

**THERE’S ALWAYS A PUPPY
(AND SOMETIMES A BUNNY):
A STORY ABOUT A STORY ABOUT A STORY**

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It’s been over 20 years now, but I still remember exactly where I was when I first heard David Epston’s puppy story (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997). It was 1996, and I was attending a family therapy conference in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I was nearing the end of my master’s program in family therapy and had recently learned about a new approach to therapy called narrative therapy. Learning about narrative therapy couldn’t have come at a better time for me. In fact, you might say that it was life saving, or at least career saving for me. You see, when I decided that I wanted to be a therapist on my very first day of studies as an undergraduate student, I was filled with a hope and belief that therapy could bring about healing and transformation in people’s lives. When I anticipated the work that I would be doing with the people who came to meet me as a therapist, my mind’s (and heart’s) eye would imagine words like *sacred*, *beauty*, *love*, *healing*, and *magic* to describe what that might entail.

As far back as I can remember, I always believed in a world where the unbelievable was possible; a world where the magical was within our reach; and a world that could be transformed by a persistent hope in the eventual fulfillment of our dreams. I am not exactly sure where my capacity for believing in the unbelievable came from, but it had been a constant companion from the earliest days of my life. Shortly after I started my training to become a therapist, I quickly learned that such ways of thinking about therapy were considered naïve at best and potentially dangerous at worst. I was taught that therapy should be about nothing more than symptom relief, and any hope for things like transformation or healing were folly. While I wasn’t ready to let go of my belief in the magical, it was certainly now under surveillance as I was encouraged to question the wisdom of my idealism

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and how it might be a possible barrier in my work with the people who consulted me. “A barrier!” I thought to myself, “How could a belief in the transformation of lives and a hope for healing be something that will keep me from being a successful therapist?” I asked myself this question over and over again and, for the time being, managed to persist in convincing myself that I wasn’t just being naïve or idealistic, but in fact, that my belief was much more substantial than that.

Then, one day, during a self-of-the-therapist activity in class, the magical world that I had nurtured and that had sustained me throughout my life came crashing down around me. The class was focused on family of origin approaches to family therapy, and we were studying the ways that our experiences in our own families of origin might influence our work as therapists. I should point out here that the word *influence* was always meant to be seen as a negative or a possible barrier at best. Never was it considered that our experiences in our families of origin, even if they were difficult, could positively benefit us in our work, that they might carry with them hard-won knowledges (White & Epston, 1990) about how to care for and attend to the suffering of others.

To make a long story short, I had always been convinced that my experiences growing up in my family had helped me to develop a capacity for sensing the suffering of others and to bring peace to their lives. During this self-of-the-therapist activity, the very image of myself as a peacemaker in my family was problematized and viewed as a significant barrier in my work with families. This question asked by my professor is still burned into my mind: “How can you work with families who are in conflict if you are concerned about making peace?” In an instant, a capacity that I had long valued and cherished was transformed into a problem that could keep me from doing the very thing that I had set out to do. For the next several months, I felt bereft. I had to relearn everything. My tendencies toward peacemaking were under heavy self-surveillance as I constantly reminded myself what I had learned that fateful day—that my desire to bring peace to people’s lives was not that at all but in reality was a fear of conflict.

From that point on, therapy became much more difficult for me. I started to question everything that had up until that point been so inspiring to me when I decided to become a therapist. “Were my hopes for healing and transformation too grand?” Maybe I really was just a naïve young therapist who needed to learn what the real world of therapy was about. I was literally losing hope. I slowly started to accept a world where therapy was merely about helping people learn to manage and cope with their struggles rather than find ways to transform their lives. I became so despairing that I seriously questioned whether or not I was cut out to be a therapist. I needed a lifeline.

That lifeline came in the form of an article in the *Family Therapy Networker* by Bill O’Hanlon (1994), which told the story of his experience spending time with David Epston and Michael White who were just developing what would become narrative therapy. The article told the story of a bold new approach to therapy, where the therapists dared to believe that lives and relationships could literally

be transformed. Bill O'Hanlon even hinted that the work he was witnessing was a bit like magic:

At first, it was like watching magic. A person . . . would come in, walking a road that seemed destined to lead to more misery. During the conversation, a fork would appear, a path that had always been there, but somehow had gone unnoticed . . . Epston and White . . . conjured up doorways to new identities out of nowhere. It seemed inexplicable, radical, and elegant. When people found themselves in a corner, Epston and White could paint a door on the wall where it was needed, and then, like Bugs Bunny in the cartoons, open it and help them walk through. (O'Hanlon, 1994, p. 21)

As I was reading stories of David and Michael's work, I could literally feel the hope I had surrendered being gradually recuperated. Perhaps, my belief in the unbelievable wasn't so naïve after all.

And then another lifeline. Shortly after reading about David and Michael's work, I attended the 1996 family therapy conference in Toronto. As luck, or perhaps fate, would have it, there was a special track of the conference dedicated to narrative therapy that year. My experience attending the conference was like a blur. While I know that I was completely captivated by what I was hearing and that I felt immediately at home with narrative ideas, I don't really remember much of what I learned during those three days. In fact, the only thing that I do remember is the story about a puppy who literally saved a young boy whose life was in jeopardy. Jill Freedman was the teller of the story, a story that she had originally heard from David Epston. Here is the story in Jill's words:

Years ago David Epston told this story when he was doing a workshop in our center and it really stood out for me, so it's a story I find myself telling and thinking of often. At the time David was talking about, he was doing a huge amount of work with young people who had medical problems.

So he got this call from a mother who said, "My son is in the hospital and I have been referred to you." I can't remember what kind of medical problem he had, but the boy had some sort of medical problem and one of the consequences of it was that he was not able to hold down any food. When he ate something, he would immediately throw it up.

At the time the mother got in touch with David, the problem had actually already been resolved medically. But you can imagine. The child wouldn't eat. Even though medically he was okay, and there was no longer a medical reason for it, whenever he ate, he threw up. So he was refusing to eat.

The not eating was jeopardizing the boy's health, so he was being kept in the hospital. They were worried about him. And so the mother asked David if he would come talk to her son. David agreed. He came to the hospital. And shortly after he met the boy, he discovered that the boy had a new puppy waiting for him at home that had been given to him shortly before he went into the hospital.

When David heard this, he asked, "Do you believe in love at first sight?" Seeing that the boy was intrigued, he began to ask a series of questions like, "Did you fall in love with your puppy the moment you set eyes on him? What was it about your

puppy that you fell in love with? “Do you think your puppy fell in love at first sight of you? What was it about you that your puppy fell in love with? “Do you think he is waiting for you while you’re here? Is it a different kind of waiting than the waiting he’ll do for you to come home from school every day? Do you think he has picked a particular spot for waiting? What kinds of adventures do you think the two of you will have together? Will you have favorite places or always be discovering new places to go together?”

David continued engaging the boy in questions like these. At the end of the hour, he said, “It was a pleasure to talk with you. I really enjoyed it.” And then he proceeded to leave. The mother followed him down the hall of the hospital and cried out, “Wait a minute! You never did anything! You didn’t talk to him about the problem.” David said, “I did what I thought would be most helpful.” The woman was obviously really unhappy with him.

But David went home and two days later he got a call from her. She said, “I don’t understand it. The next meal my son ate and kept down. He is being discharged from the hospital. He is doing fine. What did you do?”

So David told this story at our center. And then, there was a long silence in the room. Finally, someone asked, “What would you do if there wasn’t a puppy?” And then came the words that I would never forget . . .

David smiled and said, “There’s always a puppy!”

It was as if those words leaped into my heart. And, they have made a home there ever since. The belief that there is “always a puppy,” that there is always hope even—no especially—in the darkest times has literally saved the lives of many of the people that I have worked with over the years.

That belief was with me when I received a phone call in the middle of the night from a woman I will call Beth. “I just can’t take it anymore, there is just too much pain,” she said. Beth had experienced the most terrible forms of sexual abuse I had ever heard of when she was a child, and even more as an adult. And, while she had managed to escape these abusive relationships, find a kind and caring partner, and raise three beautiful children, the flooding of these memories had become too much for her to bear. “Where are you?” I asked. “Is Elton with you?” Elton was her loving partner, but she had no memory of him at the time. You see, the pain was so unbearable that she had learned to escape from it by transporting herself to another time in her life when she was younger. “I don’t know anyone named Elton . . . I am all alone . . . It’s cold,” she whispered to me hazily. “I am in some kind of forest.” Beth’s house was right next to a wooded area. “I have a knife. It just hurts too much.” Looking back on it now, I should have been terrified.

Instead, I felt a calmness about me. For I could clearly hear Jill’s voice telling me, “There’s always a puppy.” Somehow I knew that we would find a way out of this together. I knew something would appear in the midst of that dark cold night that would light a path home for Beth. And, sure enough, after 30 minutes of being on the brink of death, a puppy appeared. This time, the metaphorical puppy appeared

in the form of Kara, a 9-year-old girl who happened to be Beth's daughter. "Beth, do you mind if I ask you what might seem like a strange question?" I asked. Beth kindly obliged my request. "Would you mind letting me know what feelings come to your heart when I say the name Kara?" I am not sure where the question came from. I was still grasping at straws trying to find some way to bring light back into Beth's life. "Warm . . . I feel warm." And even though I couldn't see Beth's facial response, I could sense that she was now smiling. Encouraged by this, I enquired further, "Are there other feelings that come to your heart when you think of the name Kara?" Beth's answer was immediate, "I feel like laughing . . . I feel happiness." In hopes that Beth might come to know herself through Kara's loving eyes I asked, "Beth, even if this doesn't make sense to you at the moment, what feelings does Kara's name inspire in you?" Again, without delay Beth responded, "She inspires hope in me. Like I can do anything I set out to do no matter how difficult it might seem." Feeling full of hope myself now, I continued this line of inquiry, "Again, Beth, even if this doesn't make sense to you at this moment, do you know how it is that you know Kara?" Knowingly, Beth declared in a forthright manner, "She is my daughter . . . my beautiful daughter!" Now sounding startled to me, Beth asked where she was and why she was out in the cold talking to me on the phone. I caught her up a bit on the circumstances that led her to reach out to me and how her love for her daughter had rescued her and given her the courage to go on fighting for a life well worth living. Beth returned safely home that night, but this time she was not alone, as she found herself in the loving embrace of her daughter Kara and Kara's unflinching belief in her mother.

While there were several more times when her life was on the line, Beth somehow (and I would say miraculously!) found her way all the way home. Home to a life where she could feel, accept, trust, and embrace the love of her partner and children. Later, in a letter that she wrote to me after our work together ended, she wrote:

My relationship with Elton is so relaxed. He is my greatest treasure and now I can meet the highs and lows calmly. I can accept the fact that his love is solid and eternally reliable. It is so liberating. Love is what I've always wanted but never felt and couldn't accept when given. That has changed absolutely. I can let myself love . . . more like I can't stop myself.

This is just one example of the many ways that this belief has sustained me in times when I or others might very well have given up. And while I know that this belief in the certainty of hope has been with me from a very young age, the story about the puppy gave me the courage to recuperate this belief back to life into my work as a therapist and to go on hoping for the unimaginable. As I look back now, it wasn't David's exceptional skill at his craft (as brilliant as it was) that saved the boy, but rather his unflinching belief that he would find a metaphorical puppy that would somehow save that boy's life. And it is this belief more than anything else that I have tried to pass on to my students as a professor, supervisor, and mentor.

For the past 15 years, I begin every inaugural family therapy class by relating the puppy story in hopes that it will be an exemplary tale for them in the same way that it had been an exemplary tale for me and so many of the people I have worked with over the years.

SOMETIMES PUPPIES COME IN THE FORM OF BUNNIES

Tony was obviously struggling. Before our very eyes, he appeared to be slipping deeper and deeper into the grasp of despair. His therapist, Emily, tried to engage him, but despite her best efforts, Tony just kept sliding downwards. It seemed as if he was somehow or other leaving us behind against our wishes. "I just can't do it anymore." His utterance had a finality about it, almost as if he had come here today to announce that to us. "I am just too tired to fight," Tony said as he curled himself up into a ball by tucking his head under his knees. "I just want to end it . . . I want to take a knife to my throat and get this over with." With these statements, he tucked himself deeper into his knees. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." He started to panic. Would he pass out? As a newcomer to therapy in our training program, Emily was struggling too. Understandably, she was at a loss as to what to do next. She turned around to the one-way mirror behind which I was sitting, her eyes pleading for some succor, the sooner the better. I responded accordingly. On my entrance, the room fell eerily silent. Tony looked upward, and his eyes caught mine fleetingly before fixing again on his knees. "Hi, Tony. My name is Tom. I am Emily's supervisor. Is it okay if I join you?" I uttered in the calmest and gentlest voice I could summon up in these circumstances. A peremptory nod indicated that my presence was acceptable to Tony, but I couldn't be too sure of that. Looking kindly into his eyes, I proceeded: "I can tell that you are going through a rough time right now. I am sorry for that. Do you mind terribly if I ask you a few questions?"

As I waited for what seemed an interminable time for his response, my mind flashed back to memories of the many people I had worked with over the years whose lives were literally on the line like Tony's was that day. Alice suddenly came to mind from my memories. Alice came to see me after a recent flood of memories of the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her grandfather resulted in a long hospital stay and her withdrawal from a career as a beloved teacher. Even the most mundane tasks seemed unbearable to her. In our search for alternative histories that represented Alice's courage in the face of struggle, Alice was able to recall an amazing feat of courage that had been tucked deep in the reaches of her mind. When she was just 16 years old and only a year removed from her grandfather's abuse, she had decided to put an end to her grandfather's control and terror over her. Alice had been given a precious stuffed dog when she was a child. This faithful companion, appropriately named Courage, had been with Alice during the best and worst of times. During one of Alice's fateful visits to her grandfather's house, Alice managed to run away while he was sleeping. In her rush to safety,

Courage was left behind. After two years of trying to convince others that she was the victim of her grandfather's abuse, Alice took matters into her own hands. At the young age of 16, Alice had the temerity to return to her grandfather's house to rescue her precious teddy bear. "Where's Courage?" Alice demanded. Startled by the strength of her conviction, her grandfather was unable to muster a response. "I know what you did to me. I am here to rescue Courage. I am not leaving here without my Courage." And rescue him she did. Alice marched into the bedroom, opened the closet door, and confidently walked back into the living room where she found her grandfather sitting with his hands on his face pleading for forgiveness through his tear-filled eyes. Unfazed, Alice kept right on marching out the door, having rescued her own courage in the process.

I was reminded too of Sally, who refused to abandon her belief that a life of healing and joy was possible despite years of going in and out of hospitals following attempts on her life. Apparently, her doctors had time and again tried to convince her to surrender her conviction that healing was possible. They would advise her: "You should just focus your energy on trying to manage and cope with the abuse." My mind quickly flashed back to a postcard I had received from Sally shortly after our last meeting, with the image of a hiker standing on the precipice of a snow-capped mountain with the caption, "I finally made it to the top of the mountain! I am free!"

Finally, Tony gave another nod of agreement, but this time he fixed his eyes on me, although admittedly not for long. I noticed his respirations gradually slowing and lengthening. "Tony, I heard you and Emily briefly talking about something that you like to do when you are at home and need a bit of comfort. Was it a teddy bear or a stuffed animal?" Tony's head lifted up slightly but he seemed far more alert, "Yah, but more of a stuffed bunny." Encouraged by his response, I proceeded. "Would you be willing to tell me the name of your stuffed bunny?" His head lifted up a bit more, and a minuscule but distinguishable smile formed on his face as he said, "Bunners." More hope.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about Bunners?" Tony nodded in the affirmative with what might now be described as a smile on his face. I inquired, "Can you help me understand what it is about your relationship with Bunners that brings you comfort in difficult times?" Tony, now sitting up but still holding his knees, went on to relate how Bunners had been his companion since he was a very young child and throughout the times of almost unendurable suffering. "Would you say that Bunners, having been with you during your darkest times, might know you better than anyone else and in particular what you stand for in life?" Sitting up completely now, his voice growing more resolute, "Yes, yes, he does."

I said, "Having been your companion during some of your darkest hours, what do you think that Bunners might tell me about how you have managed to keep on fighting through the darkness and despair?" "Bunners would say that I am a caring person. That I care about others . . . that I care about life." Tony replied. "And why is it that Bunners might say that you care about life?" "Because Bunners has seen

me get up time and time again when I am feeling down or like I can't keep going anymore." Tony, who had been tucked tightly in a ball unable to breathe just a few minutes ago, was now leaning forward in his chair with a small but consistent grin on his face. "Would you say that Bunnars has faith in you?" Without hesitation, Tony was unequivocal in his response. "Yes! Yes! Bunnars believes and has complete faith in me."

Indeed, Bunnars' faith in Tony was undeniable. There was no room for despair now. "Can you feel Bunnars' faith in you right now . . . right here?" I asked. Tony's eyes immediately filled with tears. He inhaled a deep and long breath, as if he were inspiring himself. I know I was.

"Yes, I can . . . Bunnars is always there when I need him most." There was no space for darkness and despair now, which afforded me the opportunity to get to know a bit more about Tony through Bunnars' eyes. As I have grown accustomed to doing in such circumstances, I asked Tony a series of questions similar to the one below that might further implicate the relationship between Tony and Bunnars. "Tony, what do you guess Bunnars might tell me about you if I were to ask him this question: Bunnars, Tony has been catching me up on what a support you have been to him throughout his life and the faith that you have in him; would you be willing to tell me a story about Tony that might help me appreciate why he knows with such certainty that you have such a deep faith in him?" Not surprisingly, Bunnars was quite willing to comply with my request. "Tony," Bunnars said, "is the type of person that stands by his convictions even if it means going against the grain. He knew at a young age that he wasn't like everyone else. And even though it meant being picked on and bullied by his peers, he didn't give up on his convictions." "Bunnars, knowing what you know about everything that Tony has endured as a result of following his convictions, just what kind of conviction would you say that Tony has? Would you say that Tony's conviction is ordinary or extraordinary?" Bunnars declared, "Extraordinary. No doubt about it," without a moment's hesitation in his voice.

Tony, now enveloped by Bunnars' faith and belief in him, suddenly announced to us, "I am going to be okay now!" Before ending our meeting, I asked Tony if he would be interested in considering ways to carry Bunnars' faith and belief in him as he went about each day between now and his next meeting with Emily. Tony's eyes seemed to light up with the prospect. "I know . . . I will get a pocket Bunnars so that I can literally carry him with me every day. And I know just where to find it." "Might you tell us where?" I asked. We ended our meeting, but not before Emily and I shared just how much we anticipated hearing what else we might learn about Tony's conviction to keep on caring about life through the constant companionship of his companion Bunnars.

After Tony left, I met with Emily to talk about the transformation we had just witnessed and to check to see how she was doing. It was after all a very dramatic turn of events, as we were literally in a life or death situation. Before I could even think of anything to say to help us both make sense of what had just transpired,

Emily asked “How did you know where to go?” I reminded Emily about the puppy story I had shared with HER on our first day of class, which by now had been a year ago. “I didn’t know where to go when I came in the room but I believed, as surely as I believed in anything, that a puppy would appear if I looked hard enough.” In this case, it wasn’t a puppy but a stuffed bunny that literally brought Tony back to life that day. Emily sat quietly with a look in her eye that told me she was in the middle of a memory. “Now I get it. Now I understand what it means. There’s always a puppy!” Emily declared. “I always knew in my head what the story was about . . . that we needed to have hope for our clients . . . but now I know it in my heart.”

EMILY’S STORY

Sitting in Tom’s office after meeting with Tony, I felt a bit shell shocked. It was like I had been witness to a battle within Tony, a battle that at first seemed to have only one possible ending. Except my shock was the result of the meeting ending in the somewhat miraculous way it did, with Tony leaving with resolute confidence in his ability to face the challenges of the week ahead. But the confidence I witnessed seemed to go far beyond this, as if he had experienced a revelation of his moral character as a person, and suddenly his life was full of previously unimaginable possibilities. My mind was reeling. What had I just witnessed? How did Tom know what direction to go in? How was he not paralyzed by fear, as I was?

As my conversation with Tom continued, I kept thinking about how we, as therapists, cannot connect to hope unless we believe that there truly *is* hope. Likewise, we cannot find the ever-present puppy (or bunny) without truly having faith that one does indeed exist. Suddenly, I saw that there had been two outcomes all along! The darkness had worked very hard to hide this fact from me, but now armed by Bunnars’ faith in Tony, I knew I would be able to see through such lies.

Being a novel therapist, I was still searching for and developing the beliefs and values I wanted to guide me. In that meeting with Tony, the darkness seemed all-encompassing, and I struggled to find hope. As I witnessed the transformation in Tony as he connected to the story of himself as strong and resilient, I experienced the power of hope which I now intentionally bring with me as I meet with other clients. Since then, I have come to recognize hope as vital to my story of myself as a therapist, and it has influenced me to keep digging through whatever muck is present for my clients to help them connect to a better version of themselves that may have escaped their view. Hope has become a companion to me, a companion I intentionally bring into the room with me every time I meet with someone. This way, it is never far off; it is by my side whenever I—or my clients—need it. That day with Tony, the story about the puppy became much more than a story—it had come alive and become my own. For me, the puppy story will forever be a story not just about a puppy, but also about a life-saving stuffed bunny named Bunnars.

Tony arrived at our next session with a bounce in his step I had never before witnessed. He brought all of his stuffed companions and proudly introduced me to one and all of them. Last, he pulled out the pocket Bunnies, which had been christened with the name Benny. Tony proceeded to tell me that after our previous session, he went searching for his new companion and found a stuffed bunny small enough to fit into the breast pocket of his coat. He then told me he had spoken about our previous session with his dad, who is still struggling with Tony's identity as a transman and from whom Tony wishes to have more support regarding his transition. Enthusiastically, Tony shared that he and his dad had chosen a name together for his newest companion, jointly settling on Benny, which to him represented an enduring expression of love and support from his dad.

As our work continued over the next few months, Benny attended fewer and fewer of our meetings. And, although Tony might not have even noticed, it became quite clear to me that Tony had found a home in Bunnies' loving eyes. The darkness, not quite ready to give up its foothold in Tony's life, attempted several last-ditch efforts, but Tony flicked them away like pests. It wasn't until our last meeting that Tony realized that Benny had not attended our meetings for some time. In fact, Benny had not left the house in weeks! It was at that moment that Tony recognized that his life was now filled with enough light to chase away the darkness whenever it might decide to return. In fact, Tony concluded that with the help of his stuffed friend Bunnies, it must have been with him all along.

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