach was too direct for them. Even though they knew the other participants, they didn't feel "safe." After discussion with my supervisor and others at the University, I decided to use the theme but to go with two groups consisting of fellow clergy members who were more used to talking about grief. All participants were British: One from Scotland and the others from different parts of England originally but who had all been living and working in Wales for more than five years. I had an even split of male and female participants. I realised that because they were familiar with grief work—although perhaps not in the way that I had been specially and specifically training—and were wanting to learn new techniques and trusted me they were good groups with which to test my research. The fact that I was the only American would also allow me to test the group process in a non-American context. I emailed clergy members in my rural mission area and asked them if they would be willing to help me in my research by participating in a group. I also offered to spend part of the time after the group to explain the process in case they would like to use it. Clergy were quite willing to help although getting an actual group formed turned out to be challenging with their schedules. I had hoped for three groups but finally had two groups of four each. I developed a plan which

included: an introduction to the group exercise, the actual group experience, and a discussion after the group experience in which I would collect feedback regarding how they felt the group went. Feedback questions were: Did it work for them? Would you like to comment on how the activity worked? Would you use this in your ministry? The first group occurred on the 13th of November and the second group ran on the 27th of November 2017. I taped the group times using a tape-recording app on my phone and then transcribed the sessions for analysis.

In designing the group, I decided to use two activities that I had used while working with groups of patients in the Cancer Centre and addicts in recovery as part of the Cone Mental Health Outpatient Addiction program. One activity that had been particularly successful with the outpatient groups used pictures of monsters to help group participants look at their problem life issues through a process of psychological projection through personification. The other activity used the theme of life as pilgrimage and utilised pictures of various kinds of suitcases and knapsacks to help people visualise their needs as they continued the journey of life. I greatly appreciate the help of my colleagues who were not only willing but also fully engaged with the process.

First Group: Monsters

The Backstory

The first activity is one I call “Monsters.” This activity came out of my research on counselling techniques that work with people’s stories. In my thesis,³³² I compared two modalities doing this: Logotherapy developed by Viktor Frankl³³³ and Narrative

³³² Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015.

³³³ Frankl is best known for his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), in which he tells his story of survival in the WWII concentration camps and the psychological theory that came out of his analysis of his and others’ experience of survival. See chapter 3 in Alexis

Therapy³³⁴ developed by Michael White and David Epston. My results led me to focus on Narrative in Therapy. Both modalities work with people's stories to foster healing, hope, and resilience and both use methods that help people objectify or externalise their problem, so they could see it more clearly. However, the goal of Frankl's and White's counselling sessions was slightly different. Frankl helped people reinterpret their experiences to find meaning for life and set life goals, White and Epston helped clients "re-story,"³³⁵ or reinterpret their experiences to transform their image of self. One of the hallmarks of Logotherapy is the use of "deflection,"³³⁶ in which the therapist diverts the client's attention away from the problem that is consuming their energy toward something else that will bring meaning to their life.³³⁷ Narrative Therapy uses a method that also helps redirect the client away from the inward focus on their presenting problem to searching for solutions. In narrative therapy this method is called externalization.³³⁸ Separating the person from the

Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, particularly 111ff.

³³⁴ The founders of Narrative Therapy are widely recognised as Michael White and David Epston. The book that sets out the theory behind this modality and explains how they developed it is *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (London: WW Norton, 1990). Many others have continued the work they began.

³³⁵ Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy*, in *Theories in Psychotherapy Series* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011) 22.

³³⁶ William Gould, *Viktor Frankl: Life with Meaning* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1993), 151.

³³⁷ Tim LeBon, "Viktor Frankl and Logotherapy," available online at <http://www.timlebon.com/frankl.htm>, last accessed on 11 April 2018.

³³⁸ Michael White introduced the idea of externalization. Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy*, in *Theories in Psychotherapy Series* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 34. Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 47, 58-9. See also Michael White, *Deconstruction and Therapy*, in David Epston and Michael White, *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre, 1992); Michael White, *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and Essays* (Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre, 1995); Michael White, "The Externalizing of the Problem and the Re-authoring of Lives and Relationships," *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* [Special Issue], Summer, 3-20, 1988/1989. Michael White, *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre, 1997); Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: Norton, 2007), 22-26; Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (London: Sage, 2006), 12; and Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), particularly 38-76. This story also provides another example of re-authoring. This is a positive use of the term in counselling as opposed to the use of externalisation by projection in order to get away from the real self. See Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1992), 115-6.

problem, as happens with Narrative Therapy's externalisation, decouples the person from ego concerns which allows people to look at a problem without feeling threatened by how the analysis might hurt their sense of self. This allows them to "exercise more choice in their response to the problem they are facing."³³⁹ Thus the process helps people "...resist the temptations of their circumstances, while not being defined within them, and not being totally at their mercy either."³⁴⁰

During my narrative therapy research, I found a quote from Grace Jantzen's research that seemed to describe how externalisation helps support emotional healing. She said:

Deep anxieties cannot be resolved merely by rational argument. . . . What is needed instead is to bring the anxieties out into the open, to articulate and examine them in all their most threatening detail. Only when this is done is it possible to let go of the fears and to find a healthy way forward.³⁴¹

Narrative's use of externalisation helps people look at the problem narratives objectively and to examine them in a non-threatening manner. In psychotherapy, externalization or projection are often viewed negatively—as a way that clients shift blame or responsibility, along with the feelings, from themselves to an external source.³⁴² However, White and Epston found that using externalisation's non-threatening approach to looking at a problem in its "most threatening detail"³⁴³ enabled people to brainstorm for solutions and find a way to cope with problems

³³⁹ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 117.

³⁴⁰ Nicola Hoggard Creegan, "Narrative and Being Free: A Theological Look at Narrative Therapy and Implications for Conceptualising Human Freedom," in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 55. See also Michael White's discussion of externalizing conversations in his *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: Norton, 2007), 9, 26-27. Quoted in Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 117.

³⁴¹ Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 263.

³⁴² Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1992), 116.

³⁴³ Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 263.

without having their sense of self threatened.

In further reading on narrative's use of externalisation, I came across instances when narrative therapists working with children asked a child to personify the issue he or she was facing by drawing a picture of it. Often the client drew a picture of a monster. The therapist asked the child to name the monster and then used the picture and monster's name to talk about the problem. This externalisation could be done in a playful way that allowed children to "face and diminish difficulties."³⁴⁴ White saw that often in family problem situations, blame and shame silence members and can have an immobilising effect as the problem seems to be linked to family members' character and "seems too 'close to home'."³⁴⁵

Separating the problem from the person in an externalizing conversation relieves the pressure of blame and defensiveness. No longer defined as inherently being the problem, a young person can have a relationship with the externalized problem. This practice lets a person or group of persons enter into a more reflective and critical position vis-à-vis the problem. With some distance established between self and problem, family members can consider the effects of the problem on their lives and bring their own resources to bear in revising their relationship with it. In the space between person and problem, responsibility, choice, and personal agency tend to expand.³⁴⁶

Using the monster, the therapist, child, and parents were able to look at the problem and gain understanding not only about how the problem impacted the client's life, but also about what to do to develop coping strategies for when the "monster" appeared.³⁴⁷

I was already working with narrative techniques in my work as a hospital chaplain and I wondered if adults would respond as well to the use of a monster as a

³⁴⁴ Freeman, Jennifer, David Epston, and Dean Lobovits, "About Narrative Therapy With Children" *Narrative Approaches* (online Journal), (June 4, 2013) available at <http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/about-narrative-therapy-with-children/>. Last accessed on 12 February 2019.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006), 106.

narrative tool. As the lead chaplain for a large oncology and palliative unit, I met many patients struggling with the fear of dying. A new diagnosis often woke them up to their mortality. In working with them and in doing research for my PhD, I found that the dominant narratives about death in Western culture often feed fears of death by showing death as a failure or abnormality in life. Physicians often viewed a death as a failure and sometimes broke off all contact with patients who were “beyond hope.” Family members would talk about people “giving up” and insisted on procedures that sometimes brought more suffering to their dying loved one as they struggled to find the miracle that would save the patient. At the least, these narratives portrayed death as a negative force that robbed people of the future opportunities to enjoy life and created meaningless suffering.³⁴⁸ I knew patients wanted to talk about dying, but they were often reluctant to begin the conversation—almost as if talking about it would bring death quicker. I developed a plan to incorporate the discussion of monsters into the work I did supporting people facing death. I thought it would be a non-threatening way of getting people to talk openly about death and what their dying meant to them.

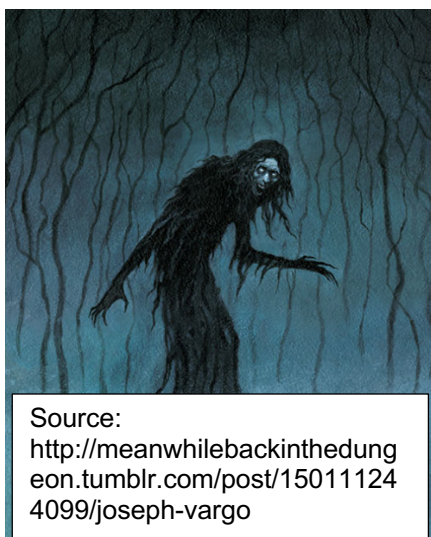
I deduced that the narrative technique of externalisation could help people look at their personal “monster” that was terrorising them and then together we could deconstruct the problem narrative and re-story their sense of identity and meaning of death and loss in accordance with their understanding of their relationship with God and God’s story.”³⁴⁹ In my pastoral counselling sessions, I began asking people to

³⁴⁸ Robert Kastenbaum, “The Good Death,” in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, Vol. 1*, ed. Robert Kastenbaum (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2002), 338-9 and 341, <http://library.worldtracker.org/Reference/Encyclopedia's/Encyclopedia%20of%20Death%20and%20Dying.pdf> and Grace Lukach, “Living Beside the Shadow of Death,” Rothman Awards, USCC, 3, at writing.uscc.edu/RothmanAwards/pdfs/rothman11-12/lukach.pdf. Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 19 and 27-33.

³⁴⁹ Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK,

draw the fear they faced as a monster. The idea was promising, and people seemed to connect to it; however, I found adults often said, “I’m not an artist” and felt that their picture (often a pom-pom like creature with stick legs) didn’t adequately express the fearsomeness of what they faced. So, I turned to Google Images (free images) for help and found a wealth of pictures of monsters. I discovered that a lot of people draw monsters to help them explain their depression or suffering and they are willing to share their images to help others. I brought a selection of pictures and let patients choose a monster. Then we talked about the choice they made and this picture gave them a way to describe their fear and look at it objectively. The technique worked so well that I decided to try it in another venue in which I used narrative techniques—co-leading the outpatient addiction group at the behavioural health hospital.

For the outpatient groups, I found pictures of monsters that embody emotions of loss, anger, and fear, and printed them out. At the group, I developed and tested a process that worked. First, I asked participants to think of an issue that had a negative impact on their image of themselves or their relationships. Then I asked them to choose a picture of a monster that seemed to represent the issue. Then I



Source:
<http://meanwhilebackinthedungeon.tumblr.com/post/150111244099/joseph-vargo>

asked them next to name the monster accordingly. The rest of the group time, we used the monster and its name to talk about the issue they faced as if it were separate from them. I thought the issue would be their addiction. However, what came out in the group times was a root issue that contributed to their addiction. During the discussions, it

2015, 148-9. Discussing the work done by Irene Alexander with John Silver and Jo-anne Brown in “Narrative Ideas and Practices in Pastoral Care and Counselling,” in *Interweavings: Conversations between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, eds. Richard Cook and Irene Alexander (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 195

became clear that the “monster” was the problem and the addiction was the coping mechanism. These group times offered people profound insights about their struggles as they and fellow members talked about the monsters and offered thoughts about a monster chosen, its name, and what it revealed about their struggle. Sometimes the monster could be driven from their lives as with one young

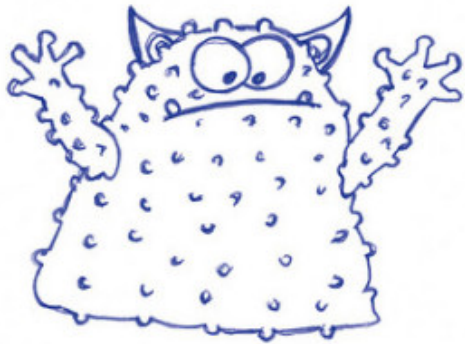


Source:
<https://www.imgrumweb.com/hashtag/grungerap>

man who found that his incompatibility with working nights was a vampire that sucked the life out of him. He had been active in sports, but he was unable to do what he most enjoyed when he got a job working nights. He was bored with his life. The groups helped him see that he needed to make some changes in his lifestyle. He was able to stay free from the addiction by changing his work and

recovering the activities that he used to do which gave his life meaning and purpose. Sometimes, however, the participants found that they would have to live with their monster. Having a face and name for the issue they struggled with helped them with the adjustment. One young woman who struggled with depression chose a sad monster. There was something particularly touching about this monster. The picture of a monster gave her struggle a face and name. Eventually, she came to feel compassion for rather than rage at the monster. This change in attitude helped her and her counsellors develop coping mechanisms. She learned to recognise signs of his upcoming visits and to live with his presence in her life. Therapists often came to observe these monster sessions and they would continue to use the monsters in their sessions with counselees.

The group was so successful that the therapists asked me to return with the



Source: <http://clipart-library.com/clipart/868265.htm> no. 28772293, free

monsters. I also used the monsters for grief and loss groups that I conducted while at the Cancer Centre—and even took them to a class I taught at the local seminary for students discerning chaplaincy. In the class, I used the same process with my students. I asked them to think of an issue that they were struggling with personally. Then I presented them with pictures of monsters, asked them to pick one that seemed to personify their issue and give it a name. I used this exercise to teach them how to help people tell their stories of grief, loss, and suffering. However, one of the students really connected with a monster he called crazy life. He would refer back to crazy life throughout the course when he was talking about his own anxiety about the multiple demands and expectations of ministry. He recognised that he would have to live with this monster, his anxiety. Talking about “crazy life” helped him recognise the times when his own anxiety was high so he could live with it rather than letting himself be a victim of the monster and feeling immobilised.

After coming to Wales, I wondered if the monsters would also work here in this culture. So, for the first group with clergy, I brought monsters related to grief or loss. I then asked participants to think of a time when they experienced a loss, to think about how they felt and the issues their grief raised in their lives. As with my other groups, I then asked them to choose a picture of a monster that seemed to represent those feelings or that issue. Then I asked them to name their monster. We then used the monster, calling it by name, to externalise the issue and talk about it as though the feelings or issue were separate from them. As with past groups,

participants connected to their monster and the taped conversation revealed how they used their conversation about their monster to talk about their problems and help them process situations of loss.

Some Thoughts on Why Monsters Works

Human beings have a long history with monsters. Researchers believe that the appeal of monsters, particularly as they are portrayed in film and literature, is that “they press the right cognitive buttons.”³⁵⁰ We attribute them with agency; They are nearly human but not quite.³⁵¹ This means that we can identify with them but also stand apart from them to judge their behaviour. Fischhoff has identified this connection in his research and particularly in a research study about what attracts people to horror movies. In that study he found that people favour older monsters such as Bela Lugosi’s Dracula, Frankenstein, and Godzilla because people felt some compassion for monsters who struggle with their stature as deviants and kill for survival rather than contemporary monsters who act as unreflective killing machines.³⁵² Yet, favourite monsters must also “behave horrifically” and evoke strong emotions.³⁵³ Jarrett states that we connect to a monster story because, “like play, it allows us to rehearse possible threatening scenarios from a position of relative safety.”³⁵⁴ Movie goers feel the adrenalized emotion of fear, but go home safely when the movie is over. In the groups, people connected to the monsters because they

³⁵⁰ Christine Jarrett, “The Lure of Horror” *The Psychologist* vol. 24, ed. 11 (Nov 2011); available online at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-11/lure-horror>, accessed 19 February 2018.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² Stuart Fischhoff, Alexandra Dimopoulos, and Francois Nguyen, “The Psychological Appeal of Movie Monsters,” *Journal of Media Psychology* vol 10, no. 3, Summer, 2005. Available online at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.577.4336&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, accessed 20 February 2018.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ Christine Jarrett, “The Lure of Horror” *The Psychologist* vol. 24, ed. 11 (Nov 2011); available online at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-11/lure-horror>, accessed 19 February 2018.

were able to see how their issue behaved as a monster in their life, but also were able to have some empathy for their monster which helped them in their reflective process.

Monsters also work as a tool for externalisation because most people are familiar with what a monster is and how it operates; horror films and literature are universally recognised. Even young children learn about monsters through fairy tales, movies such as *Monsters, Inc.*, and books such as *Where the Wild Things Are*.³⁵⁵ Since I finished my PhD work, I've noticed that there are a growing number of therapists now using monsters when working with children.³⁵⁶ In the groups that I have facilitated, I have found that people quickly connect the idea of a monster to the issue disrupting their life and relationships and having a picture of it provides a visual tool for actually looking at it objectively so that they, and others in the group, can identify strategies for how to deal with the monster. If it can't be driven from their lives, they can at least learn how to cope with its appearances.

Second Group: Journey through Life

In the second group, I also provided a visual tool in the form of pictures of all different kinds of luggage that one might use when going on a journey. I used the metaphor of life as a pilgrimage or journey. Like monsters, this metaphor is widely

³⁵⁵ Think for instance of *Where the Wild Things Are* and how successful it has been in influencing a whole generation of children. See Caitlin White, "Maurice Sendaks Where the Wild Things are Taught us These Seven Vital Life Lessons," (10 June 2014) available online at <https://www.bustle.com/articles/27544-maurice-sendaks-where-the-wild-things-are-taught-us-these-7-vital-life-lessons>, accessed 22 February 2018.

³⁵⁶ See the work of Mary Morrison Bennett, professor at Texas State University, Institute of Play Therapy and Megan Van Meter, art therapist. Referenced on the website of art therapist Carolyn Mehlomakulu for instance. Her website addresses using monsters as part of therapy: <http://creativityintherapy.com/2013/01/drawing-your-dragons/>. Last accessed 20/4/2018. See also article about a hospital helping children overcome their fears by creating monsters. John Beifuss, "How drawing monsters helps kids cope with scary feelings," *Commercial Appeal*, a USA Today Network, 13 October 2017, <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2017/10/13/monster-art-le-bonheur-childrens-hospital/754015001/>, last accessed 20/4/2018.

understood.³⁵⁷ It is also a metaphor used in the Bible and I have used it in spiritual



Source:
<https://totstotravel.co.uk/blog/choosing-right-suitcase-family-holiday/>

discussion groups at the hospital and cancer centre to discuss life as a pilgrimage.³⁵⁸ My group members were cancer patients. A diagnosis of cancer made awakened them to life in

ways they couldn't have expected. Often the diagnosis brought loss in some form:

loss of the life they had—loss of job, home, or independent living-- or loss of physical abilities. The losses meant adjusting to a new normal. However, the diagnosis also awoke them to an appreciation of life that they hadn't had before the cancer. The metaphor of the suitcase worked well for them. A traveller does not want a bag that is too heavy to carry. Yet, you do want what is necessary for the trip. As a metaphor, the contents of the suitcase can be more than physical belongings; they can be attitudes, beliefs, stories, and memories. As the group participants faced a new life, they went through a time of assessing not only what they had lost, but also what remained. The suitcase metaphor helped them process the life transition. Spiritually, we also discussed what things in the suitcase might need to go if they kept us from moving along a journey toward God and authentic freedom.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Albert Katz and Tamsen Taylor, "The Journeys of Life: Examining a Conceptual Metaphor with Semantic and Episodic Memory Recall," *Metaphor and Symbol*, vol. 23 (2008): 148–173, available online at http://www.maraserrano.com/MS/articulos/mt_33042490.pdf, accessed 22 February 2018. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) also Justin Rossow, "Preaching the Story Behind the Image: A Narrative Approach to Metaphor for Preaching." Ph. D. diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2009. Justin's work with this metaphor is found online at his website: <https://justinrossow.com/about/>.

³⁵⁸ One of the groups I led in 2015, used Christine Valters Paintner's book *The Soul of the Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2015). Paintner often uses this metaphor for the inner and outer journeys we make. See Introduction, 1-2. Chapter 2, "The Practice of Packing Light," 33-48, was the inspiration for my development of the suitcase idea.

³⁵⁹ Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul of the Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within*

When I led the group of clergy members, I first introduced the idea of life as a journey. Then I asked each participant to pick out a picture of a piece of luggage that they would make their own. I had two questions for reflection. The first question was: “What is in your suitcase of life now?” I thickened this question by asking further: “What knowledge, skills, experiences, relationship, etc. do you have in your suitcase now that have helped you get to this point in your life? In pictures or words, add them to your suitcase.” Participants worked with this question, and then reflected on what they had chosen and why they’d chosen it. They were asking themselves what items were necessary for their life and what function these items served. After a period of processing this, I asked the second question: “What do you need for the rest of your life?” Again, I thickened the question by adding. “There might be some things you still need. There might be some things you no longer need that you might want to remove from the suitcase.” I gave them time to work; then we reflected on how the second suitcase was different from the first.

Summary of the Groups

I knew that the monster group had gone as I had planned as soon as the group finished based on the insights participants had about their own behaviour. I used narrative techniques effectively and asked a majority of clean questions that allowed participants to share freely. Group members were very engaged with their monsters and shared openly using externalisation without much prompting. The overall theme of the group was loss and participants were asked to think about a time when they suffered a major loss and how that loss influenced their life then and now.

Participants were given a choice of ten different monsters to choose from. No

(Notre Dame, IN: Sorin, 2015), 34-5.

two people could have the same monster. The following page contains a chart of the monsters chosen, themes arising, and emotions associated with the losses.

<p>Regret</p> 	<p>Image Credit: Unknown Source: https://www.local-guru.net/blog/2012/6/20/sad-monster</p>
<p>Stan</p> 	<p>Image Credit: WotansKriegerin Source: https://depressionscollateraldamage.wordpress.com/2013/03/23/the-monster-in-our-bed/</p>
<p>Losty</p> 	<p>Image Credit: Matthew Inman Source: groundnotes.wordpress.com, Bedroom Monstres</p>
<p>Topsy</p> 	<p>Image Credit: Unknown Source: http://thenameismell.blogspot.com/2010_09_01_archive.html</p>
<p>Themes arising</p>	<p>Loss is disorienting Life goes on Loss can bring learning The loss is something you continue to live with Resignation and acceptance can look similar</p>

Emotions associated with loss today	sadness, guilt, loneliness, lostness, resignation
-------------------------------------	---

Initially, I did not feel as positive about the outcome of the second group because it was so different and I did not use narrative techniques as fully. I led more in the group and was more involved in discussions. I have realised since doing the analysis that differences in the group were largely related to the instrument used for reflection and to the personalities of participants. Both groups yielded positive outcomes for participants and substantiated earlier ideas I had identified in the work of Gadamer and White. Chapter five will include a critical dialogue with Gadamer's and White's work as it relates to this thesis.

Insights gained from the Monster Group

For both groups, insights gained and new learning in the group sessions came as participants reflected on the past and reinterpreted events with the help of others. In chapter two of this thesis I discussed how Gadamer wrote about the importance of context in interpretation. In connection with interpretation, he wrote about the importance of historical conditions under which the original text was created.³⁶⁰ All that happens to us happens within a certain context and that context shapes our interpretation. Gadamer contrasted his work with Schleiermacher's by saying that Schleiermacher wrote that a text or work of art lost some of the meaning when it is taken out of its original context and that the text couldn't be understood unless the original context was fully restored while he, Gadamer, said that the intervening time between the original event and the present time added to the interpretation as people re-interpreted the original meaning. Therefore, it was not

³⁶⁰ Andrzej Wiercinski, "Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Truth of Hermeneutic Experience," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 1 (1):3-14 (2009): 5, available online at: journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/viewFile/2/1.

necessary and was, in fact, futile to try to fully reconstruct the past context.³⁶¹ Gadamer said that the past provides the meaning through the “*interiorizing recollection (Er-innerung)*”³⁶²-- true understanding comes “not in the restoration of the past but in the thoughtful mediation with contemporary life.”³⁶³ In the groups, it would not have been helpful for the original context of an event to be reconstructed. What was necessary for learning, was that people were able not only to look back on the past and see the context, but also to be able to see the loss or gain that had occurred since the original event. In the loss group, all of the participants had painful experiences of suffering. To recreate the original context would have re-opened old wounds and brought back suffering from the time when the loss first occurred. Since the original loss, all had grown. This meant they could look at the loss from a different perspective. That difference of perspective that they had now, enabled them to learn from the experience rather than to remain stuck in past pain and to help others move forward in coping. This was particularly true for the person who had Regret as his monster. In the group, it came out that he was struggling with the pain of regret that came with his loss even though some time had passed since the original event. The others in the group helped him not only acknowledge the pain of the loss, but also look at the event differently. The others listened to S (Regret’s owner), talk about his feelings of loss expressed through his choice of monster. At one point, he struggled with the emotion. Then E and P noticed things about Regret and helped S see Regret differently—less as an enemy trying to hurt him and more as a vulnerable monster who might need a friend. The transition came as E said: “His eyes are sort of saying I don’t know which direction I’m going in.” Then P spoke

³⁶¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 159. A full discussion of the differences in his view from Schleiermacher is found on pages 158-9. See also page 301.

³⁶² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 161.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

up about his looking vulnerable. Bracketed information is my observation of the discussion.

P: His stance is very naïve, isn't it? It's rather like a newborn lamb. All the legs are there but they're not flexed. They're not weight bearing,-- but they obviously are in Regret's case,-- but it looks like a good push and Regret would go over...

S: Yeah... [S was looking at Regret's picture as P spoke. He seemed to be processing this new information about Regret.]

P: Partly because [of the way it is drawn], it looks like a good wind and Regret would go over. Do you know what I mean, it's not flexed.

S: Yeah. He doesn't want to be a dangerous monster. [Because of P's comments, S made the jump from Regret being a monster that would hurt S, to feeling empathy for and identification with Regret.]

S later said about Regret's demeanour "There is a sadness in it and a loss." To which I responded. "The... um...it sounds like he might feel that way because the loss was something very precious to him. Thinking about the preciousness... (S nods thoughtfully.) This exchange seemed to bring relief and healing for S. His mood lightened and, as I observed since then, Regret seems to be less of terror to S since the group.

In both groups, the group experience helped people remember incidents of past events, learn from them as they looked closely at them through the process of externalisation, and then bring that learning into their current situations. E, whose monster was Losty, has learned to live with her monster. She said: "We can't just stick them in a box on a shelf because they are still there, because they happened. I think we all just find ways to carry them...And we learn from them, and work from that." Her sentiment was also voiced by P. This speaks to how the interpretation of original events in their lives have been in constant adjustment as other experiences either thickened the original interpretation and narrative or changed them. Every new reading of the past experience is a new reading of it, bringing a slightly new

interpretation.³⁶⁴ In both groups, participants talked about the importance of learning—from their monsters and from others who helped them reflect on the experience of loss.

This learning was expressed most explicitly in conversations from E about Losty. For instance, E said: “So I’ve learned to live with it (her monster Losty) in my own way as best I can.” Learning comes also with others as they help us process our narratives about an event. S’s monster Regret caused people to think of their own experiences with Regret. Both E and P reflected on Regret as shown in this piece of dialogue from P:

P: One of the things in listening to S and thinking about Regret (S’s monster) has made me think again about the past and what we can and can’t do about the past. It’s just reminded me—...Regret reminded me,... there are levels ... in my being, I think, where I can understand and actually take it in quite deeply, that the past is redeemed. And there is no point in living in the past. And yet at another level, it’s still sort of physically there and is or was something that...occurred in my life...It will carry on until the day I die.

As others reflected on Regret, S also reflected on what they said. This was, as he told me later, an important part of his healing. White realised how this interpreting process in narrative work is aided by others listening.³⁶⁵ Listeners bear witness to the telling of the story, but also contribute to the meaning and become part of the writing.³⁶⁶ In the dialogue above, P and E were both touched by S’s monster Regret. They incorporated the monster into their own stories and also responded to each other. S who had been quite strongly moved as he talked about Regret, gained strength from their empathy and also the wisdom they gave as they talked about their own coping with the monster Regret who had now become a part

³⁶⁴ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 9.

³⁶⁵ See this discussion in chapter two, 10.

³⁶⁶ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: Norton, 1990), 17.

of their narratives.

Gadamer also said that in our making interpretations, not all interpretations are possible.³⁶⁷ It was interesting in the group when the interplay of discussion led to an interpretation that was not possible for an individual member. One of the participants in the monster group, P, had a monster named “Stan.” He had a clear idea of what Stan was like from the very beginning. When someone offered an alternative interpretation, P would reject it. Yet, later in the time, he surprised himself with an observation about Stan that he made regarding his motivations for choosing Stan as his monster as demonstrated in the following dialogue.

P: Yes. Yes. He is I think, almost as a trait, as a disposition, as something or someone inherited or recognised. Um. Looking again, his eyes are rather vacant. I hadn't noticed that. (Laughter) That's funny, isn't it?

A: Does that have any significance for you that his eyes are kind of vacant?

P: Possibility. He could almost be a cypher rather than a real little monster or little being. But there's a certain sense of contentment. I think I was drawn to him because of the way in which...are they flippers? or quasi-arms?...sort of just resting on his belly and that's a sort of very contented posture and, um, it's sort of steady as she goes. So, to that extent, yeah, I still recognize him as very much a part of my make-up.

A: So, he's like a companion that is with you. Do you ever draw on him? Does he ever teach you anything?

P: Probably draw on him far more than I realize. Um. Yeah. I think I do. And I don't know the extent that I do that sub-consciously and the extent which it is part of my DNA. Um. There is a lot of inherited traits in Stan. (Quiet)

A: How does Stan help you?

P: Um. I think he gives me a personal sense of perspective. I mean, I have perspectives and frameworks through what I profess, and what commonly I might be saying (unclear) –what is commonly believed and what I work with and all over and so on. But he reminds me that there is something quite deep down in my dispositions to life that come from him. And, yeah...

A: Is that a positive?

P: Yeah, I think so. I mean. Overall it's a positive. But, it is interesting me saying “his vacant eyes” and his contentedness. There could also be a streak or element of not negativity but, uh, over contentedness. Almost a sense of “don't do anything. . .”

S: Complacency.

P: Yes. Thank you. That's the word. Yeah. A sense of “this is how it is.” Mmm. There is a sense here of, in this particular companion of mine, Stan, you know, a sense of continuity... and relating it to the loss. I think there is a

³⁶⁷ See this discussion in chapter two, 11.

sense of, actually quite a strong sense of continuity, and as a degree of ...not bewilderment, but a degree of the strangeness of it all. I didn't at the time, particularly feel anything seismic under the surface and as far as I'm aware just carried on, and as far as I'm aware I didn't have any deep-seated damage.

S: There was something that you said that brought the word, "resignation" to my mind. Is there a sense of resignation in there?

P: I don't think so. I think it is more a case of this is what life is. I don't think it is resignation. That is a good question. I think it is "this is what life is." This is how Stan and others have responded to that gift of life and responded in the context of faith as it happens. But in a very accept...I won't say low key...because that seems judgmental but in a very accepting way. I don't know... it's difficult one to call... what is the difference between acceptance and resignation?

A: You haven't commented on his mouth, his expression.

P: Mouth? I wasn't sure it that was his nasal aperture. It is quite high up.

(Laughter) Yeah. I suppose if you look at it is the classic downturned grumpy mojo, isn't it, as opposed to the other way around.

S: It doesn't look so much grumpy to me as he looks a little sad.

P: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

A: Does he feel sad, do you think?

P: No. I've not noticed that. I mean. He appealed to me because he was the least ostentatious. Oh. That's interesting isn't it! (Laughter) (P seems startled.) Oh, Carry on.

As in this example, the person, himself or herself, is the one who decides if an interpretation is possible or not. Using the monster allowed other people to comment on it without the monster's owner feeling personally threatened or vulnerable, but the monster's owner still decided on the interpretation. This was very clear in the second group.

The lack of personal ego investment allowed participants to gain insights they may not have been able to have otherwise. Because people felt less vulnerable in talking about their monster instead of themselves, they were more open to question interpretations that they had of past experiences, more willing to change fore-projections.³⁶⁸ They may have come to the group with a particular interpretation of their experience of loss; but, they left with a different view of the experience almost

³⁶⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 269. See chapter 2, 12-3 for this discussion.

like someone seeing a valley from one vantage point on a hill and then seeing the same valley but noticing different aspects of it as they moved to a different viewing point. P had this experience when he realised based on the questions of other participants that what he thought was contentment in Stan was actually complacency. S had experienced a loss situation that left him with regret and guilt. He teared up as he described Regret for the group. Yet, later one of the group members observed that Regret, as a monster, was rather cute. There was laughter. Then P compared the picture of Regret to a “new born lamb” who was unsteady on his feet and looked like “a good wind and Regret would go over.” S said, “He doesn’t want to be a dangerous monster.” We could all feel that some kind of healing had happened in that moment as S’s view of the terribleness of Regret softened and he saw Regret in a different light, with compassion for Regret’s vulnerability. Gadamer wrote that people’s horizon, their range of vision, can change—almost like a door opening to new possibilities. You could feel that expansion of vision in this simple encounter. Both P and S were creating text through as original experience was re-interpreted in light of new possibilities that arose in the group interactions.

Insights from the Second Group

In the second group, each participant compiled the objects/experiences in his or her own suitcase and then interpreted the objects for us. The group began with each person sharing what he or she had listed as the important relationships, experiences, gifts, and skills in their suitcases. This exercise demonstrated that even though others can help us re-interpret our experiences, they cannot reach into our past to recreate the events that led to the interpretations. We must open up the past for others to see. However, once we bring the memory and interpretation, group members may help shape our present and future as we listen and learn from one

another.

The dynamic of the second group, because it depended so much on people knowing what was important to them and knowing what they needed to put into their bag, was very different. Compared to the first group, I was aware of how quiet the group time was. It made me uncomfortable at times and I would sometimes go to my next question more quickly than I would have in a group with more talking. I also found I had a more active role in this group than in the previous one. This is demonstrated in the following exchange:

A: This exercise is important to think about what you need to carry for life but also what you don't need to take along.

Any other insights? (Silence) Ok. Let's look back at the second list...

A spiritual director asked me on the retreat if the early settlers in America had only five kernels of corn to survive. What would be your five kernels of corn to survive?

(Quiet.)

Do you have them in your suitcase? (Quiet.)

What would you add that you don't have? (Quiet)

There was far more listening with less interaction among members as each participant described the suitcase contents and their meanings.

E: Like P, the first ones are the experiences, the path you've trod, and people you've come across. But the second one, I thought about what I still hang on to as a result of that. It's more like, um, the education side. You experience these things and now hopefully you've grown as a result of these experiences. And, it what's comes out of that that I think I need to hang on to. I think Outward Bound is an experience but I learned an awful lot about me in that—I didn't at the time—but as I looked back that's when the confidence came. That was an experience I went through (laughs). I couldn't do those things now. But, what I've taken from that. The second list is more what I feel I need to support me, and uplift me, and give me relaxation and company—that sort of thing.

J: Mine are...I put things in that I've enjoyed as I've come through life. I put friendliness in there; teaching; thirst for God; I'm a mum, daughter, sister, and an aunt. Some of the things I've cross out—bitterness, jealousy and anger. I've got those in my life and I want to leave those behind. Um. The only three things I've got to take forward on my list are: patience, listening to God and hearing him, and being a blessing to others.

E: Well done.

Silence was not passive, but active as group members used it for

self-reflection. As Gadamer has observed, the silence became part of the listening. There was an absence of awareness of time passing as participants were engrossed and attentive to how to respond to the questions.³⁶⁹ The discussions also demonstrated the importance of temporality and tradition. You could hear the continuity of experience as participants remembered past events and reinterpreted the original meanings in light of present time. Insight gained through time, helped some determine what items were no longer important and whether other life experiences should be added now. As group leader, I functioned both as a facilitator creating space for participants to witness to one another's stories and become co-writers of a new narrative, and as a leader who helped individual participants process their own story.

About half way through the group time, I told the group the story of the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth in the U.S. In the beginning, life was difficult, and the settlers had depleted their resources. Some days they only had five kernels of corn to get them through the day. When the Native Americans began to help them, they were grateful and hosted a feast to express their gratitude to their new neighbours and to God. Each Thanksgiving feast after that event, the people would include five kernels of corn on each person's plate to remind people of the hardship they had suffered and to inspire them to gratitude. Then I asked the group participants, "If you only had five kernels of corn to put in your suitcase—five things that were necessary for your life—what would they be?" This story seemed to help them focus on a deeper level what they most needed. It was after this telling that participants mentioned their insights. After the long silence and series of questions I referenced

³⁶⁹ See Sheila Ross, "Event Hermeneutics and Narrative: Tarrying in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer," PhD Thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada 2003, vii.

above, two of the members, E and P, mentioned insights they had gained through this exercise.

E: I think it almost feels like a selfish thing to think about –but I’m thinking about a broken relationship. I actually need that relationship to come back. But when you’ve done all you can and it doesn’t help, what do you do? I’m one of those people who need support. When I get in the car after church on Sunday, I’ll ask, “Was that alright?” R (her spouse) is in the car and he says, “Oh for goodness sake!” (Laughter). I need that support. I know I need people around me. I need something to support me. I read into things sometimes because I need people in my life.

A: So, does it have to be that particularly person or is it your need for others?

E: Well it would be nice if that particularly person would come back into my life. Yeah, but yes. Don’t take this wrong, but there are substitutes. But it is still a lot. I can’t get over it. I just want it there so there we go. (Silence...)

A: It still teaches you something. It teaches you that you need others, for what that other gave you. It also says there is a wound there that needs healing somehow. How do I live if there isn’t a total healing there? (E nods. There is quiet as we all think.)

For P, texts were very important. As he talked about the various texts he would put into the suitcase, he came to realise how life giving reading was for him.

P: I think I need written texts—Scripture-- because to me that’s inexhaustible and I hope and pray that I will be able to engage with it and interact with it in all sorts of strange ways, perhaps, you know, for the rest of me days. And still have the facility to read and comprehend and think about the what ifs and all the lovely things you can do with scripture and prayer. But that extends to me to written texts in the plural. It’s a bit ironic but when I go on holiday, I put books in the case --that I don’t read. Deb says, “You’re not going to read four at once. Just take one.” (Laughter) But, this all totally irrelevant in the age of Kindle.

A: But it is telling you something.

P: Yeah. I realize how life giving texts are. They always have personalities to me. They are pretty foundational in my life, narratives and texts. Um... The other thing is memory. My memories of what I’ve experienced. The parental one—part of my love is my parents and their grappling with the texts—it was life for them. There was an attitude of that that’s come through so I can see how they’re linked. Um... Yeah.

A: How might you preserve memory and keep it living?

P: A couple responses to that I think—all bound up in texts again. In somewhere in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer writes about, in a very nostalgic vein-- his youth. It’s something like: “With repentance and thanksgiving, the past is always before you.” And, I’ve often mulled over that. Because it’s stronger than nostalgia, stronger than regrets, it’s a present attitude to life—repentance and thanksgiving which in a strange way reinvigorates the past and brings out some even more of the splendors of the

past. Um... But then I'm very conscious that as far as I can tell, I've had a very happy past so it would be a totally different dialogue if it were someone else. Someone else doesn't matter, I know. It's just that..

A: what you need?

P: Yes. And that's true for him (Bonhoeffer) also.

P also talked about the importance of memories. E talked about the importance of relationships. J and A talked about the things they've enjoyed. All shared what they didn't put into the suitcase and reflected on what they would take out of their suitcases if they were packing them now. A brief discussion of how heavy your luggage could be if you had to carry it everywhere yourself, especially on a train trip, assisted reflection.

J: Makes you think. Makes you think about what you are bringing in your suitcase, what you are carrying around with you. It can be an eye opener. You may want to get rid of some of it in a hurry.

E: Hardest part is what to get rid of. We can be hoarders. If we go by train, you can only carry so much. This is a practical lesson about how little we actually need. Our minds are full of an awful lot that we could get rid of.

J: I saw an activity with a jar with big stones in it, sand and water. You put the big stones in first and everything fits, but if you put them in last, they won't fit. This group reminded me of that. Put the big stones in first....

As with the first group, this group worked with memories and the past. The questions and discussion, rather than helping them reinterpret experiences, brought some memories to the foreground and helped them reprioritise or appreciate them.

Conclusion

As I reflect on these groups, I am reminded of research I had done on Viktor Frankl's work. Though having suffered greatly in the concentration camps, Frankl understood how important the past is to us for making meaning in our lives. Through his work with Logotherapy later in life,³⁷⁰ he taught counsellors and therapists that memories of loss "became a rich repository since they are 'stored and treasured' in

³⁷⁰ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 117-8 discussing Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 175.

memory, a place from which they can be retrieved and reconnected to present experience for meaning-making.”³⁷¹ One quote in particular that seems appropriate when speaking of this group experience is:

To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives; the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.³⁷²

My story of the five kernels helped participants look into the full granary of their pasts to find what they needed most in their lives today. The group experience was helpful for all. In contacting a month later, participants told me they were still reflecting on the five kernels and their suitcases. One had already put it into a sermon.

I received good feedback from both groups. However, the experience of each was very different. The methods used in the groups continue to influence the outcome for participants. P and E from the monster group still mention Regret and their own monster and how they are continuing to learn from them. Participants from the other group are doing more interior work related to what they need in their lives as they are going through times of change with retirement for one, aging for another, and the general changes in the Church. In my next chapter, I will continue to discuss these difference but within the context of the work of White and Gadamer to talk about what this work could mean for future work I and others do in this field.

³⁷¹ Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 118.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 175.

Chapter Five

Meaning for Now and the Future

Introduction

While leading groups at both a large Cancer Centre and Behavioural Health Facility, I discovered that it was important to not only listen to people's stories but to help them look more closely at their stories and interpret them. In researching and writing my PhD thesis, I found the tools in narrative therapy to do this powerful and healing work. This MPhil has sought to understand on a deeper level not only how the interpreting narrative process works but also how clergy and others who routinely and professionally listen to people's stories, can do so in a more intentional and healing way. For this, I looked to Gadamer's work and returned to my narrative study particularly looking at the work of White. As part of my process, I led two different group discussions. Both used two important narrative processes: (1) listening to people's stories in a specific way; and (2) utilising an intentional method of questioning in which the group leader comes from a place of not knowing what the outcome of the conversation will be and asks carefully crafted questions that allow the respondent to learn through self-generated understanding.³⁷³

In this chapter, I will be entering a critical dialogue with the work of Gadamer, White, and one other—Charles Gerkin-- to analyse and interpret the work done and generate suggestions for ongoing work in using narrative methods for supporting

³⁷³ Narrative therapists have developed the methodology specifically to help people look deeply at how they have interpreted events in their lives. In asking these sorts of questions, the therapist is drawing out more information about these events and people's understanding of them. At the same time these questions enable people to imbue the events with meaning and significance. See Maggie Carey and Shona Russell, "Re-Authoring: Commonly Asked Questions," *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3 (2003): 60-71. More will be discussed about this methodology in that section of the thesis. See also my discussion in chapter three and on pages 223-4 in Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015.

people emotionally and spiritually. In particular, I will talk about how Gadamer's work is vitally important for understanding how and why narrative techniques work and how his writing provides a hermeneutic for narrative therapy. Finally, I will talk about how the work in groups could be used to support people in a theologically reflective process.

Openness in Listening-with

Anton Boisen, first used the phrase 'the living human document'³⁷⁴ to help seminary students understand how to support patients they ministered to in a hospital environment. He took them out of the classroom and took them to the bedside of patients to listen to their stories, hopes, and desires. In this process of "listening to a person's story and hearing the references to the experiences that have shaped that person's faith and outlook on life,"³⁷⁵ the pastoral care provider is better able to understand the "theological, psychological and social needs of patients".³⁷⁶ A pastoral counsellor utilizing narrative therapy methods to assist in the listening is able to enter into the person's story and assist the person in better understanding the forces and beliefs that have shaped his or her thinking and actions. Listening in this way allows the pastoral care provider to become not only a bearer of stories, but also an empathetic guide who facilitates a serious open dialogue that includes the "sharing of feelings, stories of past experiences, mutual questioning, and search for authentic connections"³⁷⁷ and new horizons to explore.

³⁷⁴ Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 185; *Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors* (New York and Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 5. He is credited with developing the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) used to train chaplains in U.S. hospitals. See David A. Steere, 'Anton Boisen: Figure of the Future?' *Journal of Religion and Health*, 8:4 (1969), 359

³⁷⁵ Ismael Gama, "Getting a Patient's Whole History," *OnFaith* (2008), available online at <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2008/07/22/living-human-document/6972>. Last accessed 30 May 2018.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ Charles Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 112.

I have chosen in my PhD work and professional life to focus on a particular way to be a bearer of stories and empathetic guide--using techniques of narrative therapy. I first began my work with narrative therapy because it specifically worked with people's stories. But since then I have come to appreciate not only its differences from psychoanalytical therapies based on the work of Freud, Adler, and others, but also the ways it functions as a "liberating process using respectful curiosity."³⁷⁸ In the group work and theory presented in this thesis, I have been reminded of the differences between Narrative and Psychoanalytical therapies. There are two areas of difference in particular that I feel are important for this work.

Recognising our Biases

If you ask practitioners of psychoanalytical therapy to explain the purpose of this counselling modality, their answers will vary greatly.³⁷⁹ However, looking for commonalities, the first one you will notice is that most people seeking psychoanalysis therapy either already have a diagnosis or will receive one during the assessment time. Mental Health Practitioners and Counsellors are taught to assess and make a diagnosis and increasing called to demonstrate evidence-based care.³⁸⁰ Treatment plans are created based on the diagnosis and research. "Yet a diagnosis is actually no more than a linguistic construct. It is often designed for the needs of one profession but it may serve others' needs inadequately or not at all."³⁸¹ Narrative

³⁷⁸ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, "The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy," in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 19.

³⁷⁹ Mark Vahrmeyer, Brighton & Hove Psychotherapy, "What is the Purpose of Counseling or Psychotherapy," (13 July 2015), available online at <https://www.brightonandhovepsychotherapy.com/blog/what-is-the-purpose-of-counselling-or-psychotherapy/>. Last accessed 4 June 2018.

³⁸⁰ Peter Fonagy, "Psychoanalysis Today," *World Psychology* 2, Issue 2 (June 2003): 73-80, available online at www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1525087/, Last accessed 12 June 2018.

³⁸¹ David Armstrong, "Construct Validity and GPs' Perceptions of Psychological Problems," *Primary Care Psychiatry* 2 (1996):119-122, available online at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1114579/>, last accessed 5 June 2018.

therapeutic practitioners do not emphasize a diagnosis, and may even avoid utilising one to determine the path to follow in therapy. The reasoning for this is that a diagnosis can act as a label that causes people to negatively judge the patient according to societal and cultural norms. The diagnosis generates unacknowledged prejudgements regarding behaviours the patient may exhibit and even about the patient's past. Without realising it, therapists can be influenced by their past experiences with people who have a similar diagnosis, and this influences their response and treatment plan for the new patient they see. Furthermore, the diagnosis itself can be stigmatising and affect how the person views himself or herself. In many cases the diagnosis can contribute to the patient feeling abnormal and trapped in certain behaviours and stories.³⁸² For the therapist, the diagnosis "may also distract attention from parts of the patient's story that might create cognitive dissonance"³⁸³ and could lead to new interpretations if these threads are followed.

Having worked in a large teaching hospital system, I realise that any kind of criticism of evidence-based care today is controversial. However, though this system of care and research brings many benefits, it also has weaknesses in working with mental health that I feel narrative therapists and Gadamer's work have suggested and addressed. The process of diagnosing is one. However, the philosophical thought behind evidence-based care, also rests on the modern model of scientific rationality and its presupposition of positivism-- that all that happens can be scientifically, mathematically, or logically verified. This belief that came out of

³⁸² Trowlett, blog for Advanced Theories of Family Therapy II, Department of Marriage and Family Therapy, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, TX (14 July 2013), available online at: <https://cn8357.wordpress.com/author/trowlett/>, last accessed 5 June 2018.

³⁸³ David Armstrong, "Construct Validity and GPs' Perceptions of Psychological Problems," *Primary Care Psychiatry* 2 (1996):119–122, available online at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1114579/>, last accessed 5 June 2018.

Enlightenment reveals a “faith in perfection,” that humankind can be completely free from “superstition” and the “prejudices of the past.”³⁸⁴ Gadamer said that the desire to eliminate all prejudice is not only unrealistic but can also be unhelpful as we seek new understandings of our world. He also said that all of us come to a text or experience with our own preconceived expectations, prejudices or horizons. Knowing this prepares us to see how our prejudgments affect our lives. New insight comes, which can open the door to a whole new interpretation or horizon, when a text or experience doesn’t “fit perfectly with my own meanings and expectations.”³⁸⁵ Rather than trying to eliminate all prejudice or influence from the past, we must seek to be aware of our prejudices; yet, “remain open to a meaning” coming from another source.³⁸⁶ Instead of thinking that we can eliminate all prejudgments and find the perfect objective reality, Gadamer talks about the “fluid multiplicity of possibilities” that arise as we recognise our own prejudgments and those of others.

Furthermore, he said that the negative connotations regarding prejudice that the Enlightenment fostered created “the prejudice against prejudice itself.”³⁸⁷ What is the problem with this? When we think we can be perfect, without any prejudice or bias, and we strive for that, we can believe that we are actually without prejudice even as we see it in others. Gadamer said that the problem is not our prejudices but our inability to see our biases.³⁸⁸ Recent research in cognitive and social psychology corroborates Gadamer’s work. When we think we are seeing issues and events

³⁸⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 275.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 270.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 271.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 273.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 271. David Tracy also affirms Gadamer in this saying that the “prejudice against prejudice disallows an experience of the disclosure of the truth of an authentic work of art.” See his discussion in David Tracy, “Chapter 1: The Context: The Public Character of Theological Language,” in *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, Religion Online at <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-1-the-context-the-public-character-of-theological-language-by-david-tracy/>. Last accessed 7 April 2020.

objectively, as they are in reality, we are actually being influenced by personal biases.³⁸⁹ People can see the impact and existence of bias in others, but “they lack recognition of...the role that those same biases play in governing their own judgments and inferences.”³⁹⁰ He said that removing our prejudice to prejudices, actually allows us to appropriately understand our finitude and opens us to the “activities of understanding which permeate all our experiences” and make us human.³⁹¹ It is better to acknowledge that we all have expectations and fore-meanings that bias us; for in our accepting of this, we can give ourselves permission to look for, see, and respond to them. Rather than eliminating the multiplicity that different horizons bring, the hermeneutic task becomes questioning which brings new interpretations but also accepts the “appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices.”³⁹² It is not the elimination of prejudice that gives us true understanding, but “the recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice.”³⁹³

Narrative therapists are trained to be aware of their prejudgments and yet, remain open. Through a process of remaining open in order to understand, the therapist is able to ask questions that can bring forth a different story, a more hopeful or healing one, than expected. This type of exploration does not preclude offering a diagnosis or even suggesting medical treatment for physical symptoms³⁹⁴. However,

³⁸⁹ Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross, “The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self Versus Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016): 369-380. Available online at www.sakkyndig.com/psykologi/artvit/pronin2015.pdf, last accessed 14 June 2018.

³⁹⁰ Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin, and Lee Ross, “The Bias Blind Spot: Perceptions of Bias in Self Versus Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016): 369. Available online at www.sakkyndig.com/psykologi/artvit/pronin2015.pdf, last accessed 14 June 2018.

³⁹¹ Jack Mendelson, “The Habermas-Gadamer Debate,” *New German Critique*, 18 (Autumn 1979), 53.

³⁹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 271. Gadamer calls our prejudgments, fore-meanings. See Page 269.

³⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 272.

³⁹⁴ David Armstrong, “Construct Validity and GPs’ Perceptions of Psychological Problems,” *Primary Care Psychiatry* 2 (1996):119–122, available online at:

this listening with the person allows other stories to emerge that might never be heard if only diagnostic questions are asked.

The groups were non-therapeutic so diagnosis was never an issue. However, people involved in the groups all came with prejudgments—about what the group would be like and about their own stories of the past. All of us came thinking, at least on a subconscious level, that we were seeing the past and present events objectively, as they are in reality. New insight came as group members were freed to see beyond the influences of personal biases. A good example of this is P's interaction with his monster Stan. The questions and interactions with others in the group helped him see that what he had read as contentment was actually complacency. He began to examine how what he thought was contentment in his own life might actually be complacency and to think about what that meant for him.

Historically Effected Consciousness

The second difference between psychoanalytic and narrative therapy is seen in how a psychoanalytical therapist pursues his or her care plan for helping clients. The care plan often includes goals related to helping people: be more self-aware of their emotional states, be more able to express their emotions and needs in an appropriate manner, and separate “the past from the present on an emotional level, so that they can experience their emotional response to the world based on their present needs, rather than on past trauma being re-triggered and replayed.”³⁹⁵ An underlying tenet of psychoanalytic theory is determinism--reflected in a belief that the patient's past determines present action. Psychoanalytical therapists work on the

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1114579/>, last accessed 5 June 2018.

³⁹⁵Mark Vahrmeyer, Brighton & Hove Psychotherapy, “What is the Purpose of Counseling or Psychotherapy,” (13 July 2015), available online at <https://www.brightonandhovepsychotherapy.com/blog/what-is-the-purpose-of-counselling-or-psychotherapy/>. Last accessed 4 June 2018.

assumption that even though people can change how they think about an issue or past event, behaviour is determined by unconscious motivations that have evolved during key psychosexual stages of early childhood. Even when “human actions or decisions seem to indicate the operation of free will, or a freedom of choice, [they] can be shown, on closer inspection and analysis to be based on unconscious determinism.”³⁹⁶ A therapist, as expert, helps a client by interpreting the narratives of behaviour that the client brings. Psychoanalytic therapists do help a lot people. However, though a therapist who has “a deterministic view toward treatment” can help the client make “rational sense of the client’s experiences, relieving him of the experience of guilt,” the therapy process utilised “may make the client feel powerless over the experiences he wants to change.”³⁹⁷ Deterministic assumptions about behaviour could also mask unexplored bias or prejudice. If either the client or the therapist doesn’t recognise that prejudice, they can’t move to a new understanding.

White and other trained Narrative therapists hold the belief that a problem cannot make or cause a person to act in a certain way. Narrative works on the assumption of a temporal dimension--that the development of peoples’ stories about who they are happens through time and is fluid. Although social and cultural factors are important influences on thought and behaviour, the influences can be identified,

³⁹⁶ Robert Knight, “Determinism, ‘Freedom,’ and Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Psychology: Interpersonal and Biological Processes* 9, Issue 3, 1946 (11 November 2016): 251. (251-262) See also Patrick Cody, “What psychodynamic psychotherapists think about free will and determinism and how that impacts their clinical practice: a qualitative study,” Smith Scholar Works, *Theses, Dissertations, and Projects*. 872. Available online at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses?utm_source=scholarworks.smith.edu%2Ftheses%2F872&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages. Last accessed 4 June 2018.

³⁹⁷ Patrick Cody, “What psychodynamic psychotherapists think about free will and determinism and how that impacts their clinical practice: a qualitative study,” Smith Scholar Works, *Theses, is, and Projects*. 10-11. Available online at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses?utm_source=scholarworks.smith.edu%2Ftheses%2F872&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages. Last accessed 10 July 2018.

examined, and discarded.³⁹⁸ People are always looking back and interpreting their experiences in light of what they now know. This means that narrative therapy works on the premises of social constructionist philosophy not determinism. “Social constructionism offers a view that personality is socially constructed” and Narrative Therapy “offers a means to make visible or deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions about how things ought to be.”³⁹⁹ Determinism closes off possibilities. Narrative Therapy’s underlying tenets allow the openness that is needed for real listening, conversation, and understanding to happen. Historically effected consciousness was evident in the second group as people remembered past events and gave them new meaning for their lives now and for where they thought they would be heading in the future.

So, Narrative Therapy provides some of the main tenets that make healing narrative work possible and it provides the tools. Gadamer’s work provides a hermeneutic for how interpretation happens as people come to understand their story and its effects. His work also provides a language and theory of listening.⁴⁰⁰

Listening-to, Listening-for, Listening-with

As I continue, I will be referring to the different ways of listening mentioned earlier in this thesis: *listening-to* someone, *listening-for* some piece of information, and *listening-with* another person.⁴⁰¹ Listening-with is the kind of listening that takes place in narrative work. As mentioned in chapter 2, listening-with happens when both

³⁹⁸ Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (New York: Sage, 2006), 32. See also Bill O’Hanlon, “The Third Wave: The Power of Narrative,” Chelvington, East Sussex: Human Givens, 1995, <http://www.hgi.org.uk/archive/thirdwave3.htm#>. UinqKeCLSR4.

³⁹⁹ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, “The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy,” in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 19.

⁴⁰⁰ Mike Jostedt, “Jane Addams and Hans-Georg Gadamer: Learning to Listen with the Other,” PhD Thesis, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL (2015), 11.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.* Abstract, 33-44.

parties work together with a “sympathetic understanding”⁴⁰² to gain understanding. Listening-to and listening-for can contribute to misunderstanding or misinterpreting since they are both rooted in the listener’s own interests and prejudices. Listening-with involves an openness that stands in contrast to judgment, blame, or determinism. “Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.”⁴⁰³ Listening-with was the primary form of listening exhibited in both groups.

This openness that Gadamer refers to as important for interpreting experience as it is for interpreting texts. The process of understanding begins as we enter into the world of a text, carrying with us “a pre-understanding and an interest in the meaning of the text.”⁴⁰⁴ (Gadamer calls these pre-understandings “fore-meanings.”) As we continue to read, we will project a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.⁴⁰⁵ The projection process continues as we gain a deeper understanding of the text and our fore-meanings are revised. Todd compares the process of understanding referenced in Gadamer to a game “in which certain rules apply, but where the outcome is not determined, but is related to performance.”⁴⁰⁶ This same process occurs as we listen-with another. Being aware of our projections is important-- not to eliminate them, but to let new information revise our prejudices and bring new meanings and new projections. “The constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretations.”⁴⁰⁷ This is why remaining open is so important to understanding and listening-with. It is a

⁴⁰² *Ibid.* 12

⁴⁰³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 355.

⁴⁰⁴ Andrew Todd, “Hermeneutics Module, Session 2, Author, Text, and Reader,” Teaching Notes provided by Rev. Dr. Andrew Todd, Sarum College, June 2018.

⁴⁰⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 269.

⁴⁰⁶ Andrew Todd, “Hermeneutics Module, Session 2, Author, Text, and Reader,” Teaching Notes provided by Rev. Dr. Andrew Todd, Sarum College, June 2018.

⁴⁰⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 269.

strength of narrative therapy's practices. The training and tools of narrative therapy, particularly in how to ask questions, allows the open interpreting process to occur. The medium of the questions and answers reveals the different horizons of the listener and speaker and allows the meanings of the narrative to come forth and be recognised and valued for themselves.⁴⁰⁸

Fusion of Horizons – Group Interactions

The openness also allows for us to expand our horizons as we see our own and understand others' horizons. Sometimes as groups members responded to one another, insight came not only for the one telling his or her story but also for the one listening and responding to it. Gadamer speaks of experience using two terms:

Erlebnis and *Erfahrung*. The translators of *Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, note the differences between the two:

Erlebnis is something you have, and thus is connected with a subject and with the subjectivization of aesthetics. *Erfahrung* is something you undergo, so that subjectivity is overcome and drawn into an 'event' (*Geschehen*) of meaning. Gadamer typically uses the term *Erlebnis* with a critical overtone, and the term *Erfahrung* with a positive one.⁴⁰⁹

Erfahrung is specifically related to how we relate to others and the past. In different places Gadamer talks about how viewers are drawn into an experience with works of art and how players are caught up in the game. *Erfahrung* makes possible the fusion of horizons when we suddenly see another's horizon and at the same time see our own. We don't realise we are seeing "horizons", but we see the other's perspective as different from our own in a caring way. This happened in the Monster's group when one of the participants began talking about Regret. Another member said:

"One of the things in listening to S and thinking about Regret is that it has

⁴⁰⁸ Andrew Todd, "Hermeneutics Module, Session 2, Author, Text, and Reader," Teaching Notes provided by Rev. Dr. Andrew Todd, Sarum College, June 2018.

⁴⁰⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), xiii.

made me think again about the past and what we can and can't do about the past." He went on to talk about the past and how though "there is no point in living in the past," there are things in the past that he continues to live with.

Another group member then joined in saying, "We can't stick them in a box on a shelf because they are still there, because they happened. I think we all just find ways to carry them, Regret or whatever."

As one member shared his experience with Regret, others could see their different experiences with Regret in a new light. With empathy they reached out with compassion to offer support to one another but also gained insight into their own struggles with their monsters Regret.

Lived Historical Responses

In both groups, memory was an important part of the discussions. Memory is always an important part of working with people's stories. As Frankl said, memories are "a rich repository"⁴¹⁰ from which we can gather important learning to help us experience the present in new ways to understand ourselves and live our lives better. Gadamer also recognised the importance of the past for meaning making "not in the restoration of the past but in the thoughtful mediation with contemporary life."⁴¹¹ However, Gadamer took reflection of the meaning of a text further than what its original meaning was through his concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.⁴¹² Gadamer, in speaking of texts, talks about the difficulty in looking for the original meaning of a text because of the "intervening tradition" that "colors any attempts to interpret a text today."⁴¹³ Markus Bockmuehl said, regarding New Testament biblical study, that

⁴¹⁰ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 118.

⁴¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 161.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, 299.

⁴¹³ Kyle Hughes, "In Layman's Terms: Wirkungsgeschichte," *Early Christian Archives* (25

studies should include not just a historical focus but also the study of the New Testament work as a historic document. He continued: "Its place in history clearly comprises not just an original setting but a history of lived responses to the historical and eternal realities to which it testifies."⁴¹⁴ As people in the groups told their stories, the stories were not static but developed dynamically over time. Interpretation and story became "lived responses" to the historical, social, emotional, and cultural realities that they faced. Narrative techniques allow for and provide space and acceptance for the dynamic changes that happen to stories and their impacts over time. In leading the groups, I could see that creative process of change in interpretation happening. Sometimes the stories change too. This does not change the underlying truth of the story. I will use an analogy that Gadamer uses to explain how I can say that the story may change, and the truth still remain. Gadamer uses art to discuss how we are open to truth. He talks about the difference between a work of art (the original), a picture of it, a copy, and a mirror.⁴¹⁵ The picture created based on the original is only connected to the original if people can look at the picture and see that the picture "has an essential relation to its original."⁴¹⁶ The picture in some way captures an essence of what the original is about. Gadamer continues then to address a copy that "has no other task but to resemble the original."⁴¹⁷ We expect a copy to look just like the object from which it is copied. It loses its independent existence. A mirror has no separate existence and is only a copy as long as the original is reflected in it. The picture has an independent

January 2013), available online at <https://taarcheia.wordpress.com/2013/01/25/in-laymans-terms-wirkungsgeschichte-1/>. Last accessed 4 June 2018.

⁴¹⁴ Marcus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Studies in Theological Interpretation), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 65.

⁴¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2006), 132-135.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid*, 132.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, 133.

existence but also says something about the original. Gadamer says of the picture, “The content of the picture itself is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original.”⁴¹⁸ In life, our stories are the pictures we create to tell others about who we are, what is important to us, and why we are the way we are. People trained to listen-with others understand that the story tells us some truth about that person. Though the story or interpretation may change over time, there is truth in it. Michael White knew that even if the story told was fictional, it conveys some truth for the person, and he would work with every story as if it was fact.⁴¹⁹

Theological Reflection as Part of Narrative Group Work

The two groups I led were made up of priests. Unsurprisingly, language often associated with the theological came up in conversations. P speaking of his monster said that Stan “embodies” how he feels. Later in the time, P spoke of the past being “redeemed” and then said, “although I can believe that monsters are redeemed by Christ on the cross, they still have an uncanny knack of turning up again.” In the second group, we worked with the metaphor of journey which is a common theme in spirituality. God came up as people talked about the importance of faith for their journeys. All participants in both groups were quite comfortable discussing existential issues.

In working with non-clergy, and perhaps even clergy if you want them to think more deeply about how their faith informs their lives, it is helpful to intentionally include spirituality in group discussion. This can be done by simply bringing in some questions and listening to the responses and stories that emerge. In my PhD work, I found a helpful and unique beginning of a model for this in the work of Charles

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, 135.

⁴¹⁹ See William Bishop, “A Subtle Difference between Narrative and Cognitive Psychotherapy,” available online at: <http://www.thoughtsfromatherapist.com/2011/03/10/narrative-cognitive-therapy-theories-compared-contrasted-difference/>. Last accessed 4 June 2018.

Gerkin.⁴²⁰ Gerkin said that the process of sharing stories and drawing out details through questions could assist people in making “authentic connections” between the person’s particular life stories and the Christian story.⁴²¹ He learned from experience in practice, that these connections often produced a “new set of images,” re-interpretations of memories now imbued with a sense of how God might have been present in unnoticed, positive ways even in places of darkness and suffering. These revelations often produced “a new, less painful and more hopeful story.”⁴²² This led him to espouse a dialogue between other disciplines, including the psychologies, “within a hermeneutic framework of the Christian message.”⁴²³ In his pastoral counselling, he helped people not only see how familial and cultural languages and messages had shaped their dominant life narratives, but also helped them gain insight into how the larger narrative of Christianity might be a source of strength and hope. For Gerkin this larger narrative focused on “incarnational life-style,”⁴²⁴ the awareness of who God is and how human beings’ “activities are permeated and given redemptive coherence and direction by the activity of God.”⁴²⁵ In practice, this meant helping clients perceive, be open to, reflect upon, and cultivate “the awareness of the presence and function of grace.”⁴²⁶ Regarding grace,

⁴²⁰ Alexis Smith, “Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality,” PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 171-177.

⁴²¹ Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 112.

⁴²² *Ibid*, 28.

⁴²³ Thomas St. James O’Connor, *Clinical Pastoral Supervision and the Theology of Charles Gerkin* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1998), 72. See also Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 19.

⁴²⁴ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 321.

⁴²⁵ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 71. See also Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 320.

⁴²⁶ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life: Theory and Theology for Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 322.

he said:

God's grace is more than a promise; it is a reality present in human experience to be recognized and appropriated as it appears in myriad forms incarnate in the events and relationships of life. Its appearance is a mystery to be grasped only through the eyes of faith. Its grasping is. . . a new way of seeing and giving significance to what occurs. Certain events can become parabolic, as if capturing in their significance the power and meaning of grace.⁴²⁷

Narrative therapists understand that “people make sense of their lives through stories”.⁴²⁸ Although each of us has a huge number of experiences in a lifetime, only a few of these experiences will generate stories that shape our sense of self and help us interpret our lives and relationships. For many people, stories of God—either positive or negative-- will also shape how they think of themselves and relate to others and life. Part of the work of narrative therapy is enabling people to deconstruct the problem stories and tell and retell preferred life-giving stories.⁴²⁹ As part of this process, it is common for narrative therapists to also use a “witnessing structure” whereby “outside witnesses” listen and reflect on the stories to contribute to the telling and making meaning process.⁴³⁰ Outside witnesses often are family members or friends, but they can also be “people who played a small but important role historically, figures the person hasn't actually met who have or who could contribute to their life (such as authors or fictional characters), people no longer living, and pets.⁴³¹ Using the witnessing structure combined with the process of

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁴²⁸ Jill Freedman, “Witnessing and Positioning: Structuring Narrative Therapy with Families and Couples,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 35 (2014), 20. See full article pps. 20–30 for all references to narrative literature.

⁴²⁹ Jill Freedman, “Witnessing and Positioning: Structuring Narrative Therapy with Families and Couples,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 35 (2014), 20-21.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴³¹ Gene Combs and Jill Freedman, “Narrative, Poststructuralism, and Social Justice: Current Practices in Narrative Therapy,” *The Counseling Psychologist*, 40(7): 1051 (1033-1060), available online at: <http://therapeuticconversations.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Narrative-Poststructuralism-and-Social-Justice-Current-Practices-in-Narrative-Therapy.pdf>. Last accessed 15 June 2018.

telling and re-telling strengthens the positive stories and helps these to become the dominant ones.

I have seen and read how narrative therapists have utilised biblical stories and references to God in this witnessing role. Gerkin was one who did, although he didn't use witnessing language to describe his pastoral counselling interactions. He insisted that "the stories of the Bible taken together disclose a way of seeing the world and human life in the world as always held within the 'plot' of God's intentional purposes and direction."⁴³² He saw utilising God's narrative as a positive story to bring into the mix of many stories people carry. However, it is important to note as we continue this discussion that many people do not have positive or helpful images of God, and some individual biblical stories would not be healing for re-storying so it is helpful to ask: "How could God's narrative be utilised?" And, "Why should we consider doing this?" I begin with the second question first.

Narrative techniques can be utilised even when people have a problematic⁴³³ image of God. It is important to work with people's image of God if you are including spirituality in narrative work. For "the images used to speak of God not only decisively determine the way one thinks about God, they have a power impact on the shape of the life of the believer."⁴³⁴ This image of a God of passionate love, as found in Moltmann's theology, is particularly powerful for promoting healing, joy, and

⁴³² Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 49.

⁴³³ By problematic, I mean an image of God as wrathful and indifferent. There is a considerable amount of research about how image of God affects us. I discussed this in my PhD work. A recent study talked about the influences that shape our image of God. See Duane Reinert and Carla Edwards, "Attachment Theory and Concepts of God," *Sage Journals*, 2 December 2014, available online at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244014560547>, last accessed 15 June 2018. The work for this thesis does not specifically relate to image of God because even a negative image can be healed and often is in narrative sessions. For more information about healing the image of God see the work by Dennis Linn

⁴³⁴ Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1.

peace. Resilience research has shown that the single most important factor helping people heal from a trauma or crisis is helping them feel unconditional acceptance and love.⁴³⁵ This comes from other people, but also from a well-integrated faith that contains an image of a God who loves and values all human beings, is caring and present in good and bad times, and helps people feel loved and accepted unconditionally. Moltmann's own recognition of God who loved him unconditionally and cared deeply about the pain and injustice of life, transformed his life.⁴³⁶

How could the story of God's activity in creating, sustaining, and redeeming be brought into listening with sessions? Without telling counselees what to believe, questions help people connect to and understand what they believe.⁴³⁷ Using the witnessing structure mentioned earlier, you could ask, "If God were your friend, how do you think God would see your situation?" Or, "How would you like God to understand your experience?" Or, "How might God have been or still be present and speaking to you?" This could be a time when you would look at stories from the Bible that demonstrate God's love, compassion, and care. In the midst of the listening-with the pastoral care provider listens and asks questions that help the person see what is already within them: their resources for resilience, their gifts and strengths, the feeling of call they may have, the memories of past positive experiences with God, and their own styles of worship and prayer. Gerkin called this type of interaction whereby two narrative structures—"that of human activity about which we seek greater clarity and that of the Christian story"—are fused as a process of "mutually

⁴³⁵ See Margot Phaneuf's article "Resilience: Abstract Concept or Survival Skill," http://www.infiressources.ca/fer/Depotdocument_anglais/Resilience_abstract_concept_or_survival_skill.pdf, [accessed 21 September 2012]. Phaneuf provides an overview of the research in this area. See also Boris Cyrulnik, *Resilience* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009).

⁴³⁶ Alexis Smith, "Towards a Narrative of Hope and Resilience: A Contemporary Paradigm for Christian Pastoral Ministry in the Face of Mortality," PhD Thesis, Chester University, Chester, UK, 2015, 252.

⁴³⁷ The importance of using questions and of framing them in specific ways is discussed in chapter 2 and in depth in chapter 3 of this thesis.

critical correlations.”⁴³⁸ His work demonstrates that practical theology seems to work best when it “finds its primary coherence in a contextual approach to the theological text.”⁴³⁹

Unfortunately, Gerkin’s work remains largely theoretical and he worked within a clinical context rather than parish or village. Though Gerkin provided case studies of how this process works, he admitted that more exploration was needed in how this narrative approach to practical pastoral theology would look outside the parish in the “real” world and in other forms of ministry practice.⁴⁴⁰ In my work as a pastoral care provider in the United States and in Wales, I am seeking to carry this work further to test Gerkin’s ideas in areas that he had envisioned but was not able to do.

For continuing work in incorporating spiritual elements into narrative group work, I continue to study the research done by Christian Narrative Therapists who incorporate spirituality into the work they do with their clients—not through telling them what to believe but in using narrative techniques to free people to find and experience the fullness of what their faith could mean for themselves. In studying the work they do, I am convinced that priests and those ministering to others could, with proper training, help people deepen and expand their horizons by helping them not only understand and interpret their own stories but engage with God’s stories from scripture for healing, hope, and resilience in life.

Justification for Training Pastoral Care Providers in these Techniques

In Romans 12:2, we read the statement: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is

⁴³⁸ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 65-67.

⁴³⁹ Paul Ballard, “The Use of Scripture,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 164.

⁴⁴⁰ Charles Gerkin, *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 129, 131.

the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NRSV) We are conformed to the pattern of this world through our thinking and life patterns. But God calls us to be transformed, to come to a new way of knowing and thinking about the goodness of God and God’s purposes, ideas, and ways of living.⁴⁴¹ All this happens through language⁴⁴² and story. Sometimes the stories are unhelpful, causing us to be alienated from ourselves, others, and God. Yet, there are alternate stories about the world, truth, us, others, life purpose, and reality that can provide a whole set of meanings and perspectives for living and living abundantly.⁴⁴³ Narrative practices give us a way to come to the new way of thinking and knowing.

Training in Narrative Practices

Narrative practices can be easily taught and used. Training for group leader is necessary but not difficult, and prolonged study and credentialing is not necessary. Narrative work, because it focuses on questions that help people see more clearly and become more honest with themselves, allows for the questioning of established power structures and creates space for doubts to be voiced. This can be threatening to some people if they depend on the illusion of certainty in life that set and prescribed ways and interpretations can give us. However, for those open to change, narrative work is a powerful technique for deconstructing beliefs based on narrow sets of meanings and exposing and freeing people to find new ways to make sense of and live out their faith in God.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, “The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy,” in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 15.

⁴⁴² See chapter two on the importance of language,

⁴⁴³ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, “The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy,” in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 15.

⁴⁴⁴ Lex McMillan, “Stories of Encounter: Christianity meets Narrative Therapy,” in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 36.

The curriculum for training would include: the philosophy behind narrative techniques, narrative techniques, how to know what questions to ask and when to ask, how to listen, and how to facilitate the group process. Another vital area for training is understanding when and how to refer. Pastoral care providers using narrative techniques are not therapists. This must be clearly articulated and understood.

Narrative practices can be used with groups or individuals on a one-off or ongoing basis. I only had one group session with each group and participants reported lasting insights from that session. I also met my groups at the behaviour health facility once although counsellors continued to work with each group on insights that arose in the group session. At the Cancer Centre, the same group of people met for six weeks. These longer group meetings were truly transformational for those involved.

Pastoral care providers could be trained in narrative techniques and let the hearing of stories be part of how they support people. "This listening to each other's stories from the inside, while still holding one's own reality, is a skill – and a gift to the person who may be having their story heard for the time."⁴⁴⁵ Listening and responding to others is highly relational and can not only bring healing to individuals but also bring people together as they recognise common experiences of life. Narrative techniques can be utilized in sermons and in group work to reach people who may not be used to the religious language often associated with church but who already know the power of story. "Stories are not just passive recollections of events. They are influential ways of seeing the world, ourselves, others, God, knowledge and

⁴⁴⁵ Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, "The History, Ideas and Practices of Narrative Therapy," in *Interweavings: Conversations Between Narrative Therapy and Christian Faith*, Richard Cook and Irene Alexander, eds. (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 9.

reality itself. There are meaning-filled stories about how life is embedded in the remembered stories.”⁴⁴⁶ The key is to have people around to help guide the process. Narrative work can revolutionise how pastoral leaders view people and relate to them. It can break down the existing power structures and provide a freedom for priest and people to be pilgrims in their own lives, to investigate who they are, who they want to be and who God is.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at how the interpreting narrative process works using the work of Gadamer, White, and Gerkin. The most important insights of the work done so far is that importance of listening-with, as opposed to listening-for or listening-to, and asking questions that focus on inviting group participants to collaboratively tell their stories and experience and understand them in new ways. I have also included a section on incorporating faith narratives into the session because “re-remembering conversations that draw on spiritual aspects of clients’ lives can lead to poignant and powerful conversations.”⁴⁴⁷ Even in a highly secular society that seems to have little time or thought for God because of the busyness of life, people still long to find meaning, identity, connectedness, purpose, and even transcendence in their lives. In all the groups that I have been privileged to lead, I and others have reported that they have found these things as we have shared our stories, sought understanding, and gained insight.

In the next and final chapter, I will summarise the work done for this thesis and talk about how it might be carried forward.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁴⁷ Madsen, *Collaborative Therapy with Multi-stressed Families* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 257

Chapter Six

Final Remarks

In the first chapter of this MPhil, I discussed the context from which I began this work and how my work with groups at a large Cancer Centre in the United States led to a desire to explore more critically how groups work within a narrative framing. Ultimately, my goal in all the work I do is to help others connect to their sources of hope and resilience --often by connecting to God through their faith. I am aware of how my own story of early childhood trauma makes this work important to me personally. If one can hang on to hope even in the darkest places of life, one can get through any experience. That hope is not wishful thinking but is founded in a God who loves and cares and is big enough to give us what we need to get through the crises of life.

My own story of resilience informed my belief that stories have tremendous power. This led me to the study of narrative therapy and techniques which became a large part of my PhD research. In using narrative techniques within the groups, I witnessed a particular type of unique outcome – “reconceptualization”⁴⁴⁸—that facilitated a sustained change in group participant’s lives. This reconceptualization facilitated what is called in Narrative Therapy “a meta-level perspective about the change process itself” and, in turn, enabled “the active positioning of the person as an author of the new narrative.”⁴⁴⁹ However, my research didn’t tell me **why and how** narrative techniques work in groups. So, I continued the quest to find the theory behind narrative techniques with this thesis using Gadamer and White as guides.

⁴⁴⁸ Miguel Gonçalves, Marlene Matos, and Anita Santos. “Narrative Therapy and the Nature Of ‘Innovative Moments’” in the *Construction of Change, Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 22, 2009, 1.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The following outcomes have been achieved by this ongoing critical engagement with the theory of Gadamer, White and Gerkin:

One of the most important outcomes in this work was the importance of relationship building. It seems like such a basic and foundation idea that it hardly seems worth mentioning, but for narrative work to achieve the unique outcome of reconceptualization, group members must feel safe and engaged with each other and the process. My “failed” groups and my “successful” groups taught me that it is much easier to build rapport quickly in a one-to-one situation such as a counselling or coaching session, than it is with a group. Several sessions may be needed before trust is at a high enough level for people to be willing to share deeply. The clergy participant groups were different because we all knew each other going into the first group time. We didn’t need the time to get to know each other at the level needed for personal sharing to occur. The leader shouldn’t expect the unique outcomes to happen the first meeting—although they could. How quickly rapport develops will depend on relational factors that differ from group to group. No two groups will be the same.

A goal of the work was to test Gadamer’s theory to see if would explain how and why narrative techniques work. I found that Gadamer’s theory about listening was very important to group work. If narrative groups are going to help others reconceptualise their stories, a specific and unique way of listening which the leader models and indirectly teaches to the others is necessary. There will be a normal conversational to-and-fro; however, within that flow listening-with rather than listening-to someone or listening-for information will be the dominant form of listening. This listening-with another involves an immediate presentness with others. The leader listens-for the metaphors and key terms that will create the opening for a

question, but then when the first clean question is launched, all listen-with the story-tellers who are also listening to their own stories—sometimes hearing them and understanding them for the first time as others join in the interpreting and understanding process.

Another outcome of this research was the testing of the clean questioning theory discussed in chapter three and whether it would facilitate the mode of listening-with that Gadamer discussed. Would it encourage the speaker to reflect on and engage with their own story at a deeper level? I found it is not a form of questioning that comes easily. However, when done properly it did encourage people to reflect more deeply on the meaning in their words and language. Periods of silence are as important as words, and silence becomes its own statement or question. These pauses for empathy or reflection take us out of normal time and allow space for an awareness of the presence of God to come. Clean questioning allows people to use their own language and metaphors; thereby allowing their context to become part of the interpretation and understanding. Each participant's context becomes a contributed horizon that allows all participating to see life and their stories in a different light. Thus, they gain a new perspective on their own interpretations. Human beings often compartmentalise parts of their lives. In listening-with another, we transcend our own walls for interpreting life to gain a more expansive view.

Gadamer's theory about the temporal component of interpretation speaks to how stories are told. In using narrative theory, it is not necessary for participants to recreating or relive the original event for healing to occur. Activities chosen for the group lift the discussion out of a talk-therapy context and provide a tool for participants to use to help them process their interpretation and understanding of

past events embedded in a particular history and culture that shaped them. In some cases, the history and culture are gifts and participants can see those gifts more clearly and understand how that historically effected consciousness will help them in the future. In other cases, the history or culture may have limited the interpretation or meaning making of an event and seeing that there are other interpretations and meanings not based in past messages can be freeing and healing.

Another outcome was testing the importance of a spiritual component. In working with groups of people who have been in places of crisis, I have witnessed how someone's spirituality and faith impact resilience and healing. Since neither Gadamer nor White have spoken specifically to this, an important part of this work was to see if a spiritual component could be compatible with the theory and practice they espoused. It is compatible with Gadamer's and White's critical engagement with how interpreting and understanding happen within and through lived historical responses. Gadamer said we both belong to a tradition and context and it conditions us.⁴⁵⁰ In working with people of faith, the historical tradition will be an important part of how they interpret and understand life. Our faith is not just another human activity like art, morality, or science, but a dimension of all human activities.⁴⁵¹ What people believe can profoundly affect their level of hope and resilience.

Gadamer, and White, also found that we can have experiences of our historical traditions which surprise and challenge us. These surprises and challenges can lead us to the unique outcome of a new understanding of our stories that can bring us healing. In the whole process of listening-with others, as they tell their stories, faith becomes a one more component of context that influences outcomes.

⁴⁵⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 354-5

⁴⁵¹ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 59.

In working with people of faith, it is therefore important to ask the questions that will help people be reflective about how faith is part of their story. I found this to be true in this study and also in the work I currently do. Gerkin's spiritually reflective work, particularly his theological understanding of God's presence with us, is helpful for bringing the subject of faith into a group. Gadamer's theory explains how our being present with another, tarrying with them, opens a place for God and all those involved to enter into communion with one another. As we listen-with one another and listen together for the voice of God in the stories told that space becomes – metaphorically speaking—holy ground.

Hope and healing are within the participants who find it as they co-labour with all the others in the group. It does not come from the leader. Narrative Therapy techniques, particularly how questions are asked and how people listen and hear in the sessions, brings the theory to application.

I have experienced the power of using this theory in groups and can see the potential for a wider application. People carry stories with them wherever they go. Any place can become holy ground. In working with the groups and actually putting the theory into practice, I realised how important it is to teach group leaders the techniques: clean questioning, listening-with, silence as a form of communication, listening for metaphors and mirroring back the language used. It is also important for us to teach this theory and practice to others. Further work will be on how to put that together into a workshop.

My hope is that this thesis and the future work that comes from it will enable others, particularly in ministry settings, to create transformation groups that will help others experience more hope in their lives. The desire to help others find hope and to be more resilient continues to be an important part of my life and work.

Appendix

Research Plan

Working Title: (Research MPhil, Cardiff University) Developing Companionship Groups within the Church in Wales to Support Spiritual Growth and Community Building

Main goals and outcomes of this research:

- To explore how narrative therapy techniques can be utilized with groups operating in a rural, village context.
- Utilizing narrative therapy and its core understanding of human beings as having “multi-storied” lives, to develop methodology to facilitate working with people to help them explore what faith means for them.
- To understand how people choose find meaning through the act of telling their stories.

Stages:

- Ethics approval has been granted for this project.
- The next stage in this research project is to develop a methodology for working with a group in a rural, village context. Therefore, the project begins with research and engagement in hermeneutics. A key source for this work will be Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* for providing the theoretical understanding. I believe this dissertation will take Gadamer’s work further than he took it by looking at **how** his theory could be applied. This could further understanding in the fields of theology, hermeneutics, and education.
- After the research is finished a methodology will be developed.
- The methodology will be utilized with a group in a local, Welsh village. After each meeting, I will write field notes and surveys will be utilized before and after the group to provide feedback on the group experience.
- Information from the notes and the surveys will be gathered and analysed.
- A second group will be launched and the process repeated.
- Finally, I will write a detailed analysis for the dissertation and out of that I will suggest methodology and develop a schematic for future groups and discuss how this contributes to work in the field.

Timescale:

- By 1 December 2016, draft of chapter one finished, discussing factors that will affect the research, study, and groups.
- By 2 February 2017: Preliminary research finished, plans in place for launching first group in February-March.
- By 15 December 2017: Groups are finished; Analysis has begun.
- By summer 2018: Analysis and further research is finished.
- July-August, 2019: Finish write up and submit.

Supervision

My tutor and I have met monthly.

Skills Assessment

I have the necessary research skills for this work. I completed a PhD at Chester University and had research skill training at University of Wales, Lampeter, and Chester University as part of the process for completing my PhD. This dissertation employs new sources and develops a new area of research although it utilizes my expertise in Narrative Therapy gained through my PhD studies, research, and writing and my experience in group work learned in teaching and in leading groups as a full-time, staff, Board-Certified, hospital chaplain. I am fully qualified to utilize software necessary for completing the research as demonstrated in my PhD work and in teaching.

Ethics Approval

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