

## KEEPING FAITH: A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL WHITE

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(a division of the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre/Gail Appel Institute)

This interview with Michael White for the *Journal of Systemic Therapies* consisted of a series of conversations that occurred over a five-year period, beginning on October 22, 2002 and ending October 4, 2007, almost six months prior to his death. All of the interviews occurred following five-day training programs that Michael was teaching at the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute in Toronto, Canada. The initial interview began with Adrienne Chambon, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto and Jim Duvall. Adrienne teaches narrative studies at the University of Toronto. She was unavailable for the second meeting, therefore, Karen Young, who is a BTTC-I faculty member, was asked to join the discussion. Michael was invited to step into the foreground of this conversation by providing glimpses of particular aspects of his life, rendering him more visible to the readers. These aspects of his life provided themes of circumstances that could be illuminated and their influences regarding the development of many of the ideas and practices that constitute what we now identify as narrative therapy, could be better understood. We were particularly interested in Michael's notion of keeping faith, staying true to those important sentiments, learnings, and circumstances in life that clarify what is important that we give value to.

**Karen:** Michael, you said something a few years ago, at the beginning of this interview to Adrienne Chambon, which was:

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*"I think that it's very difficult for me to think about life outside the context, in terms of even the most traditional structures of power—the power relations of gender, disadvantage and class are all present today. I can't really think about this conversation without also being aware of the more traditional structures of power as well."*

The question that came to my mind was; why is that? What is it about your history that made it possible to think in those terms and impossible not to? Because that's not how it is for everyone.

**Michael:** I think it has so much to do with such a wide range of experiences of life. It's about keeping faith with those experiences, those learnings. I mentioned in an interview somewhere about some of my experiences in high school, like coming from a working class family and a middle class high school and being streamed in the lower levels. I experienced being relatively neglected by the school along with the other working class kids who weren't really considered to be a good educational proposition for the school. Most of the teachers we got were not very capable of teaching us and I think the school was just happy that we weren't too disruptive to the school. I remember an English teacher that I had that came in and we were really good at driving teachers to distraction. She took no notice of the lackness in the classroom. The kids tried everything, but it didn't work. She just played Joan Baez records. She wanted us to describe the sentiment expressed in the music. And, eventually we started to listen. You know, that music was about a lot of things, including class. She encouraged us to reflect on matters of class. She was quite an extraordinary person.

**Karen:** What was extraordinary to you then, the fact that she came in and really taught or the content in terms of the Joan Baez music and understanding the themes in it? Did you get in touch with something that you hadn't really thought about before at that point?

**Michael:** We had no idea that she was a good teacher till later. But, at the time she was really interested in what we thought about everything that was going on around us. We didn't know what we thought. We hadn't had an opportunity of even finding ways of putting that into words. She was providing a context for that.

**Jim:** She provided a context for putting what you thought into words. Did you get a sense that she genuinely was interested in what you thought?

**Michael:** Genuinely interested.

**Jim:** Would you say that she provided some of your first learnings by helping to scaffold the concept of critical reflection? For example, how to listen to Joan Baez and notice the sentiments in the music?

**Michael:** She was certainly a very significant part, but not the only influence. I think that in many ways I grew up in a time of quite extraordinary social change, particularly in this culture.

**Jim:** The '60s?

**Michael:** Yes. I grew up in a time in which young people started questioning, and yet they had had no way of questioning and no support for questioning ahead of that time. I think that was very, very fortunate for me.

**Jim:** Perhaps a bit of an appreciation of the influence of the social context of the '60s, that it was a unique time.

**Michael:** It was definitely a unique time. There was discontinuity, certainly in young people's culture through the '60s, which did have ramifications. Not the ramifications that we might have hoped it would have had in the longer term. But, certainly I think there was some transformation in local culture through the '60s. In many ways there was an opportunity to raise questions about everything that would be otherwise routinely accepted or taken for granted. It was a very important time.

**Karen:** Michael, when you were talking about the teacher and how she provided opportunity for finding ways to put thought into words—providing a context; and how the culture in the '60s provided an opportunity to raise questions about that which was routinely accepted and taken for granted; I am reminded of what you said during the five-day training about it being the responsibility of the therapist to provide a context for people to move from the known and familiar to what is possible to know—for conceptual development. Could you say some more about those ideas?

**Michael:** In therapeutic practices, the people who consult us experience big failure. So this context (of therapy) could produce for people an experience of being doubly failures. So I think that we play a critical role and we are responsible to build scaffolding. In therapeutic conversations we're providing the sort of scaffolding that makes it possible for people to cross the gap that Vygotsky called the "Zone of Proximal Development."

He was mostly speaking about child development and he said that you measure a child's development in terms of what that child is able to do in collaboration with others, not in terms of what that child can do individually to achieve. His ideas of child development were in contrast to many mainstream conceptions of child development. Vygotsky argued that all learning is social and I think that this metaphor holds true for people who consult us. I think that this is also about

learning and that we play a role in establishing conditions that are fertile that are conducive to that sort of learning process.

Vygotsky was interested in the social origins of learning. He came up with some ideas that contradicted prevailing wisdom about child development. You might be familiar with Roger Piaget's egocentric speech. Vygotsky undertook a range of studies of early child development and concluded in fact that this egocentric speech is not egocentric speech, it is private speech, speech for oneself. And he said this is the outcome of social collaboration. This is the outcome of caretakers' scaffolding, that learning space, that zone between what's known and familiar and what's possible to know and achieve. And so, it's an outcome of that work that caretakers do to hold up reflecting surfaces for young children in their learning that makes it possible for them to distance from the known and familiar to arrive at the possible to know—that distancing from the immediacy of their experience. He talked about it in a sense of how caretakers hold up those reflecting surfaces and contribute to that sort of distancing. This happens when adults mimic a child's actions or gestures. This is distancing for the child. It's like a reflecting surface. A child is able to reflect on their own lives in a way they weren't able to. Private speech is the outcome of the scaffolding of that learning space, the outcome of the sort of scaffolding that makes it possible for a child to distance from the immediacy of their experience. And it also contributes to the internalization of the problem solving culture.

I'm sure that you have some sense of what I mean by that scaffolding. As a caretaker at some point you would have been a caretaker of young children as parents or aunts, uncles or as elder siblings or babysitters. At some point you might have witnessed that child that you were care taking playing with blocks and you might have said, well what color are those blocks? You would invite the child to characterize those blocks in some way and so that requires the child to distance from the immediacy of the experience and characterize those blocks by color or by shape or whatever. And so at another point in the development of this child you might ask which of these blocks fit together. That requires the child to bring these blocks into relationship with each other. This is a more sophisticated achievement than the characterization of the blocks. This requires the child to draw distinctions between similarities and differences and also bring these blocks into relationship with each other. And so it is more sophisticated achievement. At another point in time, in the child's development the child might be playing with the blocks and you ask what might happen if you put the block over there. This is inviting the child to hypothesize about an event that is yet to happen or to make a prediction about the consequences of certain actions. This is yet more sophisticated mental activity. It's not something the child can do if the child hadn't had the opportunity to characterize these objects in the child's world and to bring those objects into relationship with each other. How could they possibly come up with a speculation about the consequences of certain developments without that sort of characterization and without having had the op-

portunity to bring the events of their world into relationship? Once the child is able to begin to make predictions about the consequences of certain actions they begin to more fully inhabit their own world.

It's an interesting paradox. It is through this distancing that they can be more able to inhabit their own lives. By that I mean that it is through this distancing that the child begins to learn skills in self-regulation—their regulation of their own life; the shaping of their own life. So it is through this distancing that children become more able to fully inhabit their own life. I meet a lot of adults who don't seem to inhabit their life at all. They talk about a pervasive emptiness, personal desolation, they don't feel in their body, they have a very thin experience of self. They don't seem to be inhabiting their own life. I know then that it's important to give some priority to scaffolding that contributes to this sort of distancing and will make it possible to inhabit their own life. If we think about Vygotsky's work then the whole idea of personal agency is not just a construct. We experience personal agency when we are able to speculate about certain actions we might take and about the consequences of certain actions and initiate those actions. And to be ready to address any contingencies that might arise out of those actions. When we have that experience we are able to speculate about an action we might take to affect the course of our life in some way to influence it. To take that step we also experience us dealing with contingencies as an outcome that might be discouraging of the step. Then we experience personal agency.

I want to say a couple of things about this. What would happen as a caretaker if at the outset you said to a child, before the child had this opportunity to engage in an enquiry into the world that contributed to the categorization of events in their world, and before you'd sponsored initiatives on the child's behalf to bring some of the events of their life into relationship with each other. If you said ahead of all that, what do you think will happen if you do this? What is the child going to experience if you are consulting them about speculation, about what will happen before they've actually characterized the objects in question and before they've had the opportunity to bring these into relationship? What are they going to experience? Failure to know, failure to learn. They are going to experience frustration. So what happens in therapeutic practices if we expect people who consult us to just go ahead and solve their own problem, all they need to do is gain a little bit of personal insight that we would then give them, then they would go. The people who consult us already are experiencing big failures. They experience failure to know about their own lives even. So they could experience this as context for being doubly failures. So, I think that we play a critical role, and we are responsible to build that sort of scaffolding in. I think the other thing we do a whole lot in these therapeutic conversations when we provide a context for the incremental and progressive distancing from the known and familiar is that we open up the opportunity for the development of concepts. So I think we are contributing to conceptual development.

**Jim:** It seems as though your English teacher was able to step into that Zone of Proximal Development and provide you and your classmates with creative scaffolding to move toward your own conceptual development at that time.

**Michael:** Very much so.

**Karen:** I really like the idea that therapeutic conversations contribute to conceptual development, moving from the known and familiar to what is possible to know. Can you take these ideas into a therapeutic conversation “map” for us?

**Michael:** Because these conversations develop and we move from the known and familiar to what is possible to know, there is a chasm between these two places and we scaffold that through our therapeutic questions, so that we see this incremental and progressive distancing from the known and familiar to what is possible to know. That’s only achieved through the scaffolding that we provide through our therapeutic questions.

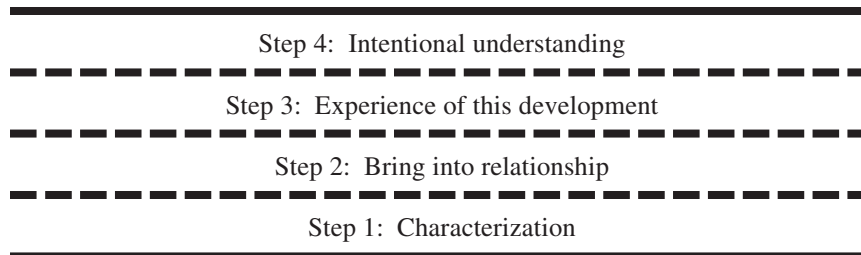
So you will notice in the videotape I showed during the training, that first I wanted the boy to come up with a characterization of a particular event/initiative. He struggled with that, then his parents joined him, and then he and his parents characterized it jointly. I then wanted to know, what does this make possible? In this way, this initiative was linked to similar events of this class. I’m inviting this young man to make distinctions between similarities and differences. So he brings the initiative into relationship with certain consequences and then with certain precedents so that we no longer have a singular event, we now have a storyline developed through time. Now there is no way that he could have brought this event into some storyline unless he had first characterized it. So that was the first step. I asked questions that encouraged the characterization of it. This was a little of what I call horizontal scaffolding because he was experiencing some difficulty with it. I solicited speculation from the parents about this that he then confirmed. Then I said, how can you relate building bridges to this, then he’d take it over in his own words. I then wanted him to reflect on the experience of the consequences of taking this initiative. He mostly spoke about his experience of what was possible for him in a therapeutic conversation. So I am holding it up for him to reflect on so he gives an account of his experience of these developments. I then want to know why he experienced this in the way that he did. Why is your experience of these developments so positive? He eventually comes up with some intentional understanding of his life. He explains how this fits with certain purposes, with what he gives value to, then there’s an account of how this is a quest to “save his soul.” I think we’re going up the scale here, this is an incremental and progressive distancing from the known and familiar to what is possible to know.

So first of all my questions have to do with the characterization of the event, then we would take that into sequence, into relationship with other events so that the initiative is taken into relationship. Thirdly I’m interviewing about his expe-

rience of what's unfolding, still holding it up there for him. I'm giving editorials. Then I'm saying, well I don't understand this. Your account of this experience is a very positive one, how come? What could you tell me about you that would help me understand this? He struggled with this question, it was too much of a stretch for him, so I say: "Do you mind if I consult your parents and I'll check it out with you?" Then his parents give an account of why this might be a positive experience for him. When I check it out, he says it's half right and half wrong, so I ask about the half right and wrong and he winds up giving me an account of how this fits with certain purposes for him. How it fits with what he gives value to. He's not telling me at this point that he feels good about it because it reflects his strengths. He's really talking about an intentional understanding or an understanding that he incorporates with his values and beliefs.

There's vertical scaffolding and there's horizontal scaffolding.

#### What is possible to know



#### The known and familiar

When there is difficulty answering a question I can drop it back down a scale or go horizontal. If he has trouble in bringing the initiative into relationship with other events we can go back into a richer characterization of the initiative. When that's more richly characterized we can then ask the question what has made this possible? What provided a foundation for it? Then you have a response to it. If he doesn't have a response to it then we ask for more characterization of it.

If I'm asking him about his experience of this initiative and he's stuck for words, we drop down the scale again to get a much richer description of this initiative in relationship with the events that preceded it and the events that are subsequent to it. We would draw them out more richly and then we'd have more of a reflecting surface for speaking about his experience.

If I ask him questions about the why of this experience and he can't answer the question, then I'd drop down the scale so there's a much richer account of these events unfolding. Then we can go back up the scale and ask the why question and then he might have a response. This is what I refer to as vertical scaffolding.

The interview invited the characterization of the initiative. If there is trouble with that, I can either go horizontal by consulting his parents (others in the

conversation) or I can drop down by discussing what I learned about the person that is the known and familiar. How does this fit with what I've heard about all this trouble? (The response might be that it doesn't fit.) Well what does it fit with? We go back to characterization. What did this make possible for you here today? (I don't know what you're talking about.) Well let's talk again about what sort of step this was because I don't understand. I have some more questions so I can get more familiar with it. So, I might go back to get a fuller characterization of the initiative. Then I might say what lead up to this and suddenly he's able to give me an account of what gave him a platform for this initiative and what went before this. That made this possible in terms of his experience of this conversation today. I might ask him to reflect on this experience, again if there is trouble providing some account of his experience I might drop down again for a richer characterization of the initiative in relationship. Again if he had trouble getting to some explanation of the intention of the initiative I drop down again.

If there is no one else present, I'm not restricted to the vertical dimension. If there is difficulty characterizing the initiative, I don't have to drop down, I can ask a question like: If your \_\_\_\_ were here, what would they say, what might they name it? Tell me a bit about them? Is it more like your mom or your dad? What would your mom name it? Then move back into how it fits for the person with us. This is what I call the *scaffolding conversations map in narrative practice*.

**Jim:** I would like to relate these ideas to your own history again. I'm wondering what events in your history were important in terms of scaffolding those learnings that you spoke about wanting to keep faith with? For example, these learnings from your relationships with people such as your English teacher or the powerful learnings that you referred to that were provided by the social change of the '60s.

**Michael:** When I was a student studying social work, Australia was in Vietnam with the United States and we had the same issues around antiwar protest, and we looked to Berkeley and we looked to the civil rights movements for inspirations. We drew a fantastic amount of inspiration from what was happening in the civil rights movements in North America. I think that in some ways the statement I made has to do with keeping faith with those experiences as well. There is a whole range of experiences that when I do my work, I am keeping faith with.

**Jim:** The '60s were an inspiring time that provided powerful foundations and a range of experiences that helped to scaffold your own conceptual development of the effects of social context.

**Michael:** You could not help but be in some way emboldened by what was happening at that time. Lots of people were involved in extraordinary initiatives and often at great personal risk, insisting on having a voice about a whole range of injustices and about a whole range of particular issues.



**Karen:** You just said you could not help but get emboldened, or inspired by all that. I still have this question though: “why is that?” I do know people who went through those times that were in many ways impervious to the influence of those times. In many ways they stood apart from it. Possibly they rejected it in some ways. But, you’re describing having been greatly influenced and engaged by it. I just wonder what it is that was the fit between those ways of thinking and you?

**Jim:** And, how you continue to keep faith with it?

**Michael:** Well, I think many experiences have gone on for me. Like exploring heterosexual dominance in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. You know, these were powerful learnings that I gained from people who were prepared to take a risk and educate me in relation to what we were talking about today during the training in terms of white privilege. For example, there were some people that I have worked in partnership with over the past 15 years and I’ve been keeping faith with what I have learned in the context of those partnerships. I think there are structures in my life that would make it very difficult for me to forget this or to forsake it. There are structures in my life that would mitigate me forsaking those learnings. But, I don’t know what the answer is to this other question. I really don’t.

You know, I had an interesting time even in my training. I was once again in a middle class environment. This is back in the second part of the ‘60s. Most university students were from relatively privileged groups who were middle class and upper middle class. I don’t know if that was true here in North America, but it was certainly true in Australia. I was quite working class in terms of my history and my orientation to life. To me it was an exotic culture—university culture, incredibly exotic. I was really on the periphery of the culture in many ways.

**Karen:** When you said that you found it exotic, it sounds like there was an intensity of curiosity. What were you curious about?

**Michael:** I think that I found that culture entirely exotic and I didn’t quite know how to participate in it. But, I was very, very curious about what people of that culture took for granted. I was very curious about how they could think in the ways that they thought, in view of what was happening out there in the “real world.” So, I was certainly very, very curious about that.

**Jim:** How is it you were able to stay so in touch with what was happening out here in the “real world” and connected to the values and principles that were so much a part of this revolutionary era?

**Michael:** I work a lot in the area of abuse. Probably 70% of my work is with trauma. People say to me, “how can you do this, this really weighs on you.” Surely you wind up getting this thing called vicarious trauma, which is a most ridiculous

idea. And I say, “well surely not.” When I grew up abuse and violence was everywhere. There was not one domain in my life where there was not abuse and violence taking place. As a child in working class Australian culture after the war, there was still a scarcity of resources and a lot of people were having a hard time. Almost every adult man I knew was abusive. I can’t recall hardly an adult man that I knew that wasn’t abusive. I can’t recall a day going to school that I didn’t witness a kid being assaulted by a gang. I can’t recall hardly a day going to school where I wasn’t witnessing someone being caned or experiencing being caned. I saw the consequences of this.

There was a family that lived in my neighborhood where the woman in that household disappeared from time to time. But, it wasn’t the sort of disappearance that would be possible in middle class culture, because she had to work. So, she would often leave the house and go to work and cover her face up because she had been beaten and the bruises were there. Then I remember the senior men in our community joking that she had walked into a doorknob. So, not only was violence everywhere, but it was also explicit. And the complicity was explicit too and it was a terrible thing. So, when I’m working with families, I make it my business in every way that I can to address abuse and violence. It is not a strange thing or an alien thing or an unusual thing. I think that makes it possible for me to actually work with men who are referred to me for perpetrating abuse and not totalize them. I cannot perceive of it outside of culture or outside the history of experience. These are some ways that I stay connected and keep faith with the learnings from those experiences.

**Jim:** That helped me more fully appreciate what you are saying, particularly when it gets back to how you can’t imagine thinking outside of context and the history of experience. I also connected with what you described because I grew up in southern Texas and many of the men in that social context were routinely abusive. So, how was it that you resisted fitting into the abusive men culture?

**Michael:** There was just no way that I could fit in to it. I mean I was just totally alienated from it. I think there are lots of answers to that. My mother was an incredibly loving and caring woman. She is extraordinary. She gave and gave and gave and had a pretty hard time, but I always had a sense from her that there has got to be more than this.

**Jim:** So, somehow she was able to help you get glimmers or views that were different from the abusive men culture?

**Michael:** I think that she, like most of the women of that time sort of accepted that lot. I think that their protest was somehow lived out in their rearing of their children. I think that in some ways the women of the community did not have an option to directly challenge what was going on. They did not have social services

back then and there was nowhere to go in terms of addressing abuse. Their protest was in what they reenforced in their children's lives.

**Karen:** Can you say more about what that was, about what they reenforced?

**Michael:** I'm not saying that this was achieved by all the women of the community, but some of the women were supportive of their daughters and their sons, but certainly with their sons through more caring ways. By being attuned to sensitivity and ways of responding to it. It wasn't explicit, but I think it happened in quite a lot of families, certainly in my family.

**Jim:** Then is it also that along with this influence from your mother and the women in the community that provided an initial foundation for you to stay out of abusive men's culture, the '60s happened? There were more opportunities that legitimized the right and need to question. I don't mean to oversimplify these influences on how you have arrived at these values. I can imagine that there are many other variables. But, did these influences help to get you further down the road?

**Michael:** Yes, definitely. I think I had mentioned to you the things that happened in my second year of high school. They had a system of prefects where they were elected by the student body, but they were agents of the institution. We were very, very suspicious of any student who would become a prefect. I remember this time when the senior prefect and the deputy prefect did things that incited all the students to come out and protest a whole lot of the conditions of the school. Eventually, the police were called and all of the doors were battened down. I witnessed one of the students being assaulted by the Deputy Principal of the school. Today they would lay charges for this. He knocked some of this student's teeth out. Anyway, these students were expelled. Their effort to bring about significant social change in the school failed, but this was inspiring to all of us to witness this. Although the initiatives failed, it didn't matter because it was inspiring to all of us to witness this. It didn't matter that the initiative failed, we witnessed the senior prefects standing up to a regime. That was inspiring.

**Jim:** Was this yet another event that helped to scaffold learnings and positioning?

**Michael:** Yes, I think it lead to providing a context for the student body to become more politicized. I'm not saying that this brought about change in the school in any rapid nature, but it lead to the development of a student body magazine. This was antiestablishment material, so I would say it was a good thing anyway.

**Jim:** What were some of the other influences that helped to create the sense of keeping faith with these learnings and values and continuing your conceptual development?

**Michael:** It was a matter of me progressively finding a plot. During the 1970s I started working in a psychiatric institution and I was involved in providing services for the hospital patients and their relatives. There were no services really, so I started the family services at this hospital, amongst other things, and they were suddenly hugely in demand. I suddenly had this huge cue going on forever and there was no way I could provide service for all these families, so I began to meet with them in groups, not that I knew how to do that.

**Jim:** You started meeting with families in groups of families?

**Michael:** Yeah, groups of families.

**Jim:** So you could do it?

**Michael:** Oh yeah, there was no other way I could do that. I always remember the first time I put up some notices around the hospital and also made it very clear to all those on the waiting list that they could sign up for this if they wanted to. I committed to eight of these meetings in the evening and when I went to see who had signed up I couldn't believe it. There was this crowd of people who had come along to this meeting. I remember going upstairs and seeing this sea of faces—there must have been about 80 or more people and I was thinking, what are all these people doing up here. I walked back downstairs again and went to the charge nurse and said: "where am I going to be meeting, obviously there's been a change. Where am I rostered to meet?" And the charge nurse said, "up there—that's your room." So I went back upstairs again and confronted this sea of faces—it seemed like thousands of people to me and I said: "look, I so much appreciate your enthusiasm for this and I hope that your faith in me is not misplaced. I must tell you I've never done this before. And I don't know how this is going to go." And someone stepped forward and said: "look, Michael, it doesn't matter, we'll make the best of it." Then there was a chorus of people saying, "it'll work out okay, we'll make the best of it." I got very emotional at that response because I felt so vulnerable.

Anyway we started to meet and we went beyond the eight meetings. Most of the people from this group were from poor state housing, mostly sole parent families. So we actually moved the group to the community they lived in and met in a primary school where we were supported by the principal of the school. He was a man of strong social conscience and he put his facilities out for groups. They became like a community and got into supporting the families who were having really hard times in the community. They became socially active and became a social action group. I was following them all this time. This school was alongside a freeway that was a major artery out of the city and it didn't have a school crossing. And because it was a disadvantaged community, there was no way they could get this addressed, they had tried to represent themselves to a local minister (congress person) but they didn't get a reception. I always remember, it was a Thurs-

day evening before Easter, them blockading the freeway with their prams and with their babies, and their barbeques. This caused gridlock, as you can imagine. And before long there were helicopters and police and it was an extraordinary scene. I still have the front-page press clippings from this event. And the police couldn't do anything about it because this was about 8 or 9 months after the battle for North Terrace, which was quite an event in local history. It was in 1972 and there had been an antiwar demonstration that occupied the major intersection in the city I lived in and the police made it very clear that they couldn't do that. There must have been 10,000 people in this demonstration. And the police brought their horses into the crowd. They broke a few ribs; the police caused mega damage. It was so bad that there was an inquiry into this and the police force was disciplined, and from this time on they had instructions to actually facilitate social dissent. And so they couldn't do anything. They couldn't move these women and children and some of the men who were in alliance with them. They couldn't move them off the freeway. The minister actually came out and they got this school crossing.

**Karen:** That's a fantastic story.

**Jim:** It's extraordinary. This would have been at the beginning of your work as a social worker?

**Michael:** It was the beginning of my work in the psychiatric system. By the way, I got incredibly supported by the senior social worker at this hospital, she was fantastic, this woman called Nina. It came to the hospital's attention that I was involved in this, so I was required to speak to the medical director of the hospital who wanted to know what this had to do with mental health. And Nina went to bat for me—she made it very, very clear that she would actually take any action that was necessary if I was disciplined for this. I don't know what she did or what she said, I guess going to the press, I don't even know. All I know is she cleared the way for me. She was fantastic, a fantastic woman.

**Karen:** What did she clear the way for?

**Michael:** Well, after that I went to a child guidance clinic for a while and continued to do what really fitted for me. But then I got into working for a children's hospital. I found there that I had to present my work in terms that were accepted, so I really had no choice but to represent my work in terms of family therapy schools. It wasn't that I didn't like them; it's just that this drifted away from some of the actual sentiment in my work and I really came to regret that, and then I turned back again, back to these things.

**Karen:** Was there something in particular that got you turning back in that way?

**Michael:** I left the hospital and it's the best thing I could have ever done. I was then free. I didn't have to justify my work at any time. This was probably 1981. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. I started reading these things that interested me, like Bateson.

**Jim:** Was that a significant turning point, or event in your life? It sounds like the early foundations for what you bring to us now?

**Michael:** Yeah, and it was me getting back on track again. That's basically it, me getting back on track.

**Karen:** When you say that, do you mean that it was getting back on track to that "keeping the faith" that you were talking about?

**Michael:** Yeah, and sort of bringing some of these values principals, back to the center of my work.

**Jim:** Returning to a "sense of myself"? So, when in a more significant way did you start getting involved in Bateson and other readings as well, like Foucault?

**Michael:** Probably in the mid-80s. Also around then I got really interested in cultural anthropology. I met David Epston in 1980 and we were originally drawn to this. David's earlier degree was anthropologist. So we began reading this stuff together.

**Karen:** Was that when you read Barbara Meyerhoff?

**Michael:** Barbara Meyerhoff, James Clifford, many of these other people, Victor Turner, and then moving on from there to Michel Foucault, you know I must say Foucault has been the most powerful academic influence in my work.

**Jim:** THE most?

**Michael:** I would say so, yeah.

**Jim:** Sorry, just to back up a bit, how did you and David meet?

**Michael:** I was involved in running a conference in Adelaide. And anyway, I was very busy with the conference but someone said "You should come and hear this guy." So, David Epston was actually sitting on the ground reading letters or something. David had this Afro haircut, full beard, and he was going like at a hundred miles an hour and it was fantastic. And we got to talk. By this time I was already

starting to get into developing aspects of practice that had something to do with my interpretation of some ideas . . . most family therapy schools interpret certain ideas and provide an accounting of and compilation of ideas. I'd already got into interpreting ideas for myself, chiefly Bateson. So, anyway we've been the best of friends ever since.

**Karen:** Was he reading similar things at the time?

**Michael:** I don't know. I mean I can't say for sure. I know that I was very taken by the sentiment that he was expressing in his work.

**Jim:** So when did you start to travel around training?

**Michael:** From about 1986 or '87 I think. Probably partly as a result of teaching, over the years I've got increased clarity of this work, for example, the sort of outsider witness tellings that have been contributing to resonance. In a way it's gotten a bit more economical or something, I don't know if that's the right word, a bit more precise, more precision? I don't know.

**Karen:** It certainly seems what you're doing is much more transparent now than it ever was in the past.

**Michael:** That's true.

**Jim:** That has been my experience. Your work is much clearer. I know that the maps are really helpful and are a lot clearer. As well, your interpretation of the work of Lev Vygotsky and William James has been enriching and exciting. So it's a continuous unpacking. Does this get at some of what you were saying in the workshop, that you have an ongoing sort of mistrust of your own work? To constantly question . . . ?

**Michael:** I think that it's incredibly helpful to sort of have a basic mistrust, I don't know if that's the right word or not, but certainly to have a basic questioning of everything that I do inside of narrative therapy and practice, questioning everything. There's not one thing that I don't question in my work.

**Karen:** I'm thinking about that history of curiosity and how it comes back to you in your own curiosity about your own work and what you're doing.

**Michael:** And that curiosity is something that winds up having a life of its own almost, once you begin getting into these ideas and work. It's of itself incredibly compelling.

**Jim:** Does that have something to do with when you talk about keeping faith with your work? I spent two days in the workshop listening to people; that's part of my job to listen to their responses. Many of them were talking about how their curiosity and their faith in their practice has increased. I am really interested in that idea. I got more excited when you started talking about faith, and it looked to me like you were having a noticeable affect on the audience in the workshop as people started talking more about keeping faith with their own learnings and experiences.

**Michael:** Yeah, I think that we need to keep this topic of faith before us. I sincerely believe that in the course of these conversations, as an outcome of these conversations that people will develop a sense of faith in their own potential to find a way forward in life. I think that as the subordinate stories become more richly known to them that we see this acceleration of this sense of faith that they do have some knowledges that are relevant to addressing the problems which have been denied in the history of their lives and their relationships. That they will find ways of proceeding that will be in harmony with what they're committed to. I certainly have faith in that, that the people will slip into that faith.

**Karen:** Does that faith help you step away from some of those other kinds of expectations that come forward, like being useful or being helpful or resolving something or fixing something?

**Michael:** I think it helps but I also think it's really important to deconstruct or unpack those other ideas so they're not so welded to them. I certainly think it helps. But I think that principally it's not about having faith about my work, it has more to do with ethics, it has more to do with keeping faith with certain experiences and learnings and what has been offered to me. I think it's more a matter of that.

**Karen:** Is there a faith in catharsis? That it will happen if you create a certain context in the therapeutic conversation. Do you have like a faith, or a sureness, or something, that the conversation will transport; that people will stand somewhere they didn't before? Is that a kind of faith?

**Michael:** Maybe it's a kind of faith, maybe another version of that term is just it's a knowing that if we establish the right circumstances then we will witness this transport.

**Jim:** This has got me thinking about how this faith in movement helps me to gain distance from ideas about "fixing people" and more task-oriented metaphors for therapeutic practice. This brings me back to your reference to Francis Goverela, who speaks about "laying down the path as you walk it." Can you talk about this distinction between being more task-oriented with people and keeping faith with the idea that if we can "establish the right circumstances we will witness this transport."



**Michael:** Yes. If we do lay down the path as we walk it, then it is pretty important to know what is being laid down, so that we can get some direction from that and ideas about how we may proceed. I think that this path becomes much more evident and becomes more richly known as the themes associated with it become more fully drawn out, much more thickly described for people. Then I find that people are able to come up with a proposal for some initiative or some step that they can take. That's not a task. They are actually running toward it because it is something that so clearly coheres to something they give value to, or to precious themes in their lives. So, again in these therapeutic conversations we're providing this sort of scaffolding that makes it possible for people to cross this chasm that Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development. This makes it possible for us to hold up reflecting surfaces for people in their learning that makes it possible for them to distance from the known and familiar and to arrive at what is possible to know.

**Jim:** So, once again, this scaffolding that makes it possible to traverse the Zone of Proximal Development contributes to conceptual development. Can you talk more about the role and responsibility of the therapist in relationship to people who consult her as they move across this gap?

**Michael:** We [the therapist] have this responsibility. If we were to see someone and have some therapeutic conversations with them, and then somehow we experience them failing to proceed to address the predicaments of their life, we can say they lack insight, they are vested in the problem and we can pathologize them in a multiplicity of ways now. We have at our disposal a whole range of discourses that would contribute to the pathologization of their lives because these have been developed exponentially over the past hundred years or so. So, we can pathologize them. This is what I call copping out. We can either say that this person lacks motivation, they are invested in the problem, they lack insight, they are resistant or lack will power. We can say that, or we can look at how we have come up against the limits of our skills, which is a very different orientation to this. Now, this doesn't mean that we are putting ourselves down. It just means that we are being a bit more honest. I'm not judging myself against some normative criteria. I know I'm going to come up against the limits of my skills. To me it's like these limits light up. It becomes an opportunity to further develop my work. Usually it's a mixed experience when I run up against the limits of my work. I'm frustrated with myself, but this is also an opportunity for me. Those limits become visible and it's like a flash of lightning to me. We can consider how to extend those limits further. We have all come up against this limit. It's harder to say that we haven't been that skilful. In my view, when we experience this situation, we haven't been that skilful in scaffolding that space for the person who has consulted us.

**Jim:** Just to get back to this scaffolding idea a bit more and how we can create circumstances that make it more possible for people, we have been very excited

as we have witnessed people arriving at their own “aha” moments in therapy sessions. As this relates to your reference to William James and stream of consciousness when people experience strong associations with a “sense of myself.” Can you speak more about how this relates to this scaffolding and creating space for these epiphanies?

**Michael:** These epiphanies are in harmony with what is precious to people that’s beautiful that they want to rush towards. It’s not a task. What I’m giving voice to again is not being task oriented. People come up with these ideas, like epiphanies. What makes them stick is how they are responded to in the outside world. We need to talk about these. There might be a way to recruit an audience to these, in ways that acknowledge these epiphanies. That acknowledgement is authenticating these epiphanies and helping them stick in these circumstances. We need to assist with this idea of stick-ability. It’s not about being task oriented. It’s simply that suddenly people are able to speculate about ideas that they are able to rush towards. It’s concept oriented, it is rich story development oriented, theme oriented.

**Jim:** The idea that “it’s concept oriented and rich story development” has really stood out for me. Michael, we really appreciate how you have come to the foreground in this conversation and in doing so have made yourself more visible to the readers. It’s been very interesting to get glimpses of the circumstances of your life and the context that you grew up in to help us appreciate the experiences that you are keeping faith with and what drew you to narrative ideas and practices. On behalf of Karen, the editorial staff and the readers of *JST* and myself, thank you for this fascinating conversation.