

# The Journey:

## A narrative approach to adventure-based therapy<sup>1</sup>

by<sup>2</sup>

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In this paper we explore our experiences of travelling with students on a journey that is both physical and metaphorical. This journey involves ten days of vigorous and demanding cycling, tramping and sea kayaking. As counsellors, we work with the young people before and after The Journey as well as visiting them in the middle of the expedition. The Journey is an attempt to offer young people, who may well not be attracted to sitting talking in a counsellor's office, the opportunity to experience a sense of group belonging, the feeling of success, and the beauty of the outdoor environment. Most importantly, it is an attempt to offer young people the chance to experience themselves in new and exciting ways and to build upon stories about themselves that will enrich their lives over time.

## **Authors' dilemmas**

In the process of writing up our work we have faced a number of dilemmas. We have wondered how to do justice to the richness of the experience of our work with young people. We have also struggled with the political implications of representing other people's experiences on paper. This seems a particularly important issue when we as adults and workers are attempting to describe the experiences of the young people with whom we work, and when these young people prefer not to be named in the text. How can we give space to the voices of young people while ensuring that we are not appropriating their experiences? We are grateful to David Denborough for helping us to find a way of writing that allows these dilemmas to be recognised and faced.

It seems that in the process of writing we encounter similar dilemmas to those that we face in our daily work. How can we as adults find ways of working and writing that question what it means to be an adult and a professional and that open possibilities for collaboration with young people?

## **Context**

We both work as counsellors at Selwyn College, which is a large co-educational multi-cultural school in East Auckland. Nearly half the students have English as a second language and there are 46 different first languages in the school. Because of its broad senior curriculum and its distinctive liberal philosophy, it attracts a wide range of students from all over Auckland.

We see our role as counsellors as being to help students co-author alternative stories to previously dominant problem-saturated stories about themselves and their lives (see White & Epston 1990). We look for competence and solutions rather than focusing on inadequacies. We try to take a counselling stance of attentiveness and respectful curiosity about students' lives, accompanied by a belief that the students are the experts on their own lives. Having genuine dialogue with students means abandoning the notion of counsellor as expert with a privileged view and instead becoming a partner in the generation of new, preferred ways of living.

We have learnt, in our one-to-one counselling work with students, that

opening space for the building of preferred stories is not always easy, especially for young people who often have limited agency in their lives. Experiences which enable students to have a different contextual relationship with the problems dominating their lives can be few and far between. We believe that outdoor experiences can provide a context which can enable students to develop different relationships with the problems in their lives. We believe that *The Journey* is a means of opening space for new stories.

We are both people who delight in spending time away from the city. I (Dorothea) am someone who spends most of her holidays tramping, sea kayaking and having outdoor adventures with groups of friends. I know personally of the excitement of achieving expedition goals, the pleasures of being away from city pressures, and the closeness of living with a group of others away from the rest of the world. I know of the sense of self-confidence and harmony that I always seem to have when returning from a trip away.

Similarly I (Aileen) have a long history of longing to 'get away' into the outdoors. I spent part of my childhood growing up on a farm. Riding my horse gave me an enormous sense of freedom and an experience of myself that was quite different from my experiences of myself at boarding school. There was nothing like coming home from school in the holidays and being free to roam.

From our own lives we know of the power of outdoor experiences. We have also, over the years, witnessed students who have struggled at school in a myriad of different ways find alternative ways of being when they are away from school. We have learnt that while for some students the experience itself is enough for them to understand their lives and themselves differently, for others, making meaning of the experience in collaborative conversations is useful. We have been exploring ways of making the most of the experiences that the young people have while on the expedition. We believe that so much more can be achieved than just allowing the experience to happen and having everyone say how wonderful it had been for them.

Counselling is one thread or strand of the program, interwoven with the two other strands of group work and physical challenge. It is the binding together of all three that gives *The Journey* its strength. The group work provides the atmosphere of the program and an audience for change, the physical challenge provides the context and catalyst, and individual counselling provides a way of making meaning of the experience. The combination of these

strands provides the possibility for translating new experiences during the expedition into longer term changes in relation to the ways in which students understand themselves and their lives.

## **The beginning**

In order to open the program up to all students who might be interested we advertise it through many different forums in the school. These include speaking to assemblies, notices around the school, Deans, Counsellors, Form Teachers directly inviting individuals, the Management Team speaking to parents and students they are involved with, and newsletters that are sent to students' homes. Anyone between the ages of 15 and 18 has the opportunity to apply for a place.

Once we have advertised we believe that it is important for us to leave it up to individual students to show their interest and apply. In our programs, we work from the standpoint of offering information and support and then standing back to allow young people to make decisions. Our interest is in encouraging self-referral, self-responsibility, and for the student to be in control of their choices.

This means that some students in the school who are causing concern will decide that this program does not appeal to them. It also means that we are acting consistently with the belief that young people have the capacity to make good decisions about their lives. In this way every step becomes a possibility for learning and for the students to take control of their lives.

## **Entry into the program**

Application forms, a pamphlet, and an explanatory letter to parents are made available from the Counselling receptionist, and students who are interested pick them up from there. The application takes the form of a parents' permission letter and medical form. A completed, signed form, returned to the receptionist, is the completion of the first step into the program. At times we have had more than forty applications for ten places, and the numbers seem to

be growing as the program becomes more known each year.

A good deal of discussion takes place at this stage as parents and students ask for more details and explore whether or not the program is suitable for them. Students are invited to reflect on their reasons for applying, to consider the following questions and to write down their responses.

- *Please tell us about what attracts you to apply for The Journey.*
- *What qualities do you have that might help you succeed on The Journey?*
- *Which of these qualities, if any, would you like to develop more?*
- *What things would you like to be different when The Journey is finished?*

Considering these questions, and writing down the responses, is often an opportunity for students to begin to articulate alternative stories about themselves, stories that focus on strengths, competencies and resources. It is hoped that these stories will develop throughout the program. We believe that the therapeutic work begins when the application forms are first asked for. It is hoped that the conversations during the time of selection can create a context for students to begin to learn about themselves in new ways. The seeds of alternative stories are sown before the program begins.

## **Selection interviews**

Selection interviews are the next step in building a counselling relationship. These interviews also offer the possibility of setting the atmosphere of self-reflection and respectful conversation. We feel it is important that students know that this is an integral part of the program before they make a full commitment to it. Our questions explore goals, expectations of change, hopes and histories, and we are clear about our underlying belief that the program offers the possibilities of meaningful change. Our questions are similar to those on the written applications but in conversation explorations of greater depth become possible.

Last year, Andrew<sup>3</sup> was one of the keenest students in enquiring about the program. He had developed an 'A+ bad reputation' in his two years at Selwyn. When 'trouble' loomed large in his school life he had come to both of us for support. Unfortunately, however, despite all attempts to challenge his

'on-the-edge lifestyle', nothing had been able to assist him to escape from the strong clutches of 'trouble'. Andrew's opening statement in response to our wondering about his enthusiasm for the program was: *Something has to change. I've got to do something, because nothing's worked so far. And things are pretty bad.*

Many students, like Andrew, see the program as a last chance. Many young people's lives are constrained by broader contexts and stories in ways that make interacting with the structures of schooling very difficult. The Journey is seen to offer the possibility of a different context. When we spoke with Andrew about the impact that an 'on-the-edge lifestyle' was having on Andrew's life and what sort of future he thought this was leading too, he had no doubts that expulsion from school and trouble with the police would be part of that sort of future. For young men in Andrew's position, the opportunity for new ways of relating are often yearned for, as the following transcript of our conversation describes:

What is it about The Journey that has led you to hope that this could be a way of having a different future?

*I've done Cubs and Scouts and things like that, and I know what that does for you. Getting away from everything and having a chance to think about things ... It might be a chance for me to feel better about myself.*

Do you have any ideas about the things in yourself that you would like to feel better about?

*Well my Dad keeps saying that one day soon he'll see me brought home in a box, he thinks it is so bad ... and I'd like to show him I can do something.*

What would that do for your ideas about yourself Andrew?

*I'd like my parents to be able to believe in me.*

Would that be like building a bridge to them?

*Yeah.*

How would you feel about yourself then?

*Much stronger ... it would take the hassles out of things ...*

## Building on changes

For other students the program is seen as a chance to build upon and strengthen changes that they have already made. Last year this was true for the majority of the group. Young people often find ingenious ways of making a path for their lives. For some, The Journey represents another step along the way. Neomai commented that in fourth form last year she had a really bad year, 'wagging lots of classes', 'not interested in school', 'in lots of trouble'. Fifth form had been going much better for her with the structured support and clear goals of the Basketball Academy. She had learnt that *discipline really helps*. She said that she would not have thought of applying for The Journey a year ago, and the fact that she was interested now was due in part to her new-found belief in herself that she could do things. Building on these new-found strengths was her main aim.

Having students who are building on changes they have already made alongside students who have a sense of urgency about the need to start to make changes, allows the possibility for young people to learn from each other. The issues that young people face are often seen as individual problems. Learning collectively provides the opportunity to place responsibility for problems back where it belongs - with the broader structures and practices of the culture.

The diversity of young people involved also sets The Journey somewhat apart from other programs designed solely for 'at-risk' young people. Students have illustrated to us the power of language and labels when they have asked, 'This isn't just for kids with big problems, is it?' With students coming together from different places and experiences, the possibilities for students to learn from each other are endless. Learning is never a one-way process - there are usually new learnings in all the relationships within the group. For us, as counsellors, this is also true. Feeling a part of a team that is working on problems and dilemmas, rather than as isolated individuals, brings sustenance and energy to our work and personal lives.

## Meeting the families

We try, where possible and appropriate, to involve the families of students in the life of the program. We invite family members to participate in

creating the climate in which change is possible. Each family is contacted by phone and, where appropriate, is invited to meet with us individually one evening at school. This is a good time for passing on information and answering questions about the program.

In one family interview I (Aileen) began by asking Timoti questions about his hopes for the program. As he explained his goal of building better relationships with his family, I was aware his mother was listening very attentively. When I asked her whether what he was saying was what she expected or whether there was some element of surprise, she responded by explaining that he had never taken the initiative to do something like this before: *Getting himself organised to do this is an absolutely new thing*. We then went on to talk about what it might mean if he was able to build on this achievement. The conversation offered Timoti and his mother a different experience of each other. To witness a young man speak of wanting to honour and build upon his relationship with family, and for this to lead to a new connectedness between mother and son, seems to illustrate the power for change that can occur when different contexts are created for conversations.

Ben, on the other hand, talked about his goals of learning to work cooperatively with others. I (Aileen) asked his aunt if these goals were what she would have expected or whether there were some surprises and she replied: *I'm absolutely blown away by what he wants to do. I think these are wonderful*. The main focus of this session was highlighting the particular qualities of Ben that his aunt believed might be useful for him in the program. Ben's pleasure in hearing the descriptions of his strengths was obvious from his grin and his own contributions. He explained that he had *been through a fair bit*, but that now things were going more the way he wanted and this was what he wanted to build on. Watching caring conversations like this one, between young men and older women in their lives, offers me considerable hope.

With some families the story of 'trouble' is so dominant that the sense of hope is very small. Stephen's mother thought, *He might as well give it a go, but it doesn't have much chance of working*. When further questions were asked (by Dorothea) possibilities became clearer:

Do you think there might be a difference with this, in that Stephen has pursued it himself?

Stephen's mother: *Yeah, well maybe, but he doesn't last at anything.*

How do you feel when you hear your Mum say that?

Stephen: *Yeah, it's true.*

Do you think there is anything different about The Journey that might mean that you could see it through? Do you think there is any hope for The Journey and you?

Stephen: *Mmm. Yeah. I chose it.*

Stephen's mother: *Yes, that's true. So far I've chosen everything. Like taking him to counselling, and he only will come for one session. Maybe if he really wants this it might help more.*

Young people often have so little power over their own lives in our culture that being able to choose to go on The Journey can become highly significant. In conversations in which hope is hard to find, we have experienced that keeping the focus on noticing very small changes has been helpful. The experience of being able to choose is one that can often be built upon.

Our main hope of involving family members in the program is to enlist their support for the young person and to provide an audience who can imagine and witness changes that may occur. Family members often have information that can be useful in identifying possible stumbling blocks and they often hold an appreciation of the history of the young people's strengths. With the restraints on young people's lives in our culture so strong, this broader audience is often invaluable.

## **The group program**

After the interviews with the young people and family members, the final selections for The Journey are made and group work begins. Before the expedition, three sessions of group work are held, but first a two day 'Adventure training workshop' takes place.

## The Challenge Ropes Course<sup>4</sup>

The group meet each other for the first time when they are picked up at school by a taxivan that delivers them to the Challenge Ropes Course at Henderson High School. We deliberately choose to start the program in this way because the Challenge Ropes Course over two days lays the foundation for how the group will operate. In adventure-based learning terminology this is know as ‘setting the bedrock’. It involves initiative exercises, group problem-solving, personal goal-setting, and developing group commitments to each other and the process. The young people have often commented on the noticeable differences between the group on the first morning when everyone is feeling shy and slightly uncomfortable, and the group on the second day when there is generally a feeling of cohesion.

### Group sessions at school

Between the Challenge Ropes Course and the beginning of The Journey we hold three group sessions with the aim of building on the strengths of the group and developing an atmosphere of trust and respect.

#### Session One

Last year our first group session began with us all watching an edited twenty-minute video of activities on the ropes course as a means of bringing us up-to-date with group developments. The group was intrigued and excited and we found ourselves joining the excitement and missing some opportunities for constructive conversations. On reflection we could have made much more of this video by asking questions such as:

- *What things do you notice about the way the group is working?*
- *Are there any things that are different between activities early in the program and those at the end?*
- *If so, what do those things tell you about the group?*
- *Are there things you notice about yourself that are different between*

*activities early in the program and those at the end?*

- *If so what do you think of these differences? What do you think enabled you to do things in a different way?*

Our focus in this session is to build on what had been done on the ropes course to develop the group. We ask the students to choose any number of words from Project Adventure 'feeling cards' that are scattered on the floor to describe their experience of the group in the two days of the ropes course. The cards are put on the floor in front of each student as they explain their experiences. Words which describe the qualities of the group are then brainstormed onto the whiteboard and a distinction is made between qualities the group wants to retain and those they think need changing. How those changes might be achieved is also discussed.

## **Session Two**

This session is designed to encourage more personal reflection and talking. Students individually work on personal shields, using words, pictures, symbols, or whatever they choose. The four sections of the shield are:

- ◆ personal qualities that support you;
- ◆ experiences or events in your life that have been important;
- ◆ values, beliefs, ideas that are important to you;
- ◆ hopes and dreams for the future.

Across the bottom, a motto or phrase of how the students would like others to think of them is included.

Last year the group took this task seriously and worked quietly for an hour or more. They then each showed their work to the group, and had the option of choosing which bits they would speak about. An atmosphere of deepening trust and confidence in each other was gradually developed. The session ended with a discussion on the group contract. All ideas were brainstormed and then discussed. It was decided that a printed version of the contract would be produced in between sessions, ready for a group signing in the next session.

## Session Three

This is the last session before the group leaves on the expedition. We try to plan this session in a way that caters for all the differing needs within the group. Last year the session began with students in pairs talking and questioning each other on their hopes for The Journey and how they saw The Journey impacting on their future lives. Each student then chose an object or objects to symbolise or represent their hopes from a pile we had assembled. The group sat at one end of the room as each student placed their object at the other end and spoke to the group about what it represented. The exercise seems to allow for the expression of young people's creativity and originality.

Hannah described a children's three-dimensional puzzle as representing the choices, risks and experiments she was making. She was, she said, *trying to figure things out*. The black rock she held represented her wish to be someone of depth, someone of value. Ben held a complex origami construction, explaining that the torn bit showed his life as it was *a while ago - a bit messed up*, but that the points of the construction showed all the possibilities he was now seeing.

Pairs were formed again and, this time, possible obstacles to their hopes were discussed. Regathering at the end of the room, we used large cushions to represent the obstacles. Each student placed as many cushions as they wished across the middle of the room and talked about the things they saw as obstacles. Many had a shared theme. Self-doubt and difficulties in resisting the invitations of friends to get side-tracked were common. Young people often face restraints from youth culture, families and the broader adult world that can restrict their vision and distort their views of themselves. This situation was metaphorically represented within the group session by the fact that the objects of hope were eventually completely blocked from view by the wall of cushions.

Finally, the group explored what they had as a group that would enable them to break through the obstacles and we wrote these on sheets of paper in front of them. Then, standing on these sheets of paper and yelling things like *go for it!*, they leapt on the wall of cushions, flattening them. Trying to find ways of acting collectively to break through barriers in all of our lives is an invigorating process. This was a session with a great deal of energy and laughter.

The group was then introduced to Tania and Mark, from Adventure Specialists Trust, who were to lead them on the expedition, and together they discussed the practical aspects of the trip. Anticipation was strong and there was a definite air of excitement.

## **The Journey**

The expedition phase of The Journey is run by a specialist firm called Adventure Specialists Trust. We have full confidence in the care that they take and in their personal work with the students. Their ways of processing experiences, debriefing activities, and questioning to deepen understanding and experience, fit very comfortably with our ways of working. They organise and guide the young people through the ten-day expedition.

In 1996, the route of The Journey involved travelling from Waitangi back to Selwyn College in Auckland. Once the group reach their starting point by minibus, the students do the full distance back 'under their own steam'. This involves cycling, tramping and sea kayaking over 400 kilometres. Each of the ten days of The Journey has a separate theme. It is introduced after breakfast, usually with a story or reading, and is continued throughout the day, ending with a group discussion each evening. Some of the themes include 'a temporary community', 'a new beginning', 'life values', 'risks', 'perseverance', 'where are you heading?', 'life is a challenge - meet it'. Each day has a leader from the group, and at the end of the day the leader is given feedback about the way the day has gone.

The physical demands of this adventure are extreme, particularly as most of the students are not especially fit. The first day is a 96 kilometre bike ride, for example. All of the students find themselves pushed to the limit physically over the ten days. Mental attitude becomes the issue. Things which were previously seen as personal problems begin to be seen in the context of what the students are learning physically. Not giving up, discovering that your limits are different to what you thought, helping others, facing difficulties as a group, and being positive, are some of the lessons that the young people have articulated as important. As The Journey progresses, the students start to experience their own strength and often begin to see the problems they left behind in Auckland in a different light.

## The counselling aspect of the expedition phase

We have tried various different ways of structuring the counselling work during The Journey. We now prefer the model of the 'visiting counsellor'. Half-way through the expedition we arrive for an evening, bearing chocolate cake and news from home, and have an individual counselling session with each of the group members. This is then followed by a group session. The students know about this from the beginning and this year we found that many had been thinking throughout The Journey about what they wanted to 'notice' in their counselling session. Our intention is clear. We are continuing the process of co-constructing alternative or preferred stories that by this stage have already been identified. By doing this during The Journey itself there is the opportunity to 'seize the moment' and 'thicken' the preferred story. This is a vital stage in the process as it not only takes advantage of the situation but also enables the student to focus on the time remaining and the possibilities this provides.

It is not hard to be curious in these individual sessions. We find excitement catching. Our purpose is to explore what students have been experiencing, noticing and thinking. Articulating the details helps 'thicken' their preferred stories, so questions not only explore their own thoughts, feeling and actions, but also look at other perspectives. At the risk of taking questions out of context and therefore losing their tone and texture, we've listed some of the questions that we often ask:

- *Have things been as expected or have there been some surprises?*
- *Have there been things that you've done that at first you didn't think you'd be able to do?*
- *What was it that enabled you to do that?*
- *Now that you know this about yourself what difference does this make?*
- *Who would be least surprised at you doing that?*
- *What do you think that person would say to you now?*
- *Are there some things about this way of thinking or behaving that you want to strengthen or develop?*

## Individual conversations

We both have clear memories of a special evening on our last journey. We had driven to meet the group at Dargaville, 150 kilometres north of Auckland. Early in the evening we each met with five students for individual conversations. In those conversations, Ken spoke about the ways in which he had been learning that he could get along very well with people from different backgrounds to him. His fears of being isolated could be looked at in a different light now that he had discovered that he had an ease with other people. What he had framed as a problem didn't seem like one at all now. He had also learned that powering ahead on his own mission to test his physical strength was not helpful to others in the group, and that his challenge was how to meet his own needs while leaving room for others. Witnessing a young man discover the ways in which being a part of a team was liberating seemed powerfully hopeful.

For Andrew, the discovery lay in his ability to support and encourage others. His challenge lay not so much in the physical tasks, but in being part of the group. Part of his dominant school story was how anger and impatience turned him against others who he saw as being *unfair* or *stupid*. Now, although frustrated and angered by the power of self-doubt and its influence on Hannah, Andrew had *put anger in the back seat* and got alongside Hannah, encouraging her and drawing her back into the group. His grin as he described his actions said it all - here was a sense of pride in discovering this different way of relating and therefore building a different sort of reputation within the group. To see a young woman and a young man working together in ways that challenged broader cultural stories and enriched both of their lives offered everyone a sense of collective pride and encouragement.

Rachel's story also offered us sustenance. Before The Journey, Rachel described it as: *my last chance to sort out my life*. She had been increasingly absent from school and had 'taken off' from home several times. When I (Aileen) began to talk with Rachel, she described the first few days of The Journey like this: *This is the very first time I haven't given up on myself. I'm helping myself for the very first time. I've always given up on myself before and now I know that, although I felt like giving up this time, I didn't*. It was a moment that seemed almost super-charged. Rachel went on to talk about what this had meant for her and in particular the thinking that she had been doing

about her relationship with her mother. What Rachel was now realising was that her mother had never given up on her no matter what she had done or how she had behaved.

We recalled the conversation that Rachel, her mother and I had shared before The Journey began. Back then, Rachel's mother had spoken strongly about the qualities that she felt were special in Rachel - in particular her *awhi* (ability to love and care for others). Rachel said that at the time she hadn't really listened to her mother but now she was remembering her words. She was already excited about seeing her mother again and could well imagine what her mother might think and say about not giving up on herself.

Rachel did go home and rebuild a different sort of relationship with her mother. It was a relationship that provided strength and solidness for both of them when, two months after The Journey, Rachel, for a short time, heard voices and saw things that no-one else saw.

The young people shared with us, in our individual conversations, stories of how they had carved out new ways of relating while on the first half of The Journey. These stories laid the foundations for powerful group discussions.

### The group conversation

By the time we had finished the individual conversations it was dark and raining. The dinner group had learned the hard way how long it takes to cook potatoes, and the whole evening had got later and later. It was ten o'clock when we were ready to start. With the rain tumbling down outside, our circle around a table in the middle of a large, shabby community hall seemed very intimate. The discoveries of the earlier individual conversations seemed to still be tangible as we sat down to talk.

Our hope for the evening was to increase the visibility of the changes which were appearing and to strengthen the support for those changes. We asked the group to speak to each member in turn, going around the circle, commenting on three areas:

1. *What have you have grown to appreciate about ... ?*
2. *Were there any surprises for you when you really got to know ... ?*

### 3. *What is a challenge you could set ... for the rest of The Journey?*

The students, whom teachers would regularly complain about in relation to their lack of focus and concentration, chose their words very deliberately and with an intense sense of caring. During the 90-minute session no-one made a joke about the process. There seemed to be a very real sense of responsibility towards what they were saying to each other. They were half-way through *The Journey* and the sense of community was strong. This session added further to this sense of community by enabling students to say to each other things that are often left unsaid. At the same time, this meant that the new stories that the young people were developing about themselves had a broader audience and could be supported and built upon. Each student heard other young people reflect publicly on the very things that they had been noticing about themselves and had talked about in their individual conversations earlier that evening. As students heard what others had to say about them, their reactions, which ranged from surprise to tears, spoke of the value of providing a respectful audience of peers.

Hannah had been struggling against negativity each day so far. She heard that others appreciated her sense of humour and her facility with words. Everyone in the group spoke of how surprised they were to find that she put herself down so much and brought herself low with negative thoughts when she had so much going for her. They set goals around turning negative thoughts into positives and offered to help with this. To witness the other young people find ways of collectively assisting Hannah to stand up to the restraints in her life as a young woman seemed to offer powerful examples to us in the adult world.

Some found what the others had to say very moving. Rachel sat with tears pouring down her face as she heard what others appreciated in her. Ken heard that others were surprised to find that he wasn't really like the person he made out to be at school, putting others down, being arrogant, but rather that he had been caring and really helpful to people who were struggling. His challenge was to be able to continue being such an open person towards others. To watch a young man step into different ways of being, outside of dominant masculine ways, while on *The Journey*, and to hear other young people speak openly of their experiences of this, was powerfully moving.

## Arriving home

Ten days after setting out, the students kayaked into Kohimaramara, to find their parents waiting on the beach. It was an emotional moment. There was a flurry of excitement, hugging and tears, as they set off to walk the final 2 kilometres of The Journey up the hill to school where there was a formal *powhiri*<sup>5</sup> to welcome them back. This was held at lunchtime so that friends could be there too. The principals spoke, as did each of the students once the formal part was over. Then a lunch for everyone followed. The school clearly recognises that to do The Journey takes courage, strength and determination. The students left the ceremony feeling affirmed and proud of themselves.

## Back to School

The first couple of weeks following the group's return are vital for cementing the new resolves and wishes to make things different back in Auckland. When we first began our involvement in The Journey, we did not know how to make the most of the experiences of the young people involved. If there is no ongoing support and strengthening of new stories they can quickly fall away when the invitations to former habits assert themselves. One young woman on our first program told us that she felt the best she had ever felt while she was away, but now that the group had been back awhile, she felt she had lost that feeling. As we talked, she helped us to realise the importance of incorporating the 'making meaning' part of the program and ensuring that it continues once back in school.

Straight after The Journey is a busy time with a lot of school-work to be caught up. We speak to teachers about realistic expectations and support for the students, particularly in noticing and reinforcing changes. It is also a busy time in the program with group meetings, individual counselling sessions, family meetings and a finale of two further days on the ropes course.

Our intentions are clear in these activities: we want to provide a context that will allow the strengthening of the preferred alternative stories that have been developed in all three strands of the program. This takes different forms.

The audience for change continues to be the group itself as the bond they have developed builds over time. Further meetings with families widen the audience. In our individual meetings, some of our questions focus on who is noticing and appreciating the steps that the students are taking. Even where the audience is limited, there is the possibility of exploring who they have known in the past who would appreciate these new developments.

Having permanent reminders creates resources which are always accessible. Students are given a certificate at the completion of The Journey as well as a folder containing the stories and readings used in the program. Any writing they have done is included. Later they also create a large photographic montage which is copied and laminated for each of them. The changes that students have made in relation to the ways in which they understand themselves and their lives are further supported by letters. We write each student a letter summarising the meetings we have had with them. These reminders are important, as students who have done The Journey in previous years have sometimes come back to school and told us that it was only after considerable time that they realised the true impact of The Journey in their lives. As they face new experiences in adult life and develop new stories, they can make different meaning of their experiences on The Journey.

## **Returning**

Sometimes it is upon return to the school that the value of The Journey becomes most clear. I (Dorothea) remember a young man who did The Journey three years ago. He wanted to gain some self-confidence and work out where he was going in his life. He was then 16 and was experiencing severe 'teasing' at school. He was very quiet in the classroom, if not silent. His teachers felt they had never got to know him and he did not appear to have any close friends.

The day the group got back we had the usual *powhiri* with family and friends in the hall. His mum was there but no friends. I was moved when he stood up and told the assembled group how important the time away had been for him. He pointed out that he had never spoken up in a group before and for him to be standing up there and saying something about himself was 'awesome'. He had learned, he said, to speak out and to think of what he had to say as being worthwhile (before he never spoke out for fear of ridicule and

being seen as 'useless'). He said that the feeling of belonging to the group had helped him to realise this, and that the things that the others had said to him while they had been away had made him feel accepted amongst his peers for the first time in his life.

After everyone had gone home that afternoon, I was approached by a teacher in the staffroom. She had been teaching biology when suddenly this young man, who would usually be in her class had he not been in the ceremony, came into the room. He said to the whole class, who had fallen silent when he came in the door, 'I've been on the most fantastic journey. Do you want me to tell you about it?' She was struck by the difference in his being as he walked in. She said it was as if he was standing tall. The class was eager and started asking questions, so she abandoned biology for the period and off he went. She said at first it was like a travelogue as he described the physical part of the adventure, but the remarkable thing to her was the silence in the room as his classmates listened with growing respect. They started to ask questions which led him into talking about what he had learned about living with a group, and how come he was standing there talking to them like this when he had never spoken in the class before. It was a powerful experience for both the teacher and the students in the class. It was a powerful experience for me to hear about it too. It is hard for me to imagine the courage it needed for him to walk into that classroom and face the very culture that had resulted in the put-downs and insults towards him. He taught me something about summoning courage. I try to remember his story whenever I need to take action in difficult circumstances.

### **Our experiences**

This work is richly sustaining. It gives me (Dorothea) encouragement and sustains my belief in the ability of people to take control over the direction of their lives. It challenges me to work with others to create contexts where this can occur. From the young people in the program I have learnt about not giving up when the going is tough. I have learnt that I can go further than I first think. I have learned about the power of accepting support from others; about the possibility of risking trusting others even when you do not know them very well; and probably most of all about having the 'guts' to take the risk to explore a different way of being with people.

Personally, through my involvement in The Journey, I (Aileen) have done a great deal of thinking about how I have faced challenges in my own life and what has supported me in facing those challenges. In remembering some of these events I have been able to see more clearly what I drew on. That has come out of conversations with students where there seems to be little in the way of support or resources for their preferred ideas about themselves. I have learnt that there is always something or someone and that has got me thinking about past events in my own life.

In my work, the biggest change is that I have become much more attuned to what or who supports resilience, and I am more thorough in my attempts to make it possible to bring this history of support out into the open. I have heard this process described as ‘small’ work in the sense that often it is very small events, or someone a long time ago, who supported the resilience. I prefer to use the word ‘fine’. To me the process is a bit like using brushes to uncover an archaeological find; it is fine work, but what is underneath is hugely important even if it is only a fragment. Perhaps most profound, however, is that in sharing The Journeys I think I have learned about the possibilities of real courage.

### Notes

1. First published in the 1996 No.4 issue of the *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*. Republished here with permission.
2. We share a history of beginning our professional lives as teachers and discovering that our interests lay with the young people we met, rather than with the content we were meant to be teaching them. This led us both into training as school counsellors with jobs that now allow us to spend all day having interesting conversations with young people and their families. Although we have quite different approaches to our lives and work, in the six years we have worked together at Selwyn College, Auckland, New Zealand, we have developed a wonderful sense of togetherness in our shared values and beliefs about the work we are doing - not to mention a love of fun, laughter, and café lattes in the local café. Dorothea and Aileen can be contacted c/- Selwyn College, Auckland, New Zealand.
3. The students whose voices appear in this paper have chosen to remain anonymous.
4. The Challenge Ropes Course is run by Liz Penman, a Project Adventure trainer.
5. A *powhiri* is a formal Maori ceremony of welcome which follows traditional protocol.

### Reference

White, M. & Epston, D. 1990: *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: W.W.Norton.