POETIC MEANS TO ANTI-ANOREXIC ENDS

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Narrative therapy locates the problem of eating disorders in cultural discourses rather than the traditional approach of locating the problem in biological, systemic, or psychological metaphors. As a result, the narrative approach to therapy offers many therapeutic possibilities with clients who struggle with anorexia and/or bulimia. This article chronicles my work with a 33-year-old woman, Nannette, who was in the grip of anorexia. Through a narrative practice of externalizing and remembering who she was outside the realm of anorexia, Nannette accessed her creative poetic talents. Writing her poetry created space for Nannette to emancipate herself from anorexic practices. By sharing her poems and our work, I hope to provide the reader with a source of sustenance, hope, and inspiration in fighting anorexia/bulimia.

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
—Audre Lorde

After ten meaningful years as a social worker at Kaiser Permanente, I made the courageous (or foolish!) decision to return to school for a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies. So, as the new millennium dawned, my days in managed care were coming to an end. Not surprisingly, I experienced mixed feelings about leaving my job: hope, fear, sadness, fear, excitement, fear, satisfaction, and more fear!

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And to add to the fear, I faced the rather daunting task of packing up a decade’s collection of books, office supplies, pictures, and papers.

While packing up my office, I came across the letters and poems that chronicled my work with Nannette, whose victorious struggle over anorexia I was privileged to witness. As I reread her inspirational poems and recalled our challenging and spirited dialogue, a profound and visceral sense of joy came upon me. This article chronicles Nannette’s heroic efforts to break free of anorexia. In sharing the letters I sent to Nannette and the creative poems she wrote, I hope to offer sustenance and encouragement to all of us who use our voices against the forces of anorexia.

NARRATIVE THERAPY

My work is situated within the narrative or text analogy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Smith & Nylund, 1997; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). There is a rich body of work describing a narrative approach to anorexia (Duran, Cashion, Gerber, & Mendez-Ybanez, 2000; Epston, Morris, & Maisel, 1995; Kraner & Ingram, 1997; Madigan & Goldner, 1998; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Instead of locating anorexia in the intrapsychic or interpersonal, narrative therapists locate the problem in wider, cultural contexts. Susan Bordo (1997) clearly articulates this notion:

Most frequently nowadays, clinicians are willing to grant that cultural images may contribute to or “trigger” eating disorders, but they insist that underlying psychological, familial, or biological factors are the true cause of eating disorders…. Clinical psychologist Rhoda Lee Fisher, for example, considers cultural messages far less potent than those sent by parents: “A mother saying, ‘Don’t take that food. You’ve been a bad girl’ is a powerful message to a female child.” Medical professionals are right to insist that eating disorders are multidimensional. But in positing culture as a contributory factor and families as the real cause, they forget that families do not exist outside cultural time and space. The destructive family dynamics they cite prove rather than dispute the importance of culture. In Fisher’s example a mother scolds her daughter for eating too much food. But what made this mother so anxious about her daughter’s eating? (p. 117)

As a narrative therapist, I invite people influenced by anorexia to consider the extent to which cultural and gender specifications support the problem. In opening this dialogue, I take a curious, respectful posture that privileges the person’s experience, not mine. This is particularly important in work with persons affected by anorexia. Many of these clients have had previous negative experiences in therapy. In treatment, they have often been subjected to the impositional and judgmental influences of expert knowledge, pathologizing
discourses, and normative social science/medicine where power is exercised over them.

From the beginning of therapy, I invite people to engage in externalizing conversations about anorexia (Madigan & Goldner, 1998). This helps create some linguistic space for persons to evaluate the effects of anorexia in their lives. In addition, externalizing anorexia can undermine the sense of guilt and self-blame so many people experience. Lastly, it challenges the notion that the totalizing effect anorexia has on a person’s identity. People can began to notice current or historical resistance (or unique outcomes) to the demands of anorexia.

Once anorexia is externalized, I attempt to address the following areas in the initial and future sessions (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994):

1. An extensive picture of the influence of anorexia over the person’s life.
2. The sense of isolation and secretiveness created by anorexia.
3. How guilt, perfectionism, and self-blame are friends of anorexia.
4. Cultural prescriptions that support anorexia’s influence.
5. Ways that anorexia has silenced people and cut them off from their preferences.
6. Anti-anorexic actions, thoughts, desires, and attitudes.

As therapy progresses, I try to notice, punctuate, and support further anti-anorexic activities. This can include narrative letters that highlight a person’s accomplishments (Epston, 1994; Nylund & Thomas, 1994). Bringing others up to date with a person’s anti-anorexic progress can also be extremely valuable in reauthoring a person’s story about their self, life, and future. Now, let’s turn to Nannette’s story.

NANNETTE’S ANTI-ANOREXIC JOURNEY

Nannette was friendly and engaging at our initial meeting as she told me that she was a manager of a well-known designer boutique. Nannette was the mother of two children, and like most mothers, found it hard to balance career and family.

Nannette told me she was seeking therapy due to some anxiety related to having to fly coast-to-coast across the United States for a business conference. This anxiety was primarily attacking her stomach. As a result, she was finding it hard to eat. As we explored the effects of anxiety on her body, Nannette’s sociable demeanor began to shift as she began to cry. With some careful, but persistent questioning on my part, Nannette shared a long history of anorexia. The remainder of the session focused on the emotional, physical, and spiritual costs of anorexia in Nannette’s life, along with some anti-anorexic moments. I sent her this letter to summarize our first meeting.
First Letter to Nannette

March 10, 1998

Dear Nannette:

As promised, I am writing a summary of our first meeting. I hope that this letter is one more anti-anorexic tool in your journey.

Nannette, in our meeting you courageously shared that anorexia has occupied your life since adolescence. Anorexia uses fears and phobias to get the upper hand. I was quite moved by your breaking anorexia’s license. Nannette, why do you think I was moved when you shared this secret?

As anorexia has been exposed, we examined the effects on your life. It recruits you into isolation. It has tricked you into thinking that if you get better, you will get fat and look like an old woman! It has had effects on your body and your health. It has left you vulnerable to body hatred. It teams up with fear. Anorexia has also stolen your artistic abilities. Before anorexia’s onset, you used to be “carefree” and wrote poetry. Anorexia tries to tell you that revealing your feelings is a sign of weakness. It recruits you into judging other’s bodies that don’t meet the standard of perfection. Here are some further questions I thought of.1

- In what ways has anorexia effected your relationship with yourself?
- How has anorexia separated you from your own version and thoughts of yourself?
- By what means did anorexia entice you into isolation and despair—would a good friend do this to you?
- What effect does being a slave to the idea of perfection have on anorexia overtaking a person?

As our conversation continued, we discussed experiences in life that have helped anorexia along. This includes a mother who loved you but provided little emotional support. Also, your stoic stepfather, THE ROCK, left you vulnerable to unrealistic expectations. We also examined life support systems in popular culture that feed an anorexic “not measuring up” lifestyle.

Nannette:

- Why do you think anorexia attempts to devastate and destroy the best women of our generation?
- Why does anorexia only effect women in Western culture?
- Do you think the voice of anorexia is male?
- What is it that our society promotes that leaves most women with a distorted sense of their own bodies?
- How does our consumer culture fortify anorexia?

Nannette, when I asked you about anorexia’s ultimate intention, you quite vividly said, “it’s trying to kill me.” What has enabled you to expose anorexia’s intentions for your life? What rules of anorexia did you have to defy in order to

1These questions were inspired by the work of Stephen Madigan (Madigan & Goldner, 1998).
tell me your story? Why hasn’t anorexia stolen your version of yourself as a mother? (In fact you said that if you had a mother such as yourself, you might not be having to battle anorexia now). If you saw yourself through your children’s eyes, what might you appreciate about yourself?

A quite significant moment occurred when you noticed in a W magazine a bony woman model. You said it looked, “disturbing.” Nannette, what was disturbing about it? Is this a new noticing? Should the magazine W (stands for Woman) change its name to A? In noticing the disturbing picture, do you think you have put anorexia on notice?

Nannette, I have been quite struck with many of the anti-anorexic acts and statements you made in our meeting. You said, “I want to get better.” Here are my last questions in this letter:

• I wonder what plans your own anorexic-free person has for you?
• I wonder how it will be for you when you are free to just have to “measure up” to yourself and not to the culture of anorexia’s nagging torment?
• Why might some of the steps you have already taken be inspiring to the team?

Anti-anorexically yours,
David Nylund

Second Meeting

Two weeks later, Nannette came in with a smile. I was inspired that she attended the meeting. It has been my experience that anorexia, once exposed, will punish a person by encouraging them to miss the therapy session. Nannette told me that the previous conversation and follow-up letter had her reflecting on the costs of anorexia. She remembered who she was before anorexia’s onset—a carefree 16-year-old who loved to read and write poetry. She decided to take a stab at reclaiming her poetic talents. Then, she shared a poem she wrote in response to my letter, called “Anorexic Shoes”:

March 19, 1998
Oh, those shoes, they are so beautiful, they are perfect.
But they are worth it. I’ll just sacrifice. It’s my style!
I slip my foot in. They squeeze my toes. But that’s okay because my feet have stopped growing. The arch is too high, so I’ll just sit when I wear them. The heel is sharp and digs in painfully. But, they make my legs look so long and slender.
Everyone will love them and admire them and wish they had some too. But they belong to me. I’m the only one that can wear them.
I wear them all the time now. I can’t hide the pained expression anymore. I can’t run and dance and laugh. But they look so wonderful. They don’t really match anything. They’re so tight I can hardly get them off. I even wake up at night with them on.
I can’t get them off. Maybe someone will help me. I’ll have to ask. But they are the only shoes I have now. I’ve thrown all my others away. I’ll have to go
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barefoot. My feet will be exposed and everyone will see that I don’t have my beautiful shoes anymore.

I’ll have to get some new shows. Not big ordinary loafers. Shoes that fit me, unique, stylish, and comfortable. Shoes that no other person has. Shoes that I can run and dance and walk and laugh in. Shoes that show my joy.

I’ll put my old shoes in the deepest, darkest corner of my closet, in case I need them again. No, I can throw them away. I don’t like them anymore. They kill my feet. They don’t fit me. I grew tired of sitting and sacrificing.

I know why they were there. No one can fit them.

Nannette

Writing this poem was a significant anti-anorexic step for Nannette. She told me she was beginning to reclaim her voice and creativity back from anorexia. I encouraged her to submit the poem to ReVive, the newsletter of the Vancouver Anti-Anorexia, Anti-Bulimia League (Madigan & Goldner, 1998). She courageously sent her poem into the League and it was published in the Volume 4, Issue 1 of ReVive. Nannette felt a sense of accomplishment to see her poem in the newsletter and to have received a very supportive letter from the ReVive’s editor, Lorraine Grieves.

Nannette’s literary talents enlivened me to follow her lead. Here is my letter to her:

March 24, 1998

Dear Nannette:

This is a summary from our meeting on March 24, 1998. It was nice meeting up with you and catching up with developments in your life. You said that the session on the 10th was quite exhausting, but was a turning point for you. Do you think it was a turning point towards breaking free of anorexia? And measuring up to your own self as opposed to anorexia? You said, “I began to realize that what I do think counts, and I can articulate my feelings.” It also had you revising your relationship with perfectionism and allowing your daughter to think more about being her own person and wearing what she wants to wear. Nannette, do you appreciate what anti-anorexia messages you are giving your daughter?

You have also found depression beginning to get a bit smaller. You are able to laugh and smile at times and feel less captured by anxiety. In fact, you did not even flip out when the termites tried to invade your home! Nannette, do you think that perfectionism and anorexia are like nasty termites that have tried to nag your life?

Nannette

The Anti-Anorexia, Anti-Bulimia League was developed by David Epston and Stephen Madigan. The Vancouver League’s activities include networking, community organizing, counseling teachers and students, and community education. ReVive aims to break anorexia’s silence by providing a venue for art, poetry, stores, and articles that celebrate one’s movement away from eating problems. In doing so the League and the newsletter create a “community of concern” for people struggling with anorexia and/or bulimia.
I was quite moved and struck by your poem, “Anorexic Shoes”. As you said, quite powerfully, that these shoes stand with perfectionism. The arch is too high, although you look slender and attractive in them. Yet, as such a cost as it is painful and you are not able to be your own person: dance, sing and have joy. The 16-year-old Nannette would have never worn those anorexic shoes, right? In fact, the 16-year-old Nannette was somebody who felt happy, who enjoyed school and had a healthy relationship with herself. She also felt free and did not wear makeup and was very natural. I asked you this question: What might the 16-year-old Nannette say to the 33-year-old Nannette? You replied with the following:

“Don’t worry what others think.”
“Things do get better.”
“You are talented.” (Standing up to perfectionism!)
“You are smart.”
“You can enjoy food.”

She also would tell you not to be so concerned about what others think, and to be more responsible for yourself and give back responsibility to others. Nannette, if you gave more weight to the 16-year-old Nannette’s voice and less to anorexia and perfectionism’s voice, what impact may this have towards stepping into new shoes—shoes that you can run, dance, walk and laugh in? What impact might it have in actually throwing away the old anorexic shoes once and for good?

Anti-anorexically yours,
David Nylund

Third Meeting

Our third session continued Nannette’s slow but steady freedom from the grip of anorexia:

April 2, 1998
Dear Nannette:

It was nice catching up with you and hearing some of the recent anti-anorexic developments in your life. You said you are feeling somewhat hopeful and somewhat better but it is unfamiliar. At times, anorexia tries to reassert itself and punish you. The anti-anorexic moments are as follows:

1. Weighing yourself at work and being somewhat distressed that you lost some weight. Nannette why is this an anti-anorexic moment?
2. Finding a pair of pants that fit you but were a size O. I asked you why this was an anti-anorexic moment and you said, “Because size O is a nothing.” Do you think anorexia’s ultimate aim is to make a woman feel like a nothing?
3. Noticing more clearly the craziness and the nonsensical thinking of seeing yourself as fat when you look in the mirror. Now that you are noticing the craziness of this, what new notices are taking place?
4. Watching a talk show on daughters and mothers and their relationships with food. As you said, “it was crap.” You said, “it’s not about food... it’s about how anorexia strips you of dignity, self-esteem and confidence.” You agreed that anorexia has been somewhat successful but as you examined some of the recent steps in you life, do you think that it has not been as successful as anorexia wants to be? Why was anorexia upset that you did not buy into that TV program? Do you think it was particularly angry that you didn’t buy into ideas about mother blaming and guilt? Do you think that it is upset that you have a love affair with your children?

5. Exposing anorexia’s secret tactic of thinking you can’t live without it... like it’s an addiction. It tries to punish you by saying that if you get rid of it you’ll gain weight.

6. Skipping all the way back to the car in the parking lot at the grocery store. When you shared this story there was a great smile over your face and Nannette was very present. I asked why this was important to you and you said, “Because I want my daughter to skip... she’s six years old. We agreed that your daughter appreciated your skipping. Why did anorexia hate this moment? Do you think it even led to a night when you enjoyed a steak dinner? What was it like to have your appetite for food? Do you think you are finding your appetite for life? Do you think this is why you are beginning to remember the 16-year-old Nannette who had an appetite for life?

7. Recognizing anorexia’s trick of how it punishes you by giving you a stomachache. Nannette, now that you are on to anorexia’s tricks, I wonder what tricks you can come up with to out-trick a trickster?

Sincerely,
David Nylund

Two days after I wrote the above letter, I received a letter from Nannette. On the envelope, was a drawing she made of what an anorexic shoe looked like! With anticipation, I opened the letter, to find this poem:

April 4, 1998
I’ve been digging through my closet lately
It’s dark and deep
Found some old shoes and tried them on
They felt good
They’re a little big, but I’ll grow into them
Took a little step
Ran, skipped, laughed
People saw and smiled
Took them off and put them back in my closet
Not too deep
I’ll try them on again.

Nannette
Nannette’s artistry was rubbing off on me as I came up with an idea to have some of my colleagues interview me as “anorexia”. We taped it and sent the video to Nannette. On the tape, my colleagues asked me such questions as:

- What tactics are you using, anorexia, to dominate Nannette’s life?
- Anorexia, what things that Nannette values have you taken away from her?
- What ideas in the culture do you use to get the upper hand on Nannette?
- Anorexia, what is your ultimate goal in her life?
- Anorexia, why are you getting worried lately?
- What do you think of her poetry? Why is her poetry your enemy?
- Anorexia, what qualities do you respect about Nannette?

Fourth Meeting

It came as no surprise that Nannette had been up to more creative and literary endeavors! She had watched the video I sent her and it energized her to write a short screenplay, entitled, *Argument with Anorexia*:

April 11, 1998

*ARGUMENT WITH ANOREXIA*

A (anorexia): Look what I’ve done for you! I’ve always been there, I’ve given you so much!
N (Nannette): Yes. You’ve been there for me. Been there to take my life away!
A: But you’re thin, isn’t that what you wanted? I’ve only given you what you wanted.
N: I wanted to be thin but not at such a huge cost. I didn’t realize that I’d have to pay so much for nothing, and then keep on paying.
A: How can you say that to me? That I’ve given you nothing? I gave you self-control. Who else could control themselves and others the way that you do?
N: You had control, not me! And I can’t control other people!
A: What about how good you look? You can wear whatever you want. All your friends are jealous of you.
N: Liar! I don’t look good! My clothes are all too big. I fit a size 0 and my friends worry that I’m losing weight and wonder why I’m sick so much. I am tired of being sick—I’m sick of you! I’m leaving you!
A: If you leave me you’ll get fat and feel ugly.
N: No—I’ll get healthy and I feel ugly with you!
A: Well, you can’t leave me because I don’t exist.
N: I’m on to your tricks. I know you’re there!
A: You’ll be nothing without me.
N: I am nothing with you.
A: I’ve loved you.
N: You’re not my lover, you’re my hater!

Nannette
Fifth Meeting

At this point, Nannette was stepping more fully into a new picture of herself. More anti-anorexic steps were noticed and celebrated. She expressed some concern about her son, Chris, who had seen a documentary film on the singer Karen Carpenter, who was murdered by anorexia. Chris was worried that his mother might die from anorexia also. We discussed the possibility of having her son come to a meeting to have him join Nannette’s anti-anorexic team. We also discussed her relationship with her husband and ways he could support her new story.

Two days after session number five, I received this letter:

April 22, 1998
Dear David:

You have inspired me to write a letter. Since I don’t have a session for two weeks this will have to carry me through. I made a discovery about myself this morning. Yes, it was one of those “turning points,” a “significant moment.” It was profound! It was anti-anorexic! I do want to say though, that you have pointed this out to me before. I just didn’t take it into myself at the time. Anyway, this is it. I really don’t compromise my creativity. I do it my way and always have.

What started all of this was your question the other day about whether I would let my husband influence my poetry because he doesn’t like it, and I said “no.” (By the way, I’ve noticed he has been going around the house rhymin’ and grin’!) When I said “no,” I couldn’t think of anything to back it up. I just knew the answer.

This morning things came into my mind. Mrs. Jenkins in first grade wanting me to color her way. She made me so mad and I thought she was so wicked for that! In Mrs. Wilson’s class when we all painted clowns and mine was the only one with a sad face because I didn’t want it to be just like everyone else. I won first place and a ribbon for my sad clown. When I was seven I drew a picture of my mother. It was of her sitting on the curb from behind. Naked, big butt and all. She loved it. (that picture was anti-anorexic!) My dad (step) told me that I couldn’t put any holes in the walls of my room in our new house. So I put posters and pictures and shelves and fabric all over. He’d come and stand in the doorway and shake his head. I would stick my nose up in defiance. In high school, I would wear old granny shoes and ties. I decided that I didn’t want to be a graphic designer because I would have to do my art the way my clients wanted. At the Academy of Art I didn’t like the way one of the figure drawing teachers wanted us to draw. It was too formalized and stiff. So I dropped her class and took another one. One that fit my style. And finally I make my husband read my poems whether he likes them or not. Of course, I have more stories and I’m rambling on, but I know that I can draw (pun!) from these experiences to fight. I’ll put my stomping shoes on! I’m strong. I’ll be okay.

Sincerely Stomping Anorexia,
Nannette
I replied with the following

April 27, 1998
Dear Nannette:
I received your letter. Thanks for sharing your profound anti-anorexic moment! Is this what stomping anorexia might look like [picture of a big shoe stepping on ANOREXIA]?

Yours in STOMPING ANOREXIA
David Nylund

A week later, I opened up this note from Nannette:

May 6, 1998
Dear David:
I feel like writing a letter about letter writing. I have a story for you about a letter and how powerful they can be. This took place 35 years ago when my Uncle was 18. He is a brilliant, sensitive man that has suffered from periods of mental illness throughout his life. Even as a small boy he displayed a tendency towards suicide. This particular time he called his mother (my grandmother) and told her of his intentions to kill himself. She, in her simple, wise way told him, “Michael, before you do anything send yourself a letter. Put it all down in words put it in an envelope and mail it. When it gets to you see if you still feel the same way.” By the time he received his letter to himself he no longer felt the urge to take his life. The crisis had passed.

Your letters summarizing our sessions are vignettes of hope to me. Little glimpses of my progress into the hard work and struggle to free myself from the grip of anorexia. I carry my letters around with me wherever I go. This way I can hold my hope.

Yours in Outwitting the Perplexing of Anorexia,
Nannette

P.S. Oh, here’s another poem I wrote!

You think you can perplex me.
But I perceive your wicked deed.
Snatch away my dignity
These attempts will not succeed.
Expressions of stupidity
Affect me unsuccessfully.

Sixth Meeting

I met Chris, age ten in this meeting. We talked about sports and my love of the Detroit Red Wings! Eventually, we talked about his worries about his mother and wondering if she was headed in the same direction as Karen Carpenter.

Chris was very skilled at the computer. I had him make a pie graph depicting the relative influence of anorexia. I first had him make a pie graph of what
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anorexia had done to Karen Carpenter. The color red represented anorexia’s territory and blue was Karen Carpenter’s own territory. Due to her death, the pie graph was 100% red.

Next, I asked him to make a pie graph of his mother’s struggle with anorexia. Chris turned to his mother and she confidently assured him that the pie graph was 70% her and only 30% anorexia. The visual image appeared to reassure Chris as I visibly noticed him breathing more calmly. I sent them a letter:

May 12, 1998
Dear Nannette and Christopher:

Hey Chris, it was great meeting you, even though you are not a Detroit sports fan! You do pick some winners like the Atlanta Braves! This led into a discussion about how you are on a winning team with your mom. You agree and you feel that you mom is “pulling it off” and anorexia is worried. Before, you were worried about anorexia taking over your mother, but now anorexia is worried. In fact, your worry went from a 6 to a 2. There is a lot less red in the pie graph!

Nannette, you shared that you had been doing pretty well, you said this with a great deal of joy in your face and it produced a joy for me. You went out to a restaurant with your family and enjoyed yourself. As you said, “it was nice.” Restaurants and you have not had the greatest time together, and yet it was very enjoyable to be with your family and enjoy the broccoli and beef, and so on. It appeared that anorexia was quite upset with this!

In addition, you have accepted a position as a manager at the Gilroy store. You were quite flattered with this adventure. Chris said that you deserve a break from motherhood, and I hope that you have some fun. By the way, do you know how moved I was noticing the two of you interact in our meeting? The culture tells mothers that they are not human and they cannot share pain with their kids. Anorexia feeds on this as it strengthens secrecy. By sharing your struggle (and hope) with anorexia with your children, can you see how you are engaging in a heroic act of cultural resistance? Nannette, is cultural resistance and resistance to anorexia almost the same thing?

Oh, getting back to Gilroy! I asked you Nannette what comes to mind when you think of Gilroy, and you immediately said, “garlic” [which is grown there]. Then I asked each of you who hates garlic the most, and you both said, “vampires.” This led to a further question, which I asked, “Do you think that your poetry and artwork and our letters are to anorexia like garlic is to a vampire?” You both exclaimed, “Yes.” Why is this so? Why are you beginning to put a dagger in anorexia’s life?

Sincerely,
David Nylund

Seventh Meeting

We continued to thicken Nannette’s anti-anorexic self as we discussed her hopes and dreams for the future. We also decided to break anorexia’s silence even
further by co-leading a workshop for therapists on narrative therapy with eating problems.

May 26, 1998
Dear Nannette:

Anorexia had the potential to claim your imagination and energy; and it was almost completely successful. However, you have reclaimed your imagination and energy many significant ways including recently deciding to write a children’s book. Your children are excited about this possibility and you see them as your consultants. They are proud of you and have been bragging about you to other children that their mother is going to be a famous author! Do you see how you are becoming the author of your own life and anorexia has little space in editing? You want to do this because it would give you more time to spend with your children.

In the past, anorexia would have told you “I could never do it...I’m not talented...I’m going to get rejected.” Nannette, how are you no longer paying attention to those voices? What voices are you paying attention to? If there were a book written about your journey so far, what would the title be?

You also spent some time down at the Gilroy store and were able to be somewhat comfortable in new and unfamiliar territory by yourself. You even ate at a restaurant by yourself and noticed how invisible you were. It made you think that if you had dressed up or were wearing clothes that would have given you more attention, the waiter would have noticed you. Instead of accepting that invisible status, you confronted the waiter and stood up for yourself. This led into an inquiry of other times in your life when you stood up for yourself, including when a boyfriend was harassing one of your employees. Everybody else in the room was intimidated and afraid to confront this man; yet you did so.

I asked you what this said about you and you replied, “I can stand up for myself.” Was the man who was harassing your employee similar to anorexia’s strategies and tactics? Can you see how you’re standing up for yourself and against anorexia in similar ways?

Nannette, I look forward to co-presenting with you on May 30. Your story needs to be witnessed by therapists and others who need inspiration.

Yours against anorexia,
David Nylund

Eighth Meeting

This session was a direct assault on anorexia as we conducted a workshop with 30 therapists who paid to gain ideas from Nannette and learn alternative therapy approaches. In the workshop, I read Nannette’s poems and she read my letters. The group was moved and the day was quite moving. Several therapists reflected at the end of the day on what Nannette’s story had meant to them as therapists and more importantly, as persons. One woman, in particular, bravely shared her own battle with anorexia. She and Nannette began to correspond with each other, further breaking anorexia’s silence and isolation.
Nannette sent me this letter about her experience of co-facilitating the workshop:

May 30, 1998

Dear David:

I don’t know if I can put into words how deeply I was affected by our experience today. You have inspired and encouraged me in many ways. Please understand that value of yourself and narrative to others and me.

After the workshop, I went to a local café for lunch. It was the perfect place for me! I loved the art and atmosphere. It was all very bohemian. After ordering, I chose a small table in the corner. Of course I had an urge to write and jotted down some thoughts. With a bit of refining when I got home this is what presented itself in honor of the day:

Winsome hours of surface and depth.
Spirit and flesh were touched this day.
Laughing and crying we cradled our souls.
Having no idea the reach of my voice, or power of words.
People can see the pictures I say.
How moving the things that transpired this day.

P.S. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you for helping me hear my own voice.

Together piercing Anorexia with Pen,
Nannette

I sent her the following note regarding the experience of our workshop:

June 1, 1998

Dear Nannette:

I want to express my gratitude for your moving presentation on May 30th. Your poems and writings captured people in a very powerful and moving way. I think all the women in the room could identify with your poetry and your struggle, and in doing so you may have inspired them in ways that may be hard for you to fully appreciate. I know that I appreciate your anti-anorexic artistry. It has had a positive, very inspiring effect on me as a therapist. And I like how you starved out anorexia by wanting to eat lunch after the presentation!

I was moved by your recent promise, that in spite of all the pain and suffering with your mom, you have been able to find a new voice and get to a place of love and forgiveness for her. In a sense, are you also forgiving yourself and stepping into more of a story of self-respect?

You said that you are eating a lot and sometimes the voice of anorexia tells you that you will get fat and lose control. You are onto its tricks though, in that these voices only stay temporarily. The voice of perfectionism is also having less and less airtime as you are taking more risks such as painting. Why is anorexia taking less and less space? Why is it getting more and more worried? Do you think it is
going to put one more fight before it moves out? Sort of like an abusive relationship in which the person tries one more time to get you back in his grip?

You are thinking more and more about publishing your poetry and co-presenting. I think that there is a great potential here and even your brother agrees. You and your brother have had a very conflictual relationship and yet through your poetry there has been a healing and reconnecting effect. In fact Nannette, I think that your poetry and your presence have had a reconnecting effect on most people you come in contact with. No wonder your children are inspired and respect you!

Yours in moving anorexia out,
David Nylund.

Ninth Meeting

This meeting was our last. Anorexia’s voice could still be heard, but faintly. Nannette’s liberation and separation from anorexia was clear. By this time, she had a very secure, self-embracing, anti-anorexic lifestyle. I invited her to think of ways to circulate the new story to a wider audience. We came up with a press release idea! To celebrate her liberation, she brought cheese and crackers and I gave her a Vancouver Anti-Anorexia, Anti-Bulimia League T-shirt. She, in turn, presented me with a gift—a framed drawing of her trademark, anorexic shoes. I cherish that picture as it hung on my office wall the past two years. For me, the drawing symbolizes hope and possibility in face of enormous obstacles.

Here is the press release we wrote and sent to friends and family:

KAISER PERMANENTE PRESS RELEASE*
Nannette begins to claim her life back from Anorexia! Uses her creativity to expose Anorexia’s tactics. Anorexia is nervous because Nannette views it as a separate entity! Nannette is thinking more of her own needs and less of Anorexia’s (or others!). Anorexia’s tricks are not so potent!

*For Release 9:00am, June 18th, 1998

Follow-up

Five months after our last visit, I received a letter from Nannette. On the envelope was one of her trademark anorexic shoes stomping out anorexia! The letter caught me up with the recent developments in her life. She and her family had moved from California to a different state. Anorexia’s voice was occasionally present, but Nannette’s anti-anorexic voice was very solid.

Nannette stated in the letter that she owned a boutique and was able to spend more time with her husband and children. She continued to write and was determined to have her poems published. It wouldn’t surprise me to one day, while browsing at a bookstore, come upon a book of poetry with Nannette’s name on the cover!
CONCLUSION

This article illustrates how a therapy of literary merit can have profound effects on women escaping anorexia. By separating the problem from her personhood, discussing the cultural and gender discourses that support anorexia and privileging her experience, Nannette was able to remember who she was before anorexia’s onset. This created some space for Nannette to reclaim her poetic talents and access her anti-anorexic voice.

Writing this article helped me to remember why I am so attracted to narrative ideas. My work with Nannette helped me to re-author my own narrative as a therapist, including finding my own creative writing ability with the anti-anorexic letters I sent her. Her poems inspired, nurtured, sustained, and challenged me. It assisted me in further integrating the personal and the political. I, too (particularly as a male therapist), do not exist “outside cultural time and space.” Nannette’s anti-anorexic excursion challenges me as a man to not reproduce anorexic attitudes and practices. To this day, Nannette’s voice is with me and assists me to live according to my own preferred values. To live such a life and work with people such as Nannette is a source of sustenance and joy—and a very powerful antidote to therapist fatigue and burnout.

REFERENCES


