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The Foundations of Hope in Therapy

John M. Winslade

California State University - San Bernardino, jwinslad@csusb.edu

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The foundations of hope in therapy

John Winslade

Abstract

Hope is a necessary construct in narrative therapy but we need to be careful how we think about it. It does not lie in the essence of persons. There are not categories of people who are hopeful and hopeless. Rather, hope lies in the stories that we use to make sense of our lives but dominant stories from the world around us sometimes interfere with our access to hopeful stories. Therapy can help us reconnect with these stories, leading to the exercise of personal agency in our own lives. This presentation will explore how to help people do this through narrative therapy.

Introductory comments on the archaeology of hope

"The archaeology of hope" was the title our (1997) book on narrative therapy. It was actually the sub-title of the book, but many people know the book by this title. I originally wanted it as the main title, but the publishers were concerned that people searching on the Internet would think it was a book about anthropology.

The title came to me as I lay awake thinking in the middle of the night when we were stuck for a title. The idea began with the image Gerald Monk wrote about in chapter 1 of an archaeologist sifting through sand for clues to make a story about an ancient past.

I wanted to capture the sense of searching for details that narrative practice is about. Not just any details, but especially those on which hope can be built.

The concept of archaeology was also an allusion to a research method originated by Michel Foucault. Foucault (1969) described his research process as about documenting the history of the present. He did this by digging through history

for the moments of discontinuity at which discourse shifts took place and new forms of practice emerged. He later called this process genealogy, but early in his career he referred to archaeology. Investigating the history of the present with a view to tracing a line from the past into the future is also a purpose of narrative therapy.

Hope is usually thought of as about the future. And archaeology is usually thought of as about uncovering stories of the past. Our title therefore contained a paradox. The suggestion we were intending was that hope lies in a story that has a past, a present and a future. It is a key principle of the narrative perspective that stories move through time and that we can strengthen the stories by which people live in the present by gathering strength for them and forward momentum from details lodged in the past.

Another assumption is that people are meaning-making creatures. One of the primary meaning-making frames people use is the narrative frame. It follows that, if people are going to find a basis for hope, they will find it in a narrative.

As Aristotle argued, a narrative is more than a list of events. It is an organization of events into a plot, according to themes. When we live by generative themes in an engaging plot, hope is produced as a byproduct. A strong story needs to be anchored in the past. But it also heads off into a future. Hence we are seeking a story that is well grounded in experience, but also one that leads us towards the hope for a future.

In this presentation, I intend to offer some reflections on the nature of hope and to explore the implications of these reflections for therapy. Then I shall suggest some possible lines of inquiry that might be used in therapy.

Therapy itself is an activity of hope.

It is worth noting to start with that the act of seeking out therapy is in itself a practice of hope. People do not come to therapy without some hope for transformative help. Research by Hubble and colleagues (2010) shows that capacity for hope is one of the four most influential factors that affect the outcome of therapy. It is calculated to account for 15% of outcome variance in studies of therapeutic effectiveness.

Hope is not a category of person.

It is not useful to think in terms of distinctions between types of persons – such as hopeful persons and hopeless persons. Neither are there types of person, or of personality, that are resilient and non-resilient. To think this way is to think of people in essentialist terms. We can easily totalize people if we do so. Totalizing runs the danger of locking people into a description that organizes others' thinking about them, including the therapist's thinking. Becoming hopeful or becoming resilient is not so much a category of personhood, but a process. In narrative terms we prefer, therefore, not to talk about hope as linked with essential aspects of personhood.

The narrative answer to the problems of essentialist thinking or totalizing is to always think of people in terms of stories or narratives. Rather than hopeful or resilient persons we think of hopeful or resilient stories, which people can access and perform. It is a foundational assumption of narrative practice that people are multi-storied. They may be susceptible to a story of despair at different points in their lives, but they are not, in essence, those stories. At times people may identify closely with a story of despair, but we take care not to hear such a story as who they are. There will also always be stories of hope or of resilience somewhere in their experience that can be accessed and rejuvenated.

This idea is summarized in Michael White's (1989) narrative aphorism: "The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem" (p. 6).

Examples of lines of inquiry.

The idea of separating persons from problems and not hearing a dominant story as fixed in a person's nature is built into the logic of externalizing in narrative practice. Both 'hope' and 'despair' can be thought of as stories that from time to time take up residence in a person's life, rather than as hardwired into a person. So we can ask questions about a person's relationship with hope or with despair. For example we might ask:

"What is the work that you want hope to do for you?"

Notice here the use of externalizing language. Hope is placed in front of a person linguistically and the person is asked to reflect on his or her relationship with it.

"What is hopelessness insisting that you understand?"

This question personifies hopelessness and treats it as having a message to communicate. But it is outside the person.

"How does hope build you up and then let you down?"

This question externalizes hope and invites a person to examine a relationship with hope. Like any relationship this one is not all straightforward. It has its upside and its downside.

What is hope?

Let me explore this question through suggesting a series of propositions and interrogating the possibilities for practice arising from each proposition.

Hope is more than a feeling

Common discourse often represents hope as an internal feeling state. It is also often thought about in terms of a wish, or, more strongly, as a desire. Under the influence of what Michael White (2001) called internal state psychologies, therapy has often given undue privilege to feelings, on the assumption that emotions are central to who we are. I would argue however, that it is less useful to think of hope as the stable experience of a state of being so much as something that comes in waves. We may be washed over by waves of hope as well as by waves of despair. Feelings are temporary and they are affected not just by real events but also by the stories we tell ourselves about those events.

Narrative practice is what Michael White (2001) called an intentional state therapy rather than an internal state therapy. It starts from the assumption that making meaning through the construction of narratives is more central to who people are than the experience of passing feelings. Narratives include feelings and emotions but are also much more than that. They are ways of organizing feelings, thoughts and actions into meaningful units of living. Therefore narrative inquiry is more likely to ask people about the stories they are living that feature hope than about whether they feel hopeful.

Examples of lines of inquiry

Rather than asking a person about how much hope they feel we might ask a question like the following:

“Can you tell me a story of when you were able to access hope?”

This question grounds hope in a personal experience.

“Have there been some circumstances when you have had some breaks from hopelessness?”

This question inquires into the unique outcomes or the exceptions to the rule of hopelessness on the assumption that clues to a story of hope will be found there.

“When you need to find resources of hope what examples in your experience do you recall?”

This question assumes that there will be a story of hope and seeks to find it in a person’s experience rather than in the therapist’s repertoire.

Hope is a verb.

Hope is a resource that can make living easier, but it is not a thing or a commodity. We cannot accumulate supplies of hope or hoard it like wealth or money. We cannot get rich in it by saving it up, and we cannot steal it from others. The word hope can be an abstract noun but its most useful value in therapy comes from its use as a verb (Weingarten, 2010). In this usage, hope is an active verb that refers to a process.

Thinking of hope as a verb conjures up a person who is the subject of the verb. We activate hope by stepping into the grammatical position of the subject of the sentence. The subject is what drives the verb and the predicate of the sentence.

Becoming the subject may be contrasted with being the object or the one to whom things are done. There are many ways in which people can be objectified and separated from experiencing the agency that goes with being the subject of the sentence. Many problems people bring to therapy result from being made into objects.

Helping people identify ways to take up the position of the subject, the position of agency, is a primary goal of narrative practice. It opens a counter story to the story of being objectified. In narrative terms this is described as becoming the authors of the stories of our own lives (White, 1995).

Examples of lines of inquiry

Here are some questions that invite people to speak as subjects of a verb.

“How do you do hope?”

This question invites a person to speak about how they hope in detailed terms rather than in general terms.

“What is the smallest thing you hope for?”

When someone is struggling with large problems hope may need to be based on modest and achievable goals.

“When life throws you a big challenge, what do you do to keep on hoping, or to keep from falling into hopelessness.”

This question acknowledges the size of a challenge or problem and dignifies a person’s efforts to hold onto hope.

Hope is a practice that people do.

Hope is achieved by taking action. Kaethe Weingarten (2010) has argued persuasively that hope is not something that people are, so much as something that they do. It is less a state of being than an action. She talks also about doing reasonable hope, not wild optimism. This involves working rather than waiting. It involves also making sense of what exists now, rather than living in a distant future.

She goes further too and suggests that hope is something that people do together, not just something that individuals do. At its best it is a collaborative project that takes place in a relational context.

As something we do rather than primarily a feeling, then it follows that, hope can be performed at times when we cannot summon up the feeling. You can do hope, even when you can’t feel it.

Doing hope is about transforming experiences into possibilities. But feeling hopeful does not alone complete this transformation. Feeling hope may be necessary but not enough. What is also needed is to set goals and establish pathways towards those goals.

There is no hope in sheer hopefulness. It needs to be anchored in action.

Weingarten describes this as ‘scaffolding ourselves to prepare for the future.’

Examples of lines of inquiry

Here are some questions that are oriented to hope as action.

“What do you want hope for?”

This question assumes that hopeful action is purposeful and inquires into its purposes.

“I such a miserable situation, how do you stay connected with hope.”

This question assumes a response to a life challenge will include actions and practices that keep a person connected to hope. It invites the development of a story around these actions.

Hope is the partner of despair

Another way to define hope is in terms of its opposite. As Jacques Derrida (1976) argued, we can understand a concept by asking about its relationship with its binary pairing, by interrogating what it is not. For example: cold relies upon a contrast with hot; male with female; poor with rich; problem with solution. In this way, meaning is always relational.

If hope is the opposite of despair, we can learn about hope by defining its opposite. So we need to ask not just “What is hope?” but also, “What is despair?”

Here's one definition of despair: “The conviction that nothing one wants is within reach”. By contrast then, hope is the opposite conviction: that is, “The conviction that something is within reach”.

Hope and hopelessness thus co-exist (White, 2000). They are not unrelated opposites. It is better to say that they exist in a dialectical, rather than just in an oppositional relationship. There is always interplay between hope and hopelessness.

Kaethe Weingarten remarks that, “Hopelessness thrives when the future is perceived as known, certain and bleak.” By contrast then hope is associated with a sense of openness to an unknown and undetermined future. In fact only in an undetermined future can we have a sense of agency.

Here is Paolo Freire (2014) talking about his own experience of depression:

“I began to take my depression as an object of curiosity and investigation. I stepped back from it, to learn its why. Basically I

needed to shed some light on the framework in which it was being generated. At bottom, in seeking for the deepest 'why' of my pain, I was educating my hope ... I worked on things, on my will. I invented the concrete hope in which, one day I would see myself delivered from my depression." (p.28)

Hope and despair often oscillate. As a pair they are unevenly distributed in our lives and on our planet, but they are intertwined. Hope depends on the negation of despair. Despair depends on the negation of hope.

In narrative practice, Michael White (2001) has adapted this distinction in his concept of 'the absent but implicit'. He suggested that we pay attention to what is being negated as well as to what is being stated. We do this by double listening.

Double listening (White, 2006) involves hearing two stories sitting side by side. It involves looking at how something positive stands out against the background of what it negates. It attends to how a problem story always has a counter story sitting in its shadow. Narrative practice endeavors to bring forward the counter story as well as understanding the problem story.

What someone feels hopeless about is the explicit story. What someone would hope for is often the absent but implicit story. Despair always has within it two stories, the explicit and the implicit.

Double listening invites us to inquire into both of these:

"What happened to produce despair?"

"What are you despairing of that previously you were hopeful about?"

These are two lines of inquiry that can bring forward two stories. One is clearly a problem story – the story of despair. But there is also another story that is currently being dominated by despair, but which needs to be grown and rejuvenated – the story of hope. We might seek to help a person externalize and separate from the story of despair and to internalize and step further into the story of hope.

Here are some further examples of such lines of inquiry:

“I don’t think I can carry on any more”

“What are you considering not carrying on with?”

“I have given up”

“What have given up on?”

“I can no longer see a future”

“What kind of future have you been discerning until now?”

Here are some further questions:

“Until now, what made it possible to keep this future in sight?”

“What has been important to you that you seem to be losing touch with?”

“How did you manage to hold onto hope as long as you did?”

These questions might open up inquiries into a person’s hopes and dreams, cherished values, untapped skills, and implicit knowledges.

The movement of hope and despair can be held in dramatic tension and sometimes reconcile with each other. Rather than argue for hope, we can invite people to experience the ambivalence between hope and despair.

As Cornel West (1997) says:

‘One can never understand what hope is really about unless one wrestles with despair.’

Hope begins in fact not in a different world but on the other side of despair.

Hope is about making meaning

Vaclav Havel (1993), writing in Communist Czechoslovakia, made a clear distinction between hope and optimism. Hope, he said, is:

‘... definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that things will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.’ (p. 68)

Optimism can be naïve or deny the realities of situation, but to be hopeful does not require this. By this logic, hopeful people may also feel discouraged or

despairing. The emphasis Vaclav Havel is making is associated with the postmodern shift from accepting reality to making meaning.

Viktor Frankl (2006) made a similar point about prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. Finding meaning for living helped people survive intolerable circumstances. Living for a meaning proved more substantial than suffering, which was inevitable, for those in Auschwitz. Those in the concentration camps who gave up on meaning, and therefore on hope, usually died very quickly.

Being hopeful involves making meanings that sustain our lives, rather than just being happy. To be hopeful involves taking up the challenge of making meaning, rather than just accepting meanings that might be made for us. Hope is a product of a story that gives someone access to meaning in action.

Examples of lines of inquiry

Here are examples of questions that invite people to connect hope with meaning.

“In these challenges, what do you hold onto to give your life meaning and purpose?”

“What do you stand for that sustains you?”

Both these questions invite people to identify meanings that help them rise above suffering.

Hope is an expression of spirituality

Hope is also intimately related to spiritual resources, which are often the wellsprings of hope. Hope is bigger than the immediacy of the experience within which we are living. The spiritual belief in something larger than ourselves enables us to see ourselves in context and thus to diminish the sense that despair might overwhelm us.

Such spiritual resources might be religious or secular. Western religions have held out for people the hopeful Christian or Muslim idea of expectation of eternal life. Eastern religions have offered a hopeful vision of nirvana or personal enlightenment as well as the hope of reincarnation into a higher form of life after we die.

But a spiritual dimension is not solely a religious dimension. Secular hope was introduced into Europe in the 18th century by the Enlightenment and was fed by the hope associated with the scientific method.

It was followed by the Marxist ideal of a socialist society. Marxism offered a secular utopian vision of freedom from oppression - the vision of emancipation.

As this utopian vision has become tarnished in recent decades, many have started to place more hope in the vision of the market. Contemporary discourse has emphasized the privatization of hope, particularly in the USA and Britain. But it too has become tarnished in recent years as the market spun out of control and damaged many people's lives.

Hope is still found in the democratic ideal. Democracy is about more than electoral systems of government. It is about the ideal of citizens having a say in the conditions of their own lives.

Jacques Derrida (2004) reminds us that democracy is an ongoing project of producing justice that is never finalized. Our task is to continue to improve democracy. Derrida spoke of 'democracy to come', the democracy of the future, the future which never quite arrives but which draws us to strive for justice.

I mention these larger narratives of spirituality because people who consult us for therapy will often have their own personal projects of hope bound up in larger spiritual narratives. We neglect these in therapy when we focus only on individual stories of hope.

Gabriel Marcel (1951) has articulated a spiritual dimension of hope in terms that can be applied to a variety of spiritual commitments. When we hope, he says, "the soul turns toward a light which it does not yet perceive, a light yet to be born". He captures here both an elusive spiritual quality and an expression of how hope involves sensing a context larger than ourselves. Kaethe Weingarten (2010) refers to such spirituality as "the practice of awe" in relation to what is larger than us. It is a practice that can be defined in many ways and it is not the job of therapists to specify these ways but to ask questions that help people enlarge whatever ways of sustaining hope they can identify with.

In its concern to establish itself as a scientific discipline, psychology in general, and therapy in particular, has often downplayed the dimension of spirituality. But it is a source of much resourcefulness for many people and we impoverish our conversations with people if we neglect to inquire into their spiritual resources for dealing with the challenges of living.

Examples of lines of inquiry

Here are some examples of questions that access these spiritual dimensions.

“What beliefs were you taught that give you hope?”

“What larger meanings of life do you remind yourself of?”

“What messages of hope have enabled your people to live through hardship?”

Hope is about relationship with a social context

Hope and despair are not just mental events. They are about a relationship with the world around us, with a social context. The psychology of hope is thus related to the social and economic conditions of living. These conditions of living bear down more heavily on some people than others and make hope more difficult to sustain.

But social contexts are also storied contexts. Narratives of hope and despair are the cultural products of social and economic realities. They are not exclusively the property of individuals, but are constructed in social exchange. Social contexts are shaped by the operation of power relations that lie beyond individual control.

For example, depression and a sense of worthlessness may be a by-product of unemployment. Despair can be brought on by the death of loved ones in a terrorist attack. Anxiety about the future increases if one is living in poverty. Identity struggles can result from the clashes of competing social movements.

Therefore, we can say that hope can be limited by social forces. In the terms in which philosopher Gilles Deleuze articulates, hope is affected by the lines of force (Winslade, 2009) that run through people's lives. A line of force is not something that a person originates, but something that begins before them and runs through their experience, before heading off into a future. For example racism produces lines

of force that shape interactions between people and carry on into the future. Those affected by racism do not invent it, but it operates to diminish hope.

What can we do about this? Deleuze suggests that lines of force can be bent, and can sometimes be escaped through a line of flight. Lines of force create situations in which people struggle to keep hope alive when they have been traumatized, dehumanized, made to feel invisible or powerless. Many of the problems that people bring to therapy result from operations of power.

In this context, just to survive with a belief in themselves and the ability to love others is often a major tribute to hope. Bending a line of force even by 2 degrees leads over time to a different future.

Escaping from one territory of living to another territory of living is what Deleuze calls a line of flight. Lines of flight make possible escape from the forces of oppression and stratification.

Michel Foucault (1982) famously described power relations as “actions upon the actions of others”. If hope is a practice, and, in Foucault’s terms, a discourse practice, then our actions include our practices of hope. And power relations work to restrict people’s practices of hope.

Hope is about how we perform acts of living in spite of the operations of power on us. It often involves expressing resistance to acts of oppression. Even when exposed to significant trauma as a result of oppression people do not just suffer. As Michael White (2006) says, “There is always a response.” People assert resistance in their responses. Narrative inquiry leads us to inquire into such responses and to dignify them by taking them seriously. For example, Allan Wade (1997) talks about the resistance embodied in the “small acts of living” that women who have been targets of domestic violence undertake and suggests that we inquire purposefully into these in order to give them greater significance.

Examples of lines of inquiry

Here are some examples of questions that inquire into the relationship between social conditions of living and the experience of hope.

“How were you were robbed of access to stories of hope?”

This question acknowledges power relations and invites people to express an sense of outrage at how they disconnect people from a sense of hope.

“How have you resisted being undermined by such powerful stories?”

This question explicitly asks for the articulation of resistance to power relations as the basis for hope.

“When you were assaulted, what did you do?”

This question shifts from the suffering of pain and oppression to the story of the actions a person has undertaken on her own behalf. It invites a person to take up a position of agency and potentially dignifies her actions.

Hope is relational

Hope is often thought of in individual terms. Many scales of hopefulness have been developed by psychologists but they all concentrate on individuals. Desmond Tutu (1999) is one who has emphasized hope as a collaborative project that is shared by communities. He uses the African concept of ubuntu to express it, which he translates as "I am because we are." Kaethe Weingarten (2010) adapts his words to the idea of hope in the expression, "I hope because we hope." Gabriel Marcel expresses a similar idea when he refers to hope as "choral".

Kaethe Weingarten talks about identifying sources of vicarious hope. When we are struggling to find places of hope within our own resources we can look outward and borrow from someone else's sense of hope. When we say to ourselves, "If she can get through it, then so can I," then we are said to be using vicarious hope.

In families and in relationships, people may not evenly share the communication and expression of hope. Representations of hope and hopelessness are often divided up between family members and distributed differentially between them.

Some are allocated the task of speaking up for narratives of hope, of possibility, of positive outcomes, while others are allocated the task of speaking for caution, for watchfulness, for the downside, even for hopelessness. These allocations are not explicitly made, but are tacitly assigned. They are then enacted in family communications and their significance is debated. The balancing of hope and

despair may be worked out in the communications between family members, rather than within the individual.

In communities also people differ in the extent to which they have access to the wider networks of support on which hope may be built. Therapy needs to pay attention therefore to the ways in which hope is distributed. Sometimes it may be necessary to negotiate a redistribution of the allocation of hope.

If hope is always interpersonal, it is always about how people are doing being in it together. Sometimes too one person may be temporarily struggling with a larger share of despair than others. In this circumstance, people may need to temporarily pick up more than their share of hope and hold it temporarily on behalf of others.

Such ideas require us to move beyond the individualistic assumptions introduced often by the confines of language.

For example we might ask a person who is struggling to maintain a sense of hope.

"Who is holding the hope for you?" or:

"Who can shine the flashlight of hope when you get tired?"

The question assumes hope to be a resource shared by people in relationship rather an aspect of individual psychology.

"Whose example might inspire you to get through this crisis?"

This is a question that helps people draw on vicarious sources of hope.

Hope can be re-membered

Narrative practice assumes that we can continue to draw on the resources even of those we love who have died. This idea is embodied in the narrative practice of re-membering conversation (Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; White, 2007), in which those who are no longer alive can still be held to be members in the club that makes up our lives. In relation to them we form identity and this does not suddenly stop when people die. Stories of identity can be inherited from our ancestors and bequeathed to our loved ones.

These ideas make a difference to the experience of grief and the practice of grief counseling. The pain of loss can be made easier to bear if we remember our

loved ones and incorporate their words and their significance in our ongoing pool of resources for living.

Hope is one such resource that can be drawn upon through remembering. In the process people can be invited to stay close to dead loved ones rather than to say goodbye and separate from them.

Examples of lines of inquiry

We can ask therapeutic questions that are built on the assumptions of remembering for the purpose of sustaining or building people's stories of hope. For example:

"What kept your mother/father going when she/he lost hope?"

"What messages of hope do you want to leave for your grandchildren?"

"What would you wish people to say after you are dead about how you handled adversity?"

What can therapy offer? Some conclusions

Fundamentally therapy is a process where we have the privilege of access to people's struggle to produce hope in their lives. Our task is to bear witness to this struggle. It is about conversation aimed at the production of difference. As Kaethe Weingarten said, making a difference is about refusing indifference. Good therapists refuse to be indifferent to the struggle with despair. They respond to expressions of suffering. They work for the production of hope but are mindful of the power of despair and of the forces that line up behind it.

Therapy that engenders hope is about identifying narrative pathways that lead to new territory. This is often painstaking work that involves careful listening, double listening especially. It involves asking questions that do the work of opening up the possibility of reflection, of meaning-making, and of re-storying.

Hope is not something we can give to our clients as a gift. Not can we instill it or inspire it. But we can bear witness to its development. We can also provoke it through asking good questions that produce fresh responses. We can help people identify the compass points that help them navigate through the waters of despair to places of light, of creativity, of hope.

In the process we can help people remember the best of their past, experience the richness of possibility in the present, and craft a narrative that will carry them into a preferred and hopeful future.

I have listed some ideas about hope that I shall reiterate one final time and leave you with them.

1. Hope is not a category of person. It is a theme of a story.
2. Hope is more than a feeling. We can do it even when we can't feel it.
3. Hope is a verb. Agency means being the subject of the verb.
4. Hope is a practice that people do. We do it together.
5. Hope is the partner of despair. We can turn the coin over.
6. Hope is about making meaning. It is more than optimism.
7. Hope is an expression of spirituality. It connects us to larger meanings.
8. Hope is about relationship with a social context. It is a response to power.
9. Hope can be re-membered. We can resource it from our dead loved ones.
10. Hope is relational. We can do it for each other.

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