

Anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia: bearing witness David Epston

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of Eating Disorders, Adelaide, 20th October 2006

Let me begin by telling the most remarkable anti-anorexic story I have ever heard, although I have heard my fair share.

I first met Larissa after anorexia had denied her the capacity to read while in early secondary school. This of course baffled her family and the professional specialists they consulted. This finally meant that she had no other option but to leave school behind when she turned 15. Given her seeming inability to read, beauty college seemed a career option where that might go unnoticed.

I first met her around this time and when we got talking, it seemed anorexia had entered her life when she was merely six, at the time her father abandoned her mother for another partner with three children and her soon to be born brother in a foreign country. Their circumstances were such that her mother had to apply for welfare for them to survive. Sophie was determined to be good, which soon turned into being Perfect as good never seemed good enough.

On graduation from beauty college, Larissa went overseas herself and to her surprise, she became very distinguished in her craft while still in her teens. In fact, she was even assisting making up such luminaries as super-model Naomi Campbell. She emailed me with a revelation – that she has seen through Perfection because she, in fact, was the very agent of its fabrication. And because of this knowledge, she found it hard to believe in Perfection any longer. I replied with considerable interest and enquired if she had ever met a happy model. In fact, aside from one whom she had met on her very first day 'at work', she spoke of their despair and wretchedness.

She fled back to New Zealand determined to abandon such a life, but had to turn away the blandishments and financial inducements of agents from movie productions flown out to lure her back overseas. Instead she decided to lead a life of her own design, earning her living waitressing.

I can't recall how long it was before she travelled to Europe, but this time with quite a different mission than her first overseas trip. She had determined to become a pilgrim and walk the two thousand kilometres long 'camino' to Santiago de Compostella in north west Spain. Pilgrims from all over Europe had walked this route, from France over the Pyrenees, since the ninth century to the tomb of St. James at the church there. In fact, by the tenth century, 25% of the then population of Europe would have made this pilgrimage at least once in their life-time.

Larissa proposed to be such a wayfarer, like so many before her, travelling on her own with only that which she could carry for the necessary two to three months. As not too long before anorexia had tried to take her life, I am sure her loved ones were concerned for her well-being as she passed along the camino to her destination.

Now twenty-two, Larissa sent me this email some time after she returned to New Zealand, after first circulating it around the Anti-Anorexia League. (1)

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Yes, I had many interesting experiences on the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage. It is as if one lives a whole life in two thousand kilometres. One day, about a week to the end, I decided to take a detour. I went into the Valley of 'Silencio' (silence). It was a very lonely and difficult route, but incredibly beautiful involving lots of mountains and very unclear paths. So I spent almost two days in silence.

It was when I was climbing the last big ascent for the day that anorexia appeared. It has always felt like a voice within me but this time it wasn't. It was the same voice but this time it was outside of me, so completely foreign. At first, I felt afraid. I remember stopping, sitting down and thinking: "My gosh, what's going on?" But anorexia was talking such complete nonsense that it actually made me laugh.

It was as if along the road, I had faced so much and seen so much beauty and kindness. Indeed, I had seen all aspects – the wonderful and not so wonderful things about myself and others that somehow I had changed. There was a deep sense of peace about who I am and was. So when anorexia tried the usual one-sided conversation, I couldn't quite understand it. It was as if it were speaking a foreign language. It was as if all its support had been stripped away. Surrounded by no one and miles of nature, I could see it for what it is. It really looked ridiculous out there on a mountain top surrounded by scenery that stops you for its sheer beauty! I think

I finally had evidence from my own experiences of the pilgrimage that had made any claim by anorexia discountable. To be free of the world, especially the one that anorexia inhabits, helps one to see clearly. It was as if I was actually was seeing for the first time!

You will recall how anorexia had denied Larissa her ability to read which had obliged her to leave high school when she turned fifteen. Now she applied for a provisional admission to a BSc programme at a New Zealand university, was accepted and completed her first year with a straight A average. At that time, I enquired:

'Larissa, do you have any idea how your pilgrimage turned anorexia, in a manner of speaking, from the inside out?' She replied: 'I think the pilgrimage didn't so much turn anorexia from the inside out; more I think I had filled myself up with me so that anorexia's echo couldn't make it seem that it came from inside me. I feel as though the world is so full of noise and confusion that we miss the original voice of anorexia and are just unlucky that we are empty enough to hear that echo reverberate inside us as if it were part of us.'

I couldn't refrain from asking: 'Has anorexia ever tried to reinstitute itself inside your life and disrupt what you refer to as your 'deep sense of peace'?' She answered: 'Yes, being in the world means that there are always times when anorexia reappears. I guess over time I have just grown more and more aware of that and now know what works for me to move past such moments.' Several months ago (2007), Larissa emailed to inform me she had graduated on an accelerated academic programme with such distinction that she had been offered the very generous national scholarship for two years' study towards her further studies.

Does this make you wonder as much it intrigued me ever since? How a young woman, almost at the end of such a venerable moral ordeal, should confront

anorexia, which had demoralised her and 'caused me to feel that I wanted to die' for so long, and find that it spoke a foreign language? Or had Larissa taught herself another language of the self by which 'I was fully, intensely and wholeheartedly engaging in my life'? What relevance did reading her story and then enquiring about it have on me? It told me where I should stand – as a witness. I will have a great deal more to say about that as this chapter unfolds.

From Down Under and Up Over – Travels with Narrative Therapy
David Epston