

Narrative tools in Social Work Supervision:

The Supervisor Life Certificate and Hero's Journey tool

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Since the development of the life certificate (Fareez, 2015), a narrative therapeutic document used to honour lives of the people we have lost, I have appreciated the utility of such documents to thicken the preferred stories of the people who consult us. In social work supervision in Singapore, the dominant discourse surrounding supervision may be that of ensuring that the supervisee is aligned to the expected standard of practices, exemplified by the proliferation of “onboarding” programmes to support new social workers who have just graduated. Although the expectations that social workers need to maintain a standard of practice may be justified, me and my colleagues were also keen to leverage on skills and resources that social workers (and social work students) are already bringing with them as they embark on their journeys in their careers (some of whom might be working for the first time).

Narrative tools may be useful in thickening these preferred narratives within a collaborative supervisor-supervisee process. This paper shares the use of two such documents in supervision: namely the Supervisor Life certificate, and the Hero's Journey tool.

These two tools can be used in tandem, where the Supervisory Life certificate can be used by the supervisor to thicken her own preferred narratives of her identity as a supervisor, informed by the influences of key leaders that have inspired her. The Hero's Journey tool is something that can be a reflection tool for the supervisee to make sense of his own journey as a Social Worker (or any helping profession for that matter). Through a process of inquiry, both supervisor and supervisee can engage in conversations on how to best journey together in the work they do. The spirit of these practices in supervision is also about the supervisor taking steps to make sense of her own preferred identities as a supervisor, which can interface with her supervisee's own reflections of his social work journey, and his hopes for his practice. These tools can contribute to a collaborative meaning making process of the supervision relationship.

The Supervisor's Life Certificate

“Fronto helped me to see how privilege and power breed malice, deceit, and hypocrisy and how often those whom we call “Patricians” lack natural human feeling.” – Marcus Aurelius (Hicks & Hicks, 2002).

Marcus Aurelius' oft read “Meditations” starts with the Roman emperor identifying various individuals in his life, who have contributed to his current disposition. Aurelius shares about how these individuals had passed on specific values and teachings, that he is practicing today, akin to the process of legacy-building. In my own experience of being a supervisor of supervisors, I found this concept useful when conducting training and even consultations for new supervisors who are about to embark on their supervision journey where they may either be starting to supervise student interns, or supervise new staff in my organization.

Starting the journey into clinical supervision can be a daunting process. The Supervisor's life certificate represents a tool that supervisors can use in supervision of supervision, going back into their own rich histories to define the values and beliefs that they have been practicing, and their subsequent rich stories. A re-remembering process (White, 2007) allows for the continuation of how these histories are being practiced in the present, allowing supervisors to reflect on what others (including their past mentors and influential people) might also appreciate about how they are practicing these values.

The use of this document allows for insider knowledges (White & Epston, 1990) to be preferred, where participants themselves can play an active part in making sense of their identities as supervisors. These documents can serve as alternative stories of supervisor's identities that could also be utilized in human resource processes of appraisal, for e.g. storing these documents in the person's supervision records. They may serve as counter stories in this instance, where dominant practices in HR usually involve the documentation of key deficiencies that need to be addressed (Citation)

The supervisor Life Certificate, consists of the following components:

1. Values and beliefs that I hold as a supervisor
2. Images that represent my role as a supervisor
3. People or ideas that have contributed to my vision of what a supervisor should be
4. What others might appreciate about my supervision/What resources might I be able to bring into my supervision.
5. Quotes or Self Talk that support me as a supervisor
6. Things I do to support myself when being a supervisor

Figure 1: The Supervisor "Life Certificate"

Think about yourself as a supervisor and fill up the following sections accordingly. Feel free to use, pictures of key words to describe yourself

Supervisor "Life Certificate"			
Name: _____			
The values and beliefs I hold as a Supervisor			Images that represent my role as a Supervisor
People/Ideas that have contributed to me being the Supervisor that I am today			What others might appreciate about my Supervision/ What resources can I bring into Supervision
Quotes or Self Talk that support me as a Supervisor			Things I do to support myself in being a Supervisor

Journey Metaphors

Michael White has discussed the use of journey metaphors in the context of narrative therapy, teaching and community work (2002). The concept of 'katharsis' was mooted:

"I am not referring to a contemporary version of 'catharsis'...This is a katharsis that was held in response to witnessing powerful expressions of life's dramas...an appropriate metaphor through to attribute meaning to our own responses to the everyday dramas of life that we witness...an experience is kathartic if one is moved by it – moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another place..." (White, 2002: 49)

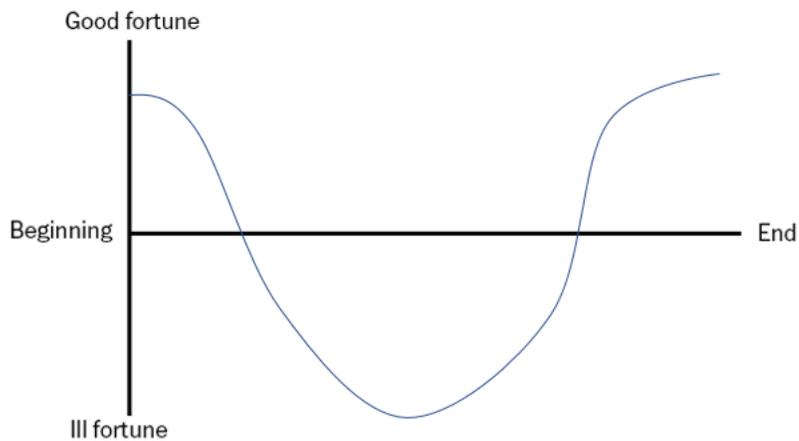
A journey framework can potentially support a new perspective of history and identity for the person or community, where individuals and groups are able to re-engage with hidden and neglected aspects of their history. New meanings of past experiences can be made, and new steps into preferred directions be taken. White (2002) discusses the 'rites of passage' metaphor where people experience three phases when negotiating life transitions: the first 'separation' phase where one is faced with a new experience or transits from a previous state; the 'liminal' phase which is characterized by "periods of confusion" and disorientation; and finally the "reincorporation" phase, where new stabilized state and new understanding of self is identified, supporting further directions in life. These processes can be thickened through a process of inquiry, or with rituals and ceremonies.

The use of the journey metaphor in the context of a tool was also inspired by a colleague's use of a journey map (Shantasaravanan, 2019) to support young children who were responding to the effects of trauma, in the context of child protection related work. The journey tool was used to engage children to identify their hopes, dreams, skills and resources, whilst identifying barriers that might hinder them in their journeys towards these hopes. The tool was helpful in making known identities beyond the trauma experiences of these young people and allowed for a safe space for children to have a voice in the process of casework and therapy. These ideas supported the conceptualization of the Hero's journey tool.

The Hero's Journey Tool

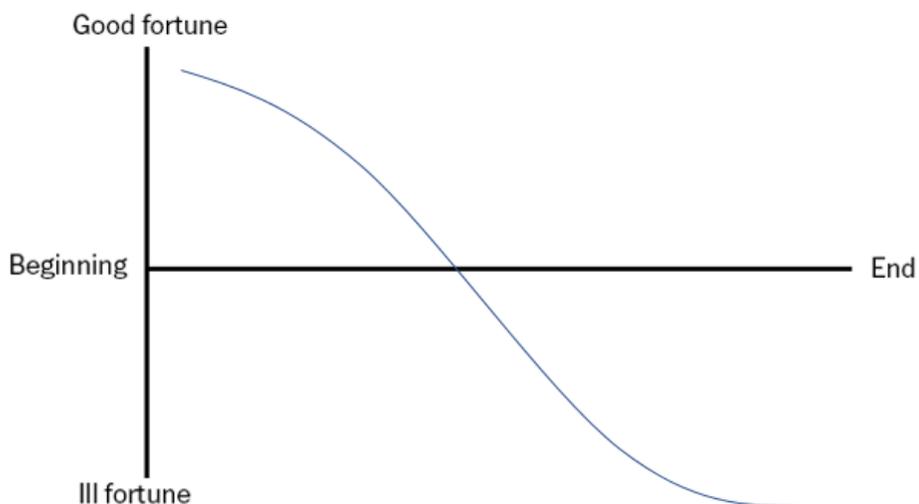
In a famous lecture, Kurt Vonnegut (acclaimed author of novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*) shared about the different shapes that stories could have (2004). His thesis was that a story's character may experience good and ill fortune that can be graphed to reveal the shape of the story. Vonnegut particularly draws attention to the "Man in the Hole" shape, which is encouraging the readers, and a shape that aspiring authors should emulate, should they want their stories to be well received. The "Man in a Hole" emotional arch typically begins the hero, or protagonist, starting from a position of good fortune, where she would then experience challenges and difficulties, contributing into a fall into bad fortune. The protagonist, then undergoes a transformative shift, both eudemonic (internal shifts) and hedonic (external shifts), that allow her to move back into a position of good fortune. He likens this to a hero's journey, as depicted by Figure 2.

Figure 2: The “Man in a Hole”



Wallman (2019) echoes the narrative perspective when he identified the “Hero’s Journey” as a nourishing pattern of storytelling that could be used in stories that we tell ourselves, and stories that we tell others, about who we are. Similarly, people mired in problematic storylines, might be influenced by a different story shape, evident in Wallman’s depiction of a “contamination pattern”, or a problem story (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A contamination pattern of storytelling



In Narrative therapy, we may see ourselves as editors in the therapeutic process, where our roles are to collaboratively identify the alternative storylines that run counter to the problem stories that people come to consult us for. The Hero's journey can be a useful frame of reference from which we can engage in a productive inquiry process, when faced with the limiting effects of problem stories. The following questions can be considered in the context of social work supervision:

1. What name(s) do you have for the challenge(s) that you are experiencing?
2. What are your thoughts about the effect of these challenges on you?
3. How have you been responding to the challenges at work?
4. What do these challenges say about what you value as a person?
5. How have you been able to hold on to your values, despite the challenges that have affected you?
6. What are some important events or turning points that reflect how you can better respond to these challenges?
7. What are some key skills or knowledge that you have gained from this process? How are you practicing them?
8. What has helped you in your journey?
9. Who are the people that have been by your side in this journey? What lessons would they have appreciated from your experience?
10. What hopes do you have about how you will continue in this journey?

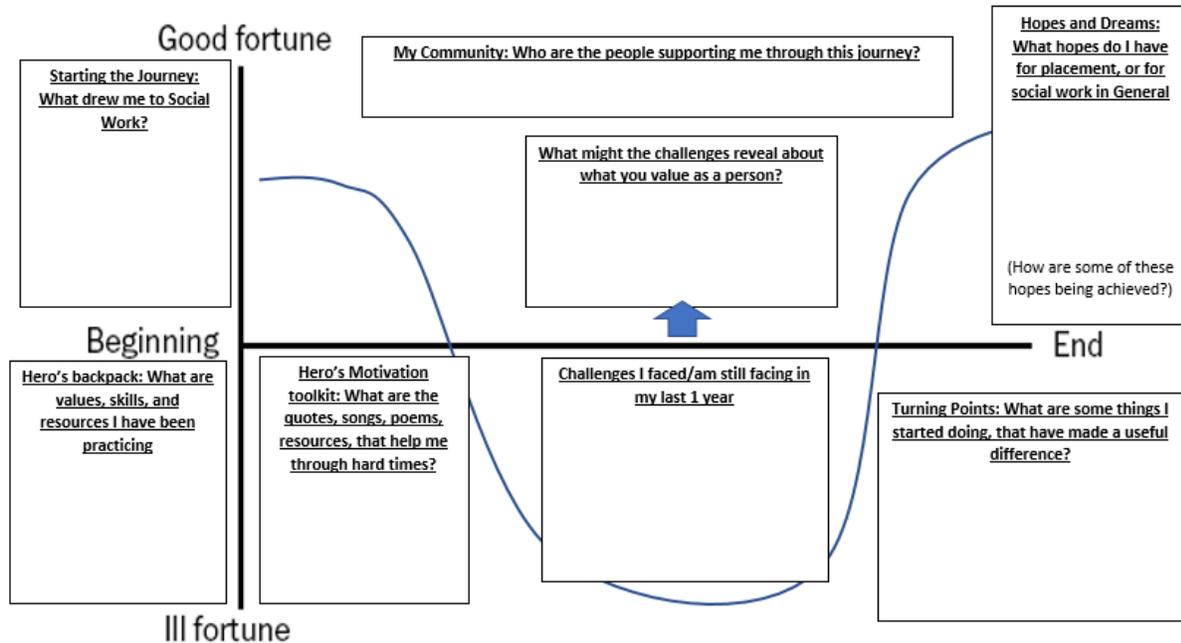
These questions have been helpful in the creation of the Hero's Journey tool, that can be used in yearly discussions and reviews with our supervisees. The toolkit borrows ideas from Vonnegut (1995) and acknowledges that our supervisees bring with them their own suite of knowledges, skills and values, into the helping profession. Hence, at the starting point, the tool begins by asking about the values and resources that the person is already tapping on. As supervisors, it is only ethical that we find different means to make these hidden stories explicit and thicken them as part of the supervisory process.

The toolkit includes the following segments:

1. Starting the journey: what drew me to social work
2. Hero's backpack: What are the values, skills, and resources that have been practiced
3. Hero's motivation toolkit: What are the quotes, songs, poems, resources, that help me through hard times
4. Challenges I am faced or am still facing in my work.
5. What might the challenges reveal about what I value as a person.
6. Hopes and dreams: What hopes does the person have about her relationship with work? How are some of these hopes already being achieved?

Typically, when using this tool, it may be helpful to share the context and story of Vonnegut’s “Man in a Hole” thesis, and how we may define ourselves from the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories we tell others.

Figure 4: The Hero’s Journey Tool for Social Work Supervision



An Inquiry for Sparkling Moments & Turning Points

When using the Hero’s Journey tool, there may be instances where turning points and sparkling moments are identified. These can be experiences or events where the supervisee felt a positive shift in her state of being. I find the following map of inquiry helpful when encountering these moments.

1. Identifying the context
 - a. When did the situation happen? (go into detail)
 - b. What did you do? Where were you?
 - c. How did you decide to do what you did? Was it intentional?
 - d. Who else was with you?

2. Thickening the moment
 - a. How did taking these actions make you feel?
 - b. Were you surprised that you were able to do it? Why?
 - c. What made it possible for you to take these actions?
 - d. What were you hoping for when you decided to take these steps?
 - e. What new understandings about yourself do you have after taking these actions?

3. Identifying skills and talents
 - a. What does it mean for you to be able to carry out this action?
 - b. Is there a name for this set of skills you were able to use?
 - c. What is the history of this skill? How did you pick it up?
 - d. Was this the first time you used this skill? Where else have you used it?
 - e. What does this skill say about the things you value as a person?
 - f. How was the demonstration of this skill today different from the other times you had used it?

4. Re-remembering
 - a. How did your client appreciate the skill you showed?
 - b. What did they say or do, to show that they appreciated this?
 - c. Who else noticed that you were able to do this?
 - d. What might they say or appreciate about you?

5. Moving forward
 - a. What new understandings about yourself has this conversation brought you?
 - b. How did this conversation make you realize anything about yourself? Are there things you would continue doing, or new things that you would be doing?
 - c. How might you start using these skills for future situations?
 - d. What support do you need from me to further develop these skills?
 - e. What steps will you be taking? When will you be taking these steps?
 - f. How does this development support the hopes you have about the work you are doing?
 - g. Are there any upcoming situations where the skills that you have shown would be useful?

The supervisor may document these stories as part of the social worker's collection of stories that contribute to personal growth and development.

Applications

The Supervision Life Certificate has been used in training new supervisors in our organization, and participants have shared how this process had been helpful in helping them “go back to their roots” and be clear about their hopes and intents of the supervision process. An outsider witness process (White, 2007) was conducted in groups of threes, where supervisors would share their respective life certificate in an interview. The third person in the group would take the position of witness, and respond to the following questions:

1. What parts of the conversations or sharing stood out for you?

2. What thoughts do you have about what the interviewee values as a Supervisor?
3. How did this conversation make you think about supervision, that you might not have been so aware of?
4. What might be some ideas or future steps that you would be inspired to take for your own supervision?

Some reflections shared by participants include:

“It was a very good self-reflection piece that broke down the different essential components, thus making it holistic...I feed on value-based connections, and higher purpose...I was conscious that I was seeing my work as a form of higher purpose.” – H

“The life certificate was helpful to reflect the various experiences of how one becomes a supervisor...and what I appreciate about all my supervisors which I want to bring into my own supervisory relationship but yet appreciate the uniqueness as a supervisor.” – S

“Hearing the others put into words what was important helped me to name what is important to me. I connected to quite a few thoughts shared.” – A

The Hero's journey has been used by both social workers in their first year of practice, and students on social work placement, which typically presents more stressful periods of their career (Fareez, 2009). Participants felt that it was helpful to be reminded of their rich histories and the values that had drawn them into social work. At the same time, participants shared their appreciation for being able to uncover the hidden stories of how they are already responding to the challenges at work.

Conclusion

This paper discussed two tools that we have been using in our supervisory practices. It is important to note that these tools can only be useful when used in the context of openness, and in the spirit of Narrative therapy, where uses practices such as double listening (Yuen, 2007; White, 2006), and takes up a decentered but influential position (White & Morgan, 2006) when being curious to find out more about the rich stories of how people respond to the struggles they face in their professional career. These are tools that were designed to complement, rather than replace, existing supervision frameworks and practices. We hope that these tools can be shared and practiced within the spirit of supporting the co-creating of meanings between the supervisor and supervisee.

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