Power To Our Journeys:
Re-remembering Michael

Members of the Power To Our Journeys Group,
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The following personal reflections are in honour of Michael and all that he contributed to our lives. And, we honour Brigitte a key member of the group who died in 2006. Mem, Sue and Veronica, December 2008.

Keywords: power to our journeys, narrative therapy, community mental health, hearing voices, revision of relationship with voices, documents of identity, skills and knowledges, solidarity, belonging

In 1992 the Community Mental Health Project was developed through discussions with workers from Dulwich Centre, Adelaide, South Australia, who were using Narrative Therapy and were interested in further developing collaborative and respectful ways of working with people who had mental health concerns. The project was initiated following approaches from several people with psychiatric diagnoses who were considered to be chronically ill but who held onto hope that their lives could be different. In response to these requests, therapists involved in the project linked people whom they were seeing in therapy with community support workers and carers and the project began.

There were three strands to the project, including therapeutic conversations, community work and the Power to Our Journeys group that formed in 1994 when a group of community members got together regularly with Michael White. Project members met frequently to provide support for all members and to discuss the knowledge’s that were evolving from this work. Many people contributed their time, skills, energy and commitment to the Community Mental Health Project. The project struggled for funding and formally finished in 1999. However, some members of the Power to Our Journeys group continue to meet, support and encourage each other. The following reflections are to honour and acknowledge the life and work of Michael White through his leadership in this project.

Michael White worked in state psychiatric hospitals, child and adolescent psychiatric services and was consultant for many years to a large state psychiatric...
hospital in Adelaide. Throughout his life Michael maintained an enduring commitment to questioning practices that were pathologising of people’s lives, and to developing collaborative ways of working. His work in relation to psychotic experience and, in particular, assisting people to revise their relationship with voices was a significant part of the interactions Michael had with people who had a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Michael taught in Family Therapy forums within Australia and internationally, and in these forums he often referenced the understandings and knowledge of life gained by members of the Power to Our Journeys group in response to their experiences of hearing voices.

Michael’s approach offered a very different perspective for the people who heard voices and who formed the Power To Our Journeys group. This article offers reflections from Mem, Sue and Veronika, members of the Power To Our Journeys Group, about what it meant for them to know Michael and to have worked alongside him over a number of years to explore and develop alternate understandings of themselves and healing responses in relation to the struggles they face. This paper came together when Jussey Verco and Shona Russell1, both previous team members, invited Mem, Sue and Veronika to respond to the following questions:

- Did any particular parts of the Community Mental health project stand out to you?
- What did the Power to Our journeys group mean to you?
- If you were to send a message to Michael what would it be?
- Can you say something about what it might have meant to Michael to know you?

Were There any Particular Parts of the Community Mental Health Project That Stood Out to You?

**Mem**

The care, dedication and support of the project workers and Michael documenting the experiences of everyone in the group were a key aspect.² Dignity. Respect.

Rascal’s outings. Brigitte was with us then. It could be very, very hard to get together even for a cup of coffee, because of our mental health issues. But we’d challenge and encourage each other and we’d do it. Michael would really encourage us to challenge the power and the authority of the voices. He would really encourage us to honour and empower our own knowledges and to firm up the bonds we had together. Being there for each other and the security of knowing that we always wanted the best for each other.

I’d go into those meetings sometimes feeling like 3 cents and come out feeling like a million dollars!

**Sue**

The sense of coming together and the power that brought was really important.
I was shocked that someone would be so kind as to come and visit me. I remember being shocked that someone would really be an ally for me.

The care the team had with connecting me to different people made a difference. If someone went away for a while, they’d team me up with another worker, making sure there was someone there.

Knowing that everyone on the team was learning as well stood out. No-one has got the answers to my life. Michael really taught me that I am the author of my own life. That was so empowering and so true.

Members of the Community Mental Health Project and the Power to Our Journeys people all spoke the same language. Everyone was curious together. There wasn’t a sense of a power hierarchy. Not anyone in the support team had any more power than others. The team was on the same journey. They were not the experts on my life, but the team joined me in exploring the effects of the voices and how I could reclaim my life back from the voices. The team helped me grow confidence in my life, which had been shattered at that time.

Veronika

Meeting with my community worker weekly took the pressure off of my two sisters. Working with narrative therapy, in which my community worker was trained, supported her to listen carefully and to ask appropriate questions. This narrative questioning helped me to regain any sort of confidence (after years of the ‘voices’ telling me how bad I was), self-respect (after being diagnosed with a mental illness) and empowerment (to take a stand against the voices) in relation to what was happening to me.

Having meetings with Michael White and our discussions was important. I could not believe there was a pattern of how the voices operated that basically was experienced by other group members. The same sort of ‘dirty tricks’ the voices were using on me was also experienced by the others. The discussions we had, which exposed what the voices were saying, and then using narrative ways of practice helped me. At that stage I was not getting any help from mainstream psychiatric practice. My first psychiatrist believed I was making up the voices. He just did not want to hear what they were saying. How then could the issues arising be dealt with?

Another life-changing event for me was a psychiatrist being recommended to me by Michael White, as he had done some study into narrative ways of working. On my first visit he said, ‘We will work together regarding the voices’.

I owe so much to Michael White, narrative therapy, the Power of Our Journeys group, and Project and the Dulwich Centre team, putting together our documents and interviews. Today my quality of life is very much improved, to the point I have made plans for the future.

What Did the Power To Our Journeys Group Mean to You?

Mem

I experienced in the group all the following: friendship, understanding, kindness, security, sincerity, acceptance, love, care, support, loyalty, respect, humour,
creativity and the music we shared was empowering and honouring. I still am experiencing this, 14 years on.

It was Michael who made it possible for us to come together and to talk about the voices in respectful ways. He didn’t dismiss the content of the voices the way others did. When the voices tried to control our lives, to harangue us that was what made us miserable. Other people denied the existence of the voices and so made us feel ‘mad’ and ‘crazy’. Michael genuinely asked us what the voices were saying — were they helpful or not? Did they help us in our lives or did they make us miserable? Michael would have us together and we’d talk about the tools that we could use to take our lives back from the control of the voices so that we were back in the drivers’ seats of our own lives. Michael talked with us about our own knowledge’s, our own expertise in dealing with the voices He helped us to join together to bring laughter, mischief, respect, joy, humour and creativity into our lives.

Sue

Breaking the isolation. The voices said I was the only one who heard voices — but Power To Our Journeys Group exploded those notions!

The level of camaraderie, a sense of solidarity against the voices: that we had found the strength to expose them.

Humour and being larrikins. By talking about them, we’d know what the voices were capable of and what they were up to! Humour allowed us to have adventures together which the voices would never have allowed — like going to the museum, or the art gallery, or just getting out the front door.

Solidarity. Doing the Documents together. We were allied forces against the power of the voices and with the Community Mental Health Team the voices didn’t know what hit them! They didn’t really have a chance once we all teamed up!

Veronika

What ‘Power to Our Journey’s’ means to me …

It was totally liberating. The group was a forum to get together with a wonderful group of people who had similar experiences; ‘hearing voices’. I immediately did not feel so isolated and with my community worker, with whom I met once a week, and with whom I could confide everything the voices were saying and all the different experiences I felt. Things began to change. My life changed for the better. Instead of only hearing destructive, critical and totally derogatory voices as I had done for years, I suddenly started hearing voices that were kind, sticking up for me. These kind voices honoured and encouraged me.

We wrote in one of our group Documents giving ‘notice to the voices that try as they might they will not in the end succeed in their attempts to capture our lives. We will carry with us the Power to Our Journeys group as we walk through life and those times when we are stretched and most vulnerable to being hassled by the voices we will recreate the experience of this solidarity. This will provide for us a great deal of security and comfort in adversity’ (Document 1, Solidarity in Currents Newsletter Community Mental Health Project and Power To Our Journeys group, July 1997, Vol.1.)
If You Were to Send a Message to Michael, What Would It Be?

**Mem**
You taught me many things. That I am valuable, creative, loved. That I am the author of my own life’s journey. I have the right to respect myself. That mental health issues are only a part of who I am. This is refreshing and sustaining in a world that still operates on pathologising people and undermining people with mental health issues.

I loved flying in the plane with you and with the others, feeling so free. That symbolised for me something about you, Michael — being prepared to challenge and soar, to go where not many others had gone, and to do it with a genuine sense of curiosity, enthusiasm, delight, to break free of conventional constraints and to see what might lie beyond. And to do that together as a team, sharing ideas and insights along the way: learning from each other, sharing the experience together.

Thank you, Michael.

**Sue**
I want to tell Michael that I’m continuing the research and the conversations which we began together. He was always curious, with incredible respect about my views. He valued our thoughts and points of view. He and the team promoted a different story: one of competence and knowledge. It was revolutionary.

Thanks for the conversations, the coffees, the laughter, the sense of being respected because so much healing happened in that environment. Can I shout you a coffee?

Michael and Zoy Kazan (Project team member) taught me a new language which cut through old ways of thinking and supported new ways of viewing myself. They did this by:

- Naming the voices: acknowledging that this was real for me
- Stating clearly that the problem is the problem — not me
- To identify the ‘backlash’ experience when we speak out, to predict it and to develop ways to deal with it

**Veronika**
After hearing such soul-destroying voices without reprieve for several years my sleep was continually affected and my resilience just vanished. I lost all hope of husband and family and could see the writing on the wall regarding my humble career. There was a serious suicide attempt. It was then that Michael White, narrative therapy and my community worker came into my life. If I could send Michael a message it would be, very simply, ‘thank you’ for taking the black clouds of depression the ‘voices’ caused away from me, and saving my humble life.

What it Meant to Michael to Know Me and Be Connected With Me

**Mem**
I think in some small way that we helped to keep Michael and each other on the earth. I didn’t understand some of the intellectual component of Narrative, but he
really helped us to create a magical group with Power to Our Journeys. We often dealt with the little things, but nothing was too small — or too big. Michael would explore with us insights, creative solutions to difficult issues. We talked about the colour yellow in his life and mine. This had special meaning for both of us as yellow was one of the few colours Michael could see.

Michael encouraged me to have an exhibition and he always valued my painting. He didn’t ask my permission to disappear and there are still discussions I’d like to have with him!

**Sue**

Michael once said to me that he loved taking me up in the plane, away up and free — away from the hurley-burley of life. I took a photo of the city reflected on the undercarriage of the wing. It was quite an amazing photo. He put it up on his pin-up board and said it was one of his favourite photos. That really touched me.

Michael, Zoy, and the team, the Power to Our Journeys group: it shocks me sometimes to realise that each learnt something from me. Michael really liked our larrikin energy. He’d laugh with great sincerity with us, not at us, as we would discover a solution to the voices.

I never felt like I was ill with Michael, I was just normal, like everyone else. We’d find solutions and out of that grew a great deal of confidence.

I think that writing the Documents together was not only helpful for us, but I think for Michael also. I think he used them in his teaching and when working with other people. There is power in Documents in a world where documents are taken very seriously.

Psychiatric hospitals are not really healing places. They are important in an emergency, but they are not places of healing. The team helped me to reconnect with good energies. This would give me courage. I think Michael would discuss the power of people coming together in very respectful ways in his teaching and he had the team and PTOH group to draw on as reference.

Michael would also share his work with us, interested in what perspectives we might offer. He once showed us videos of some work he had done in a community in Africa, asking our opinions of his work. Brigitte started that discussion with commenting on the power of compassion. It was a very moving discussion. (The voices were silent that night for Brigitte and they allowed her to speak and to share such beautiful and far-reaching thoughts. She did have a huge backlash experience later, but she did speak out that night and we were all moved by what she said.) I think Michael took a lot from that session. I believe he would have continued those discussions with others throughout his teaching and his writings.

The common language that we came up with to discuss complex issues was very powerful and it still is.

Michael explored that with us all and I think this helped him with his own thoughts about respectful ways of working with community. I like to think that we all influenced his work. Michael never presumed to come to our meetings and to take over. He’d just be curious, asking questions that were not about him stepping into power — he’d keep working his way away from that.
I think he also valued the conversations about the ordinary. Conversations about voices and mental illness can become a drama: a sense of the ‘weirdo’. But around Michael, there was nothing ‘weird’. We’d have discussions about the value and respect of the everyday, of the ways we managed the effects of the voices on our lives, the ways that we were shaping our own destinies, bringing art, music, study, the love of animals and plants into our everyday lives. He was genuinely curious about how we stood up for ourselves in the systems we were in; he applauded our ingenuity, our survival instincts and our sheer ability to meet each day and deal with the many challenges that living with a mental illness can bring.

I think Michael learnt as much from the discussions with us as we did from him. I thank him for helping me reconnect with my own creativity. Through him, the Power to Our Journeys and the team I was able to reconnect with my creativity and my music. Through the Power to Our Journeys and the Community Mental Health Team I felt connected again with community: I was cared about and respected. So the healing could begin. And it continues.

**Veronika**

I think that I turned out to validate all his pioneering work from nearly 20 years ago (that I knew him — but even before that), with regard to hearing voices. He said to me once, he believed we all had the potential to hear voices — it was only when they became extremely negative or troublesome that they can impact on a life. I learnt so much from ‘kind’ and ‘helpful’ ‘voices’ that gave me terminology to explain my situation. I heard statements from the kind voices that helped me so much. I learned to say ‘don’t speak for me’ when several voices were trying to misrepresent me. ‘Let me formulate my own thoughts’, rather than misinterpret me. ‘Don’t preempt me’ when one voice was at the back of me yelling things out. I became able to say ‘Don’t prompt me’ so I was not giving people wrong ideas about me. I learned to be vigilant when voices put subtle thoughts into my head, trying to make them look like my own. Sometimes this is called ‘auto suggestion’.

Through my meetings with Michael White and the Power to Our Journeys group I was able to discover other ways of responding to the voices that were highly critical of whom I was/am. The kinder voices helped me view myself in a more positive light. Work with my current psychiatrist helps me maintain these different understandings of myself.

I have not achieved grand things in my life, but against terrible odds, I finished my Bachelor of Arts and hope to continue studying. The bad voices would tell me constantly ‘Women don’t learn — they are just good for f…g’; so furthering my education was a key objective. I did give up my job due to the stress of hearing so many voices all at once. However, I have learnt to experience happiness at the improved quality of my life. I still hear the voices daily, but I now can have joy in small things in my life. I hope Michael would be happy with this.

**Brigitte**

Mem, Sue and Veronika wondered what Brigitte might have contributed to this conversation and wrote the following words:
We suspect that Brigitte would thank Michael for helping her find, literally find, her speaking voice again, to know that she actually did have the right to speak, that she did have the right to walk the earth and to comment on the events shaping her life. We suspect Brigitte would thank him for his kindness and his laugh and his willingness to acknowledge her love for animals and plants. She would certainly thank him for the rabbit-hutch and the bunny that he bought for her so that she could bring, such as a beautiful and gentle creature as a rabbit, into her world for her to love and cherish. We suspect that she would thank him for encouraging her to laugh, to ‘out’ the voices and to enjoy with the others in the Power to Our Journeys group. She would probably thank Michael for recognising the importance of compassion and the role it plays in healing. There would be many things, we think that she would want to say to Michael, but we think these would be among them.

We all thank you Michael for what you gave to our lives and to the lives of so many peoples around the world. You are a magic person and we hope there is happiness and yellow wherever you are.

Endnotes

1. Jussey Verco and Shona Russell worked together to compile this article. Jussey was a community worker in the project for many years and remains in regular contact with Veronika, Sue and Mem. Contact e-mail: jusseyv@hotmail.com

Shona was Coordinator of the Community Mental Health project. She continues to work with people who experience mental health difficulties through her work with Narrative Practices Adelaide (www.narrativepractices.com.au). Contact e-mail: shonarussell@internode.on.net

2. Documents. Creating Documents of Identity is a key aspect of the narrative approach and was a feature of the Power to Our Journeys group. The documents referred to by Mem, Sue and Veronika were created to assist them and others to clearly distinguish the friendly or potentially friendly voices from the hostile voices and to develop a stronger alliance with these more supportive voices. The documents discussed provided a record of the skills group members developed in responding to difficulties they encountered which they could refer to at any time. The documents provided alternative descriptions of the identity of group members which included accounts of their hopes, plans and preferences for life which acted as counter documents to some of the pathologising descriptions of identity which they encountered.

3. Perspectives on working with schizophrenia. During the early 1980s Michael White began developing approaches to working with schizophrenia. Accounts of this work have been published in a variety of contexts and for the purposes of this paper we have included a reference list that is relevant to the Community Mental Health Project at Dulwich Centre 1992–1999. A fuller account of the contribution of Michael’s work in the mental health field can be found through www.narrativetherapylibrary.com

References

Dulwich Centre Newsletter, 1991, No. 4.
Speaking Out and Being Heard. Dulwich Centre Newsletter, 1995, No. 4.


Power to Our Journeys — The Clients Voice. Taken from the brochure *Starting & Supporting Hearing Voices*. Groups available from the British Hearing Voices Network.


**Appendix A**

**Solidarity**

We first talked about the techniques that the troublesome voices resort to in their attempts to get the upper hand in our lives. It was interesting that we all had similar observations to make about these techniques and all understood how important it was to expose them. The voices resort to these techniques as they engage in those undesirable activities that are against our interests.

The techniques that were exposed during the meeting fell into different categories, all of which relate to certain characteristics of the voices:

- It was established that the voices are *parasites*. They feed off guilt, insecurity, and fear.
- It was determined that the voices are *opportunists*. They take advantage of people when they are stressed-out and feeling vulnerable.
- It was determined that the voices are *sensationalists*. They have the habit of blowing things way out of proportion and, in so doing, of provoking our anxiety.
- It was established that the voices are *dependent*. They rely for their survival upon self-neglect and self-accusations.

It was generally understood that to expose the techniques of the voices in this way is of great importance because it makes visible the voices’ Achilles’ heel. For example, the voices’ allergies become rather obvious:

- They cannot stand self-love and self-acceptance.
- Self-care throws them into a real fit.
- Self-respect is toxic to them.

They are simply terrified of the possibilities of people uniting together in solidarity against them.

Challenging the sensationalism with the facts totally undermines their foundations.

Reclaiming personal power repels their efforts to feed on guilt and fear.

Apart from all of this, the voices are also allergic to seeing things clearly. We all agreed that the idea of ‘love as a movement through life’ is one that assists in establishing an immunity to the voices’ techniques.

This document is a declaration of solidarity. It is a declaration of the fact that the members of the Power To Our Journeys group are uniting and standing...
together against the forces that have attempted to tyrannise our lives. This is a way of giving notice to the voices, which, try as they might, will not, in the end, succeed in their attempts to capture our lives. We will carry with us the spirit of this group as we walk through life, and at those times when we are stretched and most vulnerable to being hassled by the voices, we will recreate the experience of this solidarity. This will provide for us a great deal of security and comfort in the face of adversity.

Appendix B
Our Determination

Mentioning the Unmentionable
We are committed to mentioning the unmentionable, and acknowledge the courage and strength this requires of us. Our achievements in mentioning the unmentionable undermine our guilt, fear, panic and self-doubt. It is also a service to others in that it brings relief to them. It helps others break free from restricting stereotypes.

Doing Things at Our Own Pace
We are determined to proceed in life at a pace that suits us, and not at a pace that suits the voices. The voices can be counted upon to push us into doing things before we are ready, and if they succeed, then our minds get clogged up and we lose sight of how we want to be in life. The voices at times rely upon outside support in their attempts to push us into things, and at times this support is unwittingly given by people like rehabilitation officers.

Acknowledging Our Teamwork
We are determined to keep sight of the fact that we are members of a team that is the size and as strong as the ocean, and as intelligent as the dolphins. Regardless of the exertions that some others engage in over their attempts to elevate this authority over our lives, we will stay in touch with the strength, the intelligence, and the beauty of our teamwork. Staying in touch with this is effective in shutting the voices up.

Honouring the Little Steps
We are committed to the honouring of the so-called ‘little steps’ we take in life. These are the kinds of steps that so many people in this world overlook, and they include getting out of bed, having a shower, and caring for our lives in general. We will not allow this culture’s overriding concern with control to take away our appreciation of these little sacraments of daily life. Instead, we will take pride in them, and in the process, take note of our specialness.

Appendix C
Authors of Our Own Lives
We are becoming more skilled at identifying our troublesome voices. The more we do this, the clearer it becomes that we are hearing certain voices of society that express some of the dominant attitudes around today.
We are developing the ability to stand back from the voices. This helps us to stop evaluating ourselves so much, and makes it possible for us to focus on and to analyse the harassing voices. When we do this, we get to understand just how much these voices have difficulty coping with our movement through our present and into our future.

Knowing that these evaluative, and at times hostile, voices are insecurities is an important realisation. It puts us in touch with the fact that they do not like change, and that it is their wish that we restrict our lives to their home territory.

We understand why they try to make us panic when we take up the adventures of life. We also understand why they try to obscure the skills and knowledges we have to bring to our journeys in life. When we openly acknowledge these skills, the voices get desperate.

We can see that the voices are now losing ground and we look forward to the time when they lose any hope of regaining it. They are aware of the fact that the ripples of our work are going out. They are aware of the extent to which the lives of people in other parts of the world are being touched by our lives, and being enriched by the knowledges we are sharing with each other.

It appears that the voices have no answer to the creation of these networks. This means a lot. As we journey together in this work, we are becoming better focused, more able to get our feet firmly on the ground in regaining control over our lives, and we are experiencing the personal dignity that is our entitlement.

These kinds of developments are freeing of us, and make it easier for us to put other people’s authority over our lives to one side. It also makes it easier for us to consult ourselves about our own lives and about the kinds of steps that would be nurturing of ourselves. In this way, we are having more to say about our own identities. We are becoming more the authors of our own lives.