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RE-AUTHORING THE WORLD: UNFOLDING IDEAS AND PRACTICES¹

By Chené Swart

INTRODUCTION

In this article you will be invited into the transformational nature of the re-authoring lens and practices for organisational and communal work. Re-authoring work facilitates ways of seeing and doing that invites individuals, communities and organisations to take back the pen in the authoring and co-authoring of their lives and their worlds as it builds on the human capacity to weave meaning into narratives in our given world. As we do this work, the beauty, dignity and knowledges of individuals and communities are deeply honoured. You will be taken on a journey through the theory and practices in three examples that show how collective meaning-making, deconstruction of societal discourses, the imagining of futures and human dignity open magical doors into unknown worlds. Re-authoring work unlocks new possibilities and imagined futures wherein human beings can co-author their relationships with all things of the world.

THE ROOTS OF RE-AUTHORING IDEAS AND PRACTICES

The re-authoring ideas and practices are rooted in a deep friendship that started at the end of the 70's between two social workers, [Michael White](#) from Australia and [David Epston](#) from New Zealand whose practices were initially called re-authoring therapy and is now better known as Narrative therapy (Epston & White 1990). Their use of the word 're-authoring' was inspired by the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1986:145) who wrote about people as 'authors of themselves'.

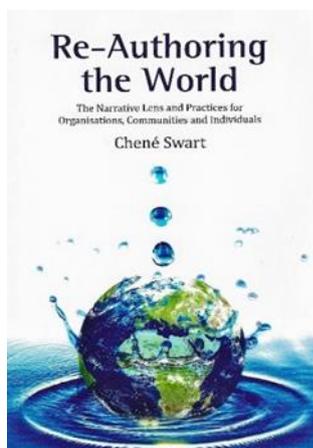


In the last 20 years, Narrative therapy ideas have been translated into various fields and is used across the world as a powerful lens and practice for organisational and communal transformation.

As I began my studies in Narrative therapy in 2002, 're-authoring' was one of the many big words in the lexicon of new words that washed over me like a tsunami. Words that I had to both make sense of and translate into my mother tongue, Afrikaans (a form of Dutch), and into my South African context. In 2010, when the fresh eyes and continuous curiosity of Peter Block looked upon my explanations of what Narrative therapy means for somebody interested in community and

¹ This article has been translated and adapted from various published documents: Connect your story manual, Rooting Narrative Work: A letter to Re-authoring in Re-authoring Futures Con-Texts and blog posts on the www.beyondstorytelling.com website.

organisational work, I saw the word, 're-authoring' again. It was as if this word could really hold the complexity and beauty of the ideas and practices in a way that helped people to enter.



When I stepped into the corporate world in 2005 with these narrative therapy ideas and practices, a journey of translation unfolded, in a no-nonsense and no-big-words context. Five years into translating these ideas, I wrote a book, *Re-authoring the World*, (Swart 2013) with what some people considered, a presumptuous title. I realised that the re-authoring work, amongst many things, also re-authors the world in big and small ways. The transformational nature of the re-authoring work is what most caught my attention and imagination.

Now five years after the publishing of the book, this article articulates the evolving and unfolding practices and thinking in my work.

Although the majority of the translated ideas and practices that I use in my work firmly stands on the shoulders of Narrative Therapy, my re-authoring practice has also been infused by Peter Block's community work (2008), Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak's Dialogic Organizational Development (2015), Jeff Zimmerman's (2018) interpersonal neurobiology, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's (2004, 2014) writings on meaning and presence, many conversations with my colleagues, Tom Carlson (2015-2017), Griet Bouwen and Marianne Schapmans (2015-2018) and my beloved country, South Africa.

These ideas and practices are part of my life, my work and my body and by now, I don't know where it begins and where it ends, where it came from and how and when it entered.

In this article you will be introduced to the explorations of the following questions: What is the re-authoring lens and practices? What does the re-authoring work offer the field of organisational and communal transformation? How can organisational and communal transformation be invited through collective meaning-making, deconstruction of societal discourses, counter-narratives for the future and human dignity?

WHAT DOES THE WORD 'RE-AUTHORING' MEAN?

Is re-authoring storytelling?

In organisational work today, we cannot even imagine that there was once a time when the words, story, storytelling and narrative were "soft" words that only the bravest would dare to try out or use in this field.

But what do story- or storytelling practices have in mind? Do we merely document and relay the stories of what is? Maybe in a humane way and touching way? Do we draw on the human capacity to be moved and touched so that we can influence and sell our products, our leadership vision, new organisational strategy or the brand of our company? Do we merely use story as an 'authentic' method to influence others? Have we extracted the heart of stories and casted it as an empty tool for marketing purposes?



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The dilemma in working with stories today, is that it has been captured. Because of countless storytelling training programmes in organisations, 'good' leaders are now expected to tell 'good' stories in a compelling way as stories are used as a marketing tool to influence and convince.

In addition to this pursuit of the 'good' story that will sell and influence, most people believe they don't have a story, or their story is not worth telling or seems too insignificant to share. Therefore, working with narratives in organisations has become increasingly difficult as you have to wade through all of the meanings and the effects created by these dominant understandings of the storytelling industry.

In this maze of meaning in storytelling-work, re-authoring work opens magical doors into untold stories through human dignity and connectedness. This re-authoring lens and practices opens up moments as a portal into the multiplicity of stories of people's and community's lives, beyond the good and right [single story](#). It does not wish to influence, convince or to merely re-tell familiar stories. Re-authoring work dares to invite communities into collective meaning-making as they re-imagine a future as part of a context, as part of this world, whilst transforming familiar and dominant stories on their way.

What is re-authoring work?

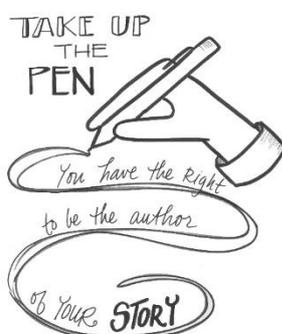
Re-authoring work facilitates ways of **seeing** and **doing** that invites individuals, communities and organisations to take back the pen in the authoring of their lives and their worlds.

This section is a short introduction into the way we see human beings and the world as well as the practices we employ in working with individuals and communities in transformational ways.

The rest of the article will show how this lens and practices play out in three examples focusing on collective meaning-making through significant moments, the co-creating of counter-narratives for the future, the deconstructing of societal discourses and transformation through human dignity.

Our Lens: What do we see?

In this understanding, a lens is a way to see humanity and the world that opens up possibilities and exposes that which presents itself as fact and given. In re-authoring work, we see human beings and the world in ways that open up moments as doorways into transformation.



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Human beings

Taking back the pen in the authoring of our lives and our worlds builds on the human capacities to make meaning and to make story (White 2007) through language and through our bodies. In the re-authoring work, human beings are seen as knowledgeable about life, are connected to various communities and social histories from which they draw conclusions about their identities, their relationships and the world. In addition, human beings are seen as the keepers of a multiplicity of stories of their lives that draw from values, dreams, commitments and hopes that move them forward.

Moments

The smallest unit of a story is a moment (Zimmerman 2018). Through our meaning-making capacity we can weave various moments into narratives. These narratives are quite powerful as they shape and maintain people's and communities' identities, relationships and how they see the world.

The way things are

The re-authoring lens also provides a way of seeing the world, or 'the way things are' as built upon societal discourses that have been crafted in history across time in a certain context and influence how we see ourselves, one another and the future. 'The way things are' is not seen as facts and can therefore move or shift in an instant.

Transformation

In re-authoring work, transformation can happen in a moment, as if by magic (Gumbrecht 2004). Transformation is invited when our meaning-making and story-making capacity is ignited in connectedness to other human beings in spaces of dignity. In these spaces of dignity, a different kind of knowing and being is invited where meaning can shift and new possibilities become available that have not previously been seen or noticed. In these transformative moments, the future and its possibilities open up from a deep knowing of experience with the past and the present.

Our practices: What do we do?

The lens described in the previous section brings a particular kind of seeing and therefore invites alternative ways of doing called practices. In re-authoring work our practices invite moments and counter-narratives, deconstruct the context, facilitate the movement between meaning and presence whilst building on re-dignifying practices as we do so.

Invite moments

Re-authoring work creates conversations or processes that invite participants to make meaning of significant moments in their lives that have often been shifted to the background or have been treated as mere exceptions. These significant moments are then further explored and enriched through the social and cultural histories that they grow from as they offer new possibilities for conclusions about identity, relationships and the future.

Deconstructing the context

Moments and meanings that get individuals and communities stuck are cast in a larger context with taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs about what is good and right in a particular time and age, sometimes also called the status quo or the norm. Re-authoring ideas and practices therefore unpack and challenge these favoured ideas and practices and its influence on people and communities and questions "the way things are" (White 2004). Through this set of practices what is taken-for-granted can be unveiled and emerging counter or alternative moments can be enriched into narratives that can re-author the future.

Invite counter-narratives

Re-authoring work is an invitation into the joy of being authors and co-authors of our world. A joy that speaks of our 'acts of refusal' and 'protest' (White 2004) about the 'way things are', the folding of the richness of our lives into our identities and relationships, the invitation to 're-member'

(Myerhoff 1982) our communities and the kindling of hope through alternative or 'counter-narratives' (Lindemann Nelson 2001) that dream of a different future.

Both the listener and the teller are transported to other worlds in these processes and conversations that invite narratives that move us forward to transform the way things are and therefore also the future. Re-authoring work opens up new possibilities and imagined futures wherein human beings can co-author their relationships with all things of the world.

Host conversations based on re-dignifying² practices

The re-dignifying practices are invitations to:

- situate the storyteller outside of or separate from the story (Carlson & Epston 2017) in ways that set them up as the 'primary authors' (White 2005:9) of the narrative
- create spaces for human connectedness
- honour, understand and work with the importance of language in the construction of identity, meaning, community and the naming of the future (Swart 2013:20-29)
- ask transformative questions and listen in ways that individuals and communities can again become surprised and fascinated with their own lives (Swart 2013:51-59)
- be aware of the privilege and power that our position holds by deconstructing power and using privilege towards the common good.

The re-dignifying practices will be discussed in more depth towards the end of this article.

Facilitate the movement between Presence and Meaning

We facilitate the movement between 'presence' and 'meaning' (Gumbrecht 2004) as the ground from where transformation can unfold.

Gumbrecht (2004) talks in this regard about the oscillation between meaning and presence or in this article we will talk about the facilitation of movement between moments as a portal into presence and the embodied meaning that grows from these moments.

In western society we live in meaning-making cultures, and we cannot but ask 'what does this mean'? Therefore, we are invited to pause in these significant moments before we too quickly move to the meaning of these moments. Once we pause in these moments with all our senses, with the presence of nature, the arts and our relationships, we can move to meaning, which is then embodied meaning.

When we facilitate the opening up of moments through the above-mentioned portals, we put into motion a continuous movement that might sound like:

- *Take me to a moment using all your senses...*
- *Where did the remembering of the moment take you?*
- *Is there a moment that will help me understand why you were taken to this place?*

² In many conversations Tom Carlson and I shared between 2015 and 2017, Tom spoke about the 're-dignification of the other'. Over the years I have referred to practices of respect in various ways, but since my conversations with Tom, I have come to call these practices, re-dignifying practices.

Once we have explored significant moments, we then ask, 'what does this moment mean?' These explorations give us an embodied meaning that grows out of the different senses of our experience. And as we do, the magic of transformation is on its way!

The unpacking of moments, the deconstructing of the context, the invitation of counter-narratives, the re-dignifying practices and the facilitation of the movement between meaning and presence are re-authoring practices that facilitate the transformation of identity, relationships, organisational/communal culture and ultimately the future. These practices will be further explored through examples in the following sections.

What are the gifts of re-authoring work in the transformation of organisations and communities?

TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH RE-AUTHORING WORK

What are the contexts in which organisations would want to transform? Is it about making our organisations better? Do we want 'more value for the shareholder' so that the 'bottom line' can improve? Do we want our organisations to transform to have less absenteeism and more 'engaged' employees? Do we feel the consequences of our inability to be an inclusive work environment where diversity is celebrated? Are we scared of the pace of change and innovation and all the prophets calling out our certain death if we don't adapt or are not agile enough? Are we afraid that we are not at the cutting edge of change?

In this multiplicity of calls for organisational transformation, the re-authoring work offers a lens and a set of practices that invite organisations to make meaning collectively through significant moments as they co-author the organisations' culture and future, to deconstruct the societal discourses that impact them, and to build on human connection and dignity whilst doing so.

Re-authoring work strongly builds on the hope that through our authorship and co-authorship, we are able to shift something in our organisations, our communities and consequently also in our world.

Through the re-authoring lens, transformation can happen in a moment, but is also supported as part of a continuous process of becoming and never an end state or the crossing of a finish line.

What do we see and do differently in adopting the re-authoring lens and practices? How can we imagine and build futures that are worth living into – for our organisations and communities?

Transformation through collective meaning-making

The first lens and practice for transformation that we will explore, is the invitation for organisations and communities to make meaning collectively through significant moments.

The importance of moments as transportation and as experience

Moments that transport us

For many years I asked participants to tell a story relating to a theme. Time after time their perplexed faces and questions showed their strong belief that they don't have a story to tell or that

their story is not significant or important enough to tell or be heard. But if you ask people to take you to a moment, soon a story will unfold.

In Re-authoring work, moments are the smallest unit of experience (Zimmerman 2018). But do not be fooled by size! Moments are small enough for anyone to enter. Moments hold the potential to unlock a whole new world that might transform all we take for granted in an instant.

Maybe this seeming simplicity invites people to dare to speak about a moment without knowing exactly what they will say. And therefore, the effect and impact always surprise participants as they are transported to long forgotten places and sometimes even unknown spaces as they 're-member' (Meyerhoff 1982). The key to this approach is asking people not to tell *about* a moment, but to *take us to a moment* in which a topic or theme was / is / became relevant and important to them.

Creating moments through experience

When we talk about significant moments, we have the moment in which we ask a group or a person about the moments, take us to:

- *a moment that you would like more of, or*
- *a moment that took you forward ...*

We also have an intersection of the present moment in which we ask the question, as well as the space for human dignity and connectedness that has been created for the question to be asked in, which is also a moment.

As we focus on significant moments, the work we do with organisations and communities happens on two levels: it is both the invitation to re-member moments that might be long-forgotten and through this re-membering to also collectively create moments in the present with the organisation or community.

At the same time these moments transform when you invite the past moments to join. And sometimes the past speaks louder now than it did in the moment we experienced it, because it is invited into a certain context. This calls for a possible moment of transformation.

The gift of moments in organisational work

Putting moments at the heart of the work, invites organisations and communities to move away from the battle ground of opinions, views, analyses and the correctness and rightness thereof. When moments are centred, we move towards collectively making meaning of these moments anew which creates the possibility for new ways of looking, new ways of relating and new interpretations of reality.

Moments activate the imagination, body and the senses and invite a different kind of conversation with different ways of knowing. As human beings we are bodily beings in which each significant moment calls forth the possibility to engage all our senses. When we are taken to these embodied moments, we experience what Gumbrecht calls 'presence', a moment when we feel 'the soft touch of the world on our skin' (2004:106).

The magic of asking to be taken to significant moments is that participants are remembering specific situations or moments in which a theme had relevance to them. With this seemingly simple

invitation, we invite people to take us there, to reexperience the moment, which according to Zimmerman (2018) opens the possibility of re-authoring.

Moments that matter or moments that we want more of in organisational life open up the possibility for collective meaning- and sensemaking and provide the ground from where we can imagine a different future as the moments becomes evidence of the possibility. These significant moments provide organisations with a rich treasure chest of real-life experiences of the possibilities of an alternative future for an organisation or community to live into.

As we unshackle moments out of the shadows of time (Carlson & Swart 2015-2017) we bring them forward into the future because they are no longer bound to time. When these moments are here, now, we can imagine what it means for the future. We can see the future in a certain sense. Leonhard Cohen has a line in a song in which he sings that there is a crack in everything where the light can shine through. For me, these moments of collective meaning-making are the moments in which the pen is all of a sudden back in our hands.

An example



In 2017 I was asked by the administrator general of Tourism Flanders, Peter de Wilde, to facilitate an open gathering of employees in which we collectively explored and made meaning of the transformational nature of tourism. The same invitation was then extended to partners in the tourism industry to also join the effort of collective meaning-making later the same year.

How could we invite collective meaning-making through moments to open up the possibilities of our co-search in a way that is useful and relevant for the employees and partners of Tourism Flanders?

These moments that were shared by nearly 50 employees and 150 partners from the tourism sector become evidence that stood as an alternative in the context of taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas of tourism as a purely economic endeavour.

Employees and partners of Tourism Flanders rediscovered why they are involved in this industry, saw themselves connected to one another anew and started imagining together what Flanders as a flourishing destination could be and look like.

It brought energy and excitement to collectively become co-authors of what this new initiative might mean for the industry and for the department. As these different groups explored significant moments, the gathering also became a significant moment in itself. One that marked the small beginnings of a journey collectively making meaning, collectively dreaming and collectively taking action.

The moment questions we explored in the gatherings were:

- *Take us to a moment when you travelled where something shifted for you? Where were you? What happened? Who was with you? When did this moment happen? What did you smell, see, hear and feel? Was there art, beauty or nature in this moment?*

- *Who would not be surprised that this is the moment you have chosen to take us to today? To which moment will they take us to, to help us understand why they would not be surprised?*
- *What would you call this moment if you had to give it a name like the title of a book?*

The meaning questions we explored were:

- *What transformed in this moment you spoke about?*
- *What is the influence of this moment on your life?*
- *What in the travel experience invited the transformation?*
- *Which insights from the moment can be carried into our work and lives?*

As we collectively make meaning, we become witnesses to one another's experiences in a way that builds relationships, connectedness and community. We dare to see life and possibilities through the eyes of the other which also creates a sense of belonging and intimacy. We are not only witnessing others but we are also listening to ourselves, reexperiencing the moments anew through our retelling.



One of the participants in the workshop stood up and said that when he thought of the moment, the memory of the moment was even stronger than the moment itself. Re-authoring work taps into the richness of the moment and beyond. As if the moment transcends time.

If we invite real-life moments to inform our futures and explorations, we do not fall into the trap of seeing, in this case transformative tourism, through our well-established and well-known opinions and frames of reference. By using significant moments in our meaning-making we invite the possibility that the exploration becomes transformative in nature.



Working with moments within the re-authoring practices invites people with all their capacities and gifts to bring their insights, commitments, passions and wisdom as they reconnect with the theme at hand, reconnect with one another and are seen and heard in a dignified way.

Since these two gatherings, Tourism Flanders have embarked on think tanks of exploration around important themes in transformative tourism, have completed a large-scale listening exercise where they harvested the stories of 1600 participants around this topic, have sponsored small projects of exploration and is now in the final phase of documenting and communicating the way forward³.

Transformation through deconstructing societal discourses

Secondly, the re-authoring lens and practices provide ways of seeing and doing wherein the taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs or societal discourses of the contexts in which organisations function are 'disrupted' (Bushe & Marshak 2015a:29) so that possibilities for transformation can open up.

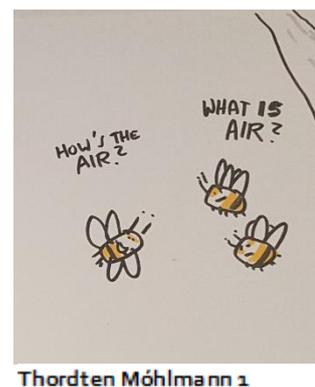
³ If you are interested in reading more about this transformative exploration, follow the link: <https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/toerismevandetoekomst>

This work acknowledges that everyone, every organization and community is part of a context with taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that supports and invests in the stories that are told by and about them and others.

What is water? What is air?

To bring back the authorship and co-authorship in organisations requires that we again see the water that we swim in or the air that we fly in. Like the fish in water and the bees in the air, we take for granted that there is such a thing as water or air. The fish might ask, what is water? The bees might ask what is air?

As human beings we take for granted: our way of life, our thinking, what is normal and acceptable, what is a good organisation and what is success. Until we understand that we were given the water and air through long histories, traditional power, our communities, markets and the stories we are told, we might remain mere characters in the larger story of our organisations and the world.



Societal discourses or taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas present the world we are living in as fixed, as a world that cannot change, as fact and one that we have been handed. Facts that are also without choice or any other alternatives or possibilities in the present.

These beliefs and ideas are hidden through language, power, knowledge and years of tradition which makes it invisible. When one dares to ask questions about them, or to them, we often hear the answer: "This is just the way it is in our organisation." Within the hidden nature of these beliefs and ideas we give meaning and experience their impact on our lives and our organisations as we unknowingly contribute to the organisational future. Societal discourses or taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas have something in mind for us, because they shape how we are in the world.

These taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas make people, teams or organisations the problem as it situates problems inside people (White 2004) or organisations. These kind of problem stories that the societal context supports are insufficient and incomplete descriptions because it does not speak of the potential and the possibilities that organisations or communities can live into and choose from.

Once we accept that 'this is just the way things are', we can become mere characters in this story of the organisation because the stories we then tell and re-tell are shaped and maintained within this organisational context. As mere characters we never bring our gifts and passions fully to the organisation, we hold no hope and wait for the pay check at the end of the month.

The re-authoring lens and practices therefore open the possibility to dare to say and see that something is amiss. It makes clear that the world is not what it can be in terms of the future. Re-authoring practices gives the platform for the context to be named and to understand the influence of the context on the team or organisation. The joy of this re-authoring work, is that once we understand the givenness of this world, we can see the stories that are valued and supported and choose again, where, how and what we want to re-author in this world.

HOW DO WE DECONSTRUCT SOCIETAL DISCOURSES?

Re-authoring work is about making these hidden taken-for-granted beliefs/societal discourses visible through powerful questions about the influence the context has on various aspects of our lives.

In addition, we also deconstruct societal discourses by making visible counter or alternative moments in which communities and organisations show up and transform this so-call fixed world. What a joy it is to unveil these precious moments and through living and telling counter stories that change and re-write the context along the way. We fold these counter-moments back into time (Carlson 2017) as the first taste and act of protest in re-authoring the future!

The re-authoring practices bring into focus the unique context that these moments take place in and help organisations and communities to see and know how they shape the context and are shaped by the context. In a sense these practices provide authorship in relationship with the context. A relationship where organisations write themselves into existence and as they do, they are shifting the context by becoming authors and co-authors of their place in the world and therefore their future.

An example

Everyone Deserves a Holiday is a holiday participation centre in Tourism Flanders⁴ that facilitates holidays for people in Flanders that would never otherwise be able to have this experience.

In 2016 I first met the team and together we deconstructed and unpacked the world of their work that they took for granted. We unpacked the context in which they were providing holidays for people in poverty and with disabilities.

These were questions we asked when unpacking taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas:

- *When we think of a holiday, what do 'they' say about holidays?*
- *Who is allowed to go on holidays in Flanders?*
- *What are the conditions under which people are allowed to go on a holiday in Flanders?*
- *What do 'they' say about people in poverty?*
- *What do 'they' say about people in poverty and the tourism industry?*
- *What do 'they' say about tourism in the industry?*
- *Who are the role players that say all of this? Who are the 'they'?*
- *If you had to give these taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas a name like the title of a book, what would you call it?*

These were questions we asked to unpack the influence of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas:

- *How do these taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs about who deserves a holiday influence?*
 - *You*

⁴ You can read more about Everyone Deserves a Holiday in the article <https://iedereenverdientvakantie.be/re-authoring-the-future-of-travel-and-hospitality> called Re-authoring the future of travel and hospitality in Tourism Flanders that I co-authored with Griet Bouwen and Marianne Schapmans.

- *The work that you do*
- *The people that you work with*
- *The teams' relationships with one another*
- *The relationship to the rest of Tourism Flanders*
- *The future*

These were the questions we asked to name the emerging counter-narratives

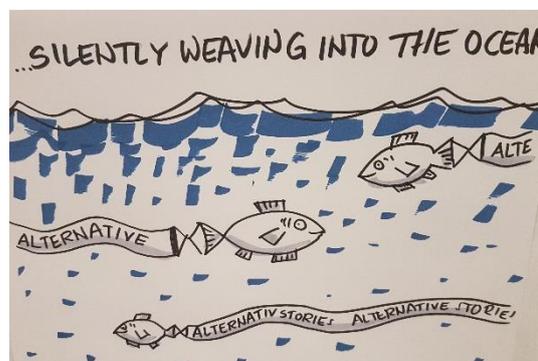
- *What are also emerging moments in your team and work that tells a different story than these taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas?*
- *What would you call these emerging moments?*
- *What are these emerging moments of difference saying to the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas?*

After this unpacking process, the team started referring to their context as the 'ocean of beliefs and ideas'. This generative metaphor (Marshak, Grant, & Floris 2015), 'the ocean', became a way of catching out beliefs and ideas that the team did not agree with and enabled them to unpack and ask questions about them beyond our time together.

In the past 6 years, Everyone Deserves A Holiday has been documenting the experiences of people they have facilitated holidays for, people that have provided discounts to make these holidays more affordable and people from the social sector that have supported people in going on holidays.

Recently, when I had a conversation with one of the team members, she referred to the power of their firm belief in listening to, documenting and publishing of moments that tell of a different story than the taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs of the world in which they do their work.

She also spoke about how people's lives have been transformed because they have been listened to as they expressed how they finally could tell their stories whilst somebody was interested for their story to be told and documented.



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All of these narratives have been standing as evidence for an alternative possibility in an ocean of fixed beliefs and ideas about who deserves a holiday.

She further commented that now, 2 years later, the alternative/counter narratives of their work with people have significantly

shifted the ocean of beliefs and ideas, so much so that she believes that it has transformed the ocean into a place of dignity where everyone indeed deserves a holiday.

Transforming the futures of organisations and communities

Thirdly, the transformational nature of the re-authoring lens and practices invite individuals, communities and organisations to take up the pen as authors and co-authors who shape the futures they want to live into individually and collectively. This notion of authorship implies that an organization, a community or an individual are keepers and agents of the stories that are told, retold, lived, created and imagined.

To build and transform the culture of an organisation requires an awareness and understanding of: the power of the storying capacity of the work-community, the power of language in the creation of the culture, the influence of power in the telling of preferred organisational culture narratives and the importance of the relationships that carry these narratives.

If the stories we tell and live, shape and maintain our identities, relationships and reality, they also shape the future of an organisation. How we see ourselves, how we relate to our fellow employees on all levels and how we speak and think about the world and the place of the organisation in it, can open up possibilities for the future or close them down.

The re-authoring ideas, practices, questions and conversations help communities and organisations to steer away from opinions and analyses about “the way things are” but rather help them to stand on the shoulders of lived moments that give them a taste of the future to be re-authored. A future that is not without histories as we know that there is never just one story. And that means that when those moments are re-remembered, it is as if we can re-remember our future. We put membership in the possibility of our future together.

If we make up stories in organisations that are not grounded in real experience and practices, or we “sell” future stories that have not been invited into the meaning-making of the community of workers, we tread on dangerous ground. Meaning cannot be forced or sanctioned, it needs an invitation to participate.

Re-authoring practices therefore transform people’s relationship to the future because organisations and communities can no longer believe that things are just the way they are. You enable organisations/communities to fold the future into the present and remembered stories of the past, and as organisations/communities stand as authors and co-authors who see anew, rich descriptions of new possibilities for alternative futures can emerge.

From this point of view, the future is not and cannot be cast in stone. The future in this understanding is an open book, a becoming, in which the organisation/community, as the keepers of the stories, participate in the writing and co-writing of the story. The very notion of futures of becoming assumes a multiplicity of possibilities, options and alternatives.

An example

In June 2018 I had the privilege to come alongside a gathering of 130 people living in Nova Scotia, a small province on the east coast of Canada and the ancestral land of the Indigenous Mi'kmaq

people. This was a grassroots gathering called How We Thrive, that had come together to build relationships and skills, and to imagine how they could re-author the future of their province.

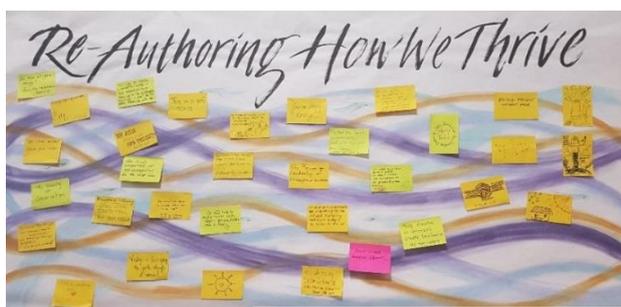
Everyone had already been together for two days before our session. We began by asking groups of three to consider these questions:

- *Take us to a moment in the last 2 days when you saw a glimpse of the possibility of a thriving Nova Scotia. Who was there? What happened? When did it happen? What did you hear, see feel and smell? Was there any art or nature present?*
- *Who would not be surprised that you are taking us to this moment and why would they not be surprised?*
- *What would you name this moment if you had to give it a title?*

Each group then made meaning of what they heard from one another using one or more of these:

- A quote
- An insight
- A commitment
- An image

The groups were then asked to jointly write a quote, insight, commitment or image on a stickie note. One person from each group first read their "glimpse of the future" to the whole group and then posted it onto a mural that was portrayed as an ocean. That way, the whole group could further lean into, enrich and explore the future themes that surfaced.



Barbara Bash 1

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH HUMAN DIGNITY

Lastly, as we work with collective meaning-making through moments, deconstruct societal discourses and its influences and invite counter-narratives for alternative futures, the podium for human dignity is crucial in the invitation for these re-authoring conversations and processes to unfold respectfully whilst holding the possibility for transformation.



Mariah Howard 2

The re-dignifying practices, the creation of human connection and the sharing of gifts ignite the beauty and dignity of all who are present and stand central in all processes that have been discussed in the sections above.

Greeting and connection

When we invite people to tell about heartfelt moments, it is important to create the context and a podium for human dignity, community and connection.

Firstly, we have to greet and “see” one another to create human connectedness in our communities, organisations and conversations.

Examples of connecting questions:

- *Why was it important to show up and say “yes” to the journey in this season of your life?*
- *On whose shoulders are you standing as you enter the room today? / Who has made it possible for you to be here today?*
- *If you had to design a t-shirt that would help us understand who you are, what would it look like or say?*

Our human connectedness makes room for the diversity in the room to participate without fear and in so doing trust is created.

Re-dignifying practices

If we would like to create a podium for human dignity in every conversation we facilitate, the re-dignifying practices stand central as ways to be and work with people that ignite the beauty and dignity of their lives (Carlson 2017). These practices understand the societal discourses that play out in our human relatedness with one another and are therefore not mere rules or methods for better communication, they do and are much more.

These practices bring the gift of respect which comes from the Latin word “respecere”. “Specere” means to see and is the word that “spectacles” come from. “Re” means that we are challenged to look again, the word respect therefore challenges us to see again and look again beyond the labels and judgements we so easily fall into.

The re-dignifying practices provide the environment for conversations where we talk about things that really matter without thinking that we know what people mean. We create spaces where we welcome all the voices and respect the diversity of meaning and ways of seeing the world as gifts that can assist us to move forward together.

Re-dignifying Practices for Re-authoring Conversations	
<i>Avoid</i>	<i>You are invited to</i>
Judging and evaluating	Be carefully curious
Assuming	Ask questions that you do not know the answer to by using the vocabulary of the narrator(s)
Fixing, solving problems, intervening and interrupting	Elevate the narrator to primary authorship
Giving advice and reframing	Listen and be open to be surprised and transformed

Giving compliments, positive judgements, applause, feedback and affirmations	Share gifts through the 'offerings of our moved hearts' (Carlson & Swart 2015-2017)
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The giving and receiving of gifts

The giving and receiving of gifts, is a very important re-dignifying practice because it enables connectedness where we are seen and see others. This practice also creates the possibility to experience our connectedness with one another in the web of stories.

As we listen to the storyteller or organisation/community, we are touched, moved or struck by what we hear. We therefore share the offerings of our moved hearts with one another.

- *What were the gifts you received from each person in the group?*
- *What were the gifts you received from the conversation?*

These gifts (Block 2008) are contextual, specific, timely and created in the conversation; they can never be reproduced in the same way. As they are given, I believe these gifts are folded into the rich fabric of our 'human becoming' (Winslade 2009).

- *We share gifts by saying: "The gift I received from you in this conversation is ..."*

When we receive a gift, we are invited to accept the gift with a "thank you" and not to diminish the gift by saying things like: "I was born like this", "It is nothing special", or "There are other people who are better at this than I am".

When human beings share gifts with one another, they open richer descriptions of one another's identities that also help participants to understand which gifts they are already bringing to their communities or the organisation and which gifts they want to bring even more fully.

Human dignity is invited through re-dignifying practices, the creation of human connection and the sharing of gifts. These re-authoring practices bring human aliveness that invites participants to see themselves and one another anew, and as we do, transformation of our relatedness becomes possible. As we welcome all the voices and respect the diversity of meaning and ways of seeing the world as gifts, it can assist us to move forward together in a transformed relationship to all the things of the world.

SAYING GOODBYE

The re-authoring work offers a lens and a set of practices that dares to hold the hope of transformation for individuals, communities and organisations.

St Augustine wrote about the two beautiful daughters of hope called, "anger" and "courage"⁵ saying that nothing in our world will change unless we are angry enough about what is unjust and wrong. And equally important, nothing will change if we are just angry but don't have the courage to do something about what is wrong.

⁵ <https://theunboundedspirit.com/saint-augustine-quotes/>

Through this article the hope of transformation is given a lens, a way of seeing and unpacking the societal context of taken-for-granted beliefs and its influence whilst putting us back into a relation where we see the water and the air, not as fixed and fact. And in so doing we find a place for the anger.

The second daughter of hope is courage. Re-authoring work provides a set of courageous practices that invite deep connectedness, dignity and aliveness. Through collective meaning-making grounded in significant moments of real-life experiences, a multiplicity of alternative/counter futures emerge from this work. Re-authoring work dares to transport us, not as mere spectators, but as authors and co-authors of our world as we co-create moments that transform our past, present and future.

May we have enough anger and courage to dare to imagine and work towards a future, and indeed re-authoring futures that would transform our organisations, communities and our world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chené Swart is an international narrative consultant, [coach](#) and trainer. She completed her studies in Narrative Therapy in 2006 and has successfully translated the work for the organisational context in the form of practices, designs, processes and [workshops](#). Her work with individuals, businesses, and civil society organisations has given her a deep understanding into co-creating environments that serve as the ground for authorship of individual narratives and co-authorship of team and organisational narratives. Chené is the author of the book, [Re-authoring the World](#) and trains organisational consultants, coaches and leaders in narrative re-authoring practices in South Africa, the USA, Russia and Belgium through [apprentice journeys](#). She teaches [re-authoring leadership](#) practices at various international leadership schools. At the heart of Chené's narrative [re-authoring approach](#) is ways of working and being with people that ignite the honour, dignity and beauty of their lives. You can find her on twitter as [@CheneSwart](#), [LinkedIn](#) and read more on her [website](#)