

## RECURSIVE AND CONNECTING DIALOGUES: SPOKEN AND WRITTEN CONVERSATIONS

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*This paper is focused on therapeutic work that includes spoken conversations and written conversations. The author views both the spoken and written conversations as part of the reflecting process. The written conversations develop out of the therapeutic dialogue and take the form of letter writing to self or another. The author outlines a four-stage process of letter writing. The therapist's role is that of an active dialogic partner with the client in identifying the usefulness of a possible letter as well as a direction to self or another. The therapist becomes a witness and reflector to the client's reading of a letter. The paper both illustrates and addresses the ways in which these practices transform stuck conversations or narratives.*

My use of writing is part of the therapeutic dialogue and is focused on letter writing. In the course of a therapeutic conversation, a client and I identify what I call a "stuck conversation" either with self at an earlier time or with another person. I often suggest that a client write a letter to revisit or open the stuck conversation. Most typically, clients choose to do the writing apart from our meeting and bring the letter to a following session. At other times, a client might choose to write a letter within a session. The very nature of a letter is both relational and conversational, and embedded in a dimension of time. In my work as a psychologist and family therapist, letter writing has become a vital and integral part of therapeutic conversations.

I am aware of the tradition of both letter writing and expressive writing in the context of psychotherapy. Michael White and David Epston (1990) discussed writing letters as the therapist to clients and families at different points in the therapy process to make visible the therapists' understanding and to foster rich story development. They further comment, "Narratives, then allow for lived experience to be construed in lived time and rendered eventful by being plotted into a story" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 127). Lepore and Smyth (2002) focus on expressive writing by clients as a way to reduce their physical symptoms.

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In my work with letter writing, the clients do the actual writing. The idea for a letter is generated in the therapy session from the conversation between the therapist and client in which a stuck or “un-voiced” conversation is identified. The focus of the letter, as well as the imagined recipient, is also identified based on the client’s wishes. Together the client and therapist identify a possible tone or perspective for the letter. “If you could imagine speaking to yourself (at an earlier or future time) or another, would you have words of blame only, or would there be some compassion?” The purpose of letter writing in my work is for the client(s) to identify new voices to articulate their experience and perhaps to find new voices in the people to whom they address their letters as in the “return letter voice.” (P. Penn, personal communication, July 14, 2004).

Peggy Penn and Marilyn Frankfurt’s work (1994) has been influential for me. The idea for a letter emerges from the therapeutic dialogue. The letter is written for the purpose of creating a new narrative for the client. My work with letter writing is both situated in the reflecting process (Andersen, 1987; 1991) and is a four stage process; both are described below.

### SITUATED IN THE REFLECTING PROCESS

My use of letter writing is situated in the reflecting process. For more than 18 years, I have been somewhat immersed in working with the ideas and practices of reflecting dialogues (Andersen, 1987; 1991). Tom Andersen (T. Andersen, personal communication, February 20, 2007) described the reflecting process as follows:

I see reflecting process as a way to be with people where pauses and after-thoughts are emphasized; after-thoughts mean we will do this to think of what one just said. It consists of three parts: the first talk where those who want to talk can do so, and those who prefer to be silent can be so; those who want to talk about what they prefer to talk about and are given the freedom (right) NOT to talk about what they prefer to NOT talk about; within this context of talking, we work within their frames of language (their metaphors). The second part consists of a reflecting talk where those who reflect talk about what they heard and NOT on what they thought about what they heard. The third part is for the person(s) in the first conversation to have a chance to respond.

I view my work with letters as deeply embedded in the reflecting process. The writing of the letters begins a new conversation on which clients can reflect on their own words, and the reading to a therapist offers further opportunity for a reflecting conversation. In my work, the idea for a letter comes out of the therapeutic conversation. In this process, I as therapist often ask a client to give voice to a word, feeling, or expression. Charlotte, a woman in her 30s, told me (in an example below) of her loneliness and fear when she was at home alone in the evening. When I asked if this was a new or familiar feeling, she remembered

feelings of loneliness and fear from her childhood. The writing of the letter becomes a new conversation for the client with the self or another person. As writer, a person can reflect on her/his very words, and as reader, s/he can reflect on the tone and emphasis of her/his words. The ensuing conversation with the therapist offers possibilities for further reflection.

### CREATION OF LETTERS IN A FOUR STAGE PROCESS

As I engage in conversations with my clients, I am often guided by Tom Andersen's questions of how to talk with my clients, about what, and who can be included in our talks. This discussion naturally leads into the notion of who can be included in a letter conversation. The actual writing of the letter and the reading of the letter to me gives both client and me the opportunity to reflect together on the written conversation. This becomes a 4-stage process. The idea for the written letter conversation occurs in a therapeutic conversation, and is the first stage. The second stage is the client's writing of the actual letter. Reading the letter in a therapy session is the third stage. The fourth stage is the client's and therapist's reflections about the letter and the process of writing.

The question of who else a client may wish to engage in conversation, how, and for what purpose often leads me to explore the following questions, "If you could imagine speaking to your friend, your deceased mother, or yourself at age four (or a relevant age), what might the words be?", and "Would the words be compassionate, curious, blaming..?" Alternatively, I might ask a client if he could imagine another person very much like her/himself in a situation similar to her/his own painful one, either at a past time or in the present. I further inquire what he might like to say to this other person, and if what he might say would be different from her own conversations with her/himself. These questions suggest the possibility of expanding my clients' expressions in the direction of a new dialogue with self or another rather than an existing monologue of shame or blame (Bakhtin, 1981).

*AV: spelling correct?*

#### The Idea for a Letter: Stage One

In this way, the dialogue between therapist and client(s) identifies possibilities for new dialogues through letter writing. These dialogues may be with another person (living or dead), a parent, teacher, spouse, or with an earlier self (during times of trauma or blame) or imagined future self (who may be accepting or more critical).

Charlotte, a young woman, reported to me that she was trying to end a relationship with a man in which she felt demeaned. She also said that she feared being alone. As we spoke, she began to remember and describe a similar feeling of aloneness and desolation in her childhood when her parents' arguments were ex-

plosive. When I inquired whether this was throughout her childhood or at a particular time, she responded that as an only child, it was particularly difficult at age nine. She described having to call the police herself and also abruptly escaping from her father with her mother. During these times, she would remain in someone else's home for extended times, where she felt lonely and uncomfortable. In the course of our conversations, I asked Charlotte if she could imagine speaking to herself as a nine-year-old from her adult perspective (like a big sister might speak to a younger sister). I further inquired what she might want to say or how she might comfort herself. I view these conversations as "scaffolding conversations" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1973) in which the possibility for a letter conversation is created for the development of a new voice and new perspectives. From this conversation, the idea of a letter to herself at age nine developed. She agreed that her adult perspective (like a big sister might comfort a younger sister) would be useful for her letter.

The idea for a letter conversation develops out of such a discussion, which begins in the dialogue with my client and me, and shifts to a conversation through writing with another or with a past or imagined future self. I have noticed that if the focus of a suggested letter is meaningful to a person, he is emotionally moved by the idea, and begins to engage in some preliminary dialogic possibilities. In some ways, the new conversation begins at this moment. Charlotte's now edited letter is as follows:

Dear Charlotte

It's not fair that you have to call the police and leave your home for days. It is hard to understand why they act this way. You will always wonder why they couldn't be more normal when they disagree. It's OK to be scared. It's OK to feel hurt and sad. These are very normal issues for a child to feel when they are faced with seeing abusive relationships. You can't take the world on your shoulders, and you can't make everything better. They have never learned to effectively communicate, but that doesn't mean that you have to be that way when you get older. You can change this vicious circle when you become an adult. You will never let a man abuse you physically and mentally. If he starts, you need to recognize the bad behavior and stop the relationship. Please remember that their [parents] arguments and battles are their issues, not yours. Cry and let it out.

Throughout the letter, Charlotte continues to assure herself that her parents loved her at age nine despite their arguments. She concludes: "You're not alone. There are lots of friends and family that love you, especially your Mom and Dad."

Charlotte had an especially difficult time sleeping alone in her condominium in the evening. I suggested that she might keep her letter near her bed to review at night before going to sleep (P. Penn, personal communication, October 3, 1998). Her new voice of support replaced or was "louder" than her voice of fear. She was able to sleep, as well as leave the abusive relationship. When she separated from the chaos of the past and her related voice of fear, she also formed a new

relationship with her parents. They became a new source of support and allies in terms of ending her current abusive relationship.

### The Written Letter Conversation: Stage Two

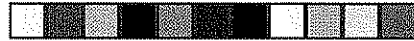
Letter writing gives birth to new voices, new language, and new conversations and is the second stage of the process. Letter writing also allows a person to establish a new relational stance with self or another, as Charlotte does when she takes a big sister's perspective to herself at age nine.

The relational aspects of letter writing are somewhat implicit in that the writer begins a process of engagement with the intended recipient of the letter. This engagement has possibilities for constructing a new relational quality whether in developing the unsaid or invoking a new perspective, as Joe experienced in the letters to his father (described below) and from his father. I have noticed that letters written to oneself from the present self to a younger or more vulnerable self evoke compassion and increased understanding. As a witness to this process, I often have the image of a person going back in conversational time and embracing and revisiting a younger self or a part of oneself with compassion rather than judgment. When this process occurs, it is my experience that a more integrated, flexible, and freed-up person emerges. Within the written letter conversation stage, there are a number of possibilities: letters to another, a return letter from another following an earlier letter to that person, and letters to oneself in the past, present or future. I will provide some examples of this work.

*Letters to another.* I met with a young artist named Carol several years ago. She was struggling with a number of questions about whether her work was good enough, and whether she might be viewed as less professional for having left New York City to live in a small New England town. She also reported that she was feeling quite anxious. I asked her, "If anxiety had a voice, what would it say?" (Tom Andersen, personal communication, October 15, 1989). In the process of our talk, she identified that "doing the right thing professionally" was the voice of anxiety, and a concern of her father. If Tom Andersen had been present in this meeting, he would also have inquired "Where in your body does the voice of anxiety reside?" (T.Andersen, personal communication, January 23, 2002). I imagined that this might also be her sense of her father's ways.

It seemed to me that she might have additional possible "voices to hear" other than that of anxiety (Penn, 1998; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994). I suggested that she write a letter of introduction of herself to her father to identify their differences and similarities. In this letter, she identified her ability to immerse herself in her work, "to make 20 paintings before [she gets] a good one or 100 drawings before [she realizes her] idea." This letter helped identify and develop her own voice about her professionalism. This letter was for the purpose of developing her own voice and was never sent to her father.

*short*



## Recursive and Connecting Dialogues

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Dear Dad,

I have been asked as an exercise to introduce myself to you; to describe for you how I see myself as similar and different from you with whom I identify so much. I think we are both strong writers, love the process of gardening and cannot imagine life without meaning. I guess we both sought supportive partners and developed relationships in which we can be the stars! Where we are different and our lives have unfolded differently is that I accept the unknown terrain of my creative work and that this creative work for me does not rely on or begin with an institution. It begins with solitude and a kind of nakedness and vulnerability.

The vulnerability allows me to make 20 paintings before I get a good one or 100 drawings before I realize my idea or hand. The nakedness allows me to leave the art-world for later—the critiques, the exchange, the acclaim, and the absence of recognition. I see the art-world and the realm of art-making as lateral; the hierarchy of success is there and achievable, but it is not the driving force. If it were, I would design my paintings rather than find them through a process.

Achievement is very important to me too. I have aspired at times to habits I learned from you of doing my homework and being responsible to my art career—'chance favors the prepared individual.' But art and the art-world both are full of serendipitous events and encounters in the studio, in a gallery and seeing a painting by Edward Stiechen in a remote Maine museum.

In this letter conversation, Carol is creating a self with a voice that can live with the uncertainty of her career as an artist. She identifies herself as preferring to immerse herself, discovering direction from her art rather than imposing a direction. She places this in opposition to her construction of her father's reality of the need for structure and preparedness, and uses what we can imagine to be his very words: "Chance favors the prepared individual." We can assume that this new voice can co-exist with the voice of anxiety.

Carol continues her letter to her father and addresses her perception of their differences in terms of how each manages family relationships:

In my relationship with Tim, I refuse to abuse the power of the beloved one. I hate how you treat Mom like a servant or secretary, and I am intensely aware of how she swallows it or saves it up and spits it back at you. Why would you pollute your most loving relationship with poor treatment?

Carol writes more about her memories of her father's need to control her and her siblings. She describes making efforts to do what would cause the least amount of conflict to obtain her father's support, which she comments was invaluable. She reflects further on his preference for a plan. She then explores her own values of friendship and relaxation, which she imagines that her father does not share. She continues by identifying his current risks and uncertainty:

*short*

I think I am able to relax more easily than you. It is also very important to me to have close friendships outside of the nuclear family.

You are the first as a college administrator to encourage your teachers'/students' creativity, but only now at age 70, almost 40 years after tasting painting, you do it for yourself. I am different in that I now embrace my creative well and in some unimagined ways, believe it holds my life path. While you evidence diligence, I have patience. I feel listening actively is important, especially with my students, my mate and my friends.

I think that you are now in a position of risk; and I hope you will find it not so scary and yet as inspiring as standing on the edge of a cliff. I hope that you find the patience with yourself and in the process, in the studio.

Love,  
Carol

*The return letter.* Several months later, Carol reported that her parents had visited her and that she had some new perspectives of her father. She decided to write about this new perspective in a letter from her new internalized voice of her father to her. In her constructed letter from her father to her (P. Penn, personal communication, January 24, 2005) his new voice said:

Dear Carol,

Your party this weekend was a great event. Although I admit, it's not easy for me to get to a place where I can relax in a crowd; I finally did find a spot in the corner where I sat whistling while the many guitars and mandolins were played by guests. I've never been good at relaxing; the push to get things done, and the fuel of anxiety drive each event and project to the finish-line in a timely, successful, and thorough way.

I guess art cannot be driven solely by an end goal. As you know, a strong work ethic has always been reflected in my and your mother's careers. Having three kids, after growing up as an only child, has always been somewhat confounding to me. I've always been good at leading a group, but in my own house I sometimes have felt out of place, not wanting to force you kids to go in any direction you didn't want to, but not wanting to offer too little guidance. It's a peculiar thing that perhaps every parent goes through. I hope you will make more sense of it someday, than I did.

I meant to listen well, and I try to. Your mother might have a better talent for it than I. I'm interested in what you kids are doing, what you will do, and what you can do. You may not realize how humbled I am by you all. I want you to know that I want, and have always wanted for you three, to have the best life you can: the most fulfilling, healthy and loved life.

He concludes: "I know you know this doesn't mean live it as I would; live it as you would, and you will never cease to surprise and teach me. With love always, Dad."

Janice Abrams Spring (Spring & Spring, 2005) has done extensive work on forgiveness. She has suggested that genuine forgiveness cannot take place with-

out some dialogue between the offender and the offended. Through Carol's letter from her father's internalized voice to herself, I observe aspects of forgiveness when his voice, constructed in her language, speaks of his limits and failings as well as his admiration of her differences from him.

*Letters to ourselves in the future.* Toward the end of our meetings, Carol and I agreed that the writing of a third letter would help in the formation of what was emerging for her that was important. At this point, I suggested that she write a letter to her present self in her early 30s from a future self, possibly at her father's age of 70. She wrote: "I guess the biggest gift I would give you if I could would be to let go of the fear; give it up. The world is a blank canvas and you have so much to bring to it. Love, Carol."

### Reading the Letter in the Therapy Session: Stage Three

This written conversation is reweoven into the therapy at that very session if the writing is done in the session, or at a following meeting when the person returns and reads aloud her/his letter (written outside the session) (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994) and the therapist listens and reflects. This is the third stage of the process. I imagine that Penn and Frankfurt (1994) would describe this as a process in which the talking with oneself or another develops a new voice that becomes both an "internal dialogic experience" (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994, p. 218) and leads to changes in a clients' outer conversations. My sense is that through the writing, the reading, and shared reflections, clients develop new language in which to express themselves. The creation of new language (Wittgenstein, 1953) begins to shape old stories of anger or blame. Clients also develop new voices in this process (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994).

The client's own reading is often filled with her own reflections about what she wrote, new discoveries, and the ways in which her own words touch her emotionally. Through the initial conversation with me as therapist, the written letter conversation, the reading in the therapy session with subsequent reflections by client and therapist, this outer dialogue changes inner talk or thinking (Vygotsky, 1986).

Through the process of dialogue, my scaffolded questions, the letter writing, and subsequent reflections and conversations, I have observed that the client begins to develop a new voice, perhaps more compassionate, more affirming or assertive (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994) which can exist side by side with other existing voices, perhaps of blame, guilt, or anger.

In my work, the writing of letters is personal and focused, since the identity of both the writer and the hypothetical receiver are known. The letter is placed in a new relational context in which the writer has a new voice and most often new narrative about her experience. This also possibly invokes imagined or linguistically constructed responses from the receiver (P. Penn, personal communication, July 14, 2004; Bakhtin, 1981). The emergence of the new voice and new



narrative is both witnessed and further developed by the writer's and therapist's reflections on the letter.

In a recent therapeutic conversation with a young woman, Susan, she identified her own sense of failure based on what she imagined to be her father's perspective of her. This sense of restlessness, failure, and anxiety had been an issue for her during times of transition. She was remembering some recent comments from her father, but did not feel ready to have an actual conversation with him. In our meeting, we agreed that she would write a letter to her father to explore her concerns.

When she returned to meet with me with her letter and read it aloud to me, we both discovered that striving to succeed had its roots in her own decision to go to a boarding school at the time when her parents were divorcing, and she felt alone and isolated. This discovery occurred in the process of writing to her father when she remembered that going to boarding school had been her decision rather than something encouraged by her father. In her written conversation, she also discovered that setting challenging goals for herself had been a way to separate her from uncertainty and personal chaos. Her letter brought new language and a new perspective to her concern. In this constructed dialogue with her father, the problem of being judged by her father dissolved, and the client discovered her own preference to set challenging goals for herself, particularly at times of stress.

I have discovered that it is important for a client to read her/his own letter aloud to me since s/he will emphasize certain words or have a tone which is unique to her/his writing. Hearing what s/he has written in her/his own voice is often significant to the client as well as to me the witness. Tom Andersen (personal communication, January 24, 2005) often said that when we speak out loud, we are speaking to self as well as to another. Andersen added that a person's words inform and move both the speaker and the listener. In both her writing and in her reading of her letter, Susan was able to be in a reflecting position to her own words and newly constructed narrative.

It is my impression that the therapeutic dialogue identifies a stuck, polarized, or undeveloped conversation that has been burdensome or hurtful to the client. A letter allows this conversation to be developed or revised with new language and for new ears as it is heard and reflected upon by the writer, other clients, and the therapist. According to Vygotsky (1986), thought "is born through words" (p. 255), as Susan and I discovered through her writing and our conversations about her writing. It also opens up a new conversational space for the writer and the imagined recipient, which becomes dynamic and at least dialogic if not polyphonic (Lynn Hoffman, personal communication, January 24, 2005).

I use the phrase "imagined recipient" to suggest the process by which the client and I construct (McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Gergen, 1994) an image of the person s/he was, or will be, as in letters to oneself, or to linguistically construct an image of another. In most instances, letters to another are not actually sent, but

free the person to have new actual conversations in their lives with self, as in the case of Susan described above, or with others, as was Barbara's experience described below.

#### **Subsequent Reflections about the Significance of Letter Writing: Stage Four**

Attention to clients' experience with the therapeutic process has been an integral part of my work. Therefore, it seems quite natural for me to inquire about clients' experiences of letter writing as part of the therapeutic dialogue just as I ask about other experiences with therapy. This process of reflection and inquiry is the fourth step of the process. I have previously referred to this process as "informative exchange" (Roberts, 1997). I continue to view this practice as integral to the therapeutic conversations. At times I refer to this practice as research in the sense of re-viewing or discovering what has been significant for a client as well as me as therapist.

Part of my work includes a conversation between the client and me about the influence of the writing, either at the time that a letter is written or after a period of time when it is relevant to the conversation. In our final meeting, Carol commented, "One's reality is how each defines it. Having you [the therapist] lead me makes you an active witness." She further stated that she had three new perspectives: one of herself in the present, a new perspective of her father, and one from her future self. I have come to understand that therapeutic conversations are formative as a person creates self in language (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Through the acts of telling and describing one's reality, aspects of self are generated and presented in relationship to this articulated reality and create a more complex and nuanced self, as Susan (described above) became aware of her striving to succeed as a way of managing stress from circumstances outside of her control. I also believe that therapeutic conversations are informative (Vygotsky, 1986), both to the therapist(s) and the client(s) in that new and previously unsaid or unknown words and utterances emerge in a dialogue (Andersen, 1991).

In my work with letter writing I have also noticed that the same process occurs with perhaps greater focus on the part of the writer in a search for more precise or nuanced language than a person might use in oral communication. This was observed by Pennebaker (2004) also in his work with expressive writing. Susan (described above) became aware of her ability to identify meaningful personal goals for herself at times of transition, which replaced her earlier sense of failure in her father's eyes.

When I inquired about her experience of writing, one client (Louise) commented that for her, "Writing is more descriptive and helps me identify the feelings—it helps me think deeper. It allowed me to shift from frustration and anger to determination." In another conversation about her writing and journaling, Louise further said,

My writing voice is more precise [than my speaking voice]. You are able to be more creative and imaginative, and you give yourself time about how you want to word it. It does validate what I feel as I write about daily events, how I felt at the time, and how I feel when I'm writing. You are not really living in the moment in life, but when I write, I really am in the moment.

In the letter writing process, the opportunity for a person to be moved and informed by her or his own words occurs. Perhaps this is what Louise meant when she spoke about being more in the moment of living in her writing as she selects words to describe or create (Gergen, 1994) her experiences. When letters or other forms of writing are read aloud to a therapist, the reader's voice and shared comments, as well as reflections of therapist and writer/reader/client, create yet another sense of being in a moment. John Shotter might refer to this process as "joint action" (Shotter, 1993).

Joe, in his mid-thirties, described the process of writing a letter to his deceased father about his disappointment in him, along with his disappointment in himself:

It made me like my father more. I did not want to be like him, and now I acknowledge that I am like him, but I am using it in a different way; he could have done the same but under different circumstances.

I was impressed by the shift in Joe's perspective of liking his father more despite his father's short-comings, as well as acknowledging his own similarities to his father. In this process of conversation with me and written conversation with his father, he now observed that he was using his limits and talents in a different and more positive way. I remembered Joe's own sense of failure and blame of both himself and his father at the beginning of our conversations. I was somewhat in awe of the transformation that had occurred in Joe and his relationship to his father during a rather short time frame.

Joe also completed a return letter (P. Penn, personal communication, July 14, 2005) from his construction of his father's new voice to him. I was curious about how Joe was able to see his father in a new way. I asked, "How could you imagine his approval?" He responded,

I could put my own values on his personality. If he had confidence, I think he could have been more open and not closed up. He could have articulated and not been closed down. If he had had the life experiences I have had, he could have instilled confidence in others.

In describing the writing Joe added, "It was kind of freeing; it was more like that whole part dissipated, the part that had negative power." I then inquired, "What came in place of the negative power?" Joe responded, "A lot more confidence and feeling like I was successful."

In another conversation about the significance of writing, Barbara commented that writing had been a turning point for her. Barbara was struggling with feel-

ings of anger and sadness from acts of betrayal in a relationship. She was growing increasingly impatient with her own sadness and grief. When I suggested that she might write a letter to her ex-lover to express these feelings, she gave me a surprised look since she was trying hard to push away these feelings. She, however, arrived at our next meeting, and appeared to be energized by the long letter that she had written and brought with her. We met two more times after this meeting. At a subsequent meeting, she told me that her ex-lover had come to her home, and that she then took the opportunity to read parts of the letter to her. My guess is that the voice that she constructed in writing the letter emerged at this later time to be a new and preferred voice in the relationship. Pennebaker and Graybeal (2001) report that writing about emotional upheavals reduces social isolation by leading to further conversations with members of the person's social network.

In our final meeting Barbara stated,

The writing helped me focus. You have a jumble in your head; it's mixed-up with anger and sadness. By writing point after point after point in a coherent way, it puts things in a proper perspective, and then you can move on.

It seems to me that re-telling a relationship story with new language and at the new time allows both the story and its writer to change. A consistent finding of research on writing is that when people begin to describe their traumatic or painful experiences in new language and new relational terms this correlates with improved health (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker, 1997).

### LETTER WRITING AS A NEW CONVERSATION/CONVERSATIONAL ACT

The letter writing process requires the writer to develop new language and possibly new meanings and understandings for self and the imagined, remembered, or intended other. The image of the listener invoked in letter writing often stimulates more carefully articulated language, and a richer array of nuanced language than most of us demonstrate on our own self-talk (thinking) or in daily spoken language. The writing process often changes the pace of our usual ways of speaking. If the pace is slower, the writer is able to write and reflect on the conversation that she/he is creating. If the pace is faster, this may allow, the usual "voices" of censorship to be less dominant.

### TIME AS A CONVERSATIONAL DIMENSION

As new written conversations develop with one's self or another, they are situated in time. While a letter is typically constructed in "the now," it may be directed to another in the present or the past as well as to oneself in the past or in the

future. Peggy Penn (1982; 1985) and Luigi Boscolo (Boscolo & Bertrando, 1992) have pointed out that our lives are situated in present time but often greatly influenced by our stories about the past and about our lives in the future. All of these stories are both linguistically and relationally constructed. The letters are often written by the client to her/himself at a past or future time. Letters might also be written by a person in the present from a past or to an imagined future self. A person may also write from an identified part of self to another part of self, as I have done in a letter from "me" to my wounded "back." In addition, letters are often directed to someone else, a parent, child, spouse, friend, or abusive person, either present or absent in the session. Often a response, either imagined or actual, follows.

### CONCLUSION

I have been writing this paper over the past several years, while continuing to include letter writing in my clinical work. I believe that letter writing allows a client to be in a reflecting process to her/his very written and spoken words and allows for the development of new conversations and new relationships. The paper provides clinical examples of the use of letter writing in a four-stage process, and evidence that the process creates new voices of comfort, encouragement, and forgiveness. All of the clinical examples provided in the paper took place in the space of a small number of clinical meetings over 2–3 months in time.

As I reflect on the many letters that I have witnessed, I am in awe of the discoveries about self or another that both I and the client have developed, as both Carol and Joe's work illustrates. I view letter writing as powerful and integral to my work and useful to the work of other clinicians. At times the changes have been very significant, and at others more subtle, based on a new choice of words or nuanced language. I am fond of saying, "We all need a good enough story to go on in our lives." Perhaps I should modify my expression: "We all need a good enough set of voices to go on in our lives."

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