

Re-Writing Life Stories Transactional Analysis and Narrative Therapy Approaches

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Acts of Kindness: Interview Crib Sheet

The aim of this interview is to find out more about how the person contributed to their being helped by another. What did they bring to the table? How did they make possible the act of helping. The story of the contribution the recipient of help makes is often a marginalised or wholly untold story. This interview bring can help bring it to the foreground.

Key tip: keep to specifics. Avoid making general statements about what the person is like, what character they have in the general case. Ask about the specifics of this occasion.

Echo back the person's own language as much as possible. As you reflect back the story they are telling, use their words, images and metaphors as much as you can. It is their story; you're acting as an editor / and authoring-coach.

- **How did you enable the person who gave you help?**
 - Optional supplement if appropriate: How come their help didn't just bounce off?
 - Optional supplement if appropriate: How come you trusted them to help you?

If the interviewee wants to concentrate on the qualities of the helper, gently steer them back. A good technique here is to use confusion or puzzlement, e.g. "But someone people, especially people who are [angry / sad / fearful – insert as appropriate] just won't be helped. So what was it about you that made you open to receiving help on this occasion?" This technique can feel contrived at first, but generally interviewees don't seem to mind.

- **What was it about you that meant that this effort to help did not fall on stony ground?**
 - Did the effort to help you flourish or did the initiative run out of steam?
 - If the initiative flourished, how did you contribute to its flourishing?
 - If the initiative run out of steam, what circumstances might have brought this about?

Feel free to substitute your own image in place of 'stony ground' or, if the interviewee has offered a suitable image, use her image.

None of these questions are intended to diminish the contribution of the helper. They are designed to bring to the foreground the person's contribution to the process. This may be a story that is less often told.

- **What does your enabling of the assistance say about what is important to you, about what you think is important in your life, about what you care deeply about?**

If the person has used a certain word or phrase to describe their contribution then use their language in framing the question. For example, if the person said that their contribution was 'willingness to trust' then you might ask: "What does your willingness to trust on this occasion say about you? Is giving trust to others something that is important to you?"

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“Problem” Stories Part 1: Interview Crib Sheet

The aim of this interview is to do some investigative reporting. The interviewee is the expert. You are providing some structure.

*The first task is to find a name for the problem. When the problem is named it can then be talked about as something separate from the person. For example if the problem is that the person says she’s going to do something dramatic but then backs down, the name of the problem might be ‘empty threats’. Once the name is established use it continuously, e.g. “Tell me a bit more about **empty threats**.”*

- **Is there a phrase or a name you’d associate with this problem?**

It can take a little while to get a phrase that resonates. Make sure you tell the interviewee that she can change the name at any point if she comes up with a better one. She is the expert. She knows about the problem. You’re just learning about it.

If either you or the interviewer is tempted by technical language (e.g. “my Hurry Up driver”) seek to find an alternative. TA language will establish a power differential (one person will be more expert than the other). The aim is to find ordinary words that have particular resonance and meaning for the interviewee. It’s her story. And it can be told in her words. It does not need to be translated into TA or any other language.

Note: This avoiding technical language is part of the narrative approach. It MAY WELL have downsides. But I would invite you to follow these instructions for the purposes of this exercise. We can discuss pros and cons as we go on.

The second task is to find out about the biography of the problem. Using the name or phrase established, ask some biographical questions. Phrase questions as if you were asking about a character / person / object in the person’s life.

- **What is ‘[problem]’ like?** e.g. **What is ‘empty threats’ like?**
 - Options you can try: Is it big or small? Is it male or female? What colour is it?
- **How does ‘[problem]’ go about its business?**
- **What does ‘[problem]’ want for you?**
- **Are there times when ‘[problem]’ doesn’t get its own way?**
 - For example: Does ‘empty threats’ feature more often in some circumstances than in others. For example, does it have more prominence at home or at work?
- **When did ‘[problem]’ first come into your life?**
 - Is ‘empty threats’ more or less active now than in the past?

Do not feel obliged to ask all these questions. Follow your own curiosity and work with the interviewee to build a picture of ‘problem’ and its doings. This process can be fun and enjoyable. And it can be so even when the problem and its doings are serious and disturbing. Keep in mind that the interviewee is the expert and you are curious to learn from her.

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“Problem” Stories Part 2: Interview Crib Sheet

The aim of this interview is to connect the story of the problem up with the person’s deeper values and orientation in life. These questions surprised me at first. But I have found that clients can give surprising responses. Both clients and I have gained valuable insights from these questions. So I invite you to give them a try.

- **Is ‘[problem]’ a positive or negative presence in your life?**
 - Depending on circumstances you might be able to ask: Is ‘[problem]’ a positive or negative *development* in your life?

*The answer may seem screamingly obvious. If the interviewee says something like ‘Well what do **you** think?’ then make clear to her that she is the expert. You might say, ‘Well, it would be a negative for me. But I’m not you. You’re the expert on you. I don’t want to presume I know the answers to questions about you.’ (No need to lay it on too thick – just enough to invite a thoughtful response.)*

- **Why do you say that ‘[problem]’ is a negative/positive presence/development in your life?**

If the interviewee’s answer doesn’t go to something deep then repeat the question. For example: “It’s positive because it keeps me busy”, you might follow up “And is keeping busy a positive or negative thing for you?” and further follow up with “Why do you say this is positive or negative?” You need to use your judgement about how far to push this. But you’re looking for a sense of something ‘bottoming out’.

People may find these questions puzzling. It asks them to get in touch with their individual values. The emphasis is on what’s important to this person, not on what society thinks or what their family thinks. The question is a way of focusing in on this.

Example

Client D identified ‘empty threats’ as problem. She described how it stopped her getting what she wanted. In contrast she talked about ‘follow through’. This was an initiative that she was attracted to and she provided a detailed list of the benefits it would bring. Often ‘empty threats’ disguised itself as ‘follow through’. I asked her whether ‘follow through’ was a positive or a negative in her life. We were both surprised when she told me that it was a negative.

Up to that point I had expected, and my client too I think, that she would have rated it as positive. But making space in the questioning left her free to be clear that it was a negative.

When asking why she rated it as a negative she was able to explain how if ‘follow through’ became an active part of her life she believed she would become a ‘hard person’. And being a ‘hard person’ was something that she was not ready or willing to become.