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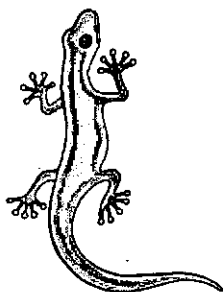
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'I give things a go': The story of how Dylan Wise rediscovered his confidence

by

Andrew Tootell¹

This story, which I was privileged to hear and document, was given to me by an eleven-year-old boy called Dylan who attended four therapy sessions over a period of three months with his mother, Gwen, and father, Paul. Dylan is the eldest child of three, with a younger sister and brother. This paper has been constructed from my memories of our sessions together, copies of letters I sent to Dylan, a videotape of our fourth and final session, a written evaluation that Gwen completed one month after our last family session, and a letter from Dylan three months later. Both Dylan and his family hope that this document will be of some help to other counsellors, teachers, children and families who may be struggling with similar problems in their own lives.²

There are numerous metaphors we can use to describe the process of narrative therapy. Personally I like the 'archaeology' metaphor³. Working collaboratively with children and their families, we slowly and patiently unearth special abilities and qualities that are often passed over, lost or forgotten. These are the treasures, the 'sparkling events', buried and concealed under years of accumulated dominant stories. The process of therapy, for me, is also about privileging the

voices and experiences of all family members, including the despair as well as the hope. I see the act of writing about our collaborative work together as documenting these archaeological discoveries, while at the same time staying as close as possible to the family voices and experience. In my work with Dylan and his family, we were able to unearth a number of important events and experiences that did not fit with, and indeed began to contradict, the dominant story that Dylan was a young person who was depressed, lacking in confidence, unable to make friends, and not very good at sport. This is not to deny or in any way trivialise the 'reality' of these experiences. Rather, it is to emphasise that there are always experiences lying outside of the dominant story that remain unstoried. As E. Bruner says (quoted in White & Epston 1990, p.11):

... life experience is richer than discourse. Narrative structures organise and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story.

For me, the 're-authoring process' of narrative therapy is about working collaboratively with children and their families to articulate alternative stories about themselves that privilege the lived experiences that dominant stories disqualify. This in turn opens up new possibilities for future actions.

The first family session

I could tell that Dylan was nervous the first time we met, but we both began to relax when we discovered a common interest in soccer. I immediately felt comfortable with Dylan, and I guess he reminded me a little of the eleven-year-old Andrew.

Dylan's mother, Gwen, related the story of how, two years prior to our meeting together, the family had moved from an industrial town in New South Wales to a rural suburb of Adelaide, South Australia. Dylan's father was a member of the Air Force and it wasn't the first time that the family had been expected to relocate. Gwen then began to tell me about the history of her concerns about Dylan.

She had been 'feeling fairly desperate'. She told me how Dylan had

'ongoing difficulties in making friends'. She was 'concerned about his emotional state - lots of tears and no company'. Gwen had been on the CAMHS⁴ waiting list for quite a few months and, in the interim, she had taken Dylan to a counsellor at the neighbourhood house. This counsellor was concerned about Dylan and felt he needed to see someone at CAMHS as soon as possible.

In a retrospective evaluation, Gwen told me about how she 'felt very alone in the problem - alone as a family'. Gwen wrote: 'Throughout the years I have not received much support through the schools as Dylan is a quiet, well-behaved child who never gives anyone trouble - except for the school counsellor in New South Wales who believed he was a nice kid but would find it difficult in that particular school (it was very rough) to meet similar children. She was concerned that such an outdoor child was seeking refuge for his loneliness and fear of bullying in the library at such a young age.'

Apparently other people, including professionals, had told Gwen that Dylan needed to 'take or be given more responsibility', that Gwen was 'doing too much to help him'⁵, and that 'counselling was a waste of time'. As Gwen wrote: 'Not much value was placed on how extreme the problem was because at home was really the place where he vented his frustrations - no-one else saw it. No-one realised how hard it had been; the frustrations we felt in our attempts to help and the emotional energy it absorbed.'

Gwen still felt that 'Dylan needed to see someone else, preferably a counsellor skilled with children - and we as a family needed that support. We were parents who care very much about what happens to our kids, but could not manage to address this issue without professional help.'

At the end of our first session together I explained to Gwen and Dylan that I would only be able to see them two or three times because of the large demand on our services, and they said that was okay. After Gwen and Dylan had left I reflected on our conversation and wrote them the following letter:

Dear Gwen and Dylan,

I really enjoyed our meeting today and found you both easy to talk with. Dylan, I also look forward to meeting your father at our next meeting.

Dylan, you said it was 'hard everywhere' making friends, and that sometimes you felt excluded. I wondered if this feeling of exclusion had ever

tricked you into believing there was something wrong with you? You said 'yes', and told me that sometimes you worried that you 'looked funny' or 'acted funny', and that you were 'unusual'.

It didn't seem to me that you looked funny or acted funny, but I did begin to realise that you were an unusual boy in many unique and positive ways. When I asked you, 'how do children make friends', you said that 'some children fit in easier' than other children, by 'acting like everyone else'. But for you, Dylan, it was more important (even than friendship) to BE YOUR OWN PERSON. Both myself and your Mum agreed that you must be a strong person to be able to be your own person and not act like everyone else.

You and Mum were also able to tell me about some of your other unusual qualities:

- a strong sense of fairness: you don't like people to be treated harshly or unfairly;
- a dislike of fighting and bullying;
- a dislike of yelling.

I wonder how much courage it must take for a boy to be so unusual and not go along with the fighting and aggression that is so much a part of boys playing and being with each other.

Dylan, you also told us how the other boys, who had once bullied you, now noticed that you were the 'best defender' in the soccer team. They were now saying 'hello' and 'goodbye' and you thought the time might be right to invite them back to your place on the weekend.

Dylan, given all these outstanding qualities and skills, why is it, do you think, that it is still hard to make friends? Do you think your Dad finds it hard or easier to make friends? Also, what is more important, a friend who likes you because of the person who you are, or a friend who likes you because you are just like everybody else?

Looking forward to finding out how the team and the friendships are going at our next meeting.

See you soon, Andrew.

When evaluating our work together, Gwen wrote in retrospect that 'the breakthrough came early in the counselling'. This was after our first meeting together. According to Gwen, the breakthrough came when I agreed that Dylan 'was different to many boys his age - but that he was different in some very unique and positive ways - he was special. I think for us this was almost a relief, and it was lovely to realise that there were some special qualities that set him apart. For so long he, and we as parents, had concentrated on the fact that he "didn't seem to fit", and this was a new way of seeing things.'

Fortunately for me, and for Dylan, Gwen and Paul did not find it difficult to begin to articulate this alternative story (I guess they had known it all along!). So, as Gwen wrote: 'When Dylan started reflecting on this [that he was indeed special in many unique and positive ways], he realised he didn't really want to be like everyone else anyway'.

When working with young people in this way, I think it is equally important for the re-authoring process initiated by the narrative therapy to be storied and reflected on, not only by the young person but also by the parents/caregivers. The parents/caregivers (and significant others) then play the part of supportive audience and witness to the young person's alternative story of self. If parents/caregivers and significant others (including teachers) continue to be influenced by dominant stories which obscure a child's special qualities and abilities, it is harder for the child to begin living the alternative story.

The second family session

Approximately one month later, the second family session was attended by both parents and Dylan. It was in this meeting that we first started to name the problem as 'embarrassment' and entered into an externalising conversation to uncover the tactics that embarrassment used to influence Dylan, and also to uncover the weaknesses of embarrassment, i.e. the times when Dylan didn't let embarrassment stop him from participating in school life. It was also during these conversations that we started to get an understanding that there was something about our culture that supported the tactics of embarrassment because

it affected so many people. Also during this meeting we named the 'counterplot' to embarrassment as 'confidence'. As David Epston writes:

This double externalisation allows the problem and the solution/alternative knowledge of self to 'face' each other. Instead of the problem speaking of the identity of the person, the person is now positioned to speak of and to the problem. This permits alternative discursive practices, many of which I have come to associate with unconsidered possibilities and previously unheard-of discoveries.⁶

At the end of our second session I wrote the following letter:

Dear Dylan,

It was good to hear how you are continuing to be your own person and to take a leadership role in some areas of your life. For example, David's Mum thinks you are a good influence on him because you can show him how to act like an eleven-year-old, and treat people fairly without getting angry.

We also discovered the part that embarrassment has been playing so far in your life. It probably got a foothold when you were teased in junior primary about your freckles. This seems to have stopped now because eleven-year-olds don't notice freckles as much. However, embarrassment is now trying to talk you into believing that your body is 'pretty stringy' and that when you get changed into your swimmers at the pool, all the other boys and girls will notice your botly. Embarrassment wants to frighten you into believing they will laugh at you and tease you, and this stops you from wanting to swim even though we know you are a good swimmer!

Also embarrassment is making inroads in the area of ballroom dancing with girls. I think embarrassment wants to trick you into believing the girls won't think you are a good-looking guy and that no-one will want to dance with you.

You said you know when embarrassment is around because you 'feel all red, hot and closed-in'. What plans do you think embarrassment has for your life if you believe what it says to you? Do you think embarrassment would like to isolate you and cut you off from friends?

However, Dylan, we also talked about other areas in your life where you have successfully kept embarrassment at bay. These include soccer and also

reading aloud in class. You said you just do this by raising your hand until the teacher picks you. But we also discovered a lot of practice and preparation had gone into this. This gave you confidence to be your own person.

Dylan, it was also clear that you don't want to look like the 'MACHO KING'.⁷ Therefore, what things that you know have worked for you in the past against the tricks of embarrassment can you use in stopping embarrassment get the better of you in swimming and dancing? How can you draw upon confidence to fight off embarrassment? In what ways does confidence help you to connect with other boys and girls?

Yours against embarrassment. Andrew.

The third family session

Approximately one month later the third family session was attended by Dylan and Gwen. We spent most of this meeting 'thickening' the alternative story of self, i.e. Dylan's growing sense of confidence and self-worth in important areas of his life such as sport, relations with peers, and participation in the classroom. Dylan also told me about an upcoming school swimming carnival that he had been feeling nervous about participating in because of his belief that his peers would perceive his body as being 'stringy'. This then became a test of the growing strength of Dylan's confidence, and we arranged for Dylan to give me a ring to let me know how he went.

The following letter was written at the end of this session:

Dear Dylan,

From what you told me today, it sounds like you are beginning to turn the tables on embarrassment. For example, you did not let it stop you from dancing at school. You said it helped knowing 'everyone had to do it'. I wonder, do you think embarrassment is a problem that affects only you, or do you think it affects lots of kids your age? Why do we worry so much about how we look? Why are people so vulnerable to embarrassment? What feeds embarrassment and gives it so much influence over people?

Dylan, your next major confrontation with embarrassment is next week during swimming. You said having board shorts will help, and that if you get through next week it will be a major boost to your confidence. Mum said she thought your confidence levels have been rising and that you value and respect the person who you are. We also agreed that no-one is perfect and that people who want to be perfect (let's say in their physical appearance) only fool themselves.

You also told me that other boys are now wanting to be your friend, such as Mike, who came over last weekend, and Jason Armstrong. Dylan, what do you think Mike and Jason like about you and why do you think they want to be with you?

Finally, we talked about David, and that you are doing some hard thinking about whether to leave this friendship with David. We discussed how taking a stand against stopping people talking and treating you badly is part of your valuing who you are as a person, and how you think people should be treated.

Regards, Andrew.

PS: Remember to phone me on how you went at swimming so that, if it's good news, I can start preparing your 'Escape from Embarrassment Certificate'!

As part of the evaluation, I asked Gwen to comment on the family's experience of receiving the letters. She wrote as follows:

The letters have been a good ongoing source to look back on. I think they were primarily so valuable because it made Dylan feel so special. We have talked about family being so far away and the issues associated with that, so to receive letters about times together were great. It also was a good starting point each time as Andrew read his copy back to us. It provides a good informal conversation starter; we all know where we finished the previous time.

In-between sessions

Dylan did ring me to tell me the good news that the swimming carnival had gone better than expected. For example, he was promoted into a higher level swimming skills group because of his performance. Gwen wrote: 'Andrew is the only person who I have ever known Dylan to telephone himself (i.e. overcoming his embarrassment about swimming) - and I knew that he was making headway'.

After the telephone conversation with Dylan, I thought that he was ready to graduate from therapy with an 'Escape from Embarrassment Certificate'⁸. In order to punctuate the importance of this occasion and to give Dylan a ceremony befitting his special qualities and abilities, I asked the family on the phone if they would feel comfortable about having our CAMHS-based narrative therapy reflecting team join us for our last session together. I explained the process of how this worked and the family agreed to go ahead with this.

The fourth and final family session

Approximately one month later the fourth and final session was attended by Dylan, his mother Gwen and his father Paul. The entire process was videotaped. The transcript in this paper consists of excerpts from the session:

Andrew: Would you just want to tell us again how that went for you at the swimming carnival?

Dylan: Well, hmm ... it was really good because I thought that everyone would be looking really mature and everything, but no-one really was. They were looking pretty much the same as me, and I was in the second highest group so I didn't really have any reason to be embarrassed.

Andrew: Was realising that everyone was the same as you one of the things that kept embarrassment at bay?

Dylan: Yep.

[This was one of Dylan's important discoveries that he made en route to escaping from embarrassment. On the one hand Dylan is his own special person,

while on the other hand everyone is basically the same as everyone else. For example, everyone has different body shapes and sizes that don't correspond to the supposedly 'perfect' body. After remaining with how he had successfully passed the swimming test (which was a major boost to his confidence), I wanted to link this with other areas of Dylan's life, such as public speaking, where confidence did not let embarrassment get the better of him.]

Andrew: So, the swimming carnival was, above all, a really good experience for you? I remember when you talked to me on the phone that week, you talked about how your confidence actually got a boost ...

Dylan: Yeah.

Andrew: So, if you were to put your confidence on a scale from nought to ten - with nought being not much confidence at all, and ten being lots and lots of confidence - looking back, when you first went to the school, where would you have put yourself on that confidence scale?

Dylan: Two.

Andrew: And where would you put yourself now?

Dylan: Er, seven probably.

Andrew: About seven ... Dylan, when I ask that question about confidence, I'm not just thinking about the swimming. I'm just wondering what other experiences of school life have boosted your confidence apart from the swimming. I know you've mentioned a couple to me, but can you remember them?

Dylan: Hmm, no.

Andrew: Remember that when we talked about how, although people are embarrassed about speaking in public ...

Dylan: Oh, right ...

Andrew: This seemed to be something that came so natural to you that you didn't actually see it as being something special?

Dylan: Hmm ... yeah.

Andrew: I remember that you said that you practised it ...

Dylan: Well I did a bit, practise it, before I spoke in front of everybody.

Andrew: What was your intention in practising?

Dylan: Just so that I didn't make an idiot of myself.

Andrew: And did you?

Dylan: Er, no.

Andrew: And was that helpful for your confidence?

Dylan: Yes.

Andrew: And so that was something that you actually had a goal, a plan, and you practised and you got up and you did it and you proved to yourself that you didn't come across as an idiot ...

[I have found in my work that unique outcomes, such as Dylan's ability to speak in public, which contradicts the dominant story, are so often lost or forgotten about in the passage of time. These are the buried treasures! It is important therefore to thicken the alternative stories that account for these unique outcomes so that they are no longer lost in life's bric-a-brac. I therefore re-introduce the theme of practice, which was so central to Dylan's story of increasing confidence. The next section highlights another unique outcome that was unearthed in this session, involving Dylan volunteering to speak at a parents' and teachers' night.]

Andrew: When Dylan got up and did this public speaking, it didn't really fit with his idea of low esteem and lack of confidence, did it?

Dylan: No.

Andrew: Were you at that night, Paul?

Paul: That particular night, yeah, I was there when he got up to speak.

Andrew: How long did he speak for, do you remember?

Dylan: Two minutes.

Paul: Three or four minutes. You and another boy did it.

Dylan: Me and Jason.

Paul: It was pretty good, it was clear and to the point.

Andrew: That's a long time to speak ...

Gwen: Other parents commented to me in the days after that, that Dylan had done it when their children would never have volunteered. That was encouraging ...

Paul: Can I say something about that? It is contradictory to a lack of confidence because it was voluntary, you weren't forced to do it. It shows you have the capacity to do it.

[It's great when other members of the family pick up the unique outcomes and run with them! Earlier in the interview Gwen had mentioned that she was doing a training course in public speaking. In the next section I started to explore Gwen's experience of public speaking, keeping with the theme that embarrassment is a cultural rather than an individual problem, and at the same time helping to join the family against a common problem.]

Andrew: Have you done any practice presentations yet Gwen?

Gwen: Yeah.

Andrew: What was your first one, how long did you speak for with your first one?

Gwen: Three or four minutes.

Andrew: Three or four minutes ... was embarrassment there when you were giving this presentation? Did it try and talk you out of it?

Gwen: Not once I got to my feet. For me it's the actual getting to my feet. Once I'm there I think that I can do this - but it's actually getting myself out of the chair and enjoying it.

Andrew: So if embarrassment had had its way, it would have kept you in the chair?

Gwen: That's right.

[I didn't want to stay too long with Gwen, keeping in mind that the central protagonist in this story is Dylan.]

Andrew: Did you experience that Dylan, or not?

Dylan: Oh yeah.

Andrew: You did? So, if embarrassment had its way with you it would have kept you in that chair and you wouldn't have gotten out of it?

Dylan: Yeah.

Andrew: Dylan, if you were talking to another person your age who was paralysed by embarrassment, what advice would you give him or her? Say they were struck dumb by this fear of getting up in the class and speaking - what would you say to them?

[This question was inviting Dylan to be a consultant to others which, in turn, 'thickens' the alternative story. It is a question I now use a lot with young people.]

Dylan: Well, if no-one else is going to put their hand up, everyone else is probably the same as you. Anyway, people who try and make themselves look really good don't really get the point across when they're talking. They're the people that make a fool of themselves and they are the people who are probably more embarrassed.

Andrew: They're wonderful words This idea that you've developed, that everyone else is the same as you, is quite important isn't it? Knowing that other people are in the same boat as you, or experiencing similar things, probably says something about the world we live in, or the culture we live in. It seems like embarrassment doesn't just attack one person - it attacks a lot of people especially around body shapes. Have you ever thought about what it is about our society or our culture that makes it possible for embarrassment around body shape to affect us in the way that it does? How does it happen do you think?

Dylan: Well, people in television are never small and stringy. They never have freckles, and they're never embarrassed or anything like that.

Andrew: So you think television is an influential kind of medium that influences the way people think about themselves?

Dylan: Yep.

Andrew: Would that be something else you could say to another person your

age? How would you try to not let television talk them into thinking their body was too stringy or they had too many freckles or they couldn't speak in public? Somehow television gives us this idea that people are perfect in some way and can do things that we can't ...

Gwen: People on television also *look* perfect, even when they've just rolled out of bed!

Dylan: They've rehearsed it, hundreds of times.

Andrew: Yeah.

Dylan: So they always get it perfect, but they wouldn't have got it perfect straight away.

[I could have continued the conversation on the influence of the media, however, Dylan had reminded me about the central theme of practice which I wanted to come back to. This being our final meeting together, I thought that practise might be a key skill that would help Dylan consolidate the influence of confidence in his life.]

Andrew: If you were giving this advice to another person your age, would you say anything about *your* practice? Like your practice for public speaking, but also your practice in other areas of your life - areas of friendship-making or the areas of performance such as swimming or soccer? Is practice something that is important for you, or not?

Dylan: Sometimes it is. If it's a project or something, it's pretty important to practise because otherwise when you just read the entire thing out people get bored.

Paul: That's really been a theme that I think Dylan has picked up on since we've been meeting together - this idea of being prepared to give things a go. You see it in the public speaking, you see it in the soccer. Dylan, you regularly go to the training nights because you've always said if you need to improve you've got to practice. And what's happened? You've improved. You really are one of the better players in the team now - it's all happened in one season! Likewise with friendships.

[Once again Paul reinforces the alternative story with some really helpful comments! I really appreciated the way in which Paul and Gwen were able to intuitively pick up and support the re-authoring process in my work with Dylan. So I therefore feel confident in asking Dylan directly what he thinks his Mum and Dad are noticing about him.]

Andrew: What other things have Mum and Dad noticed that are different about you now compared to the Dylan of two years ago?

(long pause)

Dylan: Er, probably, I give things a go and don't just wimp out.

Andrew: (writing) Give things a go - don't just wimp out.

Gwen: It's been good because I think he had skills in all sorts of places. If he hadn't given it a go he would never have known.

Andrew: Did you say he found skills in all kinds of places?

Gwen: Yeah. I don't know that he knew he was sporty or that in his schoolwork he is as capable as he is.

Andrew: So, you've been making a lot of discoveries about skills you weren't aware of before. Is that right?

Dylan: Yep.

Andrew: Wow ... What do you think is the key to making these kinds of discoveries?

Dylan: Just trying things - even if you don't want to - I mean, if they're not going to hurt you, you should try.

Andrew: Where do you think Mum and Dad would put you on the confidence scale at the moment? Do you think they'd agree with you around seven? Or do you think it'd be less or more?

Dylan: Probably a bit ... probably the same.

Andrew: Probably the same? Let's ask them. Where would you put Dylan on the nought to ten confidence scale?

Paul: It's definitely come up - it does go up and down ...

Andrew: On average, where would it hover around most of the time?

Paul: I'd say at the moment a seven or six, seven probably...

Andrew: What do you think would be the optimum? I'm not saying the optimum has to be a ten either. What do you think is a good place to be on a confidence scale?

Dylan: Arrh ...

Andrew: Do you think it's sometimes possible to be over-confident?

Dylan: Yeah.

Andrew: Could be that seven's a pretty good place to be, in terms of confidence?

I didn't want to reinforce the competitive idea in our culture that we all must be a ten-out-of-ten person!

The interview was followed by a reflection on Dylan's story by the team while we listened behind the one-way screen. Then we all came together and finished with a ceremonial ritual of presenting Dylan with an 'Escape from Embarrassment Certificate'. I then gave the video to the family to keep in order to re-view at their own convenience.

Gwen later gave the following feedback on the video:

The video has been helpful to look back on, and our daughter was very keen to watch it. Sometimes it is easy to forget words, or expressions, so the video provides a good resource of just how we felt about questions, etc. It is a bit special, too - it marks the silences, and records the moments when a smile said more than words would.

Postscript: A letter from Dylan

Approximately four months after our last family session I received the following letter:

Dear Andrew,

*Dylan has decided to dictate to me some of the things he wishes to say:
Here goes!*

Things have been going well since we last met. A real confidence booster

for me was attending an Outdoor Education Centre Camp with my school. David did not go, nor did Mike, so I was feeling very nervous. I nearly chickened out as well - Mum (Dad was away) gave me the option in the end to go to the camp or go to the school. I decided to go to the camp but I was scared of being lonely. But the camp was brilliant. I was so surprised it wasn't boring. I learnt heaps of interesting things and wasn't really left by myself. People were nice to me and included me. I felt happy that I was managing without Mike. Now I don't let Mike control me as much because I know I can survive without him. Our friendship has improved because of that.

My confidence has been boosted heaps in other ways too. This has been because my Primary School took part in a competition for a banner to promote the Tour Down Under - an International Cycling Event to be held in January. There were five Year 6/7 students selected for this activity - my teacher picked me to take part because I am a good drawer. Enclosed is the newspaper article because we won prizes!! - A Certificate to the school signed and presented by Stuart O'Grady, \$150 worth of Sports Equipment for the school, and 20 free tickets to the Adelaide Superdrome. I felt honoured to be picked before everyone else in my class and this has encouraged me to take part in things and not hold back!

When we have spare time most of the boys in my class have an informal soccer game. We select the teams ourselves. I have been improving heaps in soccer (I am doing a soccer skills coaching clinic this term) and I am now one of the first picked for the side. I seem to be getting compliments after the game because I played well. A boy, Mike, goes goally, I play defence (the only defender) and we can still stop most of the forwards getting through.

Mike seems to be hanging around with David and I. We talk to each other on the field a lot. I also have started to have a go at cricket and I am improving. I really like it and have been taking an interest in the Test Matches on the television.

I gave a boy, Malcolm, in our class a Christmas card. He doesn't have any friends and it was good to see him looking happy for a change.

It was the only card he had received and he kept opening it and having a look. I felt really glad I have made the effort to give him a card. I also had a good talk on the phone to my friend, Alan. I haven't seen him for two years and it was hard to talk to him. But I like him and think I may try and ring him next time.

PS: Dylan also went back to swimming lessons this term!!! He is really good and in the 'squad' group - did 42 laps of breaststroke on Wednesday. Doesn't seem to be dwelling on the body image as much. Gwen.

Some personal reflections on childhood

When I reflect back on my conversations with Dylan I realise how much they helped me to remember the eleven-year-old Andrew and his struggles with embarrassment. I too had freckles, felt uncomfortable undressing and going to the pool for swimming lessons, and would never ask a girl to dance! But, more importantly, I'd like to thank Dylan for putting me in touch with some of the special qualities and abilities of the eleven-year-old Andrew, which will now be more present for me in my counselling work with children and their families.

You may also want to reflect back on *your* childhood and consider the following questions:

Re-membering Special Abilities Exercise

- *Reflecting back on your self as a young person, what special abilities or qualities do you now recognise in the younger you that you may have overlooked or not noticed in the past?*
- *In what ways, if any, did they help you sustain your confidence? Can you remember any specific occasion/s when you called upon them? Did they help you overcome a problem that was dominant in your life at the time?*
- *Did anyone recognise these abilities/qualities? How important was it that someone else recognised them?*
- *Did you do any practice to develop these abilities/qualities? If yes, what does*

this say about your intentions and commitments you had for your life at the time?

- *Reflecting now on the present, are you (or could you be) using any of these special qualities/abilities in your life and relationships?*

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Notes

1. Andrew can be contacted c/- PO Box 368, Dawesley 5252, South Australia.
2. The family gave their consent for our meetings together to be documented and included in this paper. Their names have been changed to ensure privacy. However, Dylan and his family would love to hear from anyone who has found this document helpful in some way. Please address any correspondence to Dylan and family c/- Andrew Tootell.
3. I'm grateful to Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston (1997) for the metaphor of the archaeologist to describe the work of a narrative therapist.
4. At the time I was an employee of the Northern Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia.
5. Many mothers who consult me about problems in their child's life are subjected to ideas which are explicitly or implicitly blaming of themselves.
6. See Epston 1997, p.54.

7. The MACHO KING is a small doll with large biceps dressed in wrestling gear who happened to be abandoned in the CAMHS waiting room one day. I decided to take him home and have since looked after him and he has agreed to let me use him to poke fun at certain images of masculinity!
8. For those readers unfamiliar with narrative therapy, the use of certificates to ritualise important transitions in life is a common practice. See White & Epston (1990) for numerous examples of these certificates.

References

- Epston, D. 1997: 'I am a Bear': Discovering discoveries.' In Smith, C. & Nylund, D. (eds), *Narrative Therapies with Children and Adolescents*, p.54. New York: Guilford Press.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D. & Lobovits, D. 1997: *Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative therapy with children and their families*. New York: W.W.Norton & Co.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crocket, K. & Epston, D. (eds) 1997: *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The archaeology of hope*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Smith, C. & Nylund, D. (eds) 1997: *Narrative Therapies with Children and Adolescents*. New York: Guilford Press.
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